



Dark Resurrection

A NOVEL

FREDERICK PRESTON

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A novel by

Frederick Preston

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Chapter One: The Reckoning

Standing in a cemetery in the middle of the night, bored stiff guarding a tomb was not a fate the pair of Roman soldiers had considered when they enlisted in Caesar's army. Night was for sleeping, or perhaps carnal amusements at one of Jerusalem's many brothels, taverns, or dance houses. Their assignment was ridiculous – it was not an everyday occurrence that corpses would raise from their slabs after crucifixion. None had ever done so, which made the idea of guarding the tomb even more absurd, and had necessitated the drawing of straws to determine who would be charged with the dubious task of guarding a rotting cadaver.

The commander of the contubernia of eight soldiers sympathized with their plight, but insisted on the precaution to prevent fanatical followers from stealing the corpse. The directive, ordered by Procurator Pontius Pilate, struck the men and their commander as inane, for the theft of a body was not an offense considered particularly egregious, just odd, and the folks occupying Judea had always been a strange lot anyway.

The executed troublemaker had been quickly interred on a Friday afternoon by a peculiar group of individuals that boldly claimed, even as the tomb was sealed with a gigantic boulder, that Jesus of Nazareth, the dead man, would walk from the tomb in just a few days.

"If Jesus can get his ass out of there he's a better man than I am," a centurion said with a smile.

Ten muscular slaves finished seating the boulder; another group was placing mortar on the stone and rock face, closing the tomb in preparation for affixing the Imperial seal.

"He will rise Roman, we know it," a disciple named Matthew declared, staring at the soldier with anger in his eyes.

"Sure he will, get lost," retorted the centurion, waving them away.

"What if they're right sir?" an aide asked as the disciples trudged off.

"They're not fool, dead people don't rise from the grave," said the centurion, breaking into laughter.

As Saturday evening drew to a close, on their second night of duty the soldiers found their boredom almost unbearable – struggling to remain awake at their posts. Dew had formed on the sparse grass, and a light mist was descending over the graveyard. A small fire was burning near the tomb entrance to keep voracious springtime mosquitoes from devouring them while they continued in their daunting task. As it turned out, an annoyance like bloodthirsty mosquitoes would prove the least of their worries, after the risen Jesus, leaving his sepulchre, made his fateful appearance a few minutes later.

On the stroke of midnight, Jesus opened his eyes and woke from death, annoyed at having to wipe myrrh-scented oil from his face with a funereal rag. He rose from the cold slab. Feeling refreshed and rested, he was instinctively compelled to escape from the tomb. He felt much stronger than before, and found he had the incredible ability to see in total darkness. Pausing to look at his wrists and feet, Jesus noted the wounds from his beatings and crucifixion had miraculously disappeared, as had a spear wound in his right side, inflicted by another

centurion after his death.

Walking about the pitch-black sepulchre, the reanimated Jesus contemplated his newfound powers and strength. He felt tremendous power surging within his body, an incredible force not of this world. He surveyed the surroundings in his hewn stone prison, determined to free himself. Feeling a slight draft coming from his right, he turned and noticed a huge boulder covering the entrance. Heading to it, he flexed his muscles, and prepared to move the stone.

Was he a god?

No.

Was he alive?

No.

Was he dead?

Not exactly.

The resurrected Jesus was neither alive nor dead. He now belonged in a netherworld of being and unbeing, a state of existence **between** life and death, transformed by an unknown power from the dead into the undead. He had risen, but his resurrection was neither good nor miraculous, for Jesus Christ had become a vampire.

With cool, pale flesh, and straw colored liquid in his veins instead of blood, the vampire Jesus pushed away the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb, breaking the seal and crushing a hapless Roman soldier to death as the gigantic boulder landed on him. Several tons of moving granite continued on, extinguishing the fire. It continued down a hillside, scattering smashed and broken tombstones in its wake. After several seconds of vibration and cacophony, the rogue boulder broke through a perimeter fence, coming to a stop after colliding with a stonework house, killing the occupants as they slept.

Calmly walking from his tomb, Jesus spied the other startled guard, staring in silent horror at the remains of his comrade. Hungry, Jesus bared fangs and sunk them deep in the neck of the terrified soldier, draining his life in seconds. He dropped the soldier to the ground and surveyed his surroundings. It was a little past midnight, in a graveyard. **Appropriate**, thought Jesus, **after all, I am a vampire.**

Finding himself surprised at that fact, or to be walking about for that matter, Jesus stepped away from his first victims, one lying on his side, devoid of blood, the other flattened like a piece of unleavened bread. Brushing his long, myrrh scented brown hair from his face, he observed a bright full moon hanging low on the horizon, noting it was late in the evening.

Tall in stature, though not an unattractive man, his Semitic features and pale but still ethnic complexion reflected his fellows, the Israelite Hebrews, with one exception – his unusual blue-gray eyes.

Realizing that his sight, hearing and sense of smell had intensified, the vampiric Christ looked about the deserted cemetery, appearing to him in full color as if brilliantly lit like midday. He turned as he heard tiniest rustle of a leaf, and smelled the sweet aroma of a blooming hibiscus from over thirty feet away.

Instinctively looking again to the sky, the sun now his only real enemy, Jesus began a leisurely walk to the house that had been his last meeting place with his disciples. Angered by the thought of his unjust crucifixion, his mind drifted to his failed ministry and the traitorous Judas Iscariot, a man he had once considered a friend. Walking through an open city gate and arriving at the humble domicile within fifteen minutes, he saw oil lamps burning in the second floor windows. He entered and climbed the stairs leading to the upper room, where two of his followers recognized and greeted him.

“Behold, I have risen,” said Jesus in strangely accented Aramaic, unlike his own voice, and very similar to the elocution used by one of his later descendants, Vlad Dracula. “Where is Peter?” he asked in a Draculaesque monotone.

“At the temple,” a nervous Thomas answered, staring at him, wondering why he should fear his friend and teacher, when he and the others had believed Jesus would rise from the dead.

“Velly good,” said Jesus, “I must go see him.” He turned and left, disappearing in an instant.

To Thomas, it appeared that Jesus had transformed into a bat, flying from an open window into the darkness. He frowned, looked to disciple Thaddeus and said, “Something’s very wrong here, I know it. Did you hear his voice?”

“Sure I did, what do you mean?”

“Are you stupid? Jesus wasn’t himself at all, and I’m not staying around here to find out why!” Shaken by the sight of the undead Son of Man, Thomas headed to a closet where he had stored his belongings.

“Why not Brother Thomas, isn’t he God?” asked Thaddeus, watching him gather his meager possessions.

“From what I’ve just seen, I doubt it. What I do know is that something is definitely wrong with that guy, so I’m making tracks, putting a lot of distance between him and me.” Placing items in a satchel, he continued, “If I were you I’d disappear for parts unknown, immediately, that’s what I’m going to do!”

* * *

Jesus arrived at the temple, changing from bat to man in an instant. The gilded walls of the inner temple seemed somber and foreboding; dim candles in recessed wall niches used to light the stone rooms. Passing the altar, he walked up to Peter, seated in a side vestibule near the Ark of the Covenant.

“Jesus! You’re alive!” Peter exclaimed, rising and walking toward his master, not knowing that the vampire’s incredible powers of entrancement were taking hold upon him.

“In a way,” replied Jesus in his Dracula voice, plainly refusing the warm welcome his disciple was giving him.

“You sound different master,” said Peter, attempting to resist entrancement and trying to understand his stilted rebuff.

“I do?” asked Jesus, folding arms across his chest, hardly interested in how he sounded.

“Sort of,” Peter stammered, asking with newfound trepidation, “Why are you here?”

“You denied me three times.”

“I know master, you said I would.”

“That was a sin,” Jesus declared, an index finger in the air.

“Okay, I’m sorry, forgive me,” said Peter, confused by Jesus’ stoic injunction, his hypocrisy showing through his rote apology.

“Forgive you?” asked Jesus, reaching for his shoulders, “Why should I forgive such as you, your actions helped lead to my death!”

“Please?” asked Peter, feeling the new strength of his master, “Besides, you’re not dead now, so what does it matter, your prophecy about me was fulfilled,” the crowing cock crossing his mind.

“It’s not that simple,” said vampire Jesus, hands almost growing gentle for a moment, yet not once did the stronger than human grip lessen, “Not anymore, a new form of communion has become necessary for my forgiveness.”

“What do you mean?” asked a wide-eyed Peter, in terror of the undead monster before him.

“I mean that I’m going to kill you for denying me, by sucking your blood.”

“I thought you were God!”

“So did I for a while, how crass of me, but compared to you, I am a god.”

Pulling Peter closer, Jesus stared in his eyes, paralyzing the disciple like a cobra moving in for the kill. For the second time in his undead existence, he bared fangs and plunged them into the disciple’s neck, draining his life from him. Moments later he dropped the corpse to the floor, exhilarated and nourished from the revenge he had taken upon Peter.

Life is good, any life, thought Jesus, sitting down in the vestibule while Peter lay dead on the marble floor. For several hours he sat, stroking his long beard and silently contemplating his undead existence, observing the almost decadent opulence of the Temple. It was as if he was visiting this ‘House of God’ for the very first time. He had been there before, but was somehow seeing it much differently as a member of the undead, disdainfully looking about at the ostentatious structure, now striking him as more of a bank for containing valuables than as a house of worship.

I wonder what the God of the universe would need a place like this for, thought a frowning Jesus as he rose from his seat and strolled about the deserted Temple. The wealth of a nation was melded into walls made of imported polished stone and exotic oiled woods from Lebanon. Silver, gold, and ivory inlays meandered in and around corners, with window lattices wrought in curious patterns – coming close to the forbidden practice of making depictions of living things, lest they be considered graven images. **Father was right**, he thought as he wandered the Temple, **people like these were not worth it**.

From a window he observed the horizon lightening with soft blues and pinks of the approaching dawn. Looking to his bare feet, he returned to the vestibule and removed the

sandals from Peter's stiffening corpse, slipping them on before he left. For lack of a better place, Jesus returned to the cemetery, wisely choosing an unused sepulchre for safety, several tombs down from the one borrowed from Joseph of Arimathea, for protection from the sun's rays.

At dawn the relief guards arrived, calling for other soldiers after discovering the cold remains of their fellows. Using superior hearing to eavesdrop on the men carrying off his first victims, Jesus listened as they surveyed his former resting place, searching the empty tomb in an attempt to find him. Finally realizing they would get no information from a deserted tomb, the soldiers left and all was quiet.

Lurking in the shadows of a sepulchre, Jesus beheld the brilliant rays of the sun shining on the cloudless, warm spring day. During that time, he plotted his revenge against those who had crucified him. ***Pilate will be first***, he thought, ***then those damn Pharisees and Sadducees. After that, I'll ravage the rest of my disciples, especially Judas Iscariot, the Roman soldiers who scourged and crucified me, and anyone else who even looks at me wrong. I should also disguise my new voice, as it seems to frighten my victims***, he mused, wondering why he sounded so bizarre. Satisfied with his plans, he relaxed on a cool slab deep in the tomb, folded arms over his chest and settled into slumber.

* * *

Entering the barracks during early morning, the commander beheld the crushed and mangled corpse of one guard, and the pale, chalklike pallor of the other guard's cadaver, lying in stretchers on the floor. "What the hell happened out there?" he barked at his second in command, hands on hips, his feet planted firmly one shoulder length apart in a command posture.

"We don't know sir," said the officer, "The relief guards arrived at the graveyard at sunup and found the men dead. One was crushed by the boulder, and as for the other – " He waved vaguely in the direction of his deceased comrades. His voice trailed off, looking in horror at the strange appearance of the bloodless corpse.

"Do you see his color?" asked the commander, glancing at the body.

"Yes sir," the officer answered, "In twenty years of service, I've never seen anything like that!" Staring at the cadaver, he thought, ***Even bodies with major arteries cut have a bit of color to them, this one's white as a sheet!***

"Neither have I, we have to find out what killed him, and quick," said the commander, turning to leave. "Get a physician here immediately and see what he has to say, I'm heading to the cemetery to have a look at the scene."

"Yes sir," answered the officer, giving the air a Roman salute that his superior had not remained for.

The commander arrived at the sunlit graveyard along with an immunes, or specialist, an engineer named Severus Germanicus, who quickly surveyed the scene, walking about the area and examining the entrance of the tomb, afterward theorizing as to what had happened.

"As I see it," the engineer began, "It seems the stone was pushed from the inside, not pried

from the outside.”

“How did you determine this?” the commander asked, folding arms over his chest.

Pausing and wiping his hands on a rag even though they were clean, the engineer felt a chill run up his spine. Cemeteries had always made him uncomfortable, a weakness he would never admit to anyone. ***Give me a clean Roman cremation over these barbarian burials any day,*** he thought.

“Note the path of the boulder sir,” said Severus, using a thumb to point in the direction of the destroyed house, feeling little sympathy for its deceased occupants. After all, who would be stupid enough to live next to a cemetery, even the pious priests of this god-forsaken country would not think of doing so, something about the rules of uncleanness.

“Yes,” replied the commander, observing the path of destroyed tombstones, flattened saplings and other debris leading from the opening.

“It’s practically a straight line from the entrance of the sepulchre,” the engineer continued, pointing to a line a surveyor had run from the tomb to the house. “If someone had attempted to move the stone in this fashion from the outside, it would have either crushed them to death as it moved, or else they would have pried it from the sides, and the boulder would have taken a different path.”

“I understand, but are you trying to say someone was inside the sepulchre, and pushed a stone of that weight out by himself?”

“It had to be someone inside the tomb, or perhaps some – thing,” the engineer answered with a hint of foreboding, “There’s no other way the boulder could have taken such a path.”

“You’re serious?”

“Yes sir, it would be different if we were in Rome, perhaps a lever machine similar to a siege engine could accomplish such a task there. The backward people here are not technical enough for such a feat.”

“You think so?”

“Only a Roman or Greek masterbuilder would be able to do this type of work, and even then there’d be pry marks on the boulder where it was mortared.”

“Agreed.”

“Then he’d have to remove the machine without leaving a trace, there are no forgotten tools, no dropped funereal rags, not even fresh animal dung. Aside from that sir, we still can’t account for the soldier who was crushed by the boulder, for he and his comrade would have tried to stop them.”

“True.”

“So I ask commander, how could they have made the guard stay still for the boulder to crush him to death?” asked Severus, his arms out.

“They couldn’t,” said the commander, knowing the disciplined guards would have done their

duty, as there were no cowards or traitors in his command.

“Further, any such grave robbers would have needed draft oxen to haul the machine, the body and their tools away when they were finished, and there are no tracks or ruts from wheels.”

“Yes, so I suppose there’s no point in rounding up his followers for questioning?”

“You can talk to them if you want sir, but in my opinion, they had nothing to do with this,” Severus replied, frowning and looking to the open tomb.

* * *

Jesus awoke at dusk, hungry for blood. Stepping from his sepulchre, he saw a young woman standing near Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb. It was a distraught Mary Magdalene, her lovely visage causing him to raise an eyebrow.

“Why do you weep woman?” asked Jesus in his disguised voice, walking to her.

“They’ve taken the master and I know not where.” She moved the hair from her tearful eyes in an unconsciously seductive manner, which was seen but ignored by the vampiric Christ. A very attractive woman, the Magdalene was of his more trying tests of self-control when he had been a preacher.

“No they haven’t, I am he,” said Jesus, staring at her neck.

“Jesus!” she exclaimed, “You’re alive!”

“No, I am far from alive,” said Jesus, “Let’s put it this way, I exist.”

“What do you mean master?” asked Mary, wiping her tears, confused by his reply, yet willing to listen and learn a new lesson from her rabbi.

“I mean I’m a vampire,” said Jesus, grabbing her by the shoulders and plunging fangs in her soft throat. She gave a short muffled cry like that of a small animal injured, collapsing in his arms. He sucked her blood, but not enough to kill her, as he had always thought this dark haired, green eyed, Jewish – Benjaminite prostitute attractive, and had actually loved her deeply when alive. During his ministry, he had greatly enjoyed her company, her beautiful smile and past seductive glances crossing his mind while he beheld her unconscious body; even her sharp wit and intelligence had drawn him to her from the beginning. He gently placed her in a recessed corner in his sepulchre and walked to Jerusalem, heading to the home of procurator Pontius Pilate.

Mary Magdalene would recover quickly, accompanying her master Jesus to Anatolia and later to the continent of Europe, traveling with him as a vampire.

In Jerusalem, a party and sex orgy was being held at the Pilate residence, a gigantic pearlescent marble structure located in the downtown section of the city. Arriving, Jesus strolled through the open bronze clad doors, noting the debauchery, several couples openly having intercourse on cushions placed on the marble floor. Standing near a hall entrance to the atrium, two men, one a praetor, the other a consul, noticed Jesus. Finding him attractive, they approached and propositioned him.

“A lovely party isn’t it friend?” asked the consul, looking to Jesus.

"I suppose," Jesus answered in Latin, instinctively knowing them for what they were.

"You're a beautiful man, I think I'm falling in love with you this very moment," said the consul, batting eyes sensually at him.

"Indeed," said Jesus, hiding his disdain from the future victim.

"He's a Hebrew Urbanus, those like him trim the prepuces of their phalli so the head protrudes even when unaroused," said the praetor, named Carinus, having had homosexual encounters with many inhabitants of Judea.

"I must see this wonder for myself," a smiling Urbanus declared, looking to Jesus' crotch.

A disgusted Jesus, seeing them as nothing more than food, played along, the three moving to a secluded storeroom for their fateful encounter. Closing and locking the door, the Romans disrobed, fully aroused.

"Why aren't you naked friend, remove your robe and undergarments so we can love each other," said Urbanus, staring at Jesus' crotch while caressing his forearm.

Revolted by the sight of his nude homosexual suitors, Jesus answered, "Because I'm hungry, not queer, and I'm going to kill both of you."

"Surely you jest," said a smiling Carinus, falling into Jesus' arms for what he thought would be a prelude for rough sex.

"No, I'm a vampire and I need your blood to survive," Jesus replied, fangs showing as he held the enraptured man, not quite realizing how depraved he was.

"Love me to death with your stiff and conquering phallus," Carinus cooed, kissing Jesus on the cheek, his reason clouded by his arousal.

"Certainly not," retorted Jesus, staring into the victim's eyes.

Not wanting to hear more lewd proposals, he hypnotized Carinus, but Urbanus, a rare, mentally inflexible man incapable of entrancement, realizing he was in mortal danger, attempted to flee. Moving quickly, Jesus appeared in the doorway, blocking his escape. Lifting him bodily, he broke the consul's back with his bare hands, placing him in a sitting position, still alive, near the door. The horrified, frozen praetor could only watch as the vampire bared fangs and knelt down to suck Urbanus' blood, plunging razor sharp incisors in his throat. Disposing of the troublesome man, Jesus then slaughtered Carinus, draining the life from him in seconds.

"Silly queers," said a smirking Jesus, holding the nude body of Carinus. Refreshed by the nourishing blood, he dropped the corpse to the floor and left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Where the hell's Pilate?" he spat, looking about the opulent reception hall. Told by a Gallic slave that Pilate was having sex with a set of twins in the central courtyard, he headed there.

Appalled at the scene he observed, Jesus yelled, "Hey, shithead!"

Pilate was leaning on a trellis in ecstasy, a naked blonde slave rapidly fellating him.

“Jesus Christ!” Pilate exclaimed, standing up and pulling his suddenly flaccid organ from the girl’s mouth as the vampire approached.

“That’s me,” said Jesus, enjoying the sight of Pilate’s fear.

Pilate had turned as white as his disheveled equestrian toga, beholding the late Son of Man. “It can’t be you, you’re dead!”

“It is, and I am undead, thank you,” said Jesus, looking in disgust at the much shorter Pilate and his slaves, the girls cringing and attempting to cover their nude bodies with their arms.

“Why are you here?” asked a shaking Pilate, arranging his toga, trying to gain some control of the situation.

“You condemned me to death on the cross,” said Jesus in his strangely accented voice, staring into Pilate’s eyes.

“No I didn’t, I tried to stop them! All those Jews wanted you dead, what could I do?”

“You didn’t try hard enough,” Jesus answered, entrancing Pilate and the two slaves.

He killed them by sucking their blood, dropping the emptied bodies to the ground. Pausing, he ogled the bodies of the nude girls in disgust, lifting one by a leg, noting while looking closer at the body that she had been only a child, not even having pubic hair.

Better to be dead than to live a life like that, thought Jesus, staring at the lifeless body of the other child slave.

Frowning, he threw the corpse into a fountain thirty feet away, the body bouncing off a bronze statue of Venus and landing in the water with a tremendous splash. A surprised Jesus raised eyebrows at the superhuman feat, not recalling he had easily moved the huge boulder blocking the entrance to the tomb, his physical strength having increased over tenfold.

“What a pervert,” he muttered, looking to Pilate’s remains, the body having a chalklike pallor, contemplating the man’s unsuccessful defense of his actions. Thinking further, he conceded Pilate might have had a point. “Oh well,” he added with a shrug, staring at the bloodless body, knowing it was much too late for a reprieve.

Seeing a silver goblet filled with perfumed wine on a table, Jesus paused to take a delicate sip. It wasn’t his particular brand, but found the taste of the fermented nectar quite palatable. “I can still enjoy wine,” he said with a smile, emptying the goblet. Grabbing the bottle, nearly full, he corked it and slipped it in his robe.

Bloated with blood, he moved past the oblivious guests, occupied with their debauchery, and left the ostentatious mansion. Nauseous, he staggered a few blocks down the street, entering a local lavatorium. ***I suppose there’s a limit to the blood I can consume, just like with wine,*** he thought, leaning over the basin, vomiting excess blood into the sewer. Comfortable and sated, he left the lavatorium and walked about Jerusalem, taking in the sights, making way to his tomb near sunrise.

Mary Magdalene sat in undead repose in a corner, her unconscious body transforming into a vampire. ***I imagine it’ll take a few days for her to wake up,*** thought Jesus, looking to the

comatose Magdalene as he removed the bottle from his robe. Pulling the stopper with his teeth, he spat it to the floor and took a deep gulp of undiluted wine. "Not bad," he observed with satisfaction, finding the fermented nectar quite tasty. He finished it, soon finding he had become a delightfully inebriated vampire. Back in his mortal days, he and many of his followers had been, for all practical purposes, alcoholics, often getting drunk together while discussing religious philosophy. Deeply satisfied with the wonderful revelation that he could still enjoy wine, Jesus lay down on a slab, closed his eyes, and settled into blissful sleep.

* * *

Rising at dusk, he found to his surprise that Mary Magdalene had risen before him. She was sitting on a slab, staring at her burned and blistered arms.

"Master, what has happened to me?" she asked in a frightened voice, "I tried to walk outside and it felt like I was on fire!"

"Verily I say unto you," said Jesus in his vampire voice, "I've brought you to the realm of the undead: you are now a vampire, and cannot walk upon the earth while the sun shines. Incidentally Mary, just call me Jesus," he added, sitting up on his slab.

"A vampire!" she exclaimed, raising a hand in surprised horror to her pale cheek, "Jesus Christ, is this your idea of eternal life?"

"It is now," said Jesus, stepping to the floor, "The only downside is you have to avoid the sun, oak stakes, and prolonged contact with fire. That's not too bad, considering you'll live forever if you avoid things like that in the future. Oh yes, I almost forgot, you have to suck blood every night too."

"Blood? That's disgusting, I can't do that!"

"Human blood, and you must imbibe or you will truly die," Jesus replied, correcting her. "Don't worry Mary, it'll come natural, I'll teach you, after all, I'm a teacher."

"This isn't life, it's a living death," said a frowning Magdalene.

"You may have a point there, but it beats being truly dead doesn't it?" asked Jesus, leaning against the wall of the tomb, staring out at the graveyard.

"Why did you do this to me?" she asked, hands on her hips.

"Why?" asked Jesus, feeling that if he did not answer her honestly, he would lose her forever. He looked her in the eyes. "Mary, I was foolish not to take what you offered me in life, you have always been very dear to me, and I wanted you to be with me."

"Are you trying to say you love me?"

"Yes, I do love you woman," said an embarrassed Jesus, avoiding her gaze and looking to the entrance of their tomb.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me earlier?"

"Why, well, I uh..." Jesus stammered, his voice trailing off.

Mary Magdalene looked at Jesus and wondered why she had never seriously tried to seduce

him; the opportunity had come her way many times. Now perhaps he would be hers, but she knew that regardless of his serene exterior, he could so easily be hurt. She swallowed the harsh words she had, vowing to keep them to herself. "Well my love, I suppose this does beat death, and why does your voice sound so weird?"

"Damn it all," said Jesus, even as he felt his heart lift at the words of his beloved Magdalene, "I have to remember to disguise my voice."

"Do I sound like that?" she asked, who two thousand years in the future would still kid him for occasionally sounding like Bela Lugosi.

"No, you sound just as you did in the past," Jesus answered, "That's strange, I imagine only some of us have this problem."

"It is a problem," said Mary with a wry smile, "You sound goofy."

Caressing her cheek with a finger, Jesus asked, disguising his voice, "Is this better?"

"Much."

They stepped from their tomb into the night.

"It's bright, like the day," she marveled, looking to Jerusalem, seeing flickering light from street torches. In some areas, it had turned the stone and stucco buildings a warm bronze color.

"Yes," said Jesus, looking to his lovely consort, smiling at the good fortune of having her with him. "Your sight has changed so you can see in the dark. You won't miss the day, and we'll have thousands of nights to enjoy, more than all the days of Methuselah and then some."

"Did God give us this?" she asked, looking to Jesus, wondering what other delights there could be for them to share.

"Who knows," said Jesus as they headed across the cemetery, "I'm not sure; frankly, after what I went through last Friday, I don't think there is a God, at least not one who cares about the affairs of man."

"Where are we going?" she asked, relieved that he was not going to go off and start another ministry.

"To visit old friends."

"Who?"

"The Pharisees and Sadducees at the Temple."

"Oh," the Magdalene replied, her quick mind comprehending, "I get it, revenge, right?"

"Exactly," said Jesus, determined to slaughter the evil Joseph Caiaphas and his minions by sucking their blood.

"Do you think my burned arms will get better?"

"Of course woman, look at them."

To her amazement, her arms were quickly healing, returning to their normal appearance. They

headed into the city and toward the Temple complex, enjoying the coolness of the early evening.

In the Temple council chamber, an ostentatious room lined with polished stone benches covered in costly cushions, various robed hypocrites, disguised as Pharisees, Sadducees and Zealots, sat debating about Hebrew law, the vileness of pork, the terrible Romans, and of how Jesus of Nazareth had been the son of Satan, not God.

“Yeah, but he’s disappeared from his tomb and Pilate’s dead, along with his praetor!” exclaimed Abram Ben-Joshua, a Benjaminite Zealot who had demanded Jesus’ death. “His guards found his body in the mansion courtyard with two of his slaves.”

“Perhaps it was robbers, murdering him for lucre,” said Baruch Zion, adversary of Sadducee Caiaphas in their struggle for power.

“I don’t think so Baruch,” Abram replied, “Soldiers found the men guarding the sepulchre dead as well, and the boulder blocking the entrance is sitting half a stadia from the grave, smashed through the side of a house. Something strange is going on, and we’d best be on the lookout for that Levite bastard Jesus.”

“Come on Abe, do you really think he climbed out of the tomb on his own?” the wicked Caiaphas asked, High Priest who had demanded death for the self-proclaimed Son of Man. “The man was crucified, he died, and dead he will stay. The explanation is simple; his disciples dragged his stinking carcass from the graveyard so they could say he rose from the dead.”

“Probably,” agreed a young Benjaminite Pharisee, named Saul of Tarsus.

“What does it take to get through to you, Caiaphas?” asked Abram, pointing to the vestibule, “Sunday morning a scribe found one of his disciples, Simon Peter, dead – back there!”

“You’re saying Jesus did it?” asked Caiaphas, hiding his glee at their apparent foolishness, his judgment clouded by blind ambition. ***He would indeed go higher in the temple with these fools saying a dead man had risen from the grave,*** thought the Sadducee, they would be seen as insane and removed from their positions by Herod Antipas and the Temple elders.

Then he could assume the position he had coveted for so long – sole blessed treasurer of the valuable sin gifts to the temple, a job that would allow him to embezzle untold sums of silver shekels for his personal use. For had he not learned as a child to misdirect and mislead from his childhood nurse, a woman who had slept with his father for years – the vicious Jezebel still ruling his father’s house with impunity, thanks to forbidden favors she gave him that his mother never would.

“I don’t know Caiaphas, but they say Thomas and another disciple saw him Sunday and fled for parts unknown,” said Abram, unaware that he and his fellows were playing into the hands of an unknown enemy – the greedy, amoral Caiaphas. “Thomas may have been a member of Jesus’ group, but he isn’t stupid. A man who knows both of us swears Thomas was scared to death when he saw him, and suspects he has returned as a vampire, bent on revenge.”

“A vampire, and who are ‘they’?” asked Caiaphas, smirking.

“A Roman writer named Gaius Plinius Celer and Grania Marcella his wife,” Abram answered. “They are lodged at Issachar’s hotel with their young son Pliny.”

"I know who you're talking about," Shadrach Bar-Judah replied, another Pharisee who had demanded the death of Jesus. "He's the guy who wants to write an encyclopedia of history, using that prodigy son of his as a scribe to record events around the empire."

"You're kidding," said a frowning Caiaphas, shaken by what he heard. "Gaius Celer is a man of letters, well educated, and I know him too." He rose to his feet and added, "Excuse me brethren, I'm heading to the hotel to hear firsthand what he has to say."

"I'm coming with you," Saul of Tarsus declared, rising from his softly covered stone bench.

Both left the temple as Jesus approached, these men forever escaping his wrath. The Pharisees, Sadducees and Zealots resuming in their discussion, Jesus and Mary silently climbed the temple stairs, entering the council chamber, confronting most of the holy men who had condemned the gentle preacher to death.

Abram looked up and said, "So, Thomas of Capernaum was right, you have risen, surely you are the Son of God."

"I don't know about that anymore," said Jesus, pausing and looking to his consort. The Magdalene's instincts were awakening, she staring hungrily at their necks, sharp fangs emerging from her gums for the first time. "But there's one thing I do know," he added, turning to the assemblage of hypocrites.

"What is that Rabbi?" asked Shadrach.

"That I'm going to kill all of you, for killing me," said Jesus, entrancing and freezing them to their spots.

Six Hebrew fanatics met their end, as the Son of Man, a vampire, and his consort, Mary the Magdalene, dropped the bodies to the floor, she wiping her mouth on the robe of one victim.

Jesus sat down on a couch, belched loudly and remarked, "See, it wasn't that bad was it?"

"No, but I feel bloated," said Mary, rising from the cooling cadavers, rubbing her distended stomach.

"Two or three seems to be the limit, and you're rather small," Jesus replied, watching her move her hand. "If you like we can go to a lavatorium and purge the excess."

"I need to; thank you Jesus, you're still a wonderful teacher," she answered politely, smiling in gratitude. Jesus nodded, embarrassed at her extolations.

They left the Temple and headed to a lavatorium, where Mary vomited half of her hemoglobin supper into the sewers of Jerusalem.

"Would you like to see the city at night, it's beautiful," said Jesus, while Mary leaned over the basin, wiping coagulating blood from her mouth.

"I'd love to," replied his smiling consort, sensing the blooming romance between her and Jesus, a man she had been deeply in love with for several years.

They strolled Jerusalem for hours, hand in hand, enjoying their surroundings, agreeing the Romans were probably the best thing that ever happened to Judea, with their villas, plumbing,

aqueducts and sewerage systems. The main streets lit by torchlight, the beauty of the golden stonework and slightly darker concrete masonry gave the deserted streets an amber hue.

As the sky began to lighten, Jesus said, "We'd best head to our tomb woman."

"Do you have to put it that way?" the Magdalene asked, facing him with arms around his waist. She hoped that in time he would understand that romance was an art form, as much as seduction or dancing, and like all art, it had to be practiced, even if she had to help him.

Jesus looked to the beautiful, raven-haired vampiress and replied, "No my dear Mary, perhaps a better word would be our home." He kissed her passionately, the Magdalene overwhelmed by his embrace, her body nearly growing limp.

"What's wrong, my woman?" asked Jesus, holding her in his arms.

"Oh, nothing, I just love you, that's all," said Mary, feeling flushed.

"And I love you Mary, I have always loved you," said Jesus, taking her hand in his.

Maybe he does understand, she thought, smiling and strolling beside him toward the sepulchre, hand in hand.

* * *

Jesus Christ still had scores to settle, fires of revenge burning within his tormented mind. Awakening the following evening, he told Mary of his intent to destroy his disciples. "Judas Iscariot's the one I really want," he said, his eyes narrowed in contempt, "I've disposed of Peter, but I have to get that traitorous Judas. He's worse than Peter ever was and he must not escape me."

"Why'd you kill Peter, I thought he was your friend."

"He was my friend, but he denied me three times."

"You actually killed him for that?"

"Maybe I did screw up there woman, but I was rather angry that night."

"And you're not angry now?" asked Mary, stifling a laugh, looking to her frowning consort.

"I am to a degree, but I must dispose of friend Judas nevertheless," said Jesus, realizing his slaughter of Peter was perhaps unjustified.

"You'll get him, he was hanging around the Temple the past few days before you turned me," Mary replied, not pressing further regarding Peter. "I imagine he's looking for more money. John told me Saturday that Judas plans to sell out Lucius the Christ next, for 60 pieces of silver."

Only in the game for lucre and earthy glory, the cynical, traitorous Judas Iscariot had been paid off amply by the high priests in Tyrian tetradrachmae to betray his innocent friend Jesus, the amount given him considered a small fortune in those days.

"What an asshole," said Jesus, slipping into his vampire voice, "Lucius Christ is a liar and charlatan, I'm the real Christ, and that bastard Judas sold me out for only 30 pieces of silver!"

“Brother John said the same thing.”

“John is a good man; I’ll spare him,” Jesus declared, disguising his voice.

“The other disciples believed in you too,” said Mary, hoping to blunt his maniacal desire for vengeance.

“Thomas doesn’t anymore.”

“Who cares, lots of people don’t believe in you – you can’t kill them all.”

“Quite true, but I must destroy Judas Iscariot.”

“I agree,” said Mary, “He deserves it; incidentally, do you have any idea where he’s been spending most of his time since betraying you?”

“Not really, considering I was dead until recently. I suppose he’s living high in the saddle, letting all that blood money burn a hole in his pocket.”

“You guessed part of it, but get this, he’s spent a lot of it at a brothel I used to work at.”

“He used it to buy whores?”

“Yes.”

“What vermin he is, verily I say, I never trusted him; Judas is as slippery as a bucket of eels,” said Jesus, his accent returning.

“Jesus, your voice.”

“Of course, thank you Mary,” said Jesus, disguising his voice.

Leaving the cemetery, they headed into the cool spring night in search of Judas Iscariot. Arriving at the brothel entrance, Jesus noted business was brisk; the place was packed. By torchlight, pictures painted on the walls in brilliant colors graphically illustrated the services provided and the cost of each in Roman currency.

“You’ll have to wait friend,” said a pimp at the door, holding up hands. “All the girls are busy with other customers.”

“I’m not looking for a girl,” Jesus replied.

“Oh,” said the smirking pimp, “We don’t do that here, but my brother Ephraim on the next block –”

Dear Jesus, do you have a lot to learn, thought Mary, stifling a sudden fit of giggles his innocence had incurred.

Jesus ignored the insult and said, “No sir, I’m not looking for men either. As you can see I have my woman, I’m looking for a friend that frequents here.”

“Sorry, what’s the name?” the pimp asked.

“Judas Iscariot.”

“I know him, he’s in back,” said the pimp, pointing the way with a jerk of a thumb, pleased that

Judas was telling friends about the expert abilities of the ladies in his charge.

“Take me to him.”

“Perhaps we should wait till he’s finished with Adria,” said the pimp, not wanting to lose business, after all, a patron would not return to his brothel if he didn’t get his money’s worth.

“That won’t do, take me to him now,” Jesus ordered, staring into the pimp’s eyes. The entranced pimp obediently led them to the rear of the brothel.

“You do that well,” Mary whispered into his ear, “Will you teach me?”

“You’ll learn in time.”

The pimp stopped at a door, pointed, and walked away.

“What do we do now?” asked Mary.

“Watch, I intend to have fun with this guy.”

“Yeah, but I’m getting hungry.”

“Take the whore after we enter, but leave Judas to me.”

“Okay.”

The sounds of sexual pleasure were coming from the small room, the voice clearly that of Judas Iscariot. Jesus pushed the door down with one arm and entered, standing on the broken door. Judas turned and leapt from the sheets, leaving a frightened Adria naked on the bed.

Mary moved for the whore, Jesus blocking her path. “Hold on girl, you’ll get her in a minute.”

“Jesus!” a terrified Judas cried, beholding the risen Son of Man.

“In the flesh.”

“Master, I can explain,” said Judas.

“That would prove interesting my friend, but I don’t feel there is any need,” Jesus replied.

Always a liar, the treacherous Judas was trying to buy time, moving for a sharp dagger concealed in his robe. He found it, pulled it out and plunged it deep into the vampiric Christ’s chest, waiting to run after he fell. To Judas’ surprise, Jesus smiled and pulled the 8-inch dagger from his chest, dropping it to the floor.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” retorted Jesus, chuckling at the horrified Judas. Turning from him, he looked to the naked whore, and said in his accented voice, “Take her Mary, we have other things to do!”

The Magdalene moved like lightning, plunging fangs deep and sucking her dry in seconds.

“Come, my friend Judas,” ordered Jesus, having entranced his betrayer during his consort’s attack. Judas, wishing he could resist, obeyed. He led Judas and Mary from the brothel, out of the city and into the countryside near their sepulchre. Like a zombie, Jesus stood the betrayer near a stunted olive tree, sitting down on a stone with the Magdalene.

“What are you going to do with him?” she asked, hands folded in her lap.

“I haven't decided, but it's definitely going to be painful.”

“Why not hang him?”

“No, that's much too easy, besides, we haven't any rope.”

“How about torturing him to death, that's a good idea isn't it?”

“Perhaps,” Jesus answered, staring at his terrified victim.

“You know,” said the Magdalene, “When I was a whore, Judas beat the hell out of me at the brothel one day. When he's drunk he has a mean streak toward women, he really got a kick out of beating my head against a wall.”

“Really? Then perhaps you should beat his head against that tree. After all, is it not written, even from the time of Hammurabi: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth?”

“But I thought you wanted to kill him.”

“You can kill him if you like, I don't care, just do it slowly,” said Jesus with a wave of a hand. She headed to the olive tree, intending to beat the traitor's skull against its thick trunk.

“Why are you doing that?” asked Jesus, Mary reaching for Judas' head.

“What do you mean?” she asked, confused by his question, her hand held high, stopped before she could grab a handful of hair.

“Use your mind; make him beat his head against the tree. I'll release him to you so you can try it.”

“We can do that?” she asked, walking over and sitting on the stone, ready to learn from her undead rabbi.

“With practice, give it a try; you seem more vicious than I am anyway.”

Mary concentrated and found her entrancement power came easily. She forced Judas to slam his head against the tree until he was nearly unconscious, his face and scalp a bloody pulp. Satisfied with his consort's talent at torture, Jesus walked over to Judas. He ran a finger across the blood-covered forehead and put it in his mouth, enjoying the taste. He lifted the tortured body with one arm, raising his betrayer into the air.

“You greedy bastard,” Jesus spat in his vampiric accent, “Verily I say, those like you make our people look bad! You sold me out, fornicating in a brothel as they crucified me!” The terrified Judas, weak and with a severe concussion, was unable to say anything in defense, even if he had been able to think of one, his forced delirium numbing the pain somewhat. Disgusted, he dropped Judas to the ground in a crumpled heap.

“Is he dead?” asked Mary.

“Not yet, but I'm sure he wishes he was,” said Jesus, walking to the stone and sitting down.

“Can we make him make him beat his head some more or is he too tired to do that?”

“Tired or not, we could make him beat his head against that tree until he died from the blows, but I think the whole affair is getting boring,” a chuckling Jesus replied.

“What else can we make him do?” asked Mary, lying on her side on the large stone, resting her head on her right arm.

“Anything as long as he’s alive, it’s as if he were a puppet.”

“Can I make him dance?”

“Easily, but what will that accomplish?”

The Magdalene smiled. “Okay, can I make him walk off that cliff?”

“Sure, why not, we need to get rid of him, go ahead.”

Mary concentrated, spoke words of command, and incredibly, Judas rose to his feet, terrified. Turning, he walked off a 100-foot cliff to his death, the broken body bouncing off the rocks below, landing lifeless in a crumpled heap next to a stream.

Satisfied in his revenge, Jesus said, “I’ll be back in a minute woman, there’s no point in wasting good blood.” Assuming the form of a bat, he flew down the cliff and sucked the warm corpse dry.

Returning, he took human form, Mary exclaiming as she beheld the transformation, “I didn’t know we could do that!”

“It comes in handy, don’t you think?”

“How did you do it?”

“The same way I do anything else, by concentrating - give it a try.”

Mary concentrated and assumed chiropterian form, flitting about the cemetery, alighting on the stone and returning to human form. “That was easy.”

“You’re a natural,” said Jesus, smiling.

“What would you like to do next?”

“It’s early, why don’t we head back to town so I can find and kill other enemies,” Jesus suggested, leaning against a tall tombstone.

“What happened to the idea of forgiveness?”

“That was then, this is now,” said Jesus, sitting down beside her, “In other words, I now do unto others as they have done unto me.”

“Oh,” the Magdalene replied in a subdued voice, noting that his latest admonitions were much different from any he had ever uttered when alive. Relaxing for a moment, Mary wrinkled her nose at the scent of dried blood. The odor would be barely discernable to mortals, but was almost overwhelmingly pungent to undead nostrils. She sat up and noticed that she and Jesus were dirty, thanks to sleeping during the day in dusty tombs and wandering about at night, murdering people by sucking their blood. ***I need a change of clothes and so does he,*** she thought.

“So Jesus, how long do you think you’ll be, killing enemies and such?”

“Why?” asked Jesus, staring in the direction of the cliff.

“I’d like to go to one of the baths and perhaps shop for some new clothes tonight.”

“Why?”

“The ones I’m wearing are disgusting,” said Mary, pointing to her dusty garb, “You should clean up too, you’re still covered in funereal oil.”

Jesus looked down and held his clothes away from his body, noting that he was spattered with dried blood and dust. The odor was bothersome, but adding the almost overpowering stench of rancid oil and myrrh, he agreed that a bath and change of clothes was a good idea.

A thought crossed his mind. “The vendors are closed woman, besides, we haven’t any money.”

“That’s no problem, we’ve killed nearly a dozen people in the last day or two – I don’t think stealing clothes and a bath will make any real difference now.”

Ruminating on the statement, he decided she was right, and after a few more enemies were disposed of, they would head to the Roman baths after finding or stealing new, or at least clean, clothes.

Through entertaining themselves with Judas’ agony, they returned to Jerusalem. Jesus had decided to hunt for the Roman soldiers who had scourged him, along with others who helped nail him to the cross and mocked him while hanging helpless on the cross. Arriving at the barracks near midnight, they were viewed suspiciously by a soldier guarding the gate.

“What do you want, Jew?” the guard sneered in bad Hebrew.

“I’m looking for Decius Publius,” answered Jesus in flawless Latin.

“Decius isn’t here; he’s at Pilate’s residence with the acting procurator, centurion Flavius. Incidentally, what would a man like Decius want with arena bait like you?”

“Pardon me, but I am a Levite, sir, not a Jew,” said Jesus, disgusted that Romans could not tell the difference between the few tribes of Hebrews left in the province of Judea, of which the tribe of Levi was a part.

“So?”

“Levites are the inherent tribal priests of the Hebrew people.”

“Who cares, why would Decius want to see you?”

“I don’t really think he does want to see me, but he will see me tonight anyway,” Jesus answered, turning from the guard.

“Wait!” the guard ordered, reaching for his weapon. “You look familiar, who are you?”

“Who do I look like friend?” asked Jesus, turning back and moving in closer, concealing his fangs.

The guard stared at the stranger, his identity dawning on him.

“You’re that Jesus guy, the man Decius crucified!” the frightened guard exclaimed, moving back and drawing a gladius. Jesus grabbed his arm with his left and broke it at the elbow, the sword falling harmlessly to the ground. Not feeling particularly hungry, he started to strangle him.

“Don’t kill him,” said Mary, grabbing his arm, not out of sympathy for the guard, but because she was hungry.

Relaxing his grip and dropping the unconscious man to the ground, Jesus replied, “By all means, why didn’t you ask me earlier?”

“You didn’t give me any time to,” she said, sinking fangs into the victim’s throat. Quickly draining him, she rose, wiped her mouth and added, “I needed that.” An understanding smile crossed Jesus’ face as he took her hand in his.

“Let’s find Decius, I should be hungry by that time, woman.”

Heading to Pilate’s residence, Mary asked, “Who’s Decius?”

“The soldier that nailed me to the cross.”

“You’re pretty pissed at him aren’t you?”

“How would you feel in my sandals?”

Mary fell silent as they approached the opulent mansion. Just outside the wrought iron entrance gate stood a guard.

“Who goes there?” called the guard.

“Jesus of Nazareth.”

“Who?”

“Jesus of Nazareth.”

“I don’t know anyone by that name,” the guard answered.

“Good, drop dead you Roman bastard,” said Jesus, the guard falling to the porch and dying on the spot.

“Can I do that?” asked Mary in amazement.

“I doubt it,” said Jesus, “Verily I say, there are some things only the Son of Man can accomplish, and even I know not how.”

“Does such power come from God?” she asked, wondering about the supernatural abilities they had.

“I don’t know, but if there is a God, surely such comes from him,” Jesus replied, having had time to think about the situation they were in, putting it in a more positive light.

“Since he’s dead, may I?” asked Mary, looking to the body.

“Make it fast, I have work to do,” said Jesus, surprised that such a small woman could consume so many meals in one evening. She drained the corpse quickly, wiped her mouth, rose to her feet and they headed through the gate into Pilate’s residence.

“Decius Publius, Etruscan of Rome, where are you?” Jesus called while they stood in the doorway.

“Here,” answered proud centurion Decius Publius, stepping from the courtyard in full armor, beholding Jesus and folding arms across his chest.

“Do you know who I am?” asked Jesus.

“You’re Jesus of Nazareth, also called the Christ, who I crucified last Friday,” said Decius, standing in the threshold.

Jesus, taken back, asked, “Don’t you fear me?”

“I fear no one, not even Caesar, and I don’t give a damn who you are, whether you’re the son of Jupiter or Pluto,” said Decius, walking toward Jesus.

“Kill him,” Mary hissed in Aramaic, strangely understanding much of the gist of the conversation, though not at all fluent in Latin.

“No, this man is different,” replied Jesus, walking to Decius, intent on getting the measure of the man.

“Some say you’re the risen Son of God, others say you’re a bloodsucking vampire,” said Decius, boldly facing Jesus.

“Am I?”

“I don’t believe in God, and I don’t care if you’re a vampire, the fates will determine my life,” a smiling Decius answered, drawing a polished steel gladius.

Jesus, astonished at his remarks and actions, observed the soldier with interest.

Decius continued, “I was once a gladiator, I was made a slave as a child; my family fell into disfavor under Augustus. I’ve beaten and killed 100 men in the arena to win my freedom, and I proudly wear my signet ring of citizenship. I’ve fought beasts – bulls, jackals, tigers; even lions, barehanded. Go ahead Jesus, if you have the guts, try to subdue me, you vampire Jew, I’ll fight you to the death and proudly. If you defeat me so be it, and may the best man win!”

“You’ve been through a lot haven’t you?” asked Jesus in a subdued voice. A feeling of kinship passed over him and a deep compassion for the hardened soldier welled to the surface, the same emotions that had unwittingly helped lead to his unjust crucifixion.

“You could say that,” retorted Decius, disdainful and uncaring of the compassion which seemed to emanate from the vampiric Christ.

“You crucified me!” Jesus exclaimed, unable to let the transgression pass, his darker side coming to the surface.

“It was nothing personal, I was following orders. Procurator Pilate ordered it, he was the governor. I had to follow his directives as a soldier of the Empire; I’m sworn on my honor to do

so. Tell me, as a man, what would you have done in my place?"

"Kill him," said the Magdalene, lunging for Decius.

"No Mary, it would be wrong," said Jesus, moving an arm in front of her, "I understand him, this gentleman is a man of honor, and that is rare indeed in this world."

"What?" asked Mary, "Are you crazy, this bastard crucified you – he nailed you to the cross!"

"That may be true, but he doesn't deny it and has faced me."

Decius stood his ground, sword in hand.

"You're an honorable man?" asked Jesus.

"I'd rather die before I would compromise my honor."

"Verily I say unto you, I am a vampire, and could kill you with a single word, like I did with your guard."

"I know."

"Don't you fear that?"

"Yes, I fear that, but if you kill me now, I will have died a man and not a coward. It's better to die that way, as you tried to do while being scourged."

"I can't take this man," said Jesus, turning from Decius and moving a hand to his forehead.

"I can," Mary replied with a vicious smile, moving toward the centurion that had harmed her rabbi.

"No woman!" ordered Jesus, invoking his authority over her.

The Magdalene reluctantly obeyed. She had to, as Jesus was her master, the vampire who had brought her to the sunless, dark realm of the undead. Moving back as ordered, she looked sullenly to him.

"Decius, are you my enemy?" asked Jesus, looking into his hazel eyes.

"No, I have never been, I don't even truly know you," said a frowning Decius, looking down at his gladius.

"Will you let the Magdalene and I pass, and not utter a word of our having been here?"

"Yes, I swear on my honor, and not out of fear. You're not my enemy, nor are you an enemy of Rome, and I never believed you were, even as I nailed you to the cross."

"And if I was?"

"I would have fought you to the death, then or now, with weapons or my bare hands."

"Granted," said Jesus, "What do you think of my returning as a vampire?"

"I don't know, but I think I envy you and wish I were like you."

"I will spare you centurion Decius, even though you crucified me," said Jesus, raising an index

finger in the air, "I feel we will meet again, within your lifetime."

Decius nodded, returned his gladius to its scabbard and saluted Jesus Christ. He extended his arm, offering it in friendship. Jesus took his arm, giving him a Roman handshake.

Gripping each other's forearms, Decius said, "I certainly hope we'll meet again Jesus, the one called Christ. It's good to have met an equal adversary; I look forward to meeting you again, as a friend or as an enemy."

Jesus nodded. He and the Magdalene vanished from Pilate's residence, never to return. Decius stepped to the porch, noting the pale corpse of the guard on the marble floor, just outside the gate. "I'm going to need another guard," he observed, wondering if he would encounter Jesus again. The brave, honorable centurion T. Decius Publius would again see Jesus, once more in Jerusalem that year, and then much later on the European continent, before his life ended.

* * *

They acquired suitable clothing from a shop on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Jesus breaking into the structure by forcing the door down, setting about stealing the necessary items.

"You're a bit noisy," said Mary, standing in the doorway while he rooted around for the clothes.

"Everybody's asleep and no one can stop us anyway."

"You're right about that," Mary replied, shaking her head at his carelessness, watching him ransack the shop. They bathed in a deserted Roman bathhouse at around four, donning their new outfits. Standing beside the pool, Mary gathered up their soiled garments, using her dirty dress as a sack and placing the other clothes within.

"Why are you doing that?" asked Jesus, pulling back his long hair, still drenched with water.

"Doing what?"

"Gathering those filthy rags."

"They're not rags, they're only soiled, we can wash them and have a change of clothes for later," said Mary, thinking ahead.

"I guess that's a good idea," Jesus replied.

"Good idea, I paid nearly five denarii for that dress not two weeks ago!"

"That was expensive."

"I was trying to get you to notice me, but even now you barely do, even while nude in the bath."

"Believe me, I noticed you woman," said a smiling Jesus.

"Then or now?" asked the Magdalene, posing for him.

"Both," Jesus replied while they headed for the bathhouse door.

They returned to their tomb near dawn. Jesus was dressed in a cotton tunic and tan robe, his

consort attired in a light green stola, an outfit usually worn by Roman matrons.

Dropping their soiled clothes to the floor, Mary, who had been silent regarding Decius since leaving Pilate's residence, asked, "Why didn't you kill that Roman bastard, or at least let me kill him for you?"

"Centurion Decius is a man of honor," said Jesus, "I believe those like him should be spared such a fate, for not denying his transgressions against me, and for facing me like a man, not like a sniveling coward."

"What are you doing, forgiving him for crucifying you?"

"Forgiveness has nothing to do with it; he's a man worthy of respect."

"Weird," Mary observed, refusing to allow the subject to drop.

"What do you mean?" asked Jesus, disliking that she might be questioning his honor.

"Your selective method of only killing people you hate. I don't care about that, I look at them as food and don't see any point in it."

"I try to take only those who deserve it."

"Deserve it? That sounds a bit hypocritical, after all, you killed Peter, not to mention Pilate, and he tried his very best to save you from the cross. Why did you blame him, he was a Roman, when it was the Jews and the Pharisees that had you killed?"

"We all make mistakes: may ye who are without sin, cast the first stone," said Jesus, slipping into his vampire voice.

"Yeah, I've heard that before, you said it when they were going to stone me for being a whore – what does that have to do with anything?"

"It means you should not question me in these matters. Verily I say, woe unto those who deny or oppose the Son of Man as a vampire, such actions will vex me greatly, and they shall reap the whirlwind."

"Is that a threat?" asked Mary, arms folded across her chest in unconscious imitation of Decius.

"No, it's a promise," said the powerful vampire, Jesus Christ, realizing they would ever be at odds on the subject of vengeance.

"You're sounding strange again," Mary observed, not intimidated at all by his threat.

"I am?" asked Jesus, annoyed by his troublesome vampiric accent.

"Yes."

"Thank you for reminding me, what would I do without you?" asked Jesus, distracted from his anger.

"Sound like a weirdo I guess," retorted Mary with a giggle, not wanting to argue with him. She relented and asked, "Are you hungry?"

“A little, but it can wait till tomorrow.”

“I’ll give you some of my blood if you need it,” she offered, instinctively preparing to slash a wrist with her fangs.

“No,” said Jesus, raising an index finger, “Vampires do not live by blood alone: but by every truth issuing from the mouth of –”

“You sound just like you did when you were alive, what gives?”

“I don’t know,” said a confused Jesus, “Such aphorisms seem to be a part of me.”

“That’s the truth.”

A few moments of silence followed, Jesus remarking as he ogled her, “You know Mary, you really look good in that stola.”

“I do?” she asked, embarrassed by the comment.

“It shows off the curves of your body well.”

The Magdalene could almost feel a blush coming on, but as real blood no longer coursed through her veins, the all-too-human sign of embarrassment could not show through to betray her.

“Thank you Jesus,” she replied, noting he had finally noticed her without prompting, feeling as if she were walking on air.

“Don’t mention it,” said Jesus, turning and leaning against a wall of their tomb, staring out at the cemetery.

“Yeah,” said Mary.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

The sun on the rise, Jesus said, “Let’s get sleep, we’ll find those other bastards tomorrow night.”

“Okay,” replied a sighing Magdalene, disturbed by his unrelenting need for vengeance, “I guess you’re still bent on revenge, right?”

“Right,” said Jesus, walking to a hewn granite slab, joined by her. Both relaxed on the cold stone slab, curled around each other in comfortable repose and settled into sleep.

* * *

Over the next weeks, Jesus Christ, together with the Magdalene, exacted his bitter vengeance upon his tormentors, murdering most of the enemies who had sent him to the cross.

Pharisee Annas was taken in the courtyard of his home one evening with his wife and adult eldest son, their bloodless bodies strewn about the house, the pious Pharisee’s corpse dumped headfirst by Jesus into the family latrine pit.

He was a hypocritical piece of shit, at least he’s where he belongs, lying in a pile of

excrement, thought a smiling Jesus, strolling from the latrine, heading across the courtyard and joining Mary in the house.

“Did you get him?” asked Mary, crouching in a hallway, wiping the blood of the priest’s wife from her lips.

“Yeah, I dumped his ass in the shitter,” Jesus answered, staring at a plate of love offerings on a table, silver shekels taken from the Temple.

“You’re a mean one,” said Mary.

“You’d better believe it, when it comes to my enemies,” Jesus replied, still looking at the coins.

“What are you staring at?” Mary asked, noting her consort’s unremitting gaze.

“The shekels, since there’s no one here we may as well take them,” said Jesus, intent on stealing them.

“Why not, those bastards owe you something for what they did to you,” the Magdalene agreed. She gathered up the coins in a leather bag and the couple left the ostentatious residence. Heading to a seedier section of Jerusalem, she asked, “What do we do now?” Sodden drunks, passed out in gutters, and a few unclaimed whores surrounded them.

“Who knows, let’s uh, live the night as it comes,” said Jesus while they strolled the worn cobblestones, an arm around her waist. Finding another enemy an hour later, not even the murderer Jesus Barabbas could escape the vampiric Christ’s unbridled wrath, taken in an alley by the vicious Magdalene. The only notable exceptions to the carnage were Sadducee Joseph Caiaphas and Pharisee Saul of Tarsus, later known as Paul, who had fled to coastal Caesarea, and Decius the centurion, the Roman soldier Jesus had freed from his vengeance.

Jerusalem was becoming a hotbed of panic, especially when a Greek physician named Thucydides of Delos determined that a vampire had caused the unexplained deaths. Bite marks found on the throats of Pontius Pilate, the High Priests and the Roman soldiers had proven this conclusively. The only thing these men had in common was their condemnation of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ.

For this pronouncement, Thucydides was called before the acting procurator of Judea, centurion Flavius Maximus. Shown into Pilate’s former residence by a legionary guard, the doctor told the acting procurator of his theories regarding the deaths.

“Come on doctor, that’s ridiculous, these are modern times, vampires?” Flavius asked, relaxing on a couch during the cool early evening.

“It can only be that,” the doctor declared in a pompous tone of voice, “My examinations of the victims proves this, each had bite marks on their throats, and when I opened the great artery in their necks nothing issued, the blood was gone from their bodies!”

“Vampires are a myth.”

“They are a fact. In the past, vampires walked unchallenged about Greece; it has been proven by Plato, Aristotle and Herodotus, along with a Greek historian ancestor of mine, also named Thucydides.”

“Really doctor,” said an unbelieving Flavius.

“What I’m saying is true,” said Thucydides, “Herodotus referred to them in his encyclopedic texts. He wrote the vampires of Athens were banished by Pericles, who after their defense of Athens, gave them freedom to maraud unchecked over the rest of Greece, killing any and all enemies of the Athenians.”

“Such writings are rubbish, myths and fairy tales.”

“No they’re not; the vampires are now in Jerusalem, among us, in our midst. The one called Jesus the Christ vanished from his tomb a few weeks ago, together with a woman who knew him called Mary the Magdalene,” Thucydides replied in an excited tone of voice.

“What does that prove?” asked Flavius, rising from the couch in indignation, “Jesus, ‘King of the Jews’, was crucified and died on the cross weeks ago! Mary the Magdalene was known by many to be a common whore, selling her ass to anyone who’d pay for her favors. The slut was probably killed by one of her clients, it happens all the time!”

“His body vanished from the grave on the third day.”

“So what, his followers stole the body of that mad rabbi!”

“Not true,” said Thucydides, “Gaius Plinius Celer of Como was told by the disciple Thomas of Capernaum that Jesus appeared on the Sunday after his crucifixion, and that Thomas, frightened, suspected from his behavior he had returned as a vampire. Thomas is not rumored to be a stupid man, and it’s said he left in fear of the Christ for Illyria. Also, the pimp Cassius stated that he saw Jesus and the Magdalene at his brothel on the following day, looking for Judas Iscariot, and afterward a whore named Adria was found dead in her room, emptied of blood.”

“Who’s Judas, the village idiot?” asked a smirking Flavius.

“No procurator, he was the man that betrayed Jesus to another man named Joseph Caiaphas; Judas was one of his disciples,” the doctor answered, as if scoring a point in debate.

“Really,” said Flavius, staring at Thucydides, scratching an itch on his forehead, vainly wishing that someone else had the job of acting procurator

“His body was found mutilated at the bottom of a cliff, drained of all blood, near the cemetery where Jesus was interred after he was executed. Further, ever since this Jesus fellow was crucified and disappeared from his tomb, the bodies of his enemies have been showing up all over the place, emptied of blood.”

Flavius frowned, conceding defeat. “I understand good doctor, judging from what you’ve told me, nothing else fits. Though I’ve always doubted their existence, I now agree, perhaps it could be a vampire.”

“It is, it’s the man called Jesus of Nazareth, who claimed he was the Christ: he has resurrected from the dead, and he’s the vampire who did this!” said Thucydides with firm resolve.

“So you think it’s Jesus?” asked Flavius, sitting down on the couch and resting his head on an upright arm.

“Yes, he’s risen as a vampire.”

“We’ll have to find him before he kills half of Jerusalem in his thirst for blood.”

“We may find him procurator, but if Jesus is a vampire he will prove difficult to destroy.”

“Ha!” retorted Flavius, “I’ll have him bound in chains and brought to Rome to fight to the death in the Circus Maximus!”

“It’s not that simple, for the term death doesn’t even apply in these cases, this vampire Jesus is not truly alive, nor dead, he is undead.”

“Undead, what’s that?” asked Flavius, leaning forward, confused by the unfamiliar term.

“None of us really know. Though it may sound contradictory, the best explanation for such a condition would be the ‘living dead’. This is a very serious situation sir, and if Jesus has in fact become a vampire, normal weapons will not work against him.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Jesus, if he has become a vampire, is endowed with great powers we cannot understand, and if we can even confront him, he will be as if almost a god,” said Thucydides with envious resignation.

“What God?” said a frowning Flavius, sinking back in the couch.

Chapter Two: Trek to Nazareth

The summer solstice arriving a little over a week later, Jesus and his consort continued to take various stragglers, wandering about Jerusalem in the middle of the night. Striking from the shadows, they took soldiers who had gambled for his garments beneath his cross, and other people he recognized, they having mocked him while he walked to his crucifixion. Still intent on taking Caiaphas and another soldier that had kicked him while Decius was nailing him to the cross, they were lurking in the sparse brush outside the garrison one evening when Jesus heard a familiar voice.

“Hey, come over here,” called a voice in Latin from behind a shed near an olive grove, about thirty feet from them.

Seeing the reddish hue of the warm body standing behind the structure, Jesus whispered, “Who is it?” he and Mary moving cautiously toward the voice.

“Get your ass over here; I have to talk to you!”

“Decius!” Jesus exclaimed, recognizing the face.

“Greetings Jesus,” said Decius, nodding to the Magdalene, “Look, I have to warn you, you’d best be careful, they’re on the lookout for you.”

“Who?”

Decius looked about for a moment and replied, “Flavius Maximus and the legionary guards that’s who, and they’ve got a Greek doctor with them – he knows all about vampires.”

“Really,” said Jesus, “So, what do they intend to do?”

“Hunt you down during the day, if I were you I’d make myself scarce.”

“What do they know?” asked Mary in fair Latin.

“Not much, except there are bloodless bodies strewn everywhere, and they’re also aware of the danger oak stakes and the sun present for you.”

“I knew leaving those corpses lying about was stupid!” Mary spat, looking to Jesus.

“Never mind that woman,” said Jesus, putting up a hand in protest, “So Decius, do they have any idea where we sleep during the day?”

“No, but the doctor’s been put in as an advisor to my contubernia. We’ve been ordered to check the graveyards; I’d be on the watch for them.”

“I thank you friend Decius,” said Jesus, “Why are you doing this for us?”

“You did me a favor once friend, now I’m doing you one.”

Jesus, feeling obliged, offered his hand to the Roman soldier that had nailed him to the cross.

Firmly shaking his hand, Decius advised, “You’d best leave Jerusalem as soon as you can. As commander of the contubernia conducting the search, I can cover for you if you tell me where

you're hiding during the day."

"You will?" asked Jesus, surprised that Decius would disobey his superiors in such a fashion.

"I'll order them to look elsewhere, but I can't cover for long, perhaps a week at most. I swear on my honor that I will not betray you."

"It's the same cemetery where I was originally buried," said Jesus, knowing in his heart the centurion was telling the truth.

"Good, we won't look there."

"Thank you again, friend Decius."

"Don't mention it, I've got to go now, good luck," Decius replied, leaving the couple and heading to the garrison.

Jesus, sitting in his tomb after sunup, having heard from Decius of the pronouncements of Dr. Thucydides, spent much of the morning discussing this problem with his consort.

"We'll have to take off," said the Magdalene.

"Why?"

"They're on to us, Jerusalem's littered with bloodless bodies, and according to Decius they want to hunt us down."

"So?"

"So what if they drag us out in the sunlight you stupid bastard!"

"Watch it woman."

"Watch it my ass, it's time to leave and you know it, there's an entire world we can retreat to, why should we hang around Jerusalem tempting fate?"

"Because I haven't killed Caiaphas yet."

"Who cares?" asked Mary, her hands in the air, "You killed most of them, who gives a damn if you missed one?"

"I do."

"What are you, obsessed?"

"Obsessed?"

"Yes," said Mary, "That you'd risk our destruction to get one stupid Sadducee, a mortal who wouldn't know his ass from a hole in the ground! Forget it, he'll die within thirty years, time will get him and we'll have an eternity to be together!"

Jesus stood silent, troubled, knowing in his heart that she was correct. "You're right," he conceded, "What would I do without you?"

"Talk funny, and get burned up by the sun," said the Magdalene, putting a hand on his arm, "Look Jesus, you've got to ease up and take it easy, why risk destruction to get one

Sadducee?" I care about you, and have since I met you, do you really want to risk our destruction over one hypocritical, deluded man?"

"No, but - "

"No buts," she interrupted in a firmer tone of voice, "You've always been this way, obsessed, never leaving well enough alone. That's what got you killed! We've been given a second chance to start a new life together, and you've got to complicate it with your crazy revenge, who cares about them?"

"I do," said Jesus, in macabre imitation of his former self.

"Let it go, you got most of them."

"Yes," Jesus agreed, "But it's a shame Caiaphas will get away."

"Maybe, but you once said revenge can cloud one's thinking. What advice would you have given someone bent on revenge when you were alive?" she asked, trying once more to get him to see reason.

"I understand, let's get some sleep," said an exhausted Jesus, recalling the words he had preached to a crowd in Galilee on a summer day nearly two years earlier. ***She's right and using my own words against me***, he thought, lying down on a slab.

* * *

The next evening, a resigned Jesus listened to reason, the couple leaving the cemetery and making their way from the city, heading north on a Roman highway leading to Nazareth. At his side, he was carrying a leather satchel acquired from Pharisee Annas' house. Originally used for Torah scrolls, it now held their change of clothing, and money they had come across, so to speak, in recent times.

"Where are we going?" Mary asked, walking the dark road.

"I figured I'd stop by Nazareth before pressing on further. See mother and dad; kill a few enemies, things like that."

"You are a vengeful bastard aren't you?"

"Let's say I'm not the man I once was."

"That's the truth, so, what happened to that idea you told us about called karma, when we were sitting at the shore of Lake Galilee?"

"I imagine the concept of karma applies only to those who are alive," a bitter Jesus declared, recalling his journeys through India and his ill-fated ministry in southern Galilee.

"Don't you still believe in karma?"

"I don't know what to believe in anymore; I tried to spread good karma during my days as a preacher and all it brought me was death."

"In other words, karma's bullshit?" Mary asked, hoping he would deny her words.

"More than likely," said Jesus, at times wishing he had never bothered with his ministry, his

father's prophetic words of doom constantly repeating in his mind.

As they continued along, a thought crossed the Magdalene's mind. Her friend, Jesus the vampire, was slaughtering his enemies at an alarming rate, and with his peculiar method of selecting them, she wondered what they would do for sustenance after he finished killing them all.

She thought about this for a while, and asked, "What are we going to do for food when you run out of enemies to devour?"

"We'll find more. People like Judas and the Pharisees are all over the place."

Mary, reflecting as they walked the dark and lonely road, found to her chagrin that she agreed with him.

The first few hours of their trip were uneventful, the couple strolling in the darkness until they came upon a wooded area near the Jordan River. Out of nowhere appeared a pair of highwaymen, bent on robbery. Jesus eyed the pair warily and asked, "What brings you across our path strangers?"

"You," answered one, a Samaritan, eyeing the attractive Mary.

"Really," said Jesus, knowing exactly what they were after, having dealt with robbers before. "What do you want with us?"

"Keep your mouth shut and give us your valuables, Jew," a Syrian confederate snarled, Jesus rolling his eyes at the ignorance of the thieves, unable to recognize a Levite when they saw one.

"Why don't you take them from us?" the Magdalene asked, Jesus smiling and allowing Mary to play her game.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"She's a smart one isn't she?" the Samaritan observed, lust in his eyes, walking over and taking her by the waist as Jesus stood looking to the sky.

"This cowardly Jew won't even defend her," said the Syrian.

"I'm a Levite actually, and I'm certain she can defend herself," Jesus retorted with narrowed eyes, paralyzing the Syrian with a cold stare.

"You're a good looking bitch," said the Samaritan, not realizing that for all practical purposes, he was alone, the thought of rape crossing his mind.

"Really," replied the Magdalene as the Samaritan started kissing her neck. She looked to Jesus over the thief's shoulder, bared fangs and plunged them deep in the neck of her assailant, draining him in seconds as the terrified Syrian looked on in horror. She dropped the body to the pavement and said, "That was delicious, now it's your turn."

"Yes," said a smiling Jesus, looking to the Syrian. "You love to play games with them don't you?"

"It's fun, and better than revenge, don't you think?"

"Not really, but I'll take your word for it," said Jesus, baring fangs, going for the jugular and sucking the Syrian's blood. "That was good," he added in his vampiric monotone, the body collapsing in a heap on the road.

"We'd best hide these guys so no one can find them," Mary advised. "Remember, Decius told us leaving bodies all over the place is what tipped them off."

"He came in handy didn't he?" Jesus asked in his Dracula voice.

"You sound funny again."

"Oh," said an embarrassed Jesus, disguising his voice, "Yes, let's dump them in the woods," jerking a thumb in the direction of the trees.

Grabbing the Syrian by his foot and the Samaritan by his hair, Jesus dragged the corpses from the road, dumping them in a wooded ravine after checking for valuables.

He had taken to robbing the bodies during the past few weeks, and had already acquired 750 Roman denarii in various currencies from his victims, most notably Pharisee Annas; this was not a small sum of money in those days. A group of jackals prowled in the distance, Jesus noting they would also have a good meal that evening. Returning to the road, he told Mary that he had found shekels, drachmae and jewelry, along with Roman gold aureus and silver denarius coins on the bodies.

"Ironic," he observed with a sinister chuckle, "They meant to rob us and we robbed them instead."

"We robbed them of more than money, we robbed them of their lives," she replied, "Incidentally, isn't our stealing supposed to be a sin according to the Torah?"

"Who knows and who cares, they're dead, so I don't think they'll have any use for it."

"True, I've always liked jewelry, can I have it?"

"Sure," said Jesus, handing her the baubles.

Thus were the humble beginnings of their monetary fortune, Jesus usually handling the cash, his lovely consort controlling the jewelry. After a few weeks of night travel by foot and wing, along with the killing and robbing of several highwaymen for pleasure, nourishment and profit, they arrived in Nazareth, his home before he had begun his short-lived ministry.

Stopping at an inn late in the night, as no tombs or caves were readily available, Jesus purchased lodging from the innkeeper with some of his stolen funds. He also informed him they liked to sleep late in the day, and not to disturb them during their slumber.

The sleepy innkeeper nodded, the couple heading to their room.

"Why didn't you stop at your parent's house instead of this inn?" Mary asked as he closed the door.

"It's very late, and I don't know what mother may say, showing up like we are now. She was in Jerusalem at the time of my crucifixion, and probably heard the rumors of my resurrection,"

said Jesus, sitting down in a dilapidated chair.

“So what, you said you’d resurrect, why should it bother her?”

“I don’t think she imagined I’d return as a vampire,” answered Jesus, “If we come early tomorrow evening it may be easier for me to inform her of that, and not risk harm to ourselves if she and dad find it unacceptable.”

“If they don’t, why not kill them and be done with it?”

“Because they are my parents Mary, you will not harm them,” ordered Jesus. She again felt her master’s power, remembering that she must obey him. “Besides,” he added, “There’s plenty of food around here, as most people in this town hated me when I was alive.”

“So that’s why you went to Capernaum,” said Mary, as if finally solving a puzzle that had eluded her, lying down and relaxing on the bed.

“That’s right, they wanted to stone me because the town rabbi said I was a blasphemer,” said Jesus, joining her in the bed.

“Just like the Pharisees, I suppose you want to make them pay for that by killing them all,” said an exasperated Mary.

“Correct,” Jesus replied, settling into bed for a good day’s sleep.

* * *

After sundown, they checked out, almost immediately finding a pair of his enemies, sating their hunger pangs. After robbing and disposing of the remains, they made their way to his parent’s home. Walking along the street, they observed people going about their businesses, none recognizing the risen Son of Man. Arriving at the house, Jesus knocked on the door. His mother answered, recognized him and collapsed in his arms in a dead faint. Joseph saw him and while shaken, simply sat down in a padded chair while they entered, Jesus placing his unconscious mother on a couch and his satchel on the floor.

After a few moments, his mother regained consciousness and exclaimed, “You have risen!”

“In a way,” said Jesus.

“Uh, how are you son?” asked Joseph, not believing his eyes.

“I’m fine; a lot has happened since I last saw you.”

“You sure have developed a talent for understatements,” his consort observed.

“Really,” agreed Joseph.

“You’ve returned from the dead,” said his mother, regaining her composure and sitting up on the couch. “We should worship you, you said you would rise, and must truly be the Son of God.”

“I don’t know about that anymore,” said Jesus. “If I were you I’d forget about the stuff I told you and stick with Hebraic monotheism, or something like that.”

“Why?” asked Joseph, staring at his undead son with his head to one side, narrowing his blue-

gray eyes, his eye color the same as his firstborn.

“Um, because, I uh, well, things have changed, and not necessarily for the better, at least with regard to most people I’ve encountered recently.”

“What do you mean?” his mother asked, sensing that her son was having trouble relating what he had to tell them.

The room fell silent, Jesus Christ at a rare loss for words.

“Well, Jesus?” asked the Magdalene, giggling.

“I don’t think I’m God anymore,” said Jesus.

“Or any less,” the Magdalene retorted, bursting into laughter.

“That’s great, really great,” Joseph spat, rising from his chair and folding arms over his chest. “After all the shit your mother and I have been through in the past few months, not to mention your precocious childhood and that ministry of yours, you come back here and tell us this? Get on with it, if you’re not God and you rose from the dead, what the hell are you?”

“I am a vampire.”

His mother’s jaw dropped. Joseph stared at his eldest in disgust and said, “That figures, I knew it was too damn good to be true!”

“Oh Jesus,” said his mother, “You’re a vampire? My God, what will I tell your brothers and sisters?”

“I don’t know,” said Jesus, “Perhaps you shouldn’t tell them anything.”

“That’s the truth,” said a frowning Joseph, “That’s all we’d need, we’ve had enough problems already from the Pharisees and the stupid Romans. I don’t believe this, you’ve become a vampire? Shit, that really tears it!”

Jesus, realizing he hadn’t introduced the Magdalene, offered politely, “This is my friend, Mary the Magdalene, she was a follower of mine hailing from Magdala.”

“I suppose she’s a vampire too?” asked Joseph.

“As a matter of fact, yes.”

Joseph threw his hands up and cried, “I should have known, why did I even ask?”

“At least they haven’t tried to destroy us yet,” the Magdalene observed between stifled giggles.

After they had absorbed the incredible news, Joseph and Mary invited their son and his consort to spend the evening with them. Jesus’ mother headed to the kitchen to serve supper, as Joseph, Jesus and the Magdalene followed to the dining area.

“I’d offer you dinner, but we don’t have blood!” Joseph spat, sitting down at the table.

“Don’t worry father, we had someone to eat before we came here,” said Jesus, taking a seat.

“Someone!” exclaimed Joseph, staring at him in astonishment, “I swear, you’ve always been weird, but this takes the cake!”

Jesus' mother entered, placing an earthenware serving bowl and two smaller ones on the table.

"Guess what Mary, I told them we had no blood in our larder, and your son said they had already had someone to eat before they arrived," said Joseph, Mary handing him a wooden spoon and sitting down.

"We both had someone father."

"Whatever," retorted Joseph, eating a simple dinner of bread and a pottage of lentils cooked in meat broth, seasoned with onions and garlic.

The conversation continued for a time, Joseph making sarcastic remarks, as the thought of his eldest son being a vampire was rather unsettling. His mother seemed to accept this fact after the initial shock and quietly conversed with them.

"So, your friend Mary is also a vampire, that's very interesting," said his mother.

"Yes mother, she came to my grave one evening and I made her a vampire outside the tomb."

"Oh for God's sake!" exclaimed Joseph, slamming his spoon down and rising from the table. "This is ridiculous, I need air!"

"What's wrong father?" asked an oblivious Jesus.

"A lot is wrong; I'm heading to the courtyard. After you're finished talking with your mother I'd like to speak with you privately," answered Joseph, leaning on the table with both hands.

"Velly vell father," said Jesus in his vampiric accent, troubled by his father's remarks.

"Velly vell – what the hell's wrong with your voice?"

"It's a long story dad," said Jesus, disguising his voice while stroking his beard.

Joseph left the kitchen as his mother said, "Please don't worry Jesus, even though you're a vampire, your father and I still love you."

"Yeah, thanks ma," said a weakly smiling Jesus.

After his mother finished supper, Jesus left her and the Magdalene. He walked to the courtyard, his sandals making a scuffing sound on the flagstones, where Joseph was relaxing by oil lamp in a chair, enjoying the cool night. He was drinking fruit juice instead of his usual evening wine, feeling the need to be clear headed for the conversation he was going to have with his undead firstborn son.

"Please sit down," said Joseph, waving to a chair next to him. Jesus took a seat, his father continuing, "We need to talk about this new situation of yours."

"We do?" asked Jesus, wondering if his father had finally had enough and was going to ask him to leave the family forever.

"Yes," said Joseph, eyeing Jesus in exasperation, "I don't believe this, first, you agitate so many people in this town that you end up having to leave, then you piss off so many people in Jerusalem that you manage to get yourself killed. That was bad enough, now you return, as a

vampire! What the hell happened, and don't tell me it was some sort of miracle, I'm not going to buy that at all."

"I don't know, when I awoke in the sepulchre I had become a vampire."

"How? There's nothing in any scriptural prophecy I've ever read stating that you, or anyone else for that matter, would become a vampire. Not that I've ever given much credence to those writings, but –"

"I really don't know father, perhaps people should forget about what I preached. I mean, since I was crucified, I've honestly wondered if there even is a God."

"I agree with you there," said Joseph, taking a sip of juice, "Especially with society the way it is today. Who knows, maybe God's disgusted and has finally given up on us."

"I wouldn't be a damn bit surprised," Jesus replied, turning from his father and looking to small herb garden his mother had planted.

A frowning Joseph finished his juice and thought, ***Perhaps I should have had something stronger***, watching his undead offspring look to the heavens. Both were quiet for a while, Joseph breaking the silence by asking, "You and the girl, you kill people and suck their blood, right?"

"Yes father, we have to, and I try to take only those who have crossed me, or lately, have tried to rob us."

"Really, I suppose that's somewhat commendable; you came back here to take revenge upon your enemies, correct?"

"Yes, but I also came to visit you and mother," said Jesus, turning to his father.

"That's nice," Joseph retorted, gripping his cup, "I imagine you intend to kill half this town during your visit?"

"It has crossed my mind, probably more than half actually."

"I don't blame you, the people here are a bunch of bastards," said a frowning Joseph, looking to his empty cup. "Frankly, I've never liked them; most are deadbeats who owe me money for carpentry work. I don't even care if you kill them all, just leave your mother and I out of it."

"You don't care?" asked Jesus, surprised at his father's literal endorsement of death for the entire town.

"Hell no, I'm well over fifty and too damn old to care, but your mother, on the other hand, doesn't seem to understand such things. So, if you decide to hang around, at least be discrete in your killings, after all, a lack of discretion is what got you killed in the first place."

"I intend to, a friend named Decius Publius told us leaving bodies all over the place is the reason we had to leave Jerusalem."

"So, who's Decius, another vampire, or a Roman werewolf?" asked a smirking Joseph, closing eyes as if in pain.

"He's the centurion who nailed me to the cross."

“A friend crucified you? What did you do to him to make him do that?” asked Joseph, opening his eyes and sitting up straight in his chair, his back making an audible crack.

“He wasn’t a friend at the time, we befriended him after I became a vampire.”

“Oh,” Joseph replied, leaning back in his chair.

“Thank you for understanding father,” said a polite Jesus, as if he were still a boy.

“Don’t mention it, and it’s not that I truly understand you son, or anything else for that matter.”

“Really?” asked Jesus, needing clarification.

“Really,” said Joseph, “Incidentally, I think after all you’ve been through, you’ve found out there’s a lot we don’t understand about almost everything.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jesus, interested in his father’s philosophy.

“Well,” said Joseph, waving hands as if encompassing the world, “Like why are we even here in the first place, and why are we always bothered by weirdos who cause nothing but trouble for everyone, like the Pharisees and the Romans. Or, what exactly is this place called earth, and what is the floating disk up there we call the moon, and just what are all those lights twinkling in the sky on a clear night? Get it?”

“Yes,” Jesus answered, remembering his cynical father was also a very wise man.

“Anyway, that’s a damn good-looking girl you have at your side, you said she was one of your followers?”

“I met her walking the streets of Magdala. She used to be a whore.”

“A streetwalker, that figures,” said Joseph, wondering if his son had ever done anything not out of the ordinary.

“She’s not a whore anymore.”

“No, now she’s a vampire, thanks to you!”

“She’s very good company.”

“That’s good,” said Joseph, resting his chin in the palm of a hand, “Your mother and I had been worried about that, after all, you are thirty-three, and haven’t exactly had too many women hanging around, if you know what I mean by that.”

“Others have thought that too, in fact, a pimp at a brothel thought – ”

“What did you expect, surrounding yourself with men?”

“I see what you mean.”

All became quiet while Joseph and Jesus sat silently, lost in their own thoughts.

“It’s said that vampires are endowed with great powers,” said Joseph, breaking the silence.

“That’s true father.”

“So, they’d best not cross you now, should they?” asked Joseph, rising from his seat.

“I suppose not.”

* * *

During the next months, Jesus and Mary stayed at the home of his parents. Various townsfolk began to disappear, quietly, as Jesus and consort walked the night, preying on his enemies, or at other times taking criminals lurking outside town. This pastime had become very lucrative for the pair. After feeding, Jesus would rob bodies before he dumped them, and at times would enter his vanquished enemies’ domiciles like a catburglar, so he could steal valuables.

Adding more loot to his stash, one dark night after he murdered Samuel Bar Saklas, the town rabbi, and disposed of the body, Jesus broke into his house, looking about for items of value. Mary followed, closing the door behind them.

Seeing a pair of silver menorahs on a small family altar, he grabbed them, dumped the unlit holy candles to the floor and slipped them into his robe.

“Aren’t those rather large?” Mary whispered, looking for other valuable articles.

“They’re made of silver; we can break them up and melt them down later.”

The rabbi’s wife appeared from the bedroom, woke by the noise. Before she could utter a word, the Magdalene leapt upon her like a wildcat, sunk fangs in her neck and sucked her dry.

“Now we have another body to get rid of!” Jesus exclaimed under his breath.

“What did you want me to do, let her scream her head off?” asked Mary, dropping the corpse to the stone floor, “Besides, it’s drizzling outside, there’s no one around who will see us.”

“True, hand me those gold goblets over there,” said Jesus, returning to his thievery. “Hey, there’s a box of money here too; please find a sack.”

Mary walked to the bedroom. Finding a shelf, she grabbed a finely woven linen bedsheet imported from Egypt. Tying the corners together and making a suitable sack, she returned and handed her creation to Jesus, who dumped the booty in it as she retrieved and handed him the goblets.

“You take the sack, I’ll get the body,” said Jesus, rolling the cadaver up in a rug.

“Okay,” Mary replied, the couple slipping unnoticed from the house into the dark and rainy night. As the rug and body bounced down a steep ravine, she asked, “You didn’t mind me killing her did you?”

“Not at all, she was a mean old bitch,” the vampiric Christ replied, walking from the brink.

The Magdalene smiled and handed him the sack of loot, wondering how Jesus had been such a kind, generous man in life, especially when most people in his hometown were so arrogant and self-righteous.

Night after night, Jesus continued in his depredations, slaughtering and robbing those who had wanted to stone him for blasphemy. Unknown to the prying Roman tax collectors, he found that many residents of Nazareth were loaded, hundreds of denarii and aurei stashed in

their homes, he and Mary happily filling his sacks with their money. When morning approached, they would hide the loot in a nearby cave, return to his parent's house and settle in for a good day's sleep in a windowless storeroom next to the kitchen.

Joseph grew used to their odd hours, and came to like Mary Magdalene, remarking one evening in the courtyard that had she and Jesus not been vampires, he would have approved of a marriage between them.

"I don't think vampires can get married," said his mother.

Joseph frowned at the crass statement and retorted, "I don't think vampires need to get married woman, after all, they're vampires!"

"But what if they have vampire babies?" she asked.

Joseph closed his eyes as if in pain and answered, "Forget it Mary, just forget it."

Jesus looked impassively to his mother, who had never been known to be particularly glib with regard to the world. Rising, she and the Magdalene headed into the house, leaving Joseph and Jesus alone in the courtyard. Joseph was drinking a glass of wine, while Jesus sat contemplating his undead existence.

His reverie was broken by his father remarking, "Did you know your brother James is wandering about Jerusalem, preaching the good news?"

"Good news, what's that?"

"Who knows, but he and some of your disciples are claiming that you rose from the dead as the Son of God," Joseph answered, reaching for more wine.

"Oh brother," said Jesus, thinking of other tragedies the family might suffer thanks to his ministry, "I really screwed up telling them all that didn't I?"

"Maybe, but look at it this way son, you could have done worse, you could have said you were the son of Satan, or even a demon," Joseph replied, staring up at the night sky.

"I suppose," said Jesus, frowning at the remark.

* * *

As more townspeople began to disappear, rumors began to circulate in southern Galilee of the vampire attacks in Jerusalem. The perpetrator was said to be none other than the risen Jesus of Nazareth, also known as Jesus Christ, and that possibly he had made his way to his hometown, preying upon those living there. In time, this news made its way to Jerusalem, the authorities there looking to Nazareth as the new feeding ground of Jesus, the vampire. Mary instinctively sensed this, and voiced these concerns one night while they were preying on highwaymen outside town.

"I talked with your father this evening," she began after they had finished their version of the evening meal.

"About what?" asked Jesus, preparing to dispose of the bodies.

"I told him I was beginning to feel uneasy, with most of the folks in town now dead thanks to

us.”

“Why?”

“It doesn’t take a scholar to figure out why, and your father told me he’d heard rumors that the new procurator Marcellus is sending soldiers here to track us,” said Mary, Jesus heaving two corpses into a ravine.

“So?”

“So we’d best be moving on, unless you’ve discovered some way to walk about in the sun,” she advised, several fat jackals beginning to feast on the bodies, sinew tearing and bones cracking in their powerful jaws.

“I don’t think we have to leave yet,” said Jesus as they headed to the house, “I’m not finished here and we can’t run away all the time.”

“Your father said King Herod Antipas might be getting involved in the investigation too.”

“Big deal, he’s nothing but a depraved, drunken asshole.”

“Jesus, what of your parents?” asked Mary, turning to look at him.

“What do you mean?”

“You know very well what I mean, if Marcellus is sending soldiers, they’ll probably just kill your folks and ask questions later.”

“No they won’t, you and I will stop them,” said Jesus, not concerned at all.

“How?”

“Like this,” Jesus replied, assuming chiropterian form.

The Magdalene, believing she understood, also transformed, both heading south toward Jerusalem. Flying over the highway, about thirty miles south of Nazareth the couple spied their quarry; a small contingent of Roman soldiers encamped by the road.

Assuming human form a few hundred yards from the encampment, Mary whispered, “We’re going to kill them all, right?”

“Wrong,” said Jesus.

“What then?”

“I’ll lead them to believe they came to Nazareth, found nothing and are returning from whence they came.”

“What if there are ones who can’t be entranced?” asked Mary, having encountered such an individual recently, preparing for the worst and hoping the coming encounter would be as easy as her love thought.

“Don’t worry woman, we’ll simply kill any like them.”

Strolling to the encampment, Jesus spied the sentinel.

“Who goes there?” he barked, issuing a challenge that had and would always echo in a soldier’s camp.

Jesus walked up and answered in Latin, “My name is James, a Samaritan trader from Bethlehem. This woman and I are travelers and are hungry. I was wondering if you might have food to spare. We are not beggars, and have money to pay your commander for any sustenance he can provide.”

“Wait here, I’ll ask Commander Valerian,” said the sentinel.

“Thank you,” Jesus replied as he turned and left.

“What do you intend to do, we can’t eat, at least not the way these people do, it’ll make us sick,” said Mary, recalling an evening when she had tried to eat a pomegranate. One of her favorite foods when alive, she had violently choked on the fruit and spat it out in seconds.

“Quiet woman, just watch, you’re not the only one among us who is cunning.”

“The commander says to come to our tent,” said the sentinel, walking back to them.

“Thank you friend,” Jesus replied as they were led to the tent. Sixteen soldiers were inside finishing their meals, two contubernia with the exception of the sentinel, and Jesus nodded in greeting to the commander.

“We have hot venison stew, bread, cheese, olives and wine,” offered Valerian with his hand out, “Ten sestertii or a finger of salt will cover it for both of you.”

“Thank you,” said Jesus, entrancing him and the others within a second.

Dropping coins in the commander’s open palm, Jesus waved a hand, motioning for him to put the coins in his money belt. Looking to all of them, he intoned in his vampire voice, “Verily I say, you are returning from Nazareth and found no evidence that Jesus, also called the Christ, was ever there. Further, the deaths you were told of are from a plague, and the commander will advise the procurator that everyone should avoid Nazareth until it passes. Do you understand?”

Each nodded, zombielike, before the Christ, as Mary beheld the powerful vampire using his incredible talent for hypnosis. She also found she was beginning to easily comprehend much of what was being said. Standing before the stupefied group, Jesus advised her in Aramaic, “Retrieve the sentinel; I’ll tell him the same story.”

“Right, and watch your voice,” she answered, bringing him before Jesus moments later.

Sending the sentinel back to his post, Jesus said in his disguised voice, “Quickly Mary, fill two bowls, empty them in the pot, dirty a pair of spoons and place them before us. Then fill two cups with wine, bring them here and have a seat.”

She did as told, sat down beside Jesus and observed, “I thought there would be at least one who couldn’t be entranced.”

“Folks like that are rather rare.”

“Can we drink this wine?” she asked, lifting the cup and sniffing at it cautiously.

“Yes, I discovered that the night I killed Pilate. I’ve always enjoyed wine, so I tasted some in a goblet at his home. Finding it satisfactory, I took the bottle back to the tomb and drank it before I rested.”

“I like wine too, that’s good to know.”

“Be careful woman, we can still get drunk, I found that out too.”

“Okay,” she replied, taking a sip.

Jesus told a filthy joke to the soldiers, waved a hand and they reanimated, bursting into riotous laughter. “That was a delightful meal kind gentlemen, thank you,” said Jesus to the commander, finishing his cup of wine.

“You tell good jokes, have another belt stranger,” a smiling Valerian replied, grabbing a wine bottle and refilling their cups to the brim.

“Where are you headed?” asked an options, or junior officer, sitting across from Jesus.

“North, we were going to stop at Nazareth for food but it is very late. It’s a good thing you gentlemen were here, as the inns and restaurants there are probably closed for the night.”

“Stay away from Nazareth,” warned Valerian, “We’ve just returned from there, a plague has struck the town and it’s nearly deserted.”

Jesus looked to Mary for a moment and replied, “Thank you for telling us commander, we were unaware of that.” Quickly finishing the second cup, he rose and said, “I’m sorry, but we must be on our way. The town of Gennesar is north of Nazareth and a friend, the Samaritan Mehomet, can put us up there.”

“I know nothing of that town stranger, just remember to avoid Nazareth,” the commander replied, “Procurator Marcellus originally sent us there to look for vampires, but when we arrived there it was practically deserted.”

“Vampires?” Jesus asked, a smile crossing his face.

“It may sound ridiculous, but there was a guy named Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified in Jerusalem some months ago. Some crazies there and a nutty Greek physician are saying he resurrected as a vampire.” Pulling loose the collar of his leather armor, he added, “See this garlic he tied around our necks? The goofy bastard claims it will protect us against vampire attacks.”

“Really,” said Jesus, noting the innocuous cloves and offering his hand to the commander. “I’ve heard of this Jesus fellow, I suppose from what you tell me they believe he went to Nazareth in search of blood.”

Valerian nodded, giving him a firm Roman handshake. “If you think that’s crazy, these are strange times, you should hear what’s going on in Rome these days.”

“How’s that?”

“Would you believe Tiberius is taxing the folks who run the brothels, you can’t even get laid without paying tribute to Caesar!”

Jesus nodded and chuckled, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, I guess," as he and the Magdalene left the tent. They bid farewell to the sentinel, heading up the highway to Nazareth. Assuming chiropterian form further on, they flew to his parent's home and walked in. It was past midnight, and they made their way to the secluded room in the rear.

"That was incredible, you made them believe they had been here and left!" Mary exclaimed.

"It was easy, but I know not how I accomplish it."

"Do you think such power may come from God?" she asked, sensing there was more to what had happened to her love than he was willing to admit.

"Who knows," said Jesus, not wanting to talk of it.

"You sure have changed when it comes to religion."

"You'd better believe it," Jesus replied, sitting down heavily in a chair.

"So, I guess that takes care of our problem," said Mary, lying down on their bed to relax.

"What problem's that?" Jesus asked, stroking his beard.

"You got rid of the soldiers, so I guess that solves our problem."

"Only temporarily, they'll be back, maybe not the same ones, but others will follow shortly if I read my Romans correctly."

"Really?"

"They won't be fooled that easily, at least not for long, sooner or later someone else will journey to Nazareth to verify their story."

"True," said Mary, thinking of what could be done to protect not only themselves, but also his parents.

Frowning, Jesus added, "I now believe you were right in what you said earlier. I've only bought us time, a few weeks or months at most; we and my folks will have to take off."

"To where?" asked Mary, surprised she would not have to argue with him.

"I reckon we should head north toward Anatolia. There are several large cities and Roman outposts there, we can feed on criminals and lose ourselves in the population."

"Sounds good to me, but what of your folks?"

"I imagine I'll have to buy them a house when we get there; we have plenty of money."

"So, what was it I heard about garlic cloves?"

"I don't know, the commander told me some people believe if they carry garlic it will ward those like us off."

"Didn't stop us did it?"

"Not at all," said Jesus, smiling.

They spent the remainder of the night discussing the evening's events, Jesus resolving that he would tell his father of the situation, and decided to advise his parents that they should prepare to leave Nazareth as quickly as possible for their own safety.

* * *

"Are you crazy?" came the angry reply from Joseph after Jesus suggested that they leave. "We've lived here for over thirty years!"

"Yes, but we've killed most of the people here, so there isn't really a town left after all. Besides, you said they were all bastards anyway, what do you care?"

"I don't, but where can we go?" demanded Joseph, "I can't even sell this goddamn dump now – you slaughtered anyone who could have bought it!"

"You don't have to worry about money father, I robbed them all too."

"Oh Jesus," said his mother, looking to her son, wondering what happened to the moral training she and Joseph had given him.

"My son, the thieving vampire," Joseph spat, "First you rob them of their lives, and then you steal their money!"

"He steals their jewelry too, and any other valuables they have when he breaks into their houses," added the Magdalene, playing with a bejeweled bauble around her neck. "Look at this necklace I'm wearing, isn't it lovely?"

"My God," said Joseph, "I finally understand the meaning of blood money!"

"Really father, they don't have any further use for it, since they're dead after we're through with them. So, I figured we can use it for ourselves."

"You have a point there," Joseph replied. Narrowing his eyes, he asked, "Just how much money do you have?"

"A lot of silver, some gold, rubies, diamonds, emeralds – "

"A small fortune in other words."

"Yes."

"Joseph, we can't take stolen money!"

"Shut up Mary," said Joseph, "I've put up with this shit for years, having an idiot wife, working as a carpenter who never gets paid, having an eldest son who thought he was God, who now is a vampire for God's sake! Now he tells us we'll be killed if we don't leave this forsaken town. I'm taking the money and leaving, and don't tell me that I can't!"

"It's not all money, some is stolen jewelry," the Magdalene corrected, still playing with her necklace.

"Whatever," retorted Joseph, looking to the bejeweled Magdalene.

"But what will God think?" asked his wife, still devout in her Hebrew faith, even after all the tragedy that had happened in her life. Reflecting, she recalled the painful humiliation of

becoming pregnant before marriage, and the slow, agonizing death of her firstborn son, nailed to a cross only months earlier, standing before her as a risen vampire.

"In my opinion Mary dear, God must be thinking some strange things lately," said Joseph, glancing at his vampiric son, Jesus looking to the ceiling.

"But – " started his wife, a hand out.

"But my ass, look at it this way woman, with the crazy Pharisees, the goofy Romans, and vampires walking about Judea, I suspect God must be loony too if he permits all these things to happen!"

Mary fell silent and looked to the floor.

"Like I said, if you need money dad, I have plenty," said Jesus.

"That's good to know," Joseph replied, exhaling heavily.

"It is indeed," said Jesus, "I've stashed most of the loot in a cave north of town. A hundred aurei should be more than enough to buy a house or perhaps a nice farm, and I'll give you a pile of silver coins too. Incidentally, do you folks need diamonds or other gems, we have lots of them."

Joseph broke into a smile and replied, "Sure, at least I'm finally getting some sort of return on my investment in this farce."

"Excellent," said Jesus, "We'll take off tomorrow night."

They prepared to leave the next evening. Joseph had filled a large leather satchel with his carpentry tools during the afternoon while his wife filled two linen sacks with provisions, clothing, bedrolls, blankets and precious family heirlooms, including an antique Roman latrunculi game board. Joseph and wife sat down for dinner, as Jesus called from the living room, "Mary and I are heading out for someone to eat."

"Enjoy your meals," Joseph replied, eating his stew, hearing the door close.

"I don't know if I'll ever get used to this," said Mary.

"You will, it's human nature," Joseph retorted, grabbing a piece of bread to soak up the remainder of his meal in the wooden bowl.

After he and the Magdalene slaughtered two of his fellow Nazarenes and returned to the house, Jesus voiced his plans for the evening. "Mary and I will be taking you north toward Syria, first we'll stop at the cave where I have the loot stashed. After we arrive, I'll fly back here as a bat and set fire to the house. That way everyone will think you perished when the house burned down."

"They probably won't even notice, considering most of them are dead thanks to you and your friend, but it is a good idea," said Joseph. "I'll stoke up the fire to make it easier for you."

"Thanks dad."

"Don't mention it, I've always hated this dump anyway," Joseph spat, walking to the fireplace.

They started off later in the evening, each laden with a sack, satchel or bedroll, leaving the nearly empty town of Nazareth behind. Arriving at the secluded cave near midnight, Jesus and Mary entered.

“Come in folks,” said Jesus.

“Are you insane, we can’t see a thing!” Joseph exclaimed, standing at the mouth of the pitch-black cavern.

“I’m sorry,” said Jesus, “We can see in the dark but you can’t.”

“Obviously, that’s because we’re normal.”

Jesus quickly fashioned and lit torches for his parents, using flint and iron to set them off, and they entered the cave. “I’m heading back to burn the house down,” he said while his mother set out bedrolls for herself and Joseph.

“Hold on, before you incinerate my home, where’s the money you have stashed?” Joseph asked, demanding proof of his son’s wealth.

“Please follow me,” said Jesus, beckoning his father, both walking by torchlight several hundred feet into the cave.

Arriving at a bend, they headed through a narrow crevice and continued on to a widening area of the cavern, where Joseph beheld a glittering pile of gold and silver coins, a set of golden goblets, two silver menorahs and a pile of precious gems.

“You’ve collected a king’s ransom!” Joseph exclaimed, overwhelmed by the sight of the hoard.

“I’ve found many of our victims are loaded,” said Jesus with a smile. “Religious clerics and highwaymen seem to have the most loot, along with plenty of jewelry. That’s fortunate, as the Magdalene seems to have quite an appetite for precious gems.”

“She was a whore son; a lot of them go for gaudy baubles.”

“True,” said Jesus, handing his father the torch, “Let’s get you loaded up and we’ll make our way back to the encampment.” Producing a leather satchel, he filled it with 200 aurei in Roman gold, thirty or so pounds of silver coins and several handfuls of glittering diamonds, rubies, sapphires, precious lapis lazuli, and emeralds. “This will make you set,” he declared, taking the torch and handing the bag to his father. Joseph, at first not realizing the weight of such a hoard, dropped the bag to the floor as his arm was pulled down, almost wrenching it from its socket.

“It’s a bit heavy father, if you like I can remove some of the silver and gold to reduce the weight.”

“No, I’ll manage,” Joseph answered, lifting the heavy bag and swinging it over his shoulder.

“Let me carry it,” offered Jesus, taking the bag with one arm.

“You’re certainly a hell of a lot stronger than I ever remember,” Joseph said with a surprised look, Jesus lifting the bag as if it were nothing.

“As a vampire I have at least ten times the strength of any mortal.”

“That sure would’ve come in handy when I was doing carpentry, except you always struck me as too lazy to do real work,” Joseph replied, getting in yet another dig at Jesus as they started back.

“I did?”

“Yeah, you usually had your head in the clouds,” said Joseph, heading through the crevice.

“I never liked working; it was too much trouble to bother with that.”

“You found even more trouble by not working, or haven’t you realized that?”

“Yes, I have father,” Jesus replied, making their way by torchlight to the mouth of the cave.

Sitting on a bedroll, Joseph opened the bag and called to his wife. “Look at this Mary, we have a fortune!”

“That’s nice, but I don’t think God will like us very much for taking it,” said Mary, eyeing the treasure in the satchel.

“God doesn’t care Mary, if God didn’t want us to have it he wouldn’t have lead us to it, now would he?”

“Jesus led you to it.”

“Yes, and God made Jesus, you and me, along with everything else, so I believe God wants us to have it, don’t you?” asked Joseph, attempting to get his wife to accept what the fates had dealt them.

“I’ll have to think about that for a while.”

“I’m taking off to torch the house,” Jesus advised, “Mary, please take care of my folks.”

“Okay,” the Magdalene answered, “Come back soon.”

“I won’t be long,” said Jesus, heading from the cave.

Walking outside, Jesus assumed chiropteris form and flew south. Transforming in the courtyard, he walked into his parent’s house, a two-story structure made of stone and wood with an extended kitchen and porch built onto the rear. Looking about for suitable fuel, he dumped two barrels of olive oil onto the rug-covered floor of the living room. Moving several pieces of stuffed furniture to the center of the room, he placed kindling beneath.

I need something to set the fire, thought Jesus. Looking about, he noticed Torah scrolls on a shelf. Grabbing these, he moved one end of the Leviticus parchment into the lit fireplace, setting it ablaze, tossing the burning scroll toward the kindling. The fire quickly caught, while Jesus moved to the kitchen, holding a flaming copy of Genesis. Lighting Deuteronomy on fire, he tossed it and the remains of Genesis into the rafters, leaving the scrolls of Exodus and Numbers on the kitchen table. The house went up quickly as Jesus flew into the night, flames starting to come through the roof.

His father had been right regarding the blaze. No one noticed the collapsed ruins until the next day, and none of those who did cared. Some of the greedier among the remaining people thanked their god Yahweh for making certain they didn’t have to pay Joseph the money they

owed him.

Returning to the dimly illuminated cave, Jesus noticed that his father had filled and lit a small oil lamp, as the torches had gone out. Sitting down, he announced the house was in flames and that his parents should remain awake until dawn.

“Why?” a weary Joseph asked, lying on his side, head resting on his treasure satchel.

“I’d like to accompany both of you until you’re settled in your new home and for the time being, we must travel by night.”

“Oh yes, the sun can destroy you and your lady friend, I forgot that.”

“Aside from that and a few other things, we’re practically invincible father.”

“What other things are those?” Joseph asked, familiar with the legend of vampires but wanting to hear what Jesus had to say about it.

“Oak stakes through the heart, and prolonged contact with fire.”

“Both will kill just about anybody, not just vampires.”

“Quite true,” said Jesus as his father looked on impassively, thinking his undead son wasn’t quite right in the head.

For the remainder of the night the group remained awake, discussing such things as the couple’s future plans, why his voice sounded weird at times, and why he had become a vampire in the first place. Jesus replied they planned to dwell in Anatolia for a while and then perhaps proceed west into Europe. As for his voice, he theorized it was a speech impediment, and if he consciously disguised it, he sounded normal. The only times it became apparent was when he grew stressed or angered, and since he was a generally placid individual he didn’t see it being much of a problem.

“You certainly sound bizarre when you lapse into that silly accent,” Joseph observed.

“Yes, but there doesn’t seem to be anything I can do about it,” said Jesus, Mary Magdalene snickering in the background.

Giving her a glare, Jesus intoned, “Vellily I say unto you voman, vone day – ”

“Come off it, you sound hilarious!” she exclaimed with a howling laugh, falling onto her back.

Jesus sat a moment, breaking into a smile, realizing she was right.

“Son, how the hell did you become a vampire?” asked Joseph, changing the subject.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” said Jesus, “All I remember about the whole affair is I was dead and then awoke as a vampire.”

“You remember that you were dead?” his mother asked in surprise, wondering if he would have remembered an afterlife had he stayed dead a little longer.

“It’s a figure of speech you half-wit!” Joseph exclaimed.

“Oh yes,” she replied, realizing what he meant.

As the sky lightened, the group settled into sleep, but only after Jesus had ripped a large tree from the ground, placing it at the mouth of the cave to hinder discovery. Joseph was amazed to observe his son accomplish such a feat, stating he was better than any saw or axe ever was when it came to felling timber.

* * *

Jesus awoke almost an hour before dusk and roused the Magdalene, his mother, and Joseph. “God does my back hurt!” Joseph cried in agony, “That’s what I get for sleeping on the ground all damn day!”

“Don’t worry, with the money you have soon you’ll be able to buy a down stuffed bed to sleep in,” said Jesus, trying to soothe him, knowing it was much too late for him to back out.

“That isn’t helping my back now is it?” Joseph retorted, rising to his feet, “I need food Mary, what do we have in the bag?”

“Bread, dates, honey, cheese, and wine.”

“Give me a stiff belt of wine will you?”

“You should eat something too, on an empty stomach you could get drunk,” she admonished, handing him a bottle.

“That’s the idea, maybe it will make my back stop hurting!”

“Don’t get too drunk dad, we have traveling to do tonight. I want to find horses and an enclosed wagon in Gennesar,” said Jesus.

“Don’t worry, I’m not that foolish son, I need it for the pain.”

“Velly – I mean very well, father.”

Joseph looked to Jesus and took a long drink from the bottle.

“Could I have a slug of that, I could use some,” said Jesus, his father sitting the bottle on the cave floor.

“Sure, you can still drink wine?” asked a surprised Joseph, handing him the bottle.

“I found that out at Pilate’s house, when I uh, visited him,” Jesus answered, looking to his mother.

“So I suppose you’re still a drunk.”

“No more than you are dad,” said Jesus, chugalugging from the bottle as his father smiled, an odd camaraderie growing between them.

Joseph and wife ate a meager breakfast as the sun slipped below the horizon. Jesus pushed away the tree and looked to the darkening sky. It was going to be a clear night with a full moon, perfect for traveling. “Let’s get a move on, Gennesar’s five miles away and we need to get there quickly,” Jesus urged from the mouth of the cave.

“What’s the hurry?” asked the Magdalene, “We can walk five lousy miles in an hour.”

“I want to get there early and find a merchant so we can buy horses and a wagon,” said Jesus.

“Why don’t you eat up the owners and steal them, you seem to steal everything else,” Joseph suggested, looking him in the eyes.

“This way will be easier father, we have plenty of money and will find more than enough food in the form of thieves or highwaymen during the trip to Anatolia.”

“That’s nice,” said Joseph, frowning at his son’s bizarre utterances.

The Magdalene grabbed his treasure sack while Joseph hid their other belongings further back in the cave. Satisfied as to security, the group left and headed north.

Walking along the road, Joseph asked, “Why do we need an enclosed wagon, wouldn’t four horses be sufficient?”

“We need one so we can travel by day, Mary and I can sleep inside while you drive the horses,” answered Jesus. “During mornings and early evenings, we can let the animals feed and rest; I’ll drive them at night while you and mother sleep in back. I also want to return to the cave and pick up your tools and the loot. We definitely need a wagon for that.”

“Good idea,” Joseph agreed, “You seem to have developed a talent when it comes to planning.”

“He’s a genius,” said Mary, “You should see the way he entrances people.”

“I’d rather not see such a thing,” Joseph replied, having an instinctive aversion to the vampiric lifestyle, thinking of Jesus or Mary entrancing their prey like cobras, and of his outwardly gentle son feeding on the blood of his human victims.

They arrived in Gennesar, Jesus quickly scouting the area for his needed items. Advising the others to wait at a nearby tavern, he stopped by a blacksmith’s shop and inquired of the owner if he knew anyone who had horses or an enclosed wagon for sale.

“I have a sturdy wagon I can sell you and my friend Barnabas has horses,” said the man, a muscular Hebrew-Samaritan named Jonas.

“How much do you want for your wagon?”

“Thirty denarii should do, I haven’t used it for a year or two but it’s in good shape,” said Jonas in an opening gambit, “Come take a look.” Opening a wide door to his shop, he showed Jesus his carriage. It was complete with harness, fully enclosed and in excellent condition, with front steerable wheels, all ironclad, and a four point, iron shackle, leather strap box suspension for a relatively smooth ride.

“Really sir, this wagon is worth much more than 30 denarii,” said Jesus while inspecting it, “Are you sure that’s all you want?” Unaware he had made a social gaff in his own country, he looked to the man. A seasoned traveler, Jesus was much more used to the idea of simply paying the asking price, as he had customarily done in Europe, India and Cathay.

“I have no further use for it so 30 denarii will cover it,” Jonas replied, a little put off by the way his customer bargained, “Besides, wait till old Barnabas charges you 100 denarii for each of his horses.”

“You have a deal,” said Jesus, handing him money, having decided on the spot that he wanted the carriage. Feeling pressed for time, he asked, “Can you show me to this Barnabas fellow’s house?”

“Sure, his place is up the street, he’s probably having dinner with his family, but the sound of silver coins will pull him from his table,” Jonas answered, surprised how fast the transaction had taken place. They headed to Barnabas’ house, situated on several acres of land, surrounded by a fenced pasture and well kept stables. “Hey Barney, I have a customer for you,” Jonas called, rapping loudly on the door.

An older gentleman with a long beard appeared in the doorway, asking Jesus, “What can I do for you stranger?”

“I need a pair of strong horses for pulling a wagon,” said Jesus, as straightforward as the horse trader.

“You came to the right place, do you want mares, geldings or stallions?”

“I’d prefer mares or geldings,” said Jesus, aware either were much more docile than stallions.

“Two hundred denarii for a pair of geldings, want to have a look?”

“Sure.”

Walking to the stable, he surveyed the lot. All were fine horses, Jesus selecting a pair of common gray Arabian geldings, blankets over their backs.

“They’re a good pair of horses, strong as any oxen,” said an exaggerating Barnabas while Jesus pulled out a moneybag and paid him. Signing over and handing him the titles, the trader was amazed how fast the stranger had purchased the animals. After all, in Judea even the most hurried bargaining took at least ten minutes to settle on the price.

“Thank you, I’m certain they’re fine animals,” Jesus replied, leading the horses from the stable.

“I thank you sir,” said a surprised Barnabas, looking to the money in his hand.

“I’ll help you hitch them up, it’s a bit tricky if you haven’t done it before,” Jonas offered as Jesus led the geldings to the blacksmith shop. Hitching the horses proved no problem, the capable Jonas completing the task for Jesus while he watched.

“So friend, where are you headed with this rig?” Jonas asked, tightening the harnesses as Jesus folded the blankets and placed them on the seat of the carriage.

“North into Anatolia,” said Jesus, embellishing a bit, “I have Roman relatives there, and am claiming an inheritance from an uncle in the northeastern sector.”

“I figured you for a Roman of sorts,” Jonas replied, slipping into Latin from Aramaic as he pulled the cinches tight, “I suppose living down here gave you that beard and long hair.”

“I’m half Samaritan,” Jesus lied, answering in Latin.

“So am I, that explains it,” said Jonas, stepping away from the rig.

“I thank you sir, you’re a kind gentleman,” Jesus replied, mounting the wagon, “Let me give

you twenty more denarii for your trouble.”

“There’s no need of that,” said Jonas, declining, surprised at how much of a spendthrift the traveler was.

“I insist,” Jesus replied, dropping 20 silver coins in his hand. “Thank you and goodbye,” he added, leaning down and giving him a firm Roman handshake. Taking the reins, he pulled out and headed to the tavern, leaving blacksmith Jonas staring at his handful of coins in disbelief. Familiar with horses, Jesus drove the wagon to the tavern, stepped down and walked into the establishment. It was almost closing time, he observing his parents enjoying a meal.

The Magdalene was occupied protecting his parents from danger, as she had grown rather fond of the two over the past months. Holding Joseph’s satchel of treasure in her lap, she kept a close watch on other patrons for threatening moves.

In his usual detached manner, Jesus walked over, sat down and said, “We have transportation for the trip north, an enclosed wagon and two gelding horses.”

“How much did it cost you?” asked Joseph, finishing a bowl of venison and cabbage soup.

“250 denarii,” said Jesus, “Practically a steal.”

“You can say that again,” Joseph replied, “The horses alone would have cost maybe 400 in southern Galilee, and 500 or so in Jerusalem.”

“Are you ready to go?” asked Jesus, impatient to resume the journey.

“In a moment,” his mother admonished as if he were a fidgety child, “We’ll leave as soon as we finish dinner.”

“Yes mother, but we have a lot of work to do tonight and I’m a little hungry myself.”

“So am I,” the Magdalene added.

“Imagine that,” said Joseph, sitting his spoon down and reaching for a cup of wine.

Shortly thereafter the group was heading south at a leisurely pace to the cave, Jesus at the reins beside his consort. His parents were sitting in the wagon, Joseph having slid aside a movable wooden panel to converse with him and the Magdalene.

“Don’t tell me you’re really heading back for the loot,” said Joseph, thinking that with his son’s talent for thievery it was pointless.

“That’s right,” Jesus replied, “We’ll be traveling a great distance into Anatolia, so there’s no point leaving it here.”

“Why bother, just steal more, you seem rather good at it,” Joseph suggested, seemingly intent on insulting Jesus.

“I will, but why should I go through the trouble of robbing people if I don’t take it with me, besides, your tools and other belongings are there too,” Jesus replied, oblivious of his father’s sarcasm.

“You’re right,” said Joseph, surprised his son could think that far ahead.

They arrived quickly, Jesus and father entering the pitch-black cave by torchlight. Joseph loaded his tools and other belongings in the wagon, with Jesus returning from the depths of the cavern, effortlessly carrying his loot over a shoulder in a sack weighing approximately 200 pounds.

Heaving the heavy sack in the rear of the wagon, his father observed, "You vampires certainly have the rest of us beat when it comes to strength."

"Yes," said Jesus, "It comes in handy when one has work to do."

"Really," Joseph replied, closing and latching the rear door, wondering if vampirism was a type of infection that made hard workers out of lazy philosophers.

They passed Gennesar, heading north. It was getting near midnight, Mary Magdalene breaking the silence by remarking, "We'll have to find someone to eat soon."

"They'll turn up, they always do," said Jesus, "The road to Lebanon's desolate and a perfect hunting ground for thieves and highwaymen."

"Perfect for them or for us?"

"For us of course," a smiling Jesus answered, remembering when a traveler he had been the one to take precautions, having carried weapons of many types, and having had to use them on more than one occasion. Their wait for a nutritious hemoglobin dinner did not take long, for exactly as Jesus had predicted, a band of robbers were lurking only a few hundred yards up the road. They spotted them in the distance by the heat of their bodies, long before the group would have any chance of surprise, not that it would have mattered.

"Lock the carriage doors and wait inside father," said Jesus, turning his head to the wagon for a moment, trying to prepare his parents for the inevitable as they approached a trio of highwaymen lurking in the chaparral.

"Why?" his father asked.

"Robbers are ahead and it's time for our supper."

"Ah yes," said Joseph, raising an eyebrow. Noting that Jesus and consort would be dining out again, he closed and bolted the doors.

The robbers moved into the road, blocking their path, Jesus bringing the wagon to a gentle stop.

"That's a nice wagon, want to sell it?" came a question from one of the men, a rotund creature of nearly 300 pounds.

"No," Jesus answered.

"How about the woman, is she for sale?" another asked with an evil smile, eyeing Mary.

"I don't know, you'll have to ask her," said Jesus, waving in his consort's direction.

"Jesus!" the Magdalene exclaimed, "I don't do that any more!"

"Perhaps not, but you did say you like to have fun with them didn't you?"

“I get it.”

They stepped from the wagon and headed toward the robbers. With a broad smile, Jesus asked, “I suppose you fellows are merchants of sorts?”

“This guy’s even stupider than he looks,” one remarked to the fat man, the leader of the band.

“We’re not merchants, just thieves,” said the third, anticipating a victim’s usual fear.

“So you steal things,” Jesus replied, walking up with Mary at his side, “So do we.”

The highwaymen moved back a few steps, intimidated by the fearlessness of the undead Son of Man. “What do you steal?” asked one, looking up to the much taller Jesus.

“Lives,” said Mary, baring fangs while Jesus froze them to their spots.

“Now who’s stupid?” asked Jesus of the statuesque thieves.

Mary grabbed one; sinking fangs deep, she sucked him dry as the others looked on in horror. Pulling from the throat, she released and the corpse fell to the ground in a crumpled heap. “One down, two to go,” she said, wiping blood dripping from her mouth.

“Save one for me will you woman?”

“Take the fat one – he’s probably filled with blood.”

“Sure,” said Jesus, grabbing the entranced fat man and draining his life from him while Mary gorged on the blood of the other.

“Joseph, why did the wagon stop?” his wife asked.

“Our son and his friend have found someone to eat along the way,” said Joseph, becoming used to the fact that Jesus was a vampire.

“Oh,” she replied, not wanting to press further.

A few minutes later a knock came on the door, Jesus announcing, “You can come out, folks, it’s safe.”

The rear door opened, his mother remarking to Jesus as he helped her down, “It was getting stuffy in there with the doors and windows closed.” She looked about, saw the bodies and fainted in Joseph’s arms.

“This is going to take a little getting used to,” said Joseph, laying his wife in the back of the wagon on a blanket.

“You’re doing rather well with it, father.”

“Nothing bothers me, but your mother’s another story,” said Joseph, eyeing the corpses.

“I’ve noticed she’s always been that way, kind of flighty,” Jesus observed, feeling a twinge of embarrassment at the implied criticism of his mother.

“You’re telling me,” said Joseph, “And I’ve had to live with her for thirty-four years.”

“You must truly love her after all this time,” the Magdalene replied, kneeling by her victim,

rummaging through his clothes with thorough ruthlessness, searching for valuables.

“Of course, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t crazy at times,” Joseph answered, fondly thinking of his wife.

“We’d best clean up our mess,” said Jesus, walking to the bodies. Finding a hoard of silver on the fat one, he added, “Will you bring a sack father, this man is loaded with hundreds of denarii!”

“Sure,” Joseph replied as his wife awakened. “Stay here Mary, I don’t think you’re ready for all this yet,” he ordered, grabbing an empty satchel.

His wife did as told while Joseph brought the satchel to Jesus.

“He was a fat one wasn’t he?” Joseph observed, watching Jesus rip a gold pendant from the corpse’s neck.

“Yeah, I almost broke one of my fangs on the necklace this bastard was wearing,” an annoyed Jesus spat.

“They’ll grow back if you break one won’t they?”

“Of course, but why go through the bother,” said Jesus as he filled the satchel, “Garlic may not work on us, but I think a metal torque around the neck just might!”

“Let’s hope they don’t come into general fashion,” Mary snickered, eyeing the pendant. Noticing this, Jesus tossed the gleaming bauble to his partner.

“Just bite them someplace else,” suggested Joseph, Jesus and the Magdalene looking to him.

“You’d make a good vampire dad,” said Jesus, handing him the treasure-laden satchel.

“No I wouldn’t, but thanks just the same,” Joseph replied, heading to the wagon and climbing in.

“Let’s ditch these guys,” said Jesus.

“There’s a cliff over there, we can throw them over it.”

“Good idea,” said Jesus, dragging the fat one by his feet and heaving the other cadaver over a shoulder, the Magdalene lifting the third corpse with one arm. Heading to the cliff, they disposed of their victims, tossing them into a deep ravine. “That takes care of that,” he added as the bodies bounced down the cliff, landing in broken heaps at the bottom.

They walked to the wagon and Jesus climbed aboard, taking the reins while Mary made sure his parents were safely inside. Taking her place beside him, they resumed the trip north.

Chapter Three: The Exodus

The trip to the Anatolian border took nearly three months, the group stopping at roadside markets in Lebanon and Syria to replenish his parent's food supplies. When in town they stopped at local inns to bathe and refresh themselves. Informed of this fact early in the trip by his father, Jesus and his consort found that even vampires, regardless of fastidiousness in the taking of victims, were in need of a bath occasionally.

During that time, the couple learned more about their undead natures, finding they could fast for a night or two when their form of food was not readily available, or could even substitute blood from lower forms of life if necessary. Both found such animal fare unappetizing, but it did fill the certain void they felt when pangs of hunger came calling. In these lean times along the desolate Roman highway, they had no other choice available. In their wake, they had left several auroch, ox, boar, and deer carcasses littering the road, drained of blood, bloating and rotting in the sun during the day.

The New Year arrived, 34 of the Common Era coming uneventfully for the travelers while passing through southwestern Syria. A few weeks later they arrived at a large city named Antioch during the evening. The capitol of the eastern part of the Roman Empire, like Rome, Antioch was a city that never slept, inns, taverns, and brothels open all night long. A modern city by the standards of the day, Antioch was a beautiful place, with gleaming marble buildings, ornate fountains, a central forum or marketplace, and was surrounded by thick groves of cypress trees.

"So this is the big city," Joseph observed, watching shivering patrons standing in line outside a brothel on the cool night, "If you ask me they can keep it."

"I agree with you," said Jesus, "I usually prefer the country and small towns too."

"Hunting will be much better here," a famished Magdalene spoke up.

"We won't be here long woman, but I suppose it would be a good idea to take a breather at an inn and get a bite to eat."

Joseph smiled, amused at the euphemisms his son used to describe cold-blooded murder.

Stopping at an inn, Jesus walked to the office and rented two spacious rooms for the group. "I want the rooms for two days, leaving on the evening after tomorrow."

"Certainly," the innkeeper replied, "Breakfast is at seven, dinner at six, you buy lunch elsewhere."

"I find my own food," said Jesus with a slight smile, "But my parents will be happy to know hot meals are available."

"Suit yourself," said the innkeeper as Jesus handed him money. He pointed to their transportation and added, "You'll have to stable your horses and wagon across the street."

"No problem, incidentally sir, can they give the horses a comb and feed?"

"Sure, it's five sestertii per horse."

“Thank you,” said Jesus, returning to the wagon. “I’ve rented rooms, numbers sixteen and seventeen,” he announced to the weary group. Handing his consort the keys, he climbed in the seat and added, “Mary, please take mother and father to their room; I’ll unload the wagon.”

“I’ll carry Joseph’s satchel and tools,” the Magdalene replied, lifting them from the rear with ease and closing the door, Joseph watching in amazement.

“By all means, thanks,” said Jesus, taking the reins and driving the wagon to the stable.

“Ten sestertii to park for a day, take the rig to stall six,” the stable manager barked as Jesus entered.

“I’m staying for two; I want the horses fed and groomed too.”

“That’ll cost you twenty-five.”

Jesus pulled coins from a leather pouch tied at his waist, handing him twenty-five orichalcum sestertii coins, obverses bearing the likeness of Tiberius, reverses bearing fasces and the abbreviation ‘SC’. Nodding to the manager, he moved the carriage to a stall marked with the Roman numerals VI. Stepping down, he called a stable hand.

“Unhitch these beasts, comb and feed them,” Jesus ordered a muscular, bronzed Syrian slave.

“Yes sir,” answered the slave, tending the tired horses.

“These are fine animals sir, swift Arabian geldings,” the slave observed, inspecting the horses.

“Yes,” said Jesus, opening a wagon door, “We’ve owned them for the past few months, a trader in northern Judea sold them to me.” Ignoring the sack of worthless clothes, he lifted out his bag of treasure, now weighing 220 pounds, while the slave watered and began to comb down the horses. Walking across the street, Jesus entered a dark alleyway. A lone figure approached, directly in his path.

“What’s in the bag man?” asked the figure, clearly a common criminal.

“None of your goddamned business,” Jesus spat, the man blocking his path.

“Wrong answer,” the man retorted, pulling a dagger.

“Don’t play with me asshole,” said Jesus in his vampire voice.

“Give me the bag.”

Narrowing his eyes in contempt, Jesus waited for him to make his move. It didn’t take long, the man lunging at him with the dagger seconds later. Dropping the bag, the vampiric Christ grabbed his assailant’s arm with his left and held it, breaking his neck with his right. The robber went limp, his dagger falling to the ground. Heaving the fresh corpse over a shoulder, he lifted the bag with his free arm. Kicking the dagger to the gutter, he headed to his room, depositing the bag and body beneath the bed. He entered the adjacent room where his parents and consort were relaxing and announced, “Please come to our room Mary, I have a present for you.”

“Oh goody,” said the Magdalene, “I’ve always liked presents.”

Jesus turned to his parents. "Please be certain to lock the door father; this is not the best of neighborhoods."

Joseph nodded, barring the door as they left. Returning to their pitch-black room, Jesus opened the door and entered.

"Where's my present?" asked Mary.

"Under the bed."

Looking beneath the bed, she pulled the cadaver out by a limp, pale arm and exclaimed, "My supper, why thank you Jesus!" Noticing the lack of bite marks on the neck, she asked, "Didn't you have some?"

"No, please remember dear Mary, vampires do not live by blood alone. Besides, you were right, there are plenty of meals available here."

"Who was he?"

"A robber who wanted my bag, so I broke his neck. Enjoy your supper, I'm heading out to find another," said Jesus, leaving and closing the door behind him.

Strolling down the alley, he passed by the inn's registration office and headed to the main street. Seeing a drunken whore weaving down the sidewalk with one of her patrons, Jesus recalled his ill-fated ministry and silently observed, ***This world is indeed a terrible place – my simplistic view of this forsaken mess was really skewed.*** Dismissing the bitter thought, he continued past, heading for the heart of the city.

His hunt did not take long, for within minutes yet another thief appeared from a side street, brandishing a dagger. Walking up, he growled in Aramaic, "Give me your money or I'll kill you!"

"I seriously doubt that, and I don't have any money with me friend," said Jesus in his native tongue.

"I don't have friends!" retorted the thief.

"Your statement strikes me as obvious."

"What?"

"Never mind, forget that I said it," Jesus answered, annoyed at the thief's stupidity.

"Give me your jewels," the thief ordered, waving his dagger.

"I don't have any of those on me either."

"What are you, a bum?"

"No," Jesus replied, thoroughly bored with the situation.

"What are you then?"

"A vampire, looking for someone exactly like you," said Jesus, freezing his assailant where he stood. Saying nothing further, he plunged fangs in the throat, draining his life from him. Remembering that he should clean up leftover messes to avoid problems, Jesus retrieved the

dagger, placing it in his cloak. Lifting the body from the street, he heaved it over a shoulder, looking about for a place to dump it. He spied a public lavatorium, made his way over, and entered. Making certain it was deserted, he checked the corpse for valuables. Tearing off the victim's tunic pockets in search of the smallest coin, Jesus found nothing. Annoyed by the lack of a payoff, he hurled the body down a latrine shaft, where it landed in the sewer with a loud splash.

"I wonder if he'll clog the sewer, not that I care," said a chuckling Jesus, smiling as he left.

Returning to their room, Mary was on the bed relaxing, the emptied corpse on its side at her feet. "They go stale fast, not that it was bad or anything," she observed, Jesus sitting down on the bed with her.

"Yeah, what can you do," Jesus replied, "Guess what, I've found a really good place to dump bodies."

"Where?"

"Public lavatoriums, I dropped mine down the shaft of a latrine, the sewer will carry them away."

"Just like shit, what a great idea! I've always said you were a genius, would you like to get rid of this one?"

"Why not, want to come along?"

"Sure," said the Magdalene, "I love the night."

They headed to another lavatorium, the second cadaver over Jesus' shoulder. He propped the corpse up on a commode seat, intent on checking the body for money. A disgusted Mary interjected, "I checked him, he didn't have as much as a shekel."

"Figures," said Jesus, stopping his search, "The other robber had nothing either, the thieves in this city must be poor, stupid or perhaps both."

"This one certainly was," she agreed, as Jesus dumped the body headfirst into the latrine.

"Lavatoriums will come in handy in the future," said Jesus, "It's too bad they're not around everywhere."

"That's the truth," Mary replied, looking into the latrine and watching the floating corpse disappear headfirst into the sewer pipe.

Heading to their room, Jesus related the events he observed while hunting for his nourishment. Unlike his new self and atavistically like his old, he was bitterly complaining of the decadence of Antioch, whores and robbers plying the streets like so many flies, concluding that the thief he had killed had mistook him for a bum.

"So what, the entire world's decadent and there's nothing we can do about it, so why let it bother you?"

"It doesn't really anymore," Jesus answered, not being completely truthful, "I was just making conversation."

“But you are bothered that a common thief mistook you for a beggar,” Mary countered, with keen insight into his personality.

“Perhaps.”

“You know, if you cut your hair and trim that long beard, maybe people wouldn’t think you were an indigent,” she suggested as diplomatically as possible.

“You think so?”

“When in Rome, one does as Romans do.”

“We’re not in Rome woman.”

“We may as well be,” said Mary, “Antioch’s the capital of this part of the empire and most men here don’t look as unkempt. If you paid some attention to your appearance you might blend in a bit.”

“Really?” asked Jesus, thinking he hadn’t gone to that much trouble while traveling when younger, not recalling the sheltering care his hosts had lavished on him. As a philosopher of some fame, it hadn’t mattered as to his appearance; most figuring he was simply eccentric.

“We can give it a try if you like, I have a brush and shears.”

“Why not,” said Jesus as they entered their room.

Over the next hour, Mary gave Jesus a makeover, cutting off his long hair and trimming his beard, changing his appearance so dramatically that it was hard to for his consort to recognize him.

Observing his reflection in her polished bronze mirror, Jesus declared that he indeed looked better, venturing that it might be appropriate if he were clean-shaven like the Romans were.

“I’m afraid I don’t have a razor or even a strop for one; we could probably pick one up from a barbershop,” said Mary.

“I definitely want to,” agreed a smiling Jesus, looking in the mirror like a budding narcissist, “Thank you very much, you’ve made me look a lot better.”

The Magdalene smiled back. “At the brothel the pimps and whores always let me cut their hair, some said I should have opened a salon,” she not revealing she had been saving money to do so before meeting him in Magdala, as a whore can last only so long.

“You’d have made a lot of money,” Jesus replied.

At the tender age of 24, Mary Magdalene had saved nearly 100 denarii from her honest work of cutting hair for the local pimps and whores, and was on the verge of opening a salon until Jesus Christ came along. After meeting him, she had used the money to buy fish and bread for a multitude attending the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus having thanked her for helping him perform the miracle.

“We’d best cover the window,” said Jesus, glancing to an open window near the ceiling, noticing the sky starting to lighten. Walking to the opening, he added, “It’s facing east, all we’d need is to be fried by the sun while we sleep.”

“Close the shutters, I closed them for your folks in their room to deter bandits.”

“Good idea,” Jesus replied, closing and locking the shutters.

Tired, they moved to their bed for a good day’s sleep.

* * *

The following evening, it was Joseph who was knocking on Jesus’ door, as the couple had overslept, thoroughly enjoying their comfortable quarters. Waking about an hour after dark to the noise, a groggy Jesus rose, rubbing his eyes and making his way to the door in the darkness. Unbarring and opening the door, his father, holding a shielded candle, was taken back for a moment.

“I’m sorry sir, I have the wrong room; I was looking for my son.”

“It is I father,” Jesus announced with a yawn.

“What happened, you almost look like a Roman!”

“Please come in and I’ll tell you,” said Jesus, again yawning.

“Would you light a lamp please, I can’t see that well in the dark.”

Taking his father’s candle, he lit an oil lamp as the Magdalene was rising from slumber. “Good evening Joseph,” she said with a tired smile, sitting up as he entered the room and closed the door.

Joseph nodded to her, again asking, “So son, what happened to your hair?”

“Mary gave me a haircut and trimmed my beard, what do you think?”

“It’s about time,” said Joseph, “You looked strange with all that hair flying about, it’s no damn wonder you had so much trouble in Jerusalem. If you remember I tried to tell you that you know.”

“Yes father.”

“A robber mistook him for a beggar last night,” said Mary.

“That doesn’t surprise me, he certainly looked like one,” Joseph retorted, looking to Jesus and asking, “I imagine you made him pay for that?”

“Well, he was trying to rob me.”

“I don’t blame you, in fact, you’re probably saving a lot of other decent folk from being robbed or even killed by feeding on such people.”

“I hadn’t looked at it that way,” said Jesus, raising an eyebrow.

“See, it all depends on your point of view,” Joseph replied, “From what I’ve seen, the pair of you are simply disposing of people who aren’t any good anyway, so as far as I’m concerned, keep up the good work.”

“Thanks dad,” said Jesus, shocked by his father’s pronouncements.

“Yeah, as to the reason I came by, your mother and I just had dinner and were wondering if you’d like to join us for wine and perhaps a game of Iatrunculi, that is after you have had your uh, meals,” Joseph offered, inviting the pair to join them.

“You have the board?” asked Jesus, a skilled player of the game.

“Of course, it’s almost a hundred years old, it belonged to my grandfather and I still have all the ivory pieces too.”

“I’d like that very much; what do you think Mary?”

“Why not, there isn’t much to do here anyway, except feed on criminals.”

“We should be by in about an hour dad.”

“We’ll be expecting you,” said Joseph, returning to his room.

“Dad’s really warming up to us being vampires,” Jesus observed with a smile.

“I like your folks, and your father’s a wise man,” said Mary, moving from the bed.

“That’s true, but in the past I never realized how wise.”

“You were too busy telling others how to live, so how could you notice? Not that what you said was bad or anything, but you never had time for anyone else’s opinions.”

“I don’t think my suggestions were that far off, if people followed them the world would be a much better place to live.”

“I won’t fault you there, you did have some damn good ideas,” said Mary, brushing her hair, “But you forgot most people are egotists who couldn’t care less about their own families, let alone their fellow man.”

“I wouldn’t have agreed in the past, but I think that’s the truth now. I was wasting my time preaching to them, and many folks didn’t like what I had to say anyway.”

“People everywhere, especially the rich and powerful, never like hearing the truth about themselves, and you constantly pointed out, rather bluntly I might add, that they were hypocrites. As a consequence, they hated you, and finally killed you for that.”

“Yes,” said Jesus, “I recall you arguing with me heatedly, stating I was wasting my time and just pissing them off. I didn’t agree with you then, but I now believe you were right.”

“Don’t worry dear Jesus, we’re all wrong sometimes,” a smiling Mary replied, taking his hand as they left their room.

They stepped into the night in search of prey. It didn’t take long, for as usual the garbage of humanity appeared, bent on robbery or rape, and were quickly disposed of by undead custodians Jesus and Mary. Shortly thereafter, two corpses coursed their way through the dank sewers of Antioch, and the couple made their way through the cool night to his parent’s room.

“Come in,” said Joseph, answering the door. They entered, and he added casually, “You both look well – who did you kill off tonight?”

“A pair of robbers,” Jesus answered, looking to his mother.

“You look very nice with your new haircut Jesus, and hello Mary,” said his mother. Surprisingly, she didn’t appear shocked or even faint from hearing his candid admissions of murder. At a loss for words, Jesus looked to his father.

“I explained it all to her today,” said Joseph.

“What exactly did you explain?”

“I said you make a point to take only those who cross you, and that I think it’s very commendable.”

“I do most times, but I must tell you mother, Mary isn’t as selective as I when it comes to that. Fortunately, as her master, I – ”

“Jesus!” the Magdalene exclaimed, embarrassed at the revelation.

“So what, shit happens,” said Joseph, his wife looking to the floor and shrugging. “Have a seat son, I’ve set up the board, would you both like wine?”

“Please,” Jesus replied, and took a seat.

Filling glasses, Joseph handed his guests strong Syrian wine, guaranteed to make even the most seasoned drinker happy in a short time.

After several intense games of latrunculi, Joseph gave up. He threw up his hands and exclaimed, “That’s the fourth time you’ve trapped my eagle. I can never beat you at this damned game!”

“I’m sorry father, I used to play a lot with my friend John, he was an expert and the only disciple who could beat me.”

“I have a few tricks left, but I have to head to the lavatorium first,” a drunken Joseph replied.

“They don’t have slop jars in the rooms; I need to go too,” Jesus observed, he also inebriated.

“You still do that?” asked Joseph, raising eyebrows in surprise as they headed out.

“Of course, but only liquids, I haven’t done the other since before I died.”

“Incredible, but I suppose all that blood and wine have to go somewhere,” Joseph replied, walking into the dimly lamp lit lavatorium.

“Guess what father, we’re using a lavatorium down the street to dump bodies,” said Jesus while answering nature’s call.

“You are?” Joseph asked, not caring in the least as to where the leftover corpses went for disposal, as long as they were not found.

“Yes, the sewers carry them away, preventing any possibility of discovery.”

“Like so many turds.”

“Mary said the same thing.”

“You know son, it’s strange to think I may be pissing on someone’s head as he floats by.”

Jesus burst into laughter, falling to the floor in drunken pleasure.

Joseph, laughing, walked over and asked, “Can I help you up?”

“Thanks dad,” said a still laughing Jesus, taking his father’s arm and rising unsteadily to his feet. The drunken pair made their way back to the room, weaving as they went.

They played latrunculi and drank wine until the wee hours of the morning, with Joseph winning two games between trips to the lavatorium, the drunken Christ starting to make colossal mistakes in strategy. Mary and his mother quietly conversed, discussing housekeeping and fashions of clothing, at times gently complaining about their men as well. As the sky lightened, Joseph retired to bed with his wife, Mary helping Jesus to their room, where he collapsed unconscious, face down, on the bed. She joined him after barring the door, settling into sleep next to her snoring partner, having enjoyed the delightful evening.

* * *

“My aching head!” moaned Joseph as he woke at dusk, still drunk, afflicted with a severe, pounding hangover.

“Are you all right Joseph?” asked Mary, knowing the answer.

“No, Syrians brew a mean wine,” Joseph answered in throbbing pain.

His wife had risen earlier, cleaning up from the night’s revelry. Joseph sat up in the bed, holding his head in his hands.

“Give me some wine will you?” he asked with a cough, making his head pound even more.

“Yes dear, this should help,” said Mary, handing him a filled glass while he sat on the edge of the bed.

A seemingly loud knock came on the door, Joseph calling in agony, “Who is it?”

“Jesus.”

“Open the door Mary.”

She opened the door and the couple entered, Jesus carrying his sack of loot over a shoulder.

“It’s almost check out time dad, are you ready to go?” asked Jesus while his mother closed the door.

“Oh God,” Joseph groaned, “What’s the hurry, we don’t really have anyplace to go do we?”

“Are you sick?” the Magdalene asked, looking in his direction.

“I have a hell of a hangover,” Joseph moaned, finishing his wine. He looked to his placid vampiric son, focused and asked, “Aren’t you hungover too?”

“I’ve never felt better in my uh, life,” said Jesus, “That’s strange, in the past when I got drunk I always felt terrible the morning after.”

“Must have something to do with being a vampire,” Joseph replied, falling to the mattress with

another groan.

“Probably,” said the Magdalene, looking to Jesus.

“I could fix it for you father, by bringing you to our realm.”

“No, I’ll manage, but thank you anyway. I wouldn’t make a very good vampire, life’s bad enough without that.”

Jesus looked to his father impassively.

“I don’t think your father and I should travel tonight,” said his mother, frowning at her husband.

“You’re right mother, I’ll rent the rooms for another night and we’ll leave tomorrow.”

“Thanks son,” Joseph moaned from his bed as they left.

They returned to their room, Jesus sliding his treasure-laden sack under the bed.

Reaching for a tan robe to wear over his tunic, Jesus advised, “It’s cool tonight woman. I think we should start wearing cloaks and the like when we’re about.”

“But I don’t feel cold at all,” said Mary, surprised that she had not noticed the change in weather.

“Neither am I, but it will look strange if we walk around without warm garments in wintertime, this way we’ll fit in better.”

“You learn fast,” said a smiling Mary.

Putting on the robe, Jesus replied, “I’m heading to the office to pay the rent. I’ll be back shortly, then we’ll go out for dinner.”

“Don’t be long,” said Mary as he passed through the threshold.

Jesus walked to the manager’s office, renting the rooms for another night. Crossing the street, he handed 13 sestertii to the stable manager, telling him to keep the change. During the exchanges, both men complimented his new hairstyle, the stable manager suggesting that he shave his beard to complete the transformation. Jesus acknowledged the suggestions politely and made his way to his room, troubled about his parents, especially his father.

“That’s the second time I offered to make dad a vampire and he’s turned me down on both occasions,” said Jesus, sitting down in a chair.

“Maybe he doesn’t want to be one,” the Magdalene replied, “I imagine some folks aren’t cut out for this kind of life, you know, killing people most every night, and sucking their blood and all.”

“That’s probably true, but he’s an older man, which means he will pass soon.”

“You love your parents don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” said Jesus, looking to the floor.

“Well, you’ll simply have to accept the fact that they’ll be gone one day, as will all who we have known. Both of my parents are dead and I miss them, but they’re gone forever, and there’s

nothing I can do about it.”

“But I can do something about it,” said Jesus, looking to her.

“You haven’t changed one bit; you still think you have all the answers, and believe only your way is best.”

“I do?”

“Yes, it bothers you a great deal that your parents are content being mortal, and don’t seem to mind the fact that they will die.”

Jesus sat a moment, contemplating. “But I could save them from that.”

“You see? You haven’t changed at all, and remember you once thought you could save everybody.”

“No I – ”

The Magdalene pointed at him in emphasis. “That’s bullshit, you still don’t realize some folks don’t want, or even need to be saved.”

“They don’t?”

“Not at all, your parents are content with what they are, and they’re happy, so let it go.”

“But – ”

“No buts, one day you’ll realize that you can’t save the world, especially when it doesn’t even want to be saved,” she added, reflecting on the bitter truth of her statement.

Jesus sat silently, knowing in his heart that regarding such matters, as usual, Mary Magdalene was correct. Later, they headed into the dark night, dressed appropriately for the season, on the hunt for their version of the evening meal. Strolling along, they observed that Antioch was truly a decadent town, walking past packed brothels, accosted with offers by depraved members of both sexes. Ignoring the solicitations, they continued to the heart of the city, knowing they would soon run across suitable victims.

“Antioch’s worse than Sodom or Gomorrah ever was,” Jesus observed, making their way past a barbershop.

“Who cares, let’s buy you a razor,” said Mary, turning and heading for the establishment with Jesus following. They entered near closing time. The Roman owner was cleaning his instruments in a basin, and the Magdalene asked in fluent Latin, “Excuse me sir, do you have razors available for purchase?”

“Certainly,” the barber answered, drying his hands, “Two denarii for a bronze razor, three for a steel one; do you need a strop for it?”

“Yes,” answered Jesus.

“Ten sestertii for the strop, so what’ll it be sir?”

“Buy a steel one,” the Magdalene advised, “You don’t need to sharpen them as often.”

"The lady's right sir," said the barber, reaching for a gleaming steel example of a folding straight razor, "I exclusively use and recommend steel razors for my customers, made by Egyptian blacksmiths."

"Yes, this is satisfactory," Jesus replied, inspecting the razor, "We'll take the strop too."

"Three denarii, twenty sestertii," the barber declared, wrapping the razor and strop in a cloth.

"Here's five denarii, would you have a pouch for it?" asked Jesus, handing him money.

"Sure, but it's only 5 sestertii," the barber answered, looking at the coins in his palm.

"Keep the change for your trouble," said Jesus as the barber handed him a leather pouch.

"Thank you sir," the barber replied, Jesus placing his purchase in a robe pocket, and starting with the Magdalene toward the door.

"Your quite welcome," said Jesus. Heading into the street, he looked to Mary. "I never knew you could speak Latin that well!"

"I couldn't speak Latin at all till you made me a vampire and I listened to you speaking it," Mary replied with an impish smile.

"Incredible," said Jesus, "I imagine there's more to being vampires than we first realized," neither knowing that an inherent predilection to learn languages or skills fast was part of a vampire's camouflage, an ability akin to a chameleon fitting into its surroundings.

"You can say that again, and I like it too," Mary answered, taking Jesus' hand in hers. They resumed their hunt for dinner, heading into downtown Antioch, and for the moment, seeing no one suitable, according to Jesus' strict specifications. "Where the hell are they?" she asked a few hours later, looking about, beginning to feel hunger pangs.

"It's early yet," said Jesus near midnight, continuing their stroll around town.

"Where's a criminal when you need him?"

Pausing to relax, they sat down on a stone bench, taking in the sights of the big city from a deserted central park. While Jesus sat in placid contemplation of life, the world, God and his vampiric existence, his reverie was broken by a poorly aimed dagger, the blade coming to an abrupt stop in a tree only inches from his head.

"There he is," said Mary, seeing the assailant from body heat while he hid in the shadows.

Jesus, undisturbed by the attack, reached in his robe with his left, pulling a dagger taken from another thief. "Watch this woman," he said with a sinister grin, throwing the sharp dagger underhanded from a sitting position. The speeding blade caught the man in his chest with an audible 'thunk', cleaving his heart in two. Clutching his upper torso, he staggered backwards and collapsed dead on the sidewalk.

"Good throw!" Mary exclaimed as they strolled to their quarry. Looking to the body, she asked, "Where'd you learn to throw a dagger like that?"

"Verily I say, the Son of Man can be a dangerous person when crossed," Jesus intoned in his Draculaesque monotone.

“I know, but that doesn’t answer my question.”

“When I was a child, I didn’t have many friends outside of my family and spent a lot of time alone. So, among other things, I learned to throw knives as a pastime. Ask my father, he’s the one who taught me how to use knives and swords,” Jesus replied in his disguised voice, now usually coming to him naturally.

“I didn’t know that,” said Mary, staring at the corpse, dagger stuck in the chest, “I thought you were only a simple preacher in those days.”

“There are a lot of things you didn’t know about me then,” Jesus replied, recalling his childhood loneliness as only an adult could: for had he only felt complete when his brothers and sisters were around? When their family started to break up shortly after his return to Nazareth, with his sister’s marriages and his brothers starting their own families and businesses in Capernaum, the introspective Jesus had started to feel left out.

“Like what?”

“Like when I left India when I was 28, by that time I was an expert swordsman, thanks to the teachings of their warriors, the Kushan priests stating that I was an incarnation of the god Shiva.”

“Who’s that?” asked Mary, interested in the Hindu religion.

“Shiva the destroyer, sort of like the Hebrew lesser god Satan, that deity considered an aspect of their supreme god, a being called Vishnu.”

“Weren’t too far off were they?” the Magdalene observed, Jesus shrugging at her reply.

Reaching down, he pulled the dagger from the man’s chest. Hot blood poured from the gaping wound, and he wiped the blade on the rags he was wearing. Noting this, Jesus said, “You’d best get to your supper before it runs out on the ground.”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to kill him in the usual way?” asked Mary, sinking fangs in the neck.

“He seemed to like knives so much, I figured I’d give the bastard one,” said Jesus, tucking the dagger in his robe while Mary drained the corpse.

Her meal finished, they dragged the body to an alley and checked it for valuables. Finding nothing, which was usual for the criminals of Antioch, Jesus grabbed the corpse by the hair and dumped it in a lavatorium, where it floated away in the current with other refuse.

“Come to think of it, I wonder if he was a robber,” said Mary as they left, “By the way he behaved he could have been a simple killer, or a rapist.”

“Who cares,” Jesus replied, heading to the stone bench and pulling the man’s dagger from the tree. “All I know is that he tossed a knife at me and I killed him for his efforts. Holding the blade, he asked, “Are you in need of a dagger woman, I already have one.”

“Why not,” said the Magdalene, taking the blade and placing it in a nook in her cloak. “What do you want to do now?” she asked, taking his hand, resuming their stroll.

“Find another I suppose, I’m getting a bit hungry myself.”

* * *

An hour passed, the couple heading into an even seedier section of town, pimps and whores lining the streets, hawking their unseemly wares, drunks lying unconscious in doorways and gutters. Jesus looked aghast at the appalling spectacles passing him, Mary remarking, “Don’t be too shocked, this is the real world Jesus old friend, get used to it and move on.”

“This is unbelievable.”

“Believe it, then ignore it.”

Walking past a gambling hall, a pair of undesirables standing in the doorway studied the couple and began to follow them, not realizing their clumsy moves had been noticed.

“We’ve picked up trouble,” said Mary as they headed down a side street.

“Just what I was looking for,” Jesus replied, deliberately turning into a dark alley with her. “Head for the end of the alley, I’ll stay here,” he ordered, sinking into the shadows next to a wall. “When they enter, let them walk past me but don’t let them pass you.”

“Got it,” said Mary, heading to the end of the alley.

The hoodlums rounded the corner and entered the alley. Seeing no one and looking about, one asked the other in Syrian accented Latin, “Where the hell’d they go?”

“Probably ran to the other end,” his partner answered as they broke into a run, “We’ll get them, this is too easy.”

“Not easy enough,” announced the Magdalene, moving from the shadows, standing in their path.

Stopping, they pulled daggers, moving toward the apparently helpless woman.

“Don’t you people ever use clubs or swords?” asked Mary, hands on hips.

“What?”

“I mean, can’t you be a little more inventive, you always seem to use daggers here and it’s getting a bit old,” she teased with a smile.

Confused for a moment, then ignoring her statement, one asked, “Where’s the other one?”

“Right here friend,” Jesus answered from behind, smiling and baring fangs while Mary did the same.

“They’re vampires!” cried one, terrified, dropping his dagger and in panic attempting to run past Mary. Grabbing him by his hair, she threw him hard against a wall. He fell unconscious to the pavement, suffering from a badly fractured skull. Walking to the dying form, she lifted him with one arm, sunk fangs in his neck and drained him on the spot.

“So, what do you plan to do?” asked Jesus of the bandit’s partner, leaning against the wall and smiling at his victim. The hoodlum stood terrified, dagger falling to the ground, an unmistakable noise coming from his posterior as Jesus walked up and grabbed him by his

soiled tunic. Frowning at the noxious odor, he remarked, "This one just shit himself, can you believe it?"

"Doesn't surprise me a bit," said Mary, rising from her victim, "I don't think they expected this, do you?"

"No," Jesus replied, raising the struggling man in the air with one arm, sinking fangs in the neck and dispatching him. Dropping the corpse, he added, "I suppose we'll never run out of idiots like these."

"The world seems to be full of them."

Laden with two cadavers, the sated duo looked for a lavatorium, skirting lit torches along the main thoroughfare. Finding none in the area, a bathhouse was pressed into service; a small lavatorium was in the rear. Jesus checked the bodies for loot, and flushed the remains into the sewers of Antioch.

"At least these ones had money," said Mary as they left the bathhouse.

"Only a few denarii, hardly worth the trouble."

"They had plenty of blood in them didn't they?"

"True," said Jesus, chuckling at the remark.

Making their way to their room at about four, they entered the pitch-black lair.

Sitting down in a chair, Mary observed, "You really loosened up tonight didn't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"The way you knifed the first guy was neat, and you didn't even try to entrance the other two, you had fun with them instead."

"So?"

"It struck me as unusual, since most times you freeze them to their spots and suck their blood like a two-legged tick."

"You liked that?"

"Yes."

"May I ask why?"

"You can't be that thick," answered Mary, "I simply mean you made taking them enjoyable for a change and not so damn ritualistic."

"Oh yes, I see what you mean," said Jesus, nodding and reflecting on the evening's events.

"Would you like to try out the razor?" Mary asked, changing the subject.

"Sure, do you know how to use one?"

Mary looked to him and frowned. "What the hell do you think?"

“I’m sorry,” said Jesus, recalling their past conversation, reaching in his robe and handing her the razor.

“Goddamnit,” Mary spat, “I usually use olive oil for a shave but we don’t have any.”

“There’s some sort of oil in the lamps, can we use that?” asked Jesus, pointing to one.

“Sure, that’s a good idea, I never would have thought of that. Let me strop the razor and you get the oil,” said Mary, tying one end of the strop to a bedpost, holding the other end in her left hand, quickly stropping the razor with her right.

Jesus walked to one of several unlit oil lamps hanging on the walls, removed one and brought it to her.

“I’ve never had a shave,” said Jesus, handing her the lamp, “I’ve worn a beard since I was fourteen; what do we do with the oil?”

“Really?” asked Mary, returning the lamp, “Take oil from the lamp and rub it into your beard, making certain it reaches your skin.”

“Why?”

“Just do it, it lubricates the skin so the razor won’t cut you,” she answered, inspecting the freshly stropped blade, annoyed at his ignorance.

Moments later, his beard was drenched in oil, much to the Magdalene’s chagrin. Frowning and ignoring the oil soaked beard, she asked, “What do you want, clean shave, goatee, moustache?”

“Clean shave,” said Jesus, turning up his chin for the blade.

“You’ll look like a Roman when I’m done.”

“Good, I’m tired of looking like a Hebrew.”

“Okay,” said Mary, giving Jesus his first shave. In minutes, he was shorn of his remaining beard, cheeks and chin smooth as any baby’s bottom. “You look great!” she exclaimed, the vampiric Christ rubbing his bare chin.

“It feels strange.”

“That’s because you don’t have any hair on your face,” said Mary, reaching for her mirror. Jesus looked at the reflection of his clean-shaven countenance, giving a smile of approval to his consort. “We’ll have to get you a toga now – you’d really look good in one.”

“Only Roman citizens can wear togas,” said Jesus, informing her of one aspect of Roman law.

“Who cares, Roman laws, indeed, any laws, don’t apply to vampires! Besides, I don’t think you’ll be walking around the forum in broad daylight anytime soon wearing a Patrician toga.”

“Masquerading as a Roman citizen is also a capital offense,” Jesus added, “Augustus Caesar had the Senate ratify that law over twenty years ago.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, we’re already dead, so what can they do?”

“Well, they – ”

“Well what, I don’t think the Praetorian Guard prowls about Asia with oak stakes at three in the morning, searching for vampires who wear togas,” Mary retorted, ‘Asia’ the term used by Romans for the Middle East.

“Yes, that’s quite true,” said Jesus with an ironic smile.

Talking for the remainder of the night about his plans for the following evening, he also resolved to replace much of his current garb as soon as possible, in exchange for fine Roman tunics and an accessorizing toga. As the sun rose sleepiness set in, the couple retiring for their daytime slumber. Joseph came knocking at dusk, holding his shielded candle, Jesus answering the door.

“You’re changing rapidly,” Joseph observed, beholding his clean-shaven son.

“We’re going to find a toga for him next, I think he’ll look good in one,” said the Magdalene.

“Probably, considering he looks like any other Roman fellow now.”

Jesus took the candle, lighting a lamp, and asked, “I see you’re feeling better, are you and mother ready to leave?”

“As ready as we’ll ever be,” Joseph answered, “You know son, maybe your girl can give your mother and I a makeover too, she did a fine job with you.”

“I’d love to,” said the Magdalene, “If you like we can do it at the next stop.”

“That’ll be fine,” replied Joseph, walking to the door, “I’ll collect your mother, we’ll be back in a minute.”

“There’s no need for that father, we’ll follow you to your room. After all, one of us has to carry your belongings,” said Jesus, lifting his heavy sack from beneath the bed.

“Oh yes,” Joseph replied, still amazed at the incredible strength of vampires.

They headed to his parent’s room, Mary retrieving his carpentry tools and satchel of treasure, Joseph and wife following after he locked the door. Arriving at the office, Jesus handed the clerk the keys and checked out, walking across the street to the stable. Pulling out in the wagon, he drove to his waiting parents, loaded their belongings and climbed behind the reins, Mary at his side. His parents sitting in the rear, they headed to the city gates and resumed the trip north.

As they were leaving the locale of the inn, the stable manager walked to the office and exclaimed, “That gentleman tipped me five denarii!”

“He gave me five too,” said the innkeeper, “I’ll tell you something else, the older folks with them seemed okay, but there was something strange about that guy and his girl, and I can’t put my finger on it.”

“I thought so too,” the stable manager replied, looking to the coins in his hand as the wagon disappeared in the distance.

“Centurion Decius Publius is at the top of the duty roster,” Maxentius Jovanius remarked to the new procurator of Judea, Titus Marcellus, as they stood in the summer palace in coastal Caesarea with the aide Antonias, the new procurator preferring this residence only.

“Call him here, Thucydides of Delos has connections with Tiberius,” said Marcellus, “If we don’t at least send soldiers to track this Jesus character, the Emperor will have my ass!”

“Do you believe Jesus of Nazareth is a vampire?” Maxentius asked, Antonias occupied reading an official document concerning yet another Judean messiah named Lucius the Christ.

“Hell no, there are no vampires, besides, he’s been dead nearly a year,” said Marcellus, “But Dr. Thucydides thinks he is and sent a letter to Rome.”

“So?”

“So Tiberius sent a letter from Capri, informing me that Thucydides is a good friend of his, and a learned genius, and that we are charged with tracking a vampire named Jesus of Nazareth.”

“Are you kidding?”

“If I were do you think I’d tell you this horseshit?”

“No, and would you believe that a few idiots from Jerusalem are wandering about, saying Jesus rose from the dead as the Son of God?” asked Maxentius.

“Who are they?”

“Some of his disciples, I think they call themselves Christians.”

“Are they claiming he’s a vampire?” asked Marcellus.

“Not at all.”

“I wonder if this Lucius Christ fellow is one of those,” Antonias spoke up.

“Who in hell is Lucius Christ?” asked the procurator.

“Another one of their messiahs, like Jesus Christ of Nazareth was, according to this,” said Antonias, handing his new boss the document.

“By the gods, it figures, why the hell did Tiberius send me here?” Marcellus groaned, rubbing his forehead as he stared at the report.

“Pilate said the same thing to Antonias,” Maxentius replied, jerking a thumb at his fellow bureaucrat as the aide nodded in agreement.

“Did he, well, please see to it that the centurion is called,” said Marcellus, quickly reading the document.

“I’ll tend to it immediately,” answered Maxentius, giving him a Roman salute.

A little over two days later, centurion T. Decius Publius and his eight men, traveling from Jerusalem, appeared before procurator Marcellus, informed that he was in charge of a contubernia ordered by Tiberius to track Jesus, the vampire.

“Are you serious sir?” Decius asked, feigning an incredulous look, knowing that Jesus Christ,

the Son of Man, a former Levite rabbi, was in fact a bloodsucking vampire, but also a friend of his, sworn on his personal honor.

“Yes I am centurion, Tiberius ordered it.”

“I’m the one who crucified him, he’s dead as a coffin nail.”

“You did?”

“Yes sir, he died on the cross last spring.”

“That doesn’t mean he didn’t rise as a vampire,” Dr. Thucydides declared, walking into the atrium.

“Do I have to deal with this clown again?” asked Decius.

“I don’t believe him either, but Tiberius ordered it and we must follow the emperor’s directives,” Marcellus answered, looking to Decius with a sympathetic gaze.

“He’s a madman,” said Decius, looking to Thucydides.

“Be that as it may centurion, you are charged with tracking Jesus the vampire,” Marcellus replied, almost laughing as he uttered the order.

“Yes sir,” said Decius with a sinking feeling, giving the procurator a salute, their orders to march to the practically empty town of Nazareth.

Several weeks passed, Jesus and company pressing on into Anatolia, passing through small towns, his parents dining at taverns, he and the Magdalene dining out, so to speak, on worthless members of society that they came across.

“Where exactly are we heading son?” Joseph asked on a cool evening from the rear of the wagon, a full moon rising overhead.

“Northeast,” Jesus said over his shoulder.

“I know that,” Joseph retorted, “But where?”

“The valleys of eastern Anatolia, in the region of upper Cappadocia near the Euphrates River. The area is remote, wooded, and the land is good for farming.”

“You’re forgetting one thing son. I’m a carpenter, not a dirt farmer.”

“So what, we’ll buy slaves too, you can use them to tend the farm.”

“I suppose that’ll work,” said Joseph, falling silent, wondering where Jesus would find slaves for him, and what else his son had in mind for he and his wife.

They drove on to a desolate section of highway, not far from the town of Mansahir.

Mary Magdalene, like the hunter she had become, spotted a pair of warm figures in the distance, not waiting to ambush, they were lying still at the side of the deserted road.

“I wonder if they’re sleeping,” she asked as they drew closer.

“I think not,” said Jesus, pulling the wagon up to where they lay.

Stepping from the wagon, he walked to the pair, both alive but battered and bruised by a group of thieves, having been left for dead. "My name is Euripides, a trader from Macedonia, help us please," one called in Greek, holding out an arm in a gesture of pleading.

"Do you speak Latin or Aramaic, I'm not familiar with Greek," Jesus answered in Latin, half understanding the man's sentence.

"Yes," said Euripides, telling Jesus in passable Latin of his woes.

"Don't worry friend, we're here to help," Jesus replied, giving him a pat on the shoulder.

"You're Roman aren't you?" asked Euripides, trying to focus on Jesus.

"No, I'm a Samaritan named James, what happened to you?"

"Highwaymen robbed us and took off with our horses."

Joseph and Mary walked up, along with a hungry Magdalene, fangs baring in her mouth.

"What did they look like?" Jesus asked the bruised and bloodied man.

"There were four, I don't remember exactly what they looked like, but one had an eye missing and wore a patch," Euripides answered, trying to recall their faces.

Jesus raised his eyebrows, making a mental note of the statement.

"He sure looks like hell," said Joseph, looking at Euripides' battered face, "I imagine robbers beat the shit out of them, right?"

"Yes," Jesus replied, "Let's move them to the wagon, we'll take them to Mansahir for medical attention."

"My lord," said Jesus' mother, not at all used to such occurrences.

"Why are you bothering with them?" the Magdalene asked, annoyed at having to take in the men.

"It's the right thing to do," said Jesus, moved by his innate sense of justice.

"Oh well, no dinner tonight," Mary retorted while Jesus helped Euripides to his feet.

"It's early yet, perhaps we'll find the folks who did this on the way to town," said Jesus, "Please help the other man to the wagon Mary."

"If you say so," the Magdalene replied, walking to the other man, concluding that Jesus would never change his ways, even as a vampire.

Helping them into the wagon, his mother tended their wounds as best she could while her son took the reins, moving the horses at a gallop toward Mansahir, his consort and Joseph at his side. Entering the town, they pulled up to the first inn they found. Jesus headed to the office, asking the innkeeper if he had rooms to rent, and if a physician was available to tend to the injured men.

"We have rooms, but there's no doctor available. My sister's a midwife, will that help?"

"It'll have to," said Jesus, paying him for three rooms, asking if stabling was available for the

horses and wagon.

“No,” the man answered, “Park the rig in front of your room, that will suffice, there’s hay next to the water trough. I’ll get my sister, she’ll meet you at the rooms.”

“Thank you sir,” Jesus replied as the man left the counter and headed to the back. “We have lodging for the night,” he announced, leaving the office, walking to the wagon and climbing aboard. Pulling in front of the rooms, he stepped down and tied the horses to a hitching post. The Magdalene walked to the rear of the wagon, opened the door and helped Euripides out, along with his partner and Jesus’ mother. Both men had recovered somewhat and were on their feet, but were in need of food and medical attention. Showing them to a warm room, Mary headed to her room as Jesus was placing his loot beneath the bed for safekeeping.

“This is ridiculous,” said Mary, “Why the hell did you bother with a pair of silly Romans when we have to find supper!”

“They’re Greek woman; I think they deserved our help since it happened to them through no fault of their own.”

“Whatever, I said you’d never change, you’re still going out of your way to help stupid mortal people.”

“Please understand, it was the right thing to do, and remember I helped you out of a jam once in your hometown.”

“That’s true,” said Mary, “I guess there’s nothing wrong with having compassion once in a while, just don’t do it too often will you?”

“I don’t intend to, after they and my folks are settled in, we’re going out to find their attackers, then you’ll see how heartless I can be,” Jesus answered with a sinister smile.

Mary smiled back, leaving to tend to his parents, carrying their belongings to their room.

The innkeeper’s sister arrived while Jesus was walking the horses to cool them after the hard run. He pointed to the door of the injured men. She entered, cleaned them up and brought them much needed food.

“James the Samaritan is a kind man,” said Euripides to the midwife, named Sarai, as she wrapped a bandage around his head.

“That’s rare these days,” Sarai grumbled, “He’s either a saint or a damned fool.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Euripides, surprised at her surly attitude.

“You’re new to this forsaken place aren’t you?” retorted Sarai as she patched them up, “There’s so many thieves and pirates in this area that it’s ridiculous. The army won’t do anything about it, and that guy blunders into town thinking he can make a difference?”

“He saved us,” said Euripides, defending his benefactor.

“You’re one of the few. It’s practically anarchy in this section of the province, if it wasn’t for the whores in this town giving free pieces of ass to the soldiers to keep them here, we’d all be dead!”

“Really?” mumbled Thales, partner of Euripides, sitting up and looking to Sarai.

“You’re damn lucky to be alive,” she said, moving to Thales. She checked his jaw and remarked, “Not broken, only dislocated, lie down on your back and stay still. I warn you, this is going to hurt.” Placing her right palm next to the hinge of his jaw, she moved her hand below it toward his neck, moving her left arm back and striking her fist sharply against her right hand. Hearing a pop as the jawbone snapped in position, Thales moaned in agony, his hands clutching the bedposts. Producing a bottle of strong Anatolian grog laced with opium, she handed it to him and said, “Drink a few slugs of this, it will ease your pain.”

“Thank you,” a grateful Thales mumbled, taking a long pull from the bottle.

“Your jaw will feel better in a few weeks, watch it for a while when it comes to eating. Nothing hard, no chewing, only soup and such,” the midwife advised, Thales sinking into his bed. Gathering up her bandages and herbs, along with a few healing talismans, Sarai left and closed the door, not uttering another word. Euripides looked to his battered partner from his bed, yawned, and both settled into much-needed sleep.

* * *

Joseph came to Jesus’ door and knocked, Mary letting him in as she was brushing her hair. “That was a good thing you did son, your mother and I are proud of you,” he said, sitting down in a chair.

“Thanks dad,” Jesus replied, “Mary jumped on me about it though.”

“I didn’t mean anything, it’s just with all the trouble you’ve had in the past, by helping people and all, I figured I’d look out for you.”

“She has a point,” Joseph agreed, “Mary’s a smart girl, it would do you well to consider what she has to say on occasion.”

“Yes father,” said Jesus, feeling they were ganging up on him.

“Nevertheless,” Joseph continued, “I think you did the right thing tonight regarding those poor Roman fellows.”

“They’re Greeks father.”

“Greeks, Romans, what the hell’s the difference?” Joseph retorted, turning to the Magdalene, “Do you think you could come over and do our hair while we’re here?”

“Sure, but we have to find dinner first, will you be up later?”

“Probably, knock on our door when you get back,” said Joseph, rising from his seat and leaving.

Mary watched as Joseph closed the door. Turning to Jesus and folding arms across her ample chest, she remarked, “So, what do you want to do, I’m famished.”

“I figured we’d fly from town and find the ones who robbed the Greeks.”

“Good idea, they can’t have gone far.”

“Exactly.”

Assuming chiropterian form, they flew from an open window and headed south, looking for warm bodies from the air. A short time later they spied their quarry encamped several miles from the road, a campfire burning brightly next to their tent. Alighting and transforming a few hundred feet from the camp, Mary asked, “How will we know these are the robbers and not nomads camped out in the wilderness?”

“What do you care?” Jesus asked, trying to understand her seeming change of heart.

“I don’t, you’re the one who cares about things like that.”

“Yes I do,” Jesus answered, “Euripides said one will be missing an eye.”

“Good for him,” said Mary while they headed toward the camp.

A pair of Arabian stallions stood tied up to a twisted olive tree, with four men sitting around a campfire, getting drunk. One was wearing an eye patch, clearly proving they were the vicious assailants of Euripides and his business partner.

“Okay, what do we do?” Mary whispered while they hid in the chaparral.

“I haven’t decided, but these are definitely the ones who robbed the Greeks. What do you think woman, you always seem to have a better handle on this sort of thing.”

“A diversion will work,” said the Magdalene, watching their victims.

“Really?” asked Jesus, interested in her predatory tactics.

“Yes, and have your dagger ready if you want to have fun with them,” she answered, brushing hair from her face.

“Okay, it’s your move woman.”

Planning further, she added, “Could you hit one of them in the head with the dagger, instead of the chest?”

“Easily,” said a confident Jesus, “You want to save the blood don’t you?”

“Why not,” she replied, “Watch this, my love.” Throwing pebbles toward the men and shaking a bush, she caught the attention of the inebriated road pirates. Growling something in native Anatolian, one rose and walked toward the disturbance, carrying a short sword. As he passed the Magdalene, she broke his neck by snapping it with one hand, draining him on the spot and dropping the corpse to the ground with an audible thud. Hearing the noise, the others rose and headed to their fallen comrade as Mary called, “Now Jesus!”

Pulling a dagger, Jesus aimed the weapon at the temple of the one-eyed man. Throwing it overhand for maximum power, the speeding blade found its mark, piercing his temple. The dagger entered his skull, the man’s remaining eye crazily looking to the sky for a moment, as if asking God for a reason for his scrambled brain. It continued up to the hilt, and the man died on the spot, his body hitting the ground like a stone, dagger through the head. His comrades turning to view his demise, Jesus and Mary moved into the open, cornering their remaining victims next to the tent, baring fangs.

“Vampires!” came the cry, Jesus declaring, “Next time fools, beware of Greeks who have friends.”

“What?” asked one, understanding the Latin vernacular.

“The men you robbed this evening, they were friends of mine.”

“Only brief acquaintances really,” said Mary, running her tongue over her fangs.

Grabbing the men, they sunk fangs in their necks, sucking their blood until they died.

“That was fun wasn’t it?” Mary asked as Jesus walked to the one-eyed man’s body, knelt down and sucked it dry.

Glancing at the corpses, Jesus belched and answered, “I get it now. It’s more fun to deal with them directly, rather than by using entrancement.”

“I’ll tell you another thing, you’re damned good with that dagger, you nailed him in the temple, that’s incredible!”

“I can hit anything within fifty cubits,” said Jesus, pulling the dagger from the man’s head and rising to his feet. No blood was evident on the blade, so Jesus slipped it in his robe.

“Is that so?”

“I’m good with a sword too. I told you before my father taught me the fundamentals as a child, but I really learned to fight with blades in my twenties when traveling through India.”

“Yes, I remember you telling that to Simon Peter in Galilee.”

“Ah Peter, I called him my rock, now he’s as dead as a stone,” said Jesus, waxing philosophical.

“Are you going to rob them?” asked Mary, looking to the bodies.

“Need you ask?” Jesus replied while checking the one-eyed man’s corpse for loot. “It’s as if this man were made of silver,” he added in surprise, finding a hoard of denarii on the body.

“He’s wearing a nice toga too.”

“That he is,” said Jesus, looking at the fancy clothing, “He was a Roman citizen, look at the signet ring on his finger and the leather shoes on his feet. Let’s take his clothes too; I could use a new pair of duds.” He robbed the other bodies, gathering a pile of metallic loot that he placed in two leather sacks, one bursting with silver; the other filled with gold and jewelry. While Jesus rooted through their tent, Mary stripped the one-eyed cadaver, saving the Egyptian cotton tunic, fine leather shoes, and wool plebian toga for her consort.

“He sure had a small pecker,” Mary observed, looking to the naked body after her consort had returned from the tent.

“Don’t be so coarse woman, it’s unbecoming of you,” said Jesus, “That’s a man’s province.”

“You’re trying to say men are pigs and women aren’t?”

“Not quite, but close.”

“That’s not true at all, you’ll find women are much worse in that area than men are even capable of,” Mary retorted, a hint of anger in her voice.

“What do you mean?”

“Women are more carnal than men can ever be, or haven’t you noticed?”

“Really?” Jesus asked, looking to her.

“Remember, I was a whore in Magdala and Jerusalem and I liked it a lot, because it felt good to use men, especially when most of those flaccid bastards couldn’t satisfy me even if they’d screwed me for years. Hell, in the past I’d bed just about anything for money to feed myself, tell me dear Jesus, would you?” she asked, dropping the stolen clothing and putting hands on hips.

“Well, I don’t think I could do – ”

“That’s my point, men are pigs on the surface, where it looks good, women are pigs in their souls. Do you remember Adam’s wife Eve, in Genesis?”

“I understand,” said Jesus, holding up hands in surrender.

“Good, that means you’re one of the few men who can actually admit that!”

“Are you serious?” asked Jesus, looking his angered consort in the eyes.

“What do you think? Actually, it’s a damn good thing women are that way; otherwise, the race would die out in one generation. Tell me, can you imagine anyone in their right mind who actually wants to pass something the size of a melon in agony?”

“You mean bearing a child,” said Jesus, understanding her vivid allegory.

“Of course - women, out of unremitting carnal desire, take the risk of dying during childbirth, along with being tied to the demands of a child afterward.”

“So what, that’s the truth of our existence, if you’re looking to blame anyone for the role of your sex, blame God, if such a being even exists.”

“Even then no one appreciates us or what we do in caring for babes and children, men demeaning us or holding us in contempt for simply being women!”

“Whatever,” said Jesus, lifting leather sacks over his shoulder, “Why are you giving me such hostility Mary, do you really think men don’t appreciate women?”

“Yes I do, look how your father treats your mother – would you want to be treated that way?”

“He doesn’t mean it, he’s a bitter old man.”

“You always said to treat others as you would have them treat you, did you mean it for men only?”

“Of course not,” said Jesus, disgusted by the remark.

“Your disciples certainly seemed to think so, look how they used to order the women who followed you!”

“I wasn’t there all the time, what the hell could I do?” an angered Jesus asked, the couple having an argument in the middle of a desert, surrounded by cooling bodies.

“They thought of us as camp followers, and didn’t even have the common decency to pay us for waiting on them hand and foot. We may as well have been their slaves for all they thought of us!” Mary exclaimed, ignoring her consort’s question, hands still on her hips.

“Stop,” Jesus ordered, holding up a hand. “I understand, and it was not I who did that, especially to you, nor to any other woman I encountered!”

Mary grew silent, obeying him, while Jesus knelt down and retrieved the stolen clothing.

“Are we going to steal back their horses?” she asked.

“Why not,” said Jesus, “These dead men have no use for them, besides, we have at least sixty pounds of loot, and we can’t carry that kind of weight around easily as bats, can we?”

“No,” Mary replied, walking to the pair of Arabians, loosening their tethers from the olive tree.

Jesus placed his sacks of booty over one horse’s back, Mary asking, “What do you want to do with the bodies?”

“Leave them for the jackals. They’re in the middle of nowhere; by the time someone finds them, if they ever do, they’ll be bleached skeletons, and no one around here cares anyway.”

They mounted the steeds, leaving the area with the campfire still burning brightly, galloping back to Mansahir. Tying up the horses in front of Euripides’ room, they walked to his parent’s room carrying their loot, and knocked.

Jesus’ mother answered the door. “Please come in, we’ve been expecting you.”

“Hello son,” said Joseph, “Did you kill off the bastards who beat the Greeks?”

“Yes, we also robbed them and stole back their horses.”

“Good,” Joseph replied, “After all this time justice is being done!”

“I hadn’t looked at it that way,” said Jesus, dropping the sacks of loot to next to a table, still ruminating on what the Magdalene had said earlier.

“Your father’s right,” his mother declared with an uncharacteristic harshness, “It’s about time somebody killed off rotten sonofabitches who do such things!”

“You explained it to her well didn’t you father?” asked Jesus, never having heard his mother speak that way.

“Yeah, she isn’t half as stupid as I once thought,” Joseph replied, forgetting himself for a moment and quickly adding, “I’m sorry wife, I didn’t mean that.”

Mary looked to her husband and sighed. Turning from him, she asked the Magdalene, “So, Joseph told me you’re a beautician of sorts.”

“I guess,” said the Magdalene, “I used to cut hair for the pimps and whores of the brothels I worked at.”

“Is that so?” Mary asked.

“Can you make me look like Jesus does?” asked Joseph, attempting to change the subject.

His wife looked to him impassively as the Magdalene answered, “Certainly, let’s get started immediately.”

Jesus and his mother watched while Mary cut Joseph’s hair short, making him look much younger than his fifty plus years, and trimmed off his long but neat beard in preparation for the razor.

“I’ve never had a shave,” said a nervous Joseph, beholding the gleaming steel blade in the Magdalene’s hand.

“Don’t worry father, it’s easy,” Jesus replied, trying to soothe his father’s justified fear.

“Easy for you maybe, you’re a vampire,” Joseph retorted, “What if she cuts my throat with that thing?”

“I won’t cut you, I have very steady hands,” said Mary, holding them out so he could see she did not tremble. Turning to Jesus, she asked, “Would you get oil from a lamp please?”

“What’s that for?” asked Joseph, for a moment imagining his beard being burned off by flaming oil.

“It lubricates the skin so the razor won’t nick you,” said Jesus, removing a lamp from the wall and blowing it out, handing it to his consort.

“I see; if you nick me you won’t go crazy over the blood will you?”

“Of course not,” Mary answered, rubbing warm oil into his beard, “We’ve already eaten anyway.”

“You did at that,” said Joseph.

“Besides, even if I did lose control, good Jesus would protect you,” she teased with an impish grin, Jesus smiling at the remark.

“Okay,” said Joseph, turning up his chin, “Let her rip, or better yet, give me a close shave.”

Within minutes, he was shorn of his remaining beard without the tiniest cut. Mary presented her mirror, Joseph marveling at the reflected image of his hairless face.

“It feels so weird,” said Joseph, rubbing his smooth chin.

“He said the same thing,” Mary replied, looking to her consort, “You’re looking a little haggard yourself Jesus, you could use a shave too.”

“Really?” asked Jesus, rubbing stubble on his face.

“It’s been weeks since your last shave, you don’t want to go around looking like a bum do you?”

“No, go ahead and shave me.” Sitting on a stool, he drenched his short beard in oil.

“You use too entirely too much oil, next time let me do it will you?” said Mary, wiping the

excess from his face. She shaved him, trimmed his mother's hair, and even took time to give her, Joseph and Jesus a quick manicure.

"We look so nice," said his mother, admiring her nails as she stood near a wall lamp. Looking to her clean-shaven husband, she asked, "Do you think we could get some henna, I'd like to try on designs I used to see on the Bedouin and Samaritan women."

"Sure, I don't care," Joseph replied.

"I must admit I found it attractive," said Mary, "Like carrying around a beautiful piece of embroidery on your body. I never understood why the priests said we weren't allowed to wear such things, it seems so - "

"Maybe because the priests were a bunch of sanctimonious assholes who liked to control people," Joseph retorted, looking to his wife with a frown, not wanting to continue the conversation.

Sensing her husband's ire and turning from him, she looked to the Magdalene and said, "We thank you very much Mary, you're very talented when it comes to cosmetology."

"I'm pretty good when it comes to clothing styles too," the Magdalene volunteered, producing the sack containing the looted clothes, "Look at this fine toga, we stripped it from one of the robbers we killed tonight."

"My God!" his mother exclaimed, almost fainting while looking at the bloodstained upper area of the toga.

"Don't worry, the blood will wash out easily with cold water," said Mary.

"I suppose," said his breathless mother, leaning heavily on a chair.

Jesus sat oblivious while Joseph stared at the ceiling, smiling in amusement.

* * *

Euripides came knocking on Joseph's door a few hours after sunup. He opened the door, half-asleep, beholding the black-eyed and bandaged man. Knowing that most Greeks didn't speak Aramaic or Hebrew, and familiar with the Roman tongue from his days in Judea, while rubbing his eyes he asked gruffly in passable Latin, "What do you want?"

"Nothing sir," Euripides answered in Greek, for a moment not recognizing the clean-shaven Joseph.

"What the hell did you just say man, I don't speak Greek!" Joseph exclaimed.

"I'm sorry," Euripides apologized in Latin, "Nothing sir, I was trying to speak with James, but when I knocked on the door I got no answer."

"Oh yes, my son James, he and his girl keep odd hours."

"They're sleeping?"

"Yes," said Joseph, "So were we."

"I'm sorry."

“No problem, I’m hungry anyway; have you had breakfast?” Joseph asked, realizing he had to cover for Jesus.

“No sir, and just where are we, I was out of it last night.”

“Mansahir, about five miles north of where you were robbed.”

His wife woke, startled, and asked, “What is it Joseph?”

“It’s the trader Euripides,” Joseph answered in Aramaic, “He was looking for our son.”

“Oh,” said Mary, sitting up in bed, “Did you tell him he’s asleep and hates being disturbed at this time?”

“I told him,” Joseph replied, “I’m heading out for grub, I’ll be back in a little while woman.” Closing the door, he looked to Euripides and said, “I’m buying, let’s find breakfast shall we?”

Pointing to the animals tethered in front of his room, Euripides replied, “Would you believe it, our horses returned during the night.”

“Yes uh, we happened upon them, riderless on the road into town, so we tied them to our wagon figuring they were yours,” Joseph lied, making up the story as he went along.

“That’s strange, I seem to remember the bandits riding off with them,” said a confused Euripides, trying to piece the events together.

“Maybe you just thought they did,” Joseph answered, “You were rather delirious when we found you.”

“Perhaps,” said Euripides, not buying the reply, but knowing he shouldn’t be so stupid as to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“So, how’s your partner?” Joseph asked while they headed to a tavern.

“Thales is feeling a bit better. I told him I’d try to bring food for him.”

“You definitely will now, since I’m buying the grub.” Entering the tavern, Joseph ordered several carryout breakfasts along with a small crock of soup for trader Thales. Producing currency from a tunic pocket, he paid for the food in common orichalcum sestertii and they headed back to the inn.

“When will James be awake?” Euripides asked, wanting to thank the other members of the rescue party in person.

“He and his girl don’t often rise till early evening,” replied Joseph, as if it was as natural as the sun rising in the east, “Don’t ask me why, it’s a habit they picked up some time ago.”

“I suppose some folks don’t like the day,” Euripides observed.

“That’s the goddamn truth,” said a chucking Joseph.

Coming to the door of his room, Euripides opened it and sat their food on a table just inside. Joseph turned to his room and said, “Come back after dusk if you like, I’m sure James will be up by then.” Entering, Joseph closed the door as his wife was leaving bed.

“What did you tell him about Jesus?” asked Mary.

“That he was a late sleeper,” Joseph replied, smiling at the simple lie, “He seemed to buy that, and I also took the time to pick up breakfast for you,” handing his wife a warm lump of oil soaked, brown papyrus.

“Thank you,” said Mary, unwrapping the food, aromatic brown meat and assorted vegetables spilling onto the table. “My God Joseph, this is pork!” she exclaimed, drawing back from the well-done swine flesh, “I can’t eat this – the Torah says it’s unclean!”

“Who cares, those stupid scrolls don’t mean anything. If you remember Mary, our son now drinks blood every night! The Torah says a lot of senseless stuff and it’s all bullshit,” Joseph spat, taking a big bite of pork tenderloin, marinated in wine, seasoned with onions, carrots, and garlic. He swallowed a mouthful, chasing the delicious morsels with a gulp of strong wine. “Besides, we’re not in Judea anymore, so forget about that crap from there.”

“We were taught by the rabbis from the Torah, they said pork will defile us.”

“That’s ridiculous, we’re all defiled as it is,” Joseph retorted, preparing to take another bite, “Who were those pious fools anyway, trying to tell us what to think! After what I’ve seen in the last few months, the Hebrew faith is a fraud, just like everything else that has to do with religion, and the Torah’s nothing but scrolls of lies penned by deluded idiots.”

“But Joseph, I – ”

“Just eat the food woman, it won’t kill you and it tastes really good,” Joseph said with a cynical smile, enjoying the rich flavor of the forbidden food.

She looked to her husband and then at the food on the table. Joseph was right; it indeed smelled good, so she took a small bite of the unclean meat.

“See, you haven’t died, have you?” Joseph asked, popping a roasted carrot in his mouth, drenched in pork broth.

“No, and it doesn’t taste bad either,” she answered with pleasant surprise.

“Exactly, when in Rome, do as Romans do.”

“If you say so,” Mary replied, first picking at, and then quickly finishing her delicious breakfast.

* * *

They spent the rest of the day sitting mostly idle in their room, talking of the events of the past few months. Mary mended garments while they conversed, Joseph pointing out that flexibility seemed the best approach for them to take, as many things in their lives had changed. When dusk approached, Joseph and wife headed to Jesus’ room before Euripides did, to inform him of the lies he had told the trader on their way to breakfast. Jesus answered the door, letting them in while his consort lit a lamp. His father sat down in a chair next to a table and related the current situation, his wife taking a seat on the bed.

“Thanks dad,” said Jesus, taking a seat at the table, “Verily I say, it is good that you lied to him, and I think it would be best to leave tonight to avoid any embarrassing questions.”

“I agree,” Joseph replied, “That’s all we’d need, for all the rest of the world knows, we’ve died or disappeared, and we don’t need to screw that up do we?”

Trader Euripides knocked on the door, accompanied by partner Thales.

“Come in,” Jesus called.

The door opened, and Euripides said in passable Latin, “Good evening, James the Samaritan, you look well, this is my partner, Thales of Lydia.”

Jesus nodded and answered, “You’re looking much better gentlemen, I’m glad to see you’re recovering from your injuries.”

“We wish to thank you again for what you did for us, how can we repay you?” Thales asked in an uncomfortable but intelligible mumble.

“Maybe by leaving us alone?” the Magdalene snickered.

“Mary, watch your mouth!” Jesus exclaimed, glaring at her.

“That’s what I think, James old boy,” Mary retorted, studying her nails.

Jesus turned to the traders and said, “There’s no need of payment my friends, simply remember when you see another in trouble, do your very best to help them if you can. In other words, from now on, you should always do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

“You are a very kind and wise man,” Euripides replied, truly surprised at the generosity of the man he knew as James. Indeed, in this era, not many, if any at all, would have stopped to render assistance to a stranger, as it was usually considered best to care only for one’s own.

“Thank you,” said Jesus, “Alas, I and my family must be moving on tonight; is there anything else you fellows need before we leave?”

“Honestly, you’ve done enough for us already, but the robbers took our money and we have no funds available,” a mumbling Thales answered.

“Hand me my silver satchel woman,” said Jesus, Joseph raising eyebrows.

The Magdalene handed him the heavy bag of denarii stolen from the robbers, Jesus asking, “How much do you fellows need?”

“We cannot take charity sir,” said Euripides.

“It’s not charity to help those truly in need, it is a duty, and I have more money available than I know what to do with. You will need funds to continue in your journey, would a thousand denarii help?”

“A thousand?” Euripides asked, jaw dropping and voice trailing off.

“How about two thousand?” Jesus asked, not realizing he was preparing to give them what they considered a fortune.

“A thousand is more than enough,” a breathless Euripides answered, “Fifty, or even twenty, would suffice.”

“Consider this your lucky day,” Jesus declared, emptying the bag and dumping a pile of silver coins on a table, “Go ahead and take a couple thousand for your trouble.”

He pushed two thousand odd coins across the table while Euripides stared at him in awe.

“Are you sure?” mumbled Thales.

“I insist,” Jesus answered, folding hands, “You’ll need money to recuperate from your injuries and to continue operating your trading business.”

“Really, James has more money than even God does,” said Joseph.

“Take the money and go,” the Magdalene implored, resting her chin on an arm.

Euripides quickly gathered the silver into a fold in his tunic and prepared to leave, while Jesus rose and asked, “I forgot to ask friends, what exactly are you traders of?”

“Opium,” said Euripides.

“Oh yes, opium, I tried that in India,” Jesus replied, fondly recalling the experience.

“We thank you James the Samaritan,” Thales mumbled with a bow, the pair heading for the door.

“You’re quite welcome,” said Jesus in the way of a goodbye, closing the door.

As he turned from the door, Mary asked, “Why did you give them all that money?”

“I figured it would buy them off. At the rate we’re amassing loot, we’ll soon have enough money to buy Rome, so what does it matter?” said Jesus, leaning against the jamb.

“I really like your style son,” said Joseph.

* * *

Euripides and partner made their way to their room, Thales observing that Jesus, the man they knew as ‘James the Samaritan’, was one of the most remarkable individuals he had ever met. In later years, the pair of Greek opium traders, thanks to Jesus’ sound investment, would become incredibly wealthy men, moving to opulent villas outside Rome, and crown their success by marrying beautiful Roman women who bore them many children.

One of the traders, Thales of Lydia, would become an acquaintance of an impostor disciple blundering about Rome in Claudius’ time, during the mid-forties of the Common Era, a lying charlatan calling himself Peter. This man, like many others who claimed to have known Jesus Christ, was a liar, as Jesus had murdered his disciple Simon Peter shortly after his triumphant vampiric resurrection. Thales would relate to this man the incredible story of being saved from certain death by a compassionate individual named James, who had come upon him and his partner Euripides, just outside the small town of Mansahir in Anatolian Cappadocia many years before. Indeed, this story would survive in an abridged form across the centuries to be retold in Christian churches as the wonderful tale of ‘The Good Samaritan’, said to have been a parable told by none other than Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, in the New Testament.

An hour later, the group bid their farewells and pulled out of Mansahir, heading northeast toward a town called Heraclea, leaving traders Euripides and Thales behind. Another bright

moon was rising, as Jesus, at the reins, the Magdalene at his side, proceeded at a leisurely pace on the desolate road. Joseph and Mary were sitting in the back with the sliding door open, conversing with them. The horses slowed as the elevation was increasing, passing steep foothills on the well-engineered Roman highway, low shrubs and brush giving way to dense woodlands. All were talking of the events of the past few days, of Euripides and his friend Thales, of the bitter, sarcastic midwife who had tended their wounds, and of Mary having to eat pork that Joseph had brought her for breakfast.

“There’s nothing wrong with eating swine as a mortal if the meat is cooked well mother,” said Jesus, recalling the delicious flavor of pork. In his past travels he had met, eaten fine meals and conversed with many people who had either been fine cooks of porcine flesh, or even healers from religious groups who used swine meat in sacrificial rituals.

“It really is?” his mother asked, still unsure.

“Of course, it’s good for us too. A little over a month ago Mary and I sucked the blood of wild boars for nourishment.”

“You did?” she asked, slowly growing used to her son’s vampiric ways.

“Blood is blood mother, even from a pig, father’s right regarding these things. The Torah is nothing but worthless scrolls of lies, along with all that other crap the rabbis told you when you were a kid. Verily I say mother, never believe anything unless you can prove it to yourself first. Otherwise, dismiss it as a lie, told either by a simpleton or a charlatan who truly knows better.”

“Really?” his mother asked, frowning at the coarse remarks, surprised that her formerly devout son was now so coldly cynical about religion.

“Take my word for it mom, practically everyone is out for themselves, and always have some kind of angle. Remember, I found out the hard way, via the cross,” Jesus answered, the Magdalene nodding in agreement.

His mother grew silent, reflecting on the terrible thought of her firstborn son’s crucifixion.

Chapter Four: The Hamlet of Tiberium

Arriving in Nazareth on a cloudy morning by way of Caesarea, centurion Decius Publius and his contubernia set about interrogating the few inhabitants left, at the insistence of Thucydides of Delos. After observing the burned and collapsed ruins of Joseph and Mary's home, they pressed on, one wall of the structure having fallen into the street, scorched and broken stones still lying on the opposite sidewalk. Moving from house to house, the doctor questioned several Nazarenes about plagues and vampires, most looking at him as a deranged physician.

"I know nothing about any vampire. A lot of people died here recently yes, but I didn't, and I don't care," a very elderly man named Jehoshaphat answered.

"What about her, did she see anything?" asked Dr. Thucydides, pointing to his wife, propped up on a dilapidated couch.

"Rachel, she's not even here," said the old man, his expressionless, senile wife staring into space.

"I'm sorry, just one more thing, can you tell me if it was a plague that killed the others?"

"Probably, all I know is one day they were fine, and the next they were dead and gone."

"How did they die?"

"Who knows, but I certainly didn't see any vampires lurking around, if that's what you're trying to imply," Jehoshaphat retorted before closing the door.

"Thank you," Thucydides said to the closed door.

They came to another occupied dwelling, a middle-aged man answering the door, rubbing his eyes, the scent of wine heavy on his breath.

"Have you seen this man?" asked the doctor, holding a parchment sketch drawn with the likenesses of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

"Nope, who is he?"

"Jesus of Nazareth."

"Oh yeah, the blasphemer. I haven't seen him for a good while, didn't they kill him in Capernaum or something?" the man asked, slurring his words.

"What about this woman?" asked Thucydides, pointing to a sketch of the Magdalene.

"Good looking broad, she was a whore named Miriam wasn't she?" the man asked with another slur, leaning on the jamb.

"Mary was her name, she was once, but we now believe she and Jesus may be vampires."

"Speak for yourself Thucydides," said Decius as his second in command chuckled.

"Are you kidding?" asked the man.

“No I’m not, vampires are real.”

“Sure they are,” the drunk retorted, slamming the door.

“I told you,” said Decius, looking to Thucydides.

Passing a dozen empty houses once owned by Jesus’ vanquished enemies, they finally came to another occupied dwelling. A child answered the door, calling for his mother. She arriving, the doctor began his interrogation, the woman first listening, then looking up to the lintel in contempt of the absurd questions.

“What of his parents?” asked Thucydides of the matron, named Anna.

“They died in a fire, it’s obvious. If you don’t believe me, go down the main street and look at the ruins!” Anna exclaimed, slamming the door in the doctor’s face.

The group moved to another domicile.

“Are you insane?” asked a resident named Octavius Yeshuas, recalling Jesus while looking to the Greek physician, an amused Decius smiling at the remark

“No sir, I am not,” said the doctor, “Jesus of Nazareth was crucified last year in Jerusalem.”

“Who cares, I haven’t seen him for nearly five years. I heard about his execution too, and crucified people usually die don’t they?”

“Yes, but sometimes they rise as vampires,” said Thucydides while a frowning Yeshuas looked to Decius.

“I’m a Roman citizen, do I have to keep answering this idiot?” Yeshuas asked, showing the centurion a silver signet ring on his left hand.

“No you do not citizen,” said Decius, looking to Thucydides and motioning to him with his index finger.

“What?” asked the doctor, turning with arms out.

“That’s the ninth family you’ve bothered in Nazareth; no one here knows about this vampire you call Jesus,” said Decius, looking to the physician with disdain.

“But a woman down the street said that she saw him one night in the rain, just after the town rabbi disappeared.”

“Yes, and the rest of the people say she’s crazy,” Decius retorted as his fellow soldiers laughed in the background, the centurion knowing the woman was probably telling the truth.

“You think this is a joke don’t you?”

“No doctor, we don’t think vampires are real,” said Decius.

“But they are!” Thucydides exclaimed as a frowning Yeshuas closed his door.

“So, where are you going to drag us to next?” Decius asked, folding arms across his chest.

“North to Gennesar, and beyond.”

“Why?”

“It’s said by Herodotus that vampires prefer to move in straight lines, and if he came here he would head north.”

“You have no proof he was even here, are you mad?” asked Decius.

“I don’t need proof, I simply know that Jesus of Nazareth is a vampire,” said the doctor with firm resolve, looking at the well-drawn depiction of the couple.

* * *

Passing through small towns over the next weeks, Jesus and family finally arrived at their destination, a verdant valley in northeastern Cappadocia, situated on the Upper Euphrates River. On an early evening just after dusk, Joseph drove the travelers into the outskirts of a Roman outpost town named Tibernum, for Jesus to check out the local surroundings and find if real estate was available. Intent on settling in the area, Jesus had donned his appropriated Roman toga, having been cleaned along the way at a watering hole used by generations of caravans, along with his stolen signet ring and leather shoes. His entourage had also acquired clothing, mannerisms and aliases more appropriate for those wishing to pass for Roman citizenry.

Thinking ahead, Jesus had made a point during this time to teach his parents Classical Latin, so they too could converse in the common language of the Roman Empire. His father was already familiar with spoken aspects of the tongue, having forced himself to learn the reading and writing of Latin during their trek. Intent on fitting in with the populace, it was only a matter of time before Joseph would abandon Aramaic and Hebrew completely. His mother picked up the language quickly, a determined Joseph now speaking to his son only in Latin, asking the fluent Jesus to correct any defects in his pronunciation. After several months of total immersion, his father not only understood Latin well, but was speaking it idiomatically.

Joseph pulled into town and parked the wagon in front of an inn on the main street. Jesus stepped from the rear and rented suitable lodging for the group, while the Magdalene saw that his parents were settled in for the evening. Later, Jesus headed to the garrison to inquire of the centurion if land was available in the area.

Easily gaining admittance to the garrison by his plebian appearance, he walked to the centurion’s torch lit quarters, noting the eagle-topped Roman Standard at the entrance, ‘SPQR’ boldly emblazoned on it. Shaking off the chill gripping him at the sight of the standard, Jesus forced himself to continue into an atrium serving as an office for the commanding officer. Firmly shaking the centurion’s hand, Jesus introduced himself to him and his aide-de-camp.

“Greetings, my name is Julius Chrysippus, a traveler migrating from Etruria. My family and I are looking for land to purchase for use as a farm, could you tell me if any is available locally?”

“Yes indeed, my name’s Caius Felix, welcome to Tibernum,” the centurion answered, pleased to see more citizenry moving to the remote Cappadocian outpost. “You must have heard of this area while living in Rome, it’s being opened up by the government as a colony for people of the empire.”

“I heard that land was available on the Upper Euphrates, this area looks good as any to me.”

"It's become quite popular among our wealthier citizenry, many people from the Italian and Greek peninsulas are migrating here," the centurion observed with pride, the formerly lonely garrison of Tibernum having become a sort of boomtown during the past decade.

"Really," said Jesus, thinking wherever there were people and money, there were also plenty of criminals – bandits, thieves and their more organized brethren, highwaymen.

"So, you're a farmer?" Caius asked.

"Not presently, my family made our fortune importing wine from Gaul, and my father has decided to try his hand at farming."

"The land here is very good, but you'll need a strong team of slaves to prepare and work it, tall trees are everywhere," said the centurion.

"I suppose we'll need to purchase a few," Jesus replied, "So sir, whom do I see for such, and with regard to land?"

"Our prefect Gavinal Septimus is in charge of real estate sales, you can see him this evening if you like. Slaves are not so easy to come by, but a Greek trader named Callicles passes through here with his caravan once every six months or so, usually in spring and fall."

"He deals in slaves?"

"On occasion, Callicles of Athens and his procurators ply much of Cappadocia and surrounding provinces in search of commodities. He's known to deal in practically everything."

"When's he due in town?"

"He should arrive within three months, but always stops by Gavinal's first to get drunk with him."

"I'm rather fond of wine too," said Jesus, Caius nodding in agreement.

Jesus received directions to the prefect's home, bid his farewells, and headed to a nearby two story marble mansion. A guard was posted at the entrance, which informed his superior of the presence of 'Citizen Julius Chrysippus of Etruria'. The guard returned a few minutes later, let Jesus into the compound and led him to the prefect's office.

"So Julius, you're looking for land?" a tired Gavinal remarked at the door, shaking his hand and raising an eyebrow at the smartly attired, toga-clad Jesus. Outside Rome and other major cities of the empire, the Republican toga was quickly becoming anachronistic, excepting for holidays and official functions.

"Yes sir, the centurion said I could talk to you this evening, am I too late?" asked Jesus.

"No, it's just been a long day citizen," said a yawning Gavinal as he headed to a gigantic oak desk, "Paperwork for the procurator in Antioch, payrolls and the like, please sit down."

Jesus sat down, Gavinal remarking as he took a chair at the desk, "So, you're from Etruria, that's interesting, you have a Greek cognomen."

"My great grandfather Cephalos Chrysippus was a wine merchant from Athens, and married a Roman woman from Etruria. The surname has been passed down from then to my family,"

Jesus swiftly lied.

“Small world isn’t it friend, Etruria’s my homeland too,” said Gavinal with a tired smile.

“What part?” asked Jesus in a cunning defensive move.

“Northern, by the lakes,” the fair complected, blue-eyed blond Gavinal answered, “I haven’t seen my home since I was assigned here by Tiberius eight years ago, so, what part of Etruria are you from?”

“Volsinii,” Jesus lied, “About a day’s journey north of Rome.”

“In southern Etruria, I could tell by your accent,” said Gavinal, not knowing Volsinii, mistaking it for the more southerly town of Vesuvii, much to Jesus’ relief. “Anyway, what sort of land are you looking for Julius, lots, homesteads, acreage?” he asked, reaching in a desk drawer for a list of available real estate.

“Acreage, my father and I want to start a farm.”

“You came to the right place, the centurion’s surveyors have staked off several tracts a few miles south of here, right on the Upper Euphrates, quite suitable for farming. With the way this area’s filling up, you’ll make a lot of money here.”

“Excellent,” said Jesus, “One should never work without the idea of making a profit.”

Gavinal acknowledged the statement with a nod while perusing land platte and official price list parchments. Jesus sat quietly, noting the opulence of the prefect’s office, furnished with glass windows, a recent invention of Roman craftsmen, and walls paneled in oiled Lebanese cedar. Fine Asian carpets lay on the polished marble floor, a large oil lamp was suspended from the ceiling, and a darkened winter fireplace was on the north wall, complete with logs sitting in an iron grate.

“Due to the popularity of this area, prices have risen to high levels, there’s a note on this parchment reflecting that. Do you have a moneylender who will back you on a note?” Gavinal asked, staring at the price list.

“Money’s no problem for me at all friend, what’s the price?”

“Well, the largest tract is priced at 2,562,500 sestertii, payable to the procurator in Antioch,” Gavinal answered, reaching for an abacus to calculate the figure to a more manageable amount in silver denarii or gold aurei.

“That would be uh, 25,625 denarii,” said Jesus, figuring the math mentally, “In gold it’s 1,025 aurei, I think.”

“It is,” an impressed Gavinal replied, arriving at the same amounts on the abacus moments later, “Don’t worry Julius, with tracts the size of these we’re open to reasonable offers.”

“The area of the tract?” asked Jesus, not caring about the price in the least.

“Hold on, the area’s listed here somewhere,” said Gavinal, leafing through the documents. Pausing, the prefect looked over a papyrus document. “The area is one thousand acres, eighty-four of them riverfront,” he finally answered, looking up from the paper, “Enough land for

twenty farms. According to the addendum, most is arable, excepting for cliffs on the north end. A quarter is cleared and you can split it up for tenant farmers if you like. Property taxes are low too, roughly one percent of assessed value, in your case, they would amount to a little over 10 aurei a year.”

“When are taxes due?”

“In fall, just after harvest on the ides of October, if you buy the tract, you’ll only owe about eight months for this year.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Jesus, rising from his seat, “More than likely we’ll take it tomorrow evening, first I want to consult with my parents and my uh, wife.”

“Don’t you want to have a look at it first?” asked Gavinal, covering his ass while pressing gently, so no one could say that he had misled Jesus. After all, caveat emptor might work in most places in the empire, but never when a town prefect was accused of malfeasance or dereliction of duty.

“Yes I would, come to think of it,” Jesus answered as the prefect’s words dawned on him, he never having bought land before.

“Good, I’ll draw you a map,” said Gavinal, taking out a fresh sheet of papyrus. Tracing the path for Jesus to follow, he added, “Head down the main street, continue about four miles south, turn left at the pond and look for a sign marked “Tract XXI.”

“Thank you kind Gavinal,” Jesus replied, taking the rolled up map, “I’ll look at the land tomorrow, you should rest assured I shall buy it.”

“That’s fine, if you decide to take the property, what form of payment will you be making?” Gavinal asked, placing a neat checkmark on the document next to Jesus’ choice.

“Cash, in Roman gold and silver.”

“Okay, Julius,” Gavinal remarked slowly, impressed by the forthright candor of the wealthy Jesus, “I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Correct, in the evening after dusk, would you like a deposit on the land?” Jesus asked, reaching in a tunic pocket for money.

“That’s not necessary till I draw up the contract,” said Gavinal, holding up hands, “When you return we’ll take care of it then.”

“Very well,” Jesus replied, “I’ll see you tomorrow evening.” He again shook the prefect’s hand, let himself out and headed to the inn. Knocking on the door to his parent’s room, he was let in by his consort, she enjoying the evening conversing with his folks. “I’ve located a thousand acre farm for only 1,025 aurei!” he exclaimed as he entered.

His mother looked up, her jaw agape at the amount of money Jesus was so casually referring to.

“Only 1,025 aurei,” said Joseph, “I don’t think I’ve made 1,025 denarii in my entire life, let alone 1,025 aurei.”

“I have, though I haven’t counted it recently. I figure we’ve amassed at least two thousand aurei in various valuables, not to mention all the silver we’ve been lugging around.”

Joseph smiled and replied, “I never thought I’d hit the jackpot, it’s as if this is a dream.”

“It’s no dream dad, it’s reality; though you may have doubted it in the past, I’ve always wanted to make you and mother proud of me.”

“It’s a miracle these things have happened,” his mother declared in very passable Latin.

“I don’t believe in miracles anymore mother, I simply put it in my mind to make them.”

“I told you he’s a genius,” said Mary, looking to her Jesus.

Planning his next move, Jesus said, “Tomorrow evening I wish all of you to accompany me to prefect Gavinal’s residence. He’s the real estate manager for the area and will be selling us the property. Incidentally, I told him we’re wealthy wine merchants migrating from Gaul via our homeland of Etruria, hailing from the town of Volsinii.”

“Telling more lies?” asked Joseph.

“Why not,” said Jesus, “None of them know we’re lying, and as far as anyone knows, we’re Romans.”

“Yeah, screw the bastards,” Joseph agreed as Jesus raised an eyebrow, a dark thought crossing his mind regarding Roman citizenship and its attendant responsibilities. ***I’ll have to take care of that problem when I return to Rome in a few years, entrapment should work,*** he thought.

His parents settled in for the evening while Jesus and Mary ‘went out for dinner’ so to speak, assuming chiropterian form in the shadows. Hunting was good that night, Jesus correct in his observation that wherever people and money were, opportunistic thieves followed. Predictably, about ten miles south of town lurked a pair of bandits, dispatched in the usual way by the vampiric couple.

Looting and dumping the victims in a wooded ravine, Jesus asked, “Would you like to have a look at the property, it’s only a few miles up the road.”

“Sure,” Mary answered, “I think it’s a great idea to buy a farm for your folks, they’re nice people.”

“It’s also for us Mary. We could use a base of operation instead of wandering about all the time. Further, with the amount of loot we’re gathering from our victims we’ll need a permanent place to keep it.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” the Magdalene replied, “It’s a good idea, we’ll have a place to return should we run into trouble, along with easily available money.”

It was in fact a very good idea, for the purchase of this property was only the beginning of Jesus’ underground empire, which would last for millennia, he and his relatives controlling this small plot of land in northeastern Turkey even unto the 21st century. They walked along the dark road for a time, coming across a crude sign nailed to a tree, marked with Roman numerals ‘XXI’. A path had been cleared next to the sign, Jesus and consort walking onto the

property. Scouting about, they headed to the north end, marked by 100-foot high cliffs, Jesus noting the solid sandstone promontory contained several useful caves, perfect for containing loot.

“This is the northernmost part of the tract,” said Jesus, folding arms across his chest, “What do you think woman?”

“It’s huge; I like it, and we may as well buy it.”

“My thoughts exactly. Let’s head to the inn and I’ll tell my folks we’re going to take it.”

“Okay,” said Mary, staring at him in awe, Jesus looking to the sky at the North Star.

They knocked on his parent’s door, his father letting them in.

“We looked at the parcel father,” said Jesus.

“And?” asked Joseph, pressing for information.

“It’s beautiful,” said Mary.

“I want to buy the land tomorrow evening if you both agree.”

“That’s fine with me,” Joseph replied, “I’m tired of traveling anyway.”

His mother raised hands and shrugged, allowing Joseph to speak for her.

“Well, I guess that’s settled,” said the Magdalene.

“Have you uh, eaten son?” asked Joseph.

“Yes father, thank you for asking. We found a pair of bandits lurking outside town.”

His father nodded. “Would you care to stay over for wine and latrunculi?”

“Certainly,” said Jesus, his father getting out the board and a bottle.

Sitting at the table, Jesus beat his father six times in a row, Joseph glowering at the game board. Becoming content with simply getting drunk, a resigned Joseph put away the board and its pieces, the pair conversing about life’s vicissitudes and drinking strong wine all night long, while Mary and his mother talked and watched a replay of the night in Antioch.

Toward sunup, a drunken Jesus staggered to his room with the Magdalene and collapsed into bed, snoring loudly as he hit the sheets.

“He’ll never change,” said a smiling Magdalene, joining him in bed.

* * *

“My head,” came the cry as Joseph rose the following evening, holding his head in his hands.

“You really should stop drinking so much wine dear,” said Mary, handing him another glassful as a hangover panacea. She was not feeling particularly well either, for the past week or so she had been feeling slightly nauseous after waking, but it passed quickly, becoming her usual self after a short time.

“Thanks woman,” Joseph groaned, sitting on the side of the bed, ignoring her advice and quickly downing the wine. “Give me another.” She came over and refilled the glass. “Aren’t you going to have something to eat?” he asked as she sat down beside him.

“Not yet, perhaps later,” Mary replied, though feeling better, she was not quite ready to face food.

Jesus and consort had arisen from slumber at sundown. Refreshed, he pulled his treasure sack from beneath the bed, producing 930 aurei and 2,375 denarii, equivalent to the prefect’s asking price of 1,025 aurei. Placing the money in a leather satchel, he added another hundred denarii to cover any hidden costs.

A short time later, a seemingly loud knock came on his parent’s door, as Joseph winced and told his wife to let Jesus and Mary in.

“Hello father,” said Jesus, “Are you hungover again?”

“What do you think?” Joseph retorted with a weak smile.

“I suppose you’re in no condition to accompany us to prefect Gavinal’s residence,” answered Jesus, wishing that Joseph could at least witness him buying the property. A humble man, he never, even in life, was one for boasting, but did want his father to see he had finally made something of himself, at least as a vampire.

“I’m sorry son, I feel like shit, you don’t need me there do you?”

“Not really,” said Jesus, “You and mother stay here while Mary and I purchase the land. We should be back in a few hours, and we’ll probably fetch someone to eat along the way.”

“Terrific,” Joseph groaned, falling back into bed.

Jesus nodded to his mother and left for Gavinal’s, quietly closing the door behind him.

“Your father really hits the bottle hard at times doesn’t he?” asked the Magdalene.

“Yeah, so do I, what can you do,” Jesus replied, walking along in the cool evening.

“But you’re a vampire, heavy drinking doesn’t seem to bother you at all.”

“I’ve noticed that,” said Jesus, neither realizing that their tolerance of alcoholic beverages was increasing due to vampiric nature.

“Why do you bother to drink like that anyway?”

“I don’t know, enjoyment perhaps.”

“You enjoy that?”

“Of course, verily I say unto you, vampires do not live by blood alone: for only by the drinking of hot blood, followed by cool wine, along with killing, lying and robbery, do we survive,” Jesus intoned in macabre jest.

“That’s the truth.”

Arriving at the prefect’s residence, the guard let them in.

“Good evening Gavinal,” said Jesus, shaking his hand firmly. “This is my wife, Maria Hittica, a Hittite tribeswoman from Galatia.”

Mary Magdalene smiled and politely bowed her head to the prefect.

Gavinal returned the bow, coveting the beautiful Magdalene, and asked, “Did you look at the site?”

“Yes, we’ll take it,” answered Jesus.

“Excellent,” Gavinal replied, “Have a seat, the notary’s on the way, he should be here presently.” With those words, the notary arrived in the doorway.

“Greetings Marcus Pertinax,” said Gavinal, “This is Julius Chrysippus and his wife Maria, they’re buying tract twenty one next to your place.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Julius,” said Marcus, firmly shaking Jesus’ hand and taking a seat.

“Let’s get down to business,” said Gavinal, pulling a parchment document from a drawer in his desk. “The contract’s filled out, excepting for yours and the notary’s signatures, and I also took the time to draw up the title too; everything’s in order. The price is 1,025 aurei, plus a notary fee of 10 denarii.”

“Very well,” said Jesus, placing a sack of money on Gavinal’s desk, opening it and dumping a small mountain of gold and silver before them.

Gavinal and Marcus stared at the hoard of precious metal, not believing their eyes.

“When you said cash you meant it!” Gavinal exclaimed, the notary continuing to stare at the pile of glittering money. “I’d best call the guard in here with a strongbox to safeguard this money,” he added, walking to the door. Ordering his guard to fetch an iron strongbox and lock from the garrison, he returned to the desk and resumed his seat. “Signature or signet?” he asked, handing Jesus the contract and title parchments.

“I’ll use my signature,” said Jesus, taking a quill stylus from the prefect. Reading the contract, with his left Jesus dipped the stylus into an inkwell and then signed ‘B. Julius Chrysippus’ on the documents. The notary added his signatures as well, the Magdalene and Gavinal signing afterward as sworn witnesses.

“So, what’s the ‘B’ for?” asked Gavinal, very interested in the new arrival in his town, a tall man who paid cash, in gold and silver, for land. After all, B. Julius Chrysippus was a wealthy Roman citizen; sooner or later one could get his own to marry into the family, enriching one’s own by proxy.

“Bacchus, god of wine.”

“Oh yes,” said Gavinal, looking to Marcus and explaining, “His family made their fortune in Etruria as wine merchants.”

Marcus smiled and nodded.

“You’ve just bought a farm, welcome to our town Julius!” exclaimed Gavinal, rising and shaking Jesus’ hand.

“Let’s toast the sale with wine,” Marcus suggested.

“Absolutely,” said Gavinal, producing a fresh bottle of Gaul’s finest. Placing four goblets on his desk, he broke the clay seal, pierced the wax stopper and opened the bottle. “This is Gallic wine, Julius probably imported it,” he added while filling the goblets.

“No I didn’t,” Jesus lied, which was actually the truth, reading the Latin inscription on the bottle, “This wine was imported by Gaius Scipio Magnentius, a competitor of my father and I.”

“Is it good wine?” asked Gavinal, holding his goblet up to the lamplight, looking to Jesus for his opinion.

“Of course,” said Jesus, taking a deep gulp, “Scipio Magnentius and sons import only the finest Gallic wines, none ever adulterated or leaded, using only beeswax-lined amphorae.”

“Leaded wine’s much too sweet for me,” said Marcus, “Some have said it makes people crazy!”

“Hippocrates of Kos said that too,” Jesus replied, pouring another libation, “I don’t know about you folks, but I like wine to taste like wine, not like sweet lead, honey, or fruit.”

“That’s the truth,” Gavinal agreed, downing his glass, “The folks in Rome drink leaded and perfumed wine by the cask. I can’t stand the stuff, it tastes like shit!” The group broke into laughter, Gavinal quickly apologizing to Mary for his lapse in taste, embarrassed by his utterance before a Roman matron.

“What the hell, I’ve heard worse, I don’t give a damn,” said the Magdalene, Marcus choking on his wine as he heard the coarse reply, a perturbed Jesus shaking his head almost imperceptibly to her. She, a very worldly woman, smirked at her consort and fell silent.

Looking to Jesus with a raised eyebrow, Gavinal poured and drank another glass of the Scipio brand, sitting down with the notary and counting the pile of money, while Jesus and the Magdalene sat quietly, the guard standing at attention near the door.

Shortly thereafter, the honest Gavinal frowned and remarked, “Julius, there’s 1,029 aurei here, you’ve overpaid us by ninety denarii.”

“Split the extra with friend Marcus, I have plenty of money.”

Gavinal looked to Jesus and said, “You are truly an extraordinary man, Bacchus Julius Chrysippus of Etruria.”

“Thank you kind gentlemen,” an embarrassed Jesus replied. The transaction completed, the guard placed the money in the strongbox. Jesus slipped the Roman title in his tunic, bid farewell to Gavinal and Marcus, and the couple stepped into the night, returning to the inn.

“Gavinal sure liked me didn’t he?” asked Mary, entering their room.

“Proving he has good taste in females,” said Jesus, sitting on the bed.

“Flatter me again.”

“Honestly Mary, you’re far from an unattractive woman, and I’m quite certain you realize it,” Jesus replied, relaxing on the bed.

“You think so?” asked the Magdalene, batting her eyes in an exaggerated fashion.

“You’re a coy little bitch aren’t you?” asked Jesus, hiding a smile.

Mary frowned at the insult. “Sometimes you can really piss on someone’s parade.”

“Oh well, what can you do woman?”

“Jesus!”

He smiled, rose from the bed, and said, “Let’s find supper shall we?”

“Why not,” the Magdalene answered, her ego deflated by his remarks.

Curiously, that evening, they were unable to find suitable human fare, contenting themselves with a pair of wild boars.

Returning to the inn, Mary observed, “Your mother’s right, those pigs just don’t make it.”

“Sometimes one has to make do,” said Jesus, opening the door.

Mary shook her head in disgust and fell into bed. Removing his shoes, Jesus noticed that his toes appeared inflamed, though they didn’t actually hurt, they seemed to be sensitive to pressure from his hands.

“Look at this Mary, my feet have turned red!”

“What?” asked the Magdalene, sitting up and looking to his feet.

“I’m thinking maybe the shoes are too tight, what do you think?”

“I don’t know but it sure is weird looking, do they hurt?”

“No.”

“Maybe they are too tight,” said Mary, falling back in bed while Jesus sat staring at his feet.

“But they don’t feel tight, I wonder what this is.”

“Perhaps you have a malaise,” said Mary, leaning up on an elbow, “Wash them in strong wine and vinegar; that should kill it, whores I knew even used it for a douche when they had malaise.”

“I would think malaise of the crotch is different from malaise of the feet.”

“You’re probably right about that,” the Magdalene agreed, “Maybe you should bind them in honey for a while, it’s said that works well for skin irritations.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t think this is a malaise.”

“You don’t?”

“Not at all.”

“Well, don’t worry about it, we’ll figure it out later, let’s go to sleep,” a tired Mary replied, falling to her pillow. Jesus joined her, the pair settling into sleep for the day.

In the early evening Joseph came knocking, Jesus answering the door.

“Hello father, how are you feeling?” Jesus asked, letting him in.

“Fine,” said Joseph, “Unlike you, it takes me a day or so to sleep it off.”

“I used to be that way.”

“I remember, and I’ve been meaning to ask, why didn’t you use the money you gave me to purchase the land?”

“We have so much money now that it’s ridiculous. You didn’t have the full amount in cash, so I figured I’d let you keep that, and used my other funds.”

“Okay,” said Joseph, raising eyebrows, “You know, I don’t think I’ll ever get used to being rich.”

“Vampirism does have its rewards,” said Jesus.

“Obviously,” Joseph replied, looking to his son.

They left the inn, preparing to take the wagon to their property. Before leaving town, his parents stocked up on needed provisions at a store owned by a merchant named Vitellius, as Jesus had made them aware there were no standing structures on the property. Stopping at a restaurant, his mother purchased several loaves of fresh bread and a large earthenware crock of soup for their late supper.

“Would you like hardboiled eggs dear?” Mary asked, looking to offerings on a nearby counter.

“Sure, I like them,” Joseph replied. Realizing money was no object; he and Jesus returned to Vitellius’ store and purchased a wooden case of fine Gallic wine for 36 denarii. Arriving at the wagon, Joseph explained that it was for his and Jesus’ relaxation in the evening.

“I’m sure it is,” Mary answered, watching her son place the heavy box in the wagon. Each bottle in the oblong case of sixteen almost the size of a modern magnum, it was assured that relaxation would be quickly and abundantly available for father and son in the evenings ahead.

A full moon was low on the horizon, providing little illumination. As they drove the dark road, guided by the eyes of the vampiric Christ, Joseph said, “I’m damn glad we brought my tools along, I suppose I’ll have to build us a house first.”

“That’ll be no problem as we’re both carpenters,” Jesus replied, “Further, though many homes in Judea are built mostly of stone, I think a wooden structure with a stone foundation would be appropriate. Many domiciles here are crafted totally from wood, and the area where I would like to build the house is surrounded by trees.”

“Are you kidding, it’d take months to fell, split and hew that much timber,” said Joseph with concern for his wife, wondering where she would reside in the meantime.

“Not so father, I’ll help you.”

“You’ll actually work?”

“Yes, you will need assistance for such a daunting project.”

“That’ll be the day,” Joseph retorted.

“He’s done a lot for us already,” said Mary, defending her son.

“Yeah, he slaughtered our neighbors, burned our house down and then dragged our asses to a foreign country,” replied Joseph, punctuated by a cynical laugh.

“He gave us the money you have in your satchel or don’t you remember?”

“I know that woman, I’m only kidding him,” Joseph answered, Jesus turning away to hide a smile. They passed the pond Gavinal had spoke of, turned left and came to the entrance to their spread. As Jesus pulled the wagon into the dark woods surrounding the path, his father asked, “Can you even see anything?”

“Of course, so can the horses,” said Jesus, continuing on a bumpy ride toward the north end of the property. Stopping at a clearing about 300 feet from the cliffs, Jesus stepped from the wagon and remarked, “So folks, here it is, what do you think of our land?”

“A thousand acres huh?” Joseph asked, stepping from the wagon and attempting to look about in the dim light.

“Yes father,” said Jesus, freeing the horses from their harnesses.

“It’s huge, you made a good buy,” his father replied, “I suppose we’ll have to purchase oxen and plows to work it.”

“I’ll have to buy slaves for you too,” said Jesus, tying the horses to a tree on tethers to rest and graze.

“Slaves?” asked Joseph, bringing the horses’ feed bags from the rear of the wagon.

“You don’t expect to run the farm by yourself do you?” asked Jesus, grabbing a brush to comb down the horses.

“This is going to be better than I imagined,” said Joseph, folding arms across his chest.

Joseph and wife set up a temporary camp as Jesus leaned on the wagon, staring up at the night sky, lost in thought. His mother, thinking ahead, asked her undead daughter-in-law to fetch a few empty water skins from the rear of the wagon, intending to fill them later at the river.

“Sure,” replied the Magdalene, heading to the wagon and retrieving them, “Would you like me to draw water for you?”

“Certainly, thank you Mary,” his mother answered, pleased that she was so helpful.

“Do you want to walk with me to the river Jesus?”

“Huh?” asked Jesus, looking to his consort and returning to reality.

“Would you like to accompany me to the river while I fetch water for your folks?”

“Oh, sure,” said Jesus.

They strolled to the Euphrates, returning with fresh water for his parents. Jesus lifted his money sack from the wagon and informed his parents that they were going to check out the caves, to be pressed into use as a daytime sleeping quarters and convenient loot stash.

“Sounds like a good idea,” said Joseph, making a campfire on the chilly evening. Using flint and iron to light kindling, he soon had a warm fire burning about thirty feet from the wagon, fueling the blaze with fallen branches from nearby trees. His wife prepared a meal for them while Jesus and consort walked to the cliffs and into a dark cave. The cave he had chosen was a deep, dry meandering labyrinth, perfect for sleeping and containing valuables.

Coming to a gallery, Mary observed, “I suppose we’ll have to fix this place up a bit, but otherwise it’s perfect.”

“It seems fine to me as it is, what do you mean?” asked Jesus, placing the loot in an inconspicuous crevice.

“I don’t enjoy sleeping on a stone floor, do you?”

“No I don’t, come to think of it,” said Jesus after a reflective pause, Mary staring at him with a pained look on her face. In many ways, her Jesus was quite adept, but in others, he was still a detached, absent-minded philosopher, his head in the clouds.

“Sometimes you’re just not all there are you?” Mary retorted, refusing to let him ruin her plans for house decorating.

“Why do you say that?” asked Jesus, hurt by the remark.

“Most people, even vampires, prefer to sleep in a nice soft bed and don’t have to take time to think about it.”

“Oh,” said Jesus, “I’m sorry, I was occupied thinking about other things.”

“Such as?” she asked as they started back.

“The usual stuff, you know, the world, life, existence, God, things like that.”

“My point exactly.”

Walking from the cave, Jesus saw his father had made a brightly burning campfire, he and his mother enjoying their meals.

“Heading out for someone to eat?” Joseph asked, as if such was a normal, everyday occurrence.

“Yes, but I first wanted to make sure you were comfortable and settled in,” said Jesus, concerned for their wellbeing in the unfamiliar country.

“We’re fine,” his mother replied, “It’s so beautiful here.”

“Velly, I mean very well,” said Jesus, “We’ll be back in a little while.”

With those words, Jesus transformed. The Magdalene followed, both flying off into the darkness. Joseph sat calmly, finishing his soup, his wife’s jaw dropping at the sight.

“If I were you I’d get used to it woman,” Joseph advised, looking to his transfixed wife.

“It’s so weird, they turned into bats!” she exclaimed, “I keep forgetting they’re not quite human anymore.”

"It's weird all right, but he always was a weird one anyway."

Alighting on the road south of town, they returned to human form. Mary asked, "Do you think it was a good idea to transform in front of your parents?"

"Why not, they know we're vampires, what difference can it make?"

"It must have been shocking to them."

"Maybe, but they've grown used to everything else, so how much of a problem can it be?"

"I suppose you're right," said the Magdalene, not comfortable with the idea of transforming in front of his parents, but realizing it would have happened eventually. Finding supper proved easy, yet another pair of troublemakers dispatched by Jesus and consort, their drained and looted bodies bouncing to the bottom of a ravine.

"We'd best head back to check on my folks," said Jesus with a belch as the bodies landed in a heap. Assuming chiropterian form, they flew back to Joseph's soon-to-be farm. Landing on the cliffs, they changed back, looking down to see the brightly burning campfire with his parents relaxing beside it. His mother was mending clothing, his father sitting across from her, drinking from a gigantic bottle of wine.

"Why'd we stop here?" asked Mary, surprised he did not want to return to his parents immediately.

"I wanted to take in the view, you can see the entire spread from here."

"Yeah," said Mary, looking to the river, thankful they could have a bit of time to themselves.

Jesus sat down at the edge of the cliff and leaned back resting his head on his arms, looking to the night sky. The moon had climbed higher; brightening nearby cumulus clouds, and was beginning to illuminate the area. "I wonder what those are up there," he mused.

"What?" asked Mary, sitting down, releasing her hair from its bindings and finger combing her black locks.

"The stars," replied Jesus, looking at the moon with surprise, noticing for the first time it was studded with mountains. Due to superior eyesight, he was not only able to see in the dark, but also had the visual acuity of an eagle.

"According to the priests and rabbis they're lights shining through from heaven, signs set in the sky for the seasons," said Mary, looking up.

"Bullshit, they don't know what they're talking about," Jesus replied, sitting up, "Heaven my ass, whatever they are they seem to be very far away indeed, and I suspect there's much more to them than meets the eye."

"You're really turned off by Hebrew religion aren't you?"

"You can say that again," Jesus answered, rubbing hands on his tunic as if wiping them of something dirty, "Especially the Hebrew faith, along with any other form of religion."

"Yeah," said Mary, not believing her ears.

“Look at the moon up there, it’s covered with mountains, like it’s another world,” said Jesus, pointing to the sky.

“I wonder if people live on it,” Mary replied, seeing the mountains as well.

“Maybe,” said Jesus, looking to the silver moon.

Both grew silent. Jesus rested his head on his arms, contemplating his undead existence, the stars, and why there seemed to be so many worthless people in the world. He thought further, and suddenly realized if there weren’t, it would be slim pickings indeed for someone like him. He chuckled at the thought.

“What are you laughing about?” Mary asked, turning on her side and resting her head on an arm.

“I was thinking if there weren’t so many criminals in this world I probably wouldn’t be able to survive.”

“I suppose you should be thankful for that, but you could drink the blood of animals if there weren’t suitable people around.”

“Probably, but like you, I prefer human blood, and don’t think existence would be quite as fun, if you follow my reasoning.”

“Of course,” said Mary, “I enjoy playing with them like a cat plays with a mouse, and like watching you use knives on them.”

“I see, do you remember the parable of the wheat and the chaff?”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with this conversation?” Mary asked, not following his constantly meandering logic.

“I’ve lately found that most people seem to be chaff.”

“I get it,” said Mary. She sighed, wishing the conversation would turn to a different topic. Realizing that such hope was futile, she laid her head on his chest, staring up at the night sky and relaxing.

“It’s funny, I never thought it would be like this woman.”

“Like what?” asked Mary, annoyed at his ambiguity when he was in a philosophical mood.

“That I’d become a vampire after all I preached to people.”

“So?”

“So I once thought that if one behaved correctly, and showed at least some respect for the idea of God, that God, if he actually exists, would show favor on those who did such, with a reward after death.”

“All that did was get you crucified.”

“Precisely, I must have been very naïve to have believed it was that simple.”

“Look at it this way, perhaps being a vampire is your reward.”

“I don’t think any god would give someone a reward like this,” a chuckling Jesus replied, watching a meteor cross the sky.

“But Joseph and your disciples said you once thought you were God, proving that, those in Nazareth wanted to stone you as a blasphemer,” said Mary, sitting up and getting into the spirit of the conversation.

“Yes, I must confess at times I actually thought so, but never explicitly said that. I simply said that I had some idea of what it was to be a Son of God. That is, I preached that one could gain God’s favor by first accepting him as Lord of the universe. Then, one could ask his forgiveness for any transgressions, and afterward retain his grace by treating one’s fellow man as one would wish to be treated.”

“I know all that Jesus, but people don’t seem to like treating one another well, especially those who point out they are behaving badly. From what I’ve seen they’re only out for themselves.”

“Yeah, I wish I’d known that before; my father often said the same things.”

“I did try to tell you more than once.”

“I know,” said Jesus, again looking to the stars.

“By the way, I believe your mother’s pregnant.”

“So do I,” said Jesus, looking to his consort and resting his head on an arm, “That’s strange, we seem to be able to sense hidden things mortals cannot.”

“It must have something to do with being vampires.”

“Perhaps,” Jesus replied, thinking of his mother. They transformed and flew down the cliff, assuming human form about a hundred feet from the campsite. Walking through the brush to the campfire, Jesus greeted his parents, he and the Magdalene sitting down beside them.

“That bat thing you and Mary do is pretty neat son,” said an inebriated Joseph, offering the magnum to Jesus.

“Yeah,” Jesus replied, taking the bottle and drinking deeply from it, “It saves a lot of time and effort if you need to go somewhere fast.”

A curious proto-scientist, Joseph asked, “So, what happens to your clothes when you change into bats?”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” answered Jesus, “I imagine our garments and such become part of us, after all, we were wearing them before we transformed and we’re wearing them now.”

“True,” Joseph replied.

“Who knows, I just know it works,” said Mary as Joseph looked to her.

Joseph sat quietly, ruminating on the paradox regarding mass.

“You know father, we’re going to need picks and shovels to dig the foundation trench and a well pit,” said Jesus after finishing the bottle.

“I thought about that, there’s a merchant in town who deals in hardware. I suppose I’ll head

there tomorrow morning; I'm also going to need nails, pitch for the roof and other stuff."

"Nails are expensive," said Jesus, nails at the time hand made, one at a time, by blacksmiths.

"Who cares?" Joseph retorted, breaking into laughter, knowing he had enough money to buy twenty wagonloads of nails if he wanted them.

"You have a point there dad."

"It's getting a late," his mother remarked, Joseph opening and starting on another bottle.

"Yes woman," said Joseph, corking it, "We should turn in, I want to rise early to start on the house."

"Where are your tools father?"

"In the wagon, why do you ask?" asked Joseph, surprised that Jesus would ask for tools – to do work.

"I want to fell trees tonight so you can split and hew them in the morning."

"Sure," said Joseph, getting up and walking to the wagon, "For starters we need about twenty, perhaps thirty cubits long and a cubit or so wide."

"We'll also need stone for the foundation, I spotted some fair-sized rocks by the river," Jesus replied, looking to the Euphrates.

"I reckon with you working at night and me working by day, this shouldn't take long at all." Sliding his leather tool satchel across the floor of the wagon, Joseph dropped the heavy bag to the ground. Reaching in and producing a sharp iron axe, he handed it to Jesus.

"It may be a bit noisy, I hope you can sleep while we work," said Jesus, taking the axe and using a thumb to test the sharpness of the edge.

"I'm glad for once to see that you're actually working!" Joseph exclaimed, climbing into the wagon.

"Yes father," said Jesus, wishing his father's memories weren't so accurate.

"So I'll tell you what, I and your mother will just have to do our best while you bust your ass," Joseph added, his wife joining him in the wagon.

"After we're finished we'll be sleeping in the cave," said Jesus, used to his father's insults.

"Good idea son, there isn't much room in here anyway."

"Would you have a few blankets, and also hand me our old clothes?" Jesus asked, thankful the conversation had taken a turn for the better.

"Sure, hold on." Joseph fished around in the wagon with a candle, producing a pair of blankets, the Magdalene's old clothes and Jesus' robe and sandals. "Here you go," he said, handing him the articles.

"Thank you my father, and good night."

"Good night to you," Joseph replied, closing the door.

Taking the blankets to the cave, he and his consort changed into their former attire so they wouldn't damage their good clothes while working. Pulling off his leather shoes, Jesus stared at his even redder feet and slipped on his sandals. Wondering why his feet looked so strange, he looked to the shoes, and again at his feet. ***They're not too tight and it's not a malaise; it must have something to do with those shoes,*** he thought, dropping the offending shoes to the cave floor. It was in fact the shoes, but it would take time for him to figure out why, so he wore his sandals from that night forward, except when he was visiting Gavinal Septimus or Marcus Pertinax.

"We must have looked like hell parading around in these rags," Mary observed as they walked from the cave.

"I agree, it's strange how one's tastes change over time," said Jesus.

* * *

Over the next hours, many earth-shaking vibrations were heard and felt by Joseph and wife as they tried to sleep in the wagon, while Jesus, using superior strength, pushed down over twenty large trees like a vampiric bulldozer. Using the axe to slice off roots and branches, by three-thirty he had prepared twenty arrow-straight logs and stacked them near the area he thought would be the best place to build the house. The Magdalene pitched in while Jesus harvested the timber, bringing suitable foundation stones from the riverbank, larger ones the size of a modern V-8 engine and weighing in excess of five hundred pounds.

Jesus dropped the last of the logs from his shoulder to the stack as Mary said, "Look at us Jesus, we're filthy as dogs from this work."

"It's a good thing the river's close," Jesus replied, "Let's take a dip to wash up."

Satisfied with their work, they headed to the Euphrates. Though it was only February, the coldness of the flowing water didn't bother them at all. Leaving their clothes on the sandy riverbank, they jumped in and washed the grime from their bodies.

"I like being a vampire," said Mary, relaxing in the cold water.

"It's not bad," Jesus replied, swimming further out, "I guess the legend of vampires fearing running water is bullshit too."

"Evidently," said Mary, swimming out to join her consort. Enjoying each other's company in the cold water, Mary said while kissing him on the cheek, "Jesus, though it was a problem for me in the beginning, I want to thank you for bringing me to the realm of the undead."

"Don't mention it," said Jesus, floating toward an eddy near the riverbank, enjoying the feel of the water.

"I was trying to be romantic you jackass!" Mary exclaimed, swimming after him.

"I'm sorry," said Jesus, standing up waist deep in the water, hurt by her remark.

"You're so damn unbelievable at times," she replied, falling into his arms.

"I've never been one for romanticism woman; I love you and all, but I'm not that good at showing it am I?"

“Not really, when it comes to talking.”

“I am pretty good at that aren't I?” Jesus asked with a broad smile, referring to the physical component of romanticism.

“Yes, and I love you too,” Mary answered, giving him a passionate kiss. Thoroughly cleansed and sated, they stepped from the river near dawn and rinsed out their work rags. Dressing in the wet garb due to Hebrew modesty, they retired to the cave and changed into more comfortable attire.

“Say, didn't one of your disciples say you once walked on the Sea of Galilee?” she asked in the privacy of the pitch-black cave, slipping on a silk nightgown acquired during their travels.

“That was one of John's hallucinations, I think he was touched in the head,” Jesus answered with a frown.

“Oh,” said Mary, surprised he would say such a thing about one of his followers.

“Or maybe it was frozen at the time,” Jesus ventured, looking for a way to defend his friend.

“In the summer?”

“You're right, he was crazy.”

Spreading blankets over the floor, they retired and settled into well-deserved sleep. His parents woke just after sunup, stepping from the wagon to tend to personal needs and eat breakfast. Walking to the house site after relieving himself, Joseph stared in astonishment at a stack of freshly felled timber and piles of boulders that would become the stone foundation of the house.

“Good Lord!” he exclaimed, barely believing his eyes, “They did a month's work in one night!” Thinking of his son slumbering in his dark cave, Joseph felt a twinge of remorse for what he had said the previous evening, vowing to never again insult Jesus – when it came to manual labor.

Breaking from his reverie, Joseph yelled, “Mary, come here!”

“What is it?” asked his wife, walking over.

“Look at this, there's enough timber here to build a villa. I think our son has finally learned the virtues of work.”

“I always told you Jesus was never afraid of working, it's just he was more of a thinker than anything else.”

“It also helps when you can lift huge boulders as if they were pebbles and rip trees from the ground with your bare hands,” said Joseph, looking to a pile of uprooted trunks sitting a short distance from the timber. Looking closer, he noted that one gnarled root looked suggestively like a duck, resolving to have a try at carving the no longer forbidden images of man and beast. He recalled a set of fine carving knives he had inherited from his father, tucked away safely in the wagon. “What the hell, there isn't any lousy god anyway,” he added, reflecting on passages from the book of Leviticus.

While eating breakfast, he observed that at the rate Jesus and the Magdalene were progressing, he would be able to have a house ready within six weeks. "I certainly hope they leave some work for me to do," he grumbled while eating leftover soup. Later, he rehitched the horses, taking the wagon into town to purchase rope for moving logs, along with other needed hardware for house building – shovels, picks, sickles, pitch, and nails. The distance was only a few miles, and he arrived in Tibernum shortly after eight. Thinking ahead, he also realized he needed a tarp for covering the drying wood, and a large hammer and iron chisels for cutting stones. Though neither he nor Jesus were trained as masons, he felt that between them they could create a strong stone foundation for the dwelling.

A local hardware merchant named Drusus the Illyrian set about filling the requests, Joseph introducing himself as Julius the elder, father of B. Julius Chrysippus, placing the order for the products from him in Latin.

"You're building a house?" Drusus asked, making a list of Joseph's order, "You came to the right place, we have most of this stuff."

"Yes, I purchased tract twenty-one on the south road," said Joseph, eyeing other items in the shop.

"Gavinal told me about you folks, you're the family of Etrurian wine merchants."

"Former wine merchants," Joseph lied, adding truth to his reply, "I figured I'd try my hand as a farmer, but first I have to build a house."

"Have you built one before?" asked Drusus, leaning on the counter, he a skilled carpenter.

"Several, but not one like this," Joseph answered, "My son wants to craft most of the structure from wood, lucky for us we're both carpenters."

"As am I, many houses in Tibernum are made of wood. Mine is too, trees are everywhere here."

"You're a carpenter?" Joseph asked, noting that he had better make a serious attempt at farming, for apparently there was no real use for another carpenter in the area.

"I built my place a few miles west of here about fifteen years ago," said Drusus, finishing with the list and calling, "Slave!"

"Yes master Drusus?" a slave answered, walking up.

"Fill this man's order and bring it to the loading entrance."

"Yes master," the slave replied, taking the list and walking away.

"You'll find there's a lot of oak around here Julius, perfect for setting as floor beams," said Drusus.

"I noticed that, but oak's tough to work with," Joseph replied, walking to a shelf stocked with coils of rope.

"Lay them green, that's what I did," said Drusus, "They hardly warped, and oak beams are as strong as Hercules."

“That’s an idea,” replied Joseph, placing a length of hemp rope on the counter, thinking that setting oak beams and rafters green might actually work.

“What’ll you be using the rope for?” asked Drusus.

“Moving logs,” Joseph answered, perusing other items in the shop.

“We have iron chain for sale,” said Drusus, “Very strong, made in Anatolia, perfect for moving logs.”

“I’ll take some, can you make it the same length as the rope?”

“I haven’t a blacksmith, it’s only available in lengths of fifteen paces.”

“That’ll work, make it two,” said Joseph.

“Coming up,” Drusus replied, looking to another slave and nodding. His efficient slaves placed the order at the loading dock on a wheeled cart, while another loaded the requested items into the wagon. Joseph paid him mostly with orichalcum sestertii to be inconspicuous in his dealings. Bidding the merchant farewell and returning to his farm at eleven, Joseph unloaded the cargo, sitting it in a neat heap just outside the wagon. He unhitched the horses, tying one to a tree, and led the other to the log pile while Mary was washing clothes by the river.

Fashioning a padded rope harness for the beast, he tied a length of chain to the rope and secured the chain around a log. Placing the harness on the horse, he used it to pull several logs into position in the shade of an oak for splitting and hewing. Using his expertise as a carpenter, he drove iron wedges into the trunks with the blunt side of an axe, splitting them lengthwise, reducing them to rough beams. As late afternoon approached, a sweating Joseph hewed several beams smooth with an adze and dragged the finished beams aside to dry. Satisfied with their quality, he quit for a well-deserved lunch.

“I’ve split up five trees, that should be enough for the foundation beams,” he said breathlessly, relaxing in the shade, finishing a rough sketched plan for the dwelling on a piece of parchment.

“Yes dear,” Mary replied, looking to her exhausted husband, handing him food and a cup of wine. “Are you all right Joseph?”

“Certainly,” said Joseph, putting down the parchment, “I’m just tired, what do you expect after what I’ve been doing?”

“You’re not exactly a young man, you shouldn’t work so hard.”

“I’m not exactly dead either,” Joseph retorted, annoyed that she would think that he could not do the work. She relented; knowing it was impossible to reason with her obstinate husband once he had made up his mind. A stubborn man, Mary realized that Joseph would either build them a house, or die trying in the attempt.

Looking at the cup of wine, he frowned. “It’s much too early for this woman; do you have water?” Joseph asked, eating dried dates. She handed him a leather water bag, which he quickly drained of liquid. Changing his mind, he gulped down the wine. He wiped his face and said, “I have to set up a tent over the finished beams to keep them from splitting in the sun. We’d best start clearing the home site so Jesus and his girl can place the foundation stones

tonight, and I can set the floor beams in place over the next few days.”

Mary nodded, turning from him and walking to the wagon.

“Do we have any vinegar?” Joseph called, exhausted from the work.

“There’s some left over from pickled artichokes, what do you want it for?” asked Mary, turning.

“I need to drink it, for strength, like soldiers do on their marches.”

“Oh yes, but if you want more you’ll have to head to town, there are other staples we need as well.”

“Right,” Joseph replied, opening a woven hemp tarp to protect his fresh hewn lumber. Erecting a makeshift tent over the beams, Joseph drank the vinegar, closing his eyes at the bitter taste. Later, his wife assisted him clearing the house site using a sickle while he cleared larger saplings with an axe. The site Jesus had picked was practically level and would require only a small amount of digging where the foundation footer stones would be placed. They finished as the sun moved to the horizon. Tossing the saplings and brush in a pile, with dusk approaching Joseph stoked up the fire, he and his wife sitting down to relax.

* * *

A refreshed Jesus and Magdalene appeared from their cave just after sundown carrying their work clothes. Sitting the rags on the wagon’s seat, Jesus greeted his parents while observing the work Joseph had performed during the day. Voicing approval at his father’s accomplishments, they sat down, enjoying cups of wine while his parents had dinner.

Supper finished, Joseph and Jesus walked to the home site and finalized plans for building the foundation, his father noting the measurements on a piece of parchment nailed to a tree for use as reference. They also worked out fireplace and chimney placement, agreeing that building a large hearth on one side of the future kitchen would be best. Satisfied with their plans, they headed to the campsite and enjoyed another cup of wine together. While the fire burned in the cool evening, his mother related that Joseph had gone into town during the morning and purchased needed tools for the construction project.

“So, what did you buy father?” Jesus asked.

“Rope, chain, picks, shovels, nails and the like, we’re short on tools for a project like this.”

“Good, we need items like that anyway.”

“I also bought an iron hammer and hardened chisels for the foundation stones.”

“Excellent, I’m not a mason, but it can’t be that hard.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Joseph, finishing a cup of wine.

“Incidentally, how the hell did you fell and strip twenty trees in one night?” Joseph asked, amazed at the work his son had accomplished.

“It was easy,” said Jesus, “I pushed them over, cut off the roots and branches and carried them to the pile.”

“Carried them, that’s incredible,” replied Joseph, wishing Jesus had been as interested in carpentry in the past as he seemed to be now.

“I carried the stones,” said the Magdalene.

“Really?” Joseph asked, his jaw dropping.

“I told you we’re much stronger than mortals are father.”

“I know, but I didn’t think you were that strong,” said Joseph, staring at the petite Mary Magdalene, trying to envision her lifting such a load, she a vampire who could easily lift half a ton.

“It still surprises me too,” she confessed with a sheepish smile.

Walking to the wagon and grabbing another bottle, Joseph sat down and poured fresh cups of wine for he and Jesus. “So, what do you intend to do tonight son, build the house?”

“No, I figured since you bought picks and shovels I’d work on the foundation. After I’m finished with that I can dig a well and perhaps a latrine.”

“Both?”

“Well, maybe not both, since I’ll have to shape stones for the well first,” said Jesus. I can probably start both pits tonight, but before we do, Mary and I have to head out for a bite to eat.”

“Yes,” replied Joseph, smiling at the euphemism, “By the time you return your mother and I should be asleep. I want to rise early tomorrow to start setting the foundation stones.”

“I’ll try to keep the noise to a minimum,” said Jesus, he and Mary rising to their feet.

Walking from the camp, his father called, “Why don’t you fly son, you’ll get there faster.”

“I figured we’d walk tonight.”

“Suit yourself,” said Joseph, opening the door to the wagon, his wife having already bedded down for the night. Walking off, the last sounds they heard from the camp was Joseph, snickering about something, as usual.

Finding suitable sustenance each evening was not as easy as Jesus had first imagined when arriving in Tibernum, as the town was small and very well protected by the garrison. Most robbers and highwaymen avoided the area, thanks to prefect Gavinal and his efficient centurion, who summarily executed any they caught wishing to pursue these methods of employment.

Reluctantly contenting themselves with the blood of wild boars, Jesus said as they returned to the farm, “I think it’s good that Gavinal and his men keep the area free of criminals, but if this doesn’t change soon we’ll have to move on sooner than I imagined.”

“We could fly to Mansahir, it’s a large town with plenty of thieves,” said the Magdalene.

“We may have to, but it’s well over a hundred miles, even as bats it would take hours to get there.”

“That’s true, but there are other towns between here and Mansahir, and perhaps there are bandits up north.”

“Doubtful,” said Jesus, “Tibernum’s the northernmost settlement in this area. We’d have to fly over the mountains to see what lies beyond.” Arriving, Jesus noted that his parents were asleep in the wagon with the fire burning low, not banked as it should have been for the night. The ever-thoughtful mother of Jesus had stated they might want warm water to wash up, an exhausted Joseph dismissing the suggestion as unnecessary.

“Why?” asked his mother.

“If they want warm water let them fix it for themselves,” Joseph retorted, not wanting to tend the fire.

“Let’s start building the foundation, that’ll surprise dad,” said Jesus.

“Why not,” Mary replied. They changed into work garb, placing their good clothes on the wagon seat.

“I noticed you’re wearing sandals,” said Mary, looking to his still reddish feet.

“Yes, the ones I took from Peter are still in good shape and will have to do till I find another pair of shoes.”

“I wonder what’s wrong with them.”

“I don’t know, but I can’t wear them for more than a few days, otherwise my feet turn red and start to itch like hell.”

“Perhaps you need socks.”

“Maybe,” said Jesus, turning to the stack of tools. He took a pick and pair of shovels sitting next to the wagon and handed a shovel to his consort, showing her how to prepare the ground for the masonry. Quickly digging a perimeter trench for the stones with the pick, Jesus perused the parchment for proper figures regarding depth, finishing the excavation in less than two hours. The couple then placed suitable large stones at the corners of the trench and others in areas between.

“Cutting and shaping the foundation stones will have to wait till tomorrow,” said Jesus at a little past two, “The noise produced would definitely wake my parents.”

“True,” an exhausted Magdalene replied, wiping sweat from her face.

Jesus was lost in thought, looking at the foundation.

“The ground here is firm and dry; I’ll speak to father about building a cellar too.”

“For storing wine?”

“Of course, among other things.”

“Okay, what do we do now?” Mary asked, knowing he was teasing her.

“Dig a latrine and well,” said Jesus, looking to the nearly finished foundation. Walking ten paces from the front of the foundation, he marked the area for the well, pushing a long stick

into the ground to mark the spot. As they were close to the Euphrates, he supposed a depth of 15 cubits would be appropriate, as the elevation was around ten cubits where they stood.

“We’ll need medium size rocks to line the well, perhaps you should gather those while I dig the latrine,” said Jesus.

“Okay,” Mary replied, and she headed for the river. Watching her for a moment, Jesus measured off ten paces from the rear of the foundation. Taking the pick, he broke ground for the latrine. Over several trips, the Magdalene created a small mountain of stones, piling them near the area where the well was to be dug, with Jesus finishing the latrine pit within an hour. Almost ten feet deep, he leapt from it easily, noting that he could have jumped fifty feet into the air if he needed to.

“Dad’s going to have to build an outhouse,” said Jesus, pushing a shovel into a pile of dirt.

“We’d best cover the hole, someone could fall in.”

“Yes, verily I say, it is good you are here Mary, you’re a wise and observant woman.”

“Thank you Jesus,” said an embarrassed Magdalene, not used to honest compliments.

They headed to a grove and ripped several medium size trees from the ground. Jesus stripped them of their roots and branches with an axe, he and Mary placing the trunks over the hole. Relaxing afterward, Jesus remarked that his father could later split the trees and build an outhouse right where they lay, saving him labor in the process. Walking to the future well, Jesus broke ground with the pick and began to dig a few feet into the earth using a shovel. Stopping as the horizon lightened, he stepped out, leaning the shovel and pick against a tree.

“Dad’s going to have to pick up mortar for the stones. I wonder if they have any in town,” said Jesus, wiping his sweaty face on a rag.

“Probably, leave him a note and he can pick it up tomorrow,” Mary replied.

“That’s a good idea.”

Scratching a note on the parchment with a piece of charcoal, Jesus requested ten bags of pozzolana concrete, and trowels for applying it. Their chores completed, they washed up by the river, gathered their clothing, walked to the cave and settled into sleep.

Joseph awoke early; stepping from the wagon to observe the latest miracles his son had accomplished during the night. As usual, it was much more than he expected, the foundation was nearly finished, the latrine pit was dug, and the well was on its way to being excavated, a pile of liner stones stacked nearby. Looking at the parchment, he noticed Jesus’ note scribbled at the bottom of the sheet. “Oh well, I’ll have to head to town again,” he remarked to Mary as she was making breakfast. “Jesus left a note asking for more supplies.”

“What does he need this time?”

“Concrete and trowels,” he answered, she handing him food.

“He’s certainly accomplishing a lot of work during the night.”

“I’ll say,” said Joseph, “The foundation’s almost done.”

Such was the routine over the next weeks, the vampiric couple doing much of the heavy work during the night, Joseph finishing lumber and nailing beams and boards in place during the day. His father approving, Jesus dug a spacious cellar beneath the future kitchen, shoring it up with mortar and stones. On early evenings, Jesus would cut and shape stones with hammer and chisel, split timber and do other things that made a great deal of noise, his parents watching him do the work of ten men. Later in the night, he would work finishing the cellar, lining the well pit, moving dirt, and other chores he could accomplish quietly while his parents slept. One evening, with no heavy work to do, Jesus decided to finish digging the well, having reached cap rock the previous evening at the depth of sixteen cubits, or nearly twenty feet. Joseph was standing above the lined pit, while Jesus split away the soft rock with a pick, placing the fragments in a bucket Joseph lowered into the well.

“Take it up now,” Jesus called, his father struggling with the heavy load of stone and earth.

“Allow me,” said the Magdalene, returning from a riverside stroll. Grabbing the rope, she pulled the hundred pound plus bucket of rubble to the surface, dumping the debris on the ground.

“Thanks,” Joseph replied, Mary lowering the bucket.

“Don’t mention it,” said Mary, asking Jesus, “Haven’t you hit water yet?”

“Hell no woman,” Jesus replied, swinging the pick, “This cap rock’s as thick as – ”

A torrent of water began flooding into the well.

“Goddamnit!” exclaimed Jesus, frigid water hitting him in the face, the well rapidly filling. Seeing this, the Magdalene moved back, pulling Joseph from the opening. Leaping from the well while still having a foothold, Jesus, pick in hand, landed nearly ten feet from the opening, his father watching in amazement.

“Jesus Christ!” Joseph exclaimed.

“Yes?”

“How the hell did you do that?”

“I leapt down the well, so I leapt up.”

“How?” asked Joseph, amazed at his son’s physical feats, staring into the deep well, rubble bucket floating in the water.

“I guess vampires can do things mortals can’t,” said Jesus.

“You can say that again,” Joseph replied, staring at his son.

Soon the house, nearing completion, was livable, Joseph and Jesus spending time making furniture for the dwelling and a much-needed bed for their cave. The home design, as with others in the area, was not dissimilar from a large stick-built farmhouse, a pitch-covered wooden roof extended over the front to create a porch. His mother did her best to keep up, washing their rags on occasion and making meals for her husband. Lately, to the chagrin of Joseph, she was feeling sick almost every morning. “I missed my time last month,” she said as

he was eating breakfast, "It's hard to believe, but I think I'm pregnant."

"Perhaps you've reached the end woman," Joseph ventured, looking to his devoted wife.

"No, I feel different, like the other times, and have never missed even once without being pregnant."

"You're kidding, right?" You can't have a baby now, you're forty-nine years old!"

"The signs don't lie, I've had bad sickness every morning for the past month."

"Good Lord, I'm old enough to be someone's grandfather, not their father," said a smiling Joseph, hugging his wife. His attitude toward her changed from that day forward, from a sarcastic, boorish man, to a doting, thoughtful husband. That evening, Jesus and consort appeared shortly after sundown and were told of the good news.

Congratulations mother," said Jesus, taking a seat in the kitchen after kissing her on the cheek. It was something, as the eldest, he had always done when told he was going to be a big brother again.

"It's wonderful," the Magdalene declared, taking a seat beside her, "We'll have to take care of chores around the house during your time and help you with the baby afterward."

"I can't believe it," said his mother, "I'm old enough to be someone's grandmother, and I'm going to have another baby."

"We already knew," said Jesus, "Mary and I could tell a month ago."

"How?" asked Joseph.

"Who knows," answered Jesus, "We haven't figured that out, but Mary and I feel it has something to do with being vampires."

"I read of such legends when I was younger," said Joseph, "The scroll said the undead are endowed with great powers that mortals can never understand."

"Really?" Jesus asked, "Who wrote the scroll?"

"A Greek historian called Herodotus; he lived in Athens several hundred years ago."

"Interesting, I'd heard of vampire legends during my travels, that's what made me aware of our strengths and limitations, but I've never read Herodotus."

"We should find a copy," said the Magdalene, "We're sketchy on the finer points."

"Yes, and that brings us to the original question," Joseph replied, "Without someone to bring him the realm of the undead, how did our Jesus even become a vampire?"

"I don't think I'll ever know that dad," said Jesus, troubled deep inside about his origins. At times he thought his very love of life had allowed him to triumph over the grave, but couldn't be sure, since he didn't have all the facts. Then again, could it have been the deep rage he had experienced while dying on the cross? After all, had he not thought he would kill them all if he could only live through that? ***Have I unwittingly made a deal with the evil one?*** Jesus mused, quickly dismissing the thought.

“When are you due?” the Magdalene asked, changing the subject and snapping Jesus from his reverie.

“You probably know as well as I,” answered Mary, “I figure a little under eight months.”

“That’s about right,” said Jesus.

“I wonder if it’s a boy or girl,” his mother thought aloud.

“It’s a – ”

“I’d rather not know right now,” she interrupted, looking sternly at her son.

“Very well mother,” said Jesus, the others looking to him, noting he had not said ‘velly’ for a change.

* * *

Sensing his parents needed them, Jesus and consort stayed at the house and moved into an adjacent room, retrieving their bed from the cave, to assist in preparation for the baby. A hurried Joseph put the finishing touches on the house and built an outhouse over the latrine pit. Jesus completed the top of the well during the next nights, building a stone structure, roof, and dip bucket. Joseph and wife found a personal well a luxury they truly appreciated, for in Nazareth they always had to take a long walk to use the community well, waiting in line as their hateful neighbors shunned them and derided their eldest son as a blasphemer of the Hebrew god. Jesus’ next project was to finish constructing the fireplace and chimney. Using his acquired talent as a stonemason, it was quickly and professionally finished over several evenings, his father mixing lime mortar, looking on while his son set the stones in place.

His mother taking care of housekeeping, the dwelling was shaping up fast, thanks to Joseph and his undead assistants, Jesus coming up with new ideas practically every night.

“You know, we need windows for this place,” Jesus observed, sitting on the porch one early evening after having finished building a cradle for the baby.

“You mean glass ones?” Joseph asked, pouring cups of wine, looking to oiled parchment covering holes serving as windows.

“Why not, they have them in Rome, prefect Gavinal has them at his residence too,” said Jesus, taking a cup.

“They’re expensive aren’t they?”

“So?”

“Yeah, I see what you mean,” Joseph replied, looking about the house, and again realizing money was no object. “Terracotta roof tiles and plastered walls would be nice too.”

“They would indeed father, does Drusus carry such?”

“He has bundles of tiles and plaster at his store, I suppose I’ll have to pick some up.”

“We’ll have to build the slave quarters and a stable too,” said Jesus, “The trader’s due in town soon.”

“Where do you want to put those?” asked Joseph, finishing his cup and pouring another.

“I figure about a hundred cubits toward the east, near the river,” Jesus answered, “We can even put a grain mill down there; I’ve read of such systems installed on rivers in Greece and Italy.”

“So have I, it’s said they use the running water to turn a grinding stone,” said Joseph.

“I wonder if he has windows.”

“Who?” Joseph asked, not following his son’s meanderings.

“The trader of course.”

“It would help at times if you’d speak in complete sentences.”

“Oh,” said Jesus, shrugging.

The door opened and the Magdalene stepped out. “Your wife is resting so I made food for you,” she said.

“Thanks,” Joseph replied, smelling the aroma of the fine meal, “I was getting a bit hungry.”

“So am I,” she agreed, looking to her consort.

“Let’s take off,” said Jesus, rising from his seat as Joseph stepped into the house, “We’ll be back in a while father.”

Walking into the darkness, they strolled the property, heading to the adjacent parcel of notary Marcus Pertinax. Lately they were staying off the local roads, as robbers were rarely available in Tibernum and hunting for them seemed to be a waste of time. Occasionally they would fly south toward Mansahir when they felt the need for a human blood treat, perhaps once a week. Most times they stayed near home, contenting themselves with the blood of wild boars or deer. While not finding it particularly tasty, they had grown used to the odd flavors, and it did fill that certain void. On this night boar blood was the fare, the couple dispatching and draining two of the ferocious creatures easily. Dropping the remains to the ground, Jesus leaned against a pine tree and belched loudly.

“It’s a terrible waste to leave these animals to rot after we’re done with them,” said Jesus, staring at the emptied carcasses.

“No it isn’t, jackals will eat them,” Mary replied.

“True, but why don’t we bring them home for my parents to eat instead?”

“They could use meat, but do you think they can eat these animals after the way we took them?”

“Jackals eat them and it hasn’t killed or turned them into vampires,” said Jesus, taking a dagger from his tunic.

“What are you going to do?” Mary asked, watching him.

“Gut them.”

Preparing the carcasses for transport, Jesus lifted them over his shoulder, heading back to the farm.

“You have pig blood all over your tunic,” said Mary as he dumped the meat at the porch steps.

“It washes out,” an unconcerned Jesus replied, his father opening the door.

“Where’d you get the hogs?” Joseph asked, looking to the gutted animals.

“A few miles from here; I figured you could use meat, especially since mom’s pregnant.”

“Did you drink their blood?”

“Of course,” said Jesus, “I figured it was a waste leaving good food to rot in the woods, so I brought them home for you and mother.”

“Are you sure we can eat it?”

“Yes,” answered Jesus, “The same jackals, ravens and other scavengers have been eating the remains we leave behind for months and have had no problems, so I figured what was good for them should be good for you.”

“Thanks,” said Joseph, unconvinced by Jesus’ theory, but willing to take a chance on the fresh meat. “We’ll tell your mother I killed them, okay?”

“Sure, would you like to help me split and roast them, after they’re finished cooking you can take the choice cuts.”

“Okay,” said Joseph, stepping to the porch, “It’s a shame we can’t preserve more of it.”

“There’s plenty more where this came from; we won’t be able to save most of the meat from these animals anyway. The woods are full of boars, this is best till we build a salt room and smokehouse.”

“You’re always finding work for me to do aren’t you?” his father observed with a fond smile as they butchered the hogs. After splitting the carcasses, Jesus dug a pit, his consort bringing rocks from the riverbank to build an oven. Leaving one side open, Jesus laid three courses of stones around the pit, stringing chains over the third course. Setting another layer on top to secure them, he created a grate like structure from the chains to be used for roasting the meat. Joseph built a fire in the pit, using dried tree stumps and roots his son had split, sitting the meat on the chains to cook. Jesus, having nothing better to do at the time, ducked into his bedroom to don a fresh tunic, afterward returning to the makeshift grill.

His wife strolled to the porch, smelling the roasting pork and asking, “Where did you get the meat Joseph?”

“Jesus caught them and I killed them.”

“It’s pork?”

“There’s not much else to eat around here mother, especially when it comes to larger wild animals,” said Jesus, “There are deer and auroch roaming about, but boars are much more plentiful.”

“You drank their blood, didn’t you?” his mother asked, as if making certain he had cleaned his plate.

“Yes mother,” a patient Jesus replied.

“Good,” said Mary, turning from the doorway, “Please bring some in when it’s done.”

Stunned, Joseph and Jesus looked at each other, the Magdalene remarking, “Well, that was easy.”

Soon the meat was well done, Joseph removing the tenderloin cuts from the animals for he and his wife, along with the hams. The other meat was not salvageable, as in a short time it would have spoiled, so it was left to burn up in the fire. His parents feasted on pork tenderloin, Joseph relating he wanted to pick up salt from town for the hams.

“Tell me the truth, you didn’t kill those pigs, Jesus killed them in his usual way didn’t he?” his wife asked after finishing her meal.

“Well, yes,” Joseph answered, “I just didn’t want you to – ”

“Complain?”

“That’s part of it, but – ”

“Look Joseph,” his wife continued, “You may not realize it and may still want to shield me from it, but I’ve grown as used to this situation as you have.”

“You have?”

“Yes, our son Jesus is a vampire,” she said, rising from the table and collecting the dishes.

“We know that, but he – ”

Looking her husband in the eyes, she continued, “He is a vampire, he kills people and animals to survive and he sucks their blood.”

“Yes woman, but – ”

“Our son also robs the corpses of the people he kills on occasion, that’s why we have this farm. Jesus purchased it with money he took from his victims. At times he even broke in and looted some of their homes after he killed them. Further, as long as he and his woman don’t bring people here for us to eat, I don’t care what he does.”

Joseph sat, jaw agape, digesting her words. “Okay,” he replied as his wife cleared the table, afterward retiring to her room. He looked to the door, seeing Jesus and consort heading into the kitchen, joining him at the table.

“Did you enjoy the food?” Jesus asked, pouring a cup of wine.

“Yes, your mother did too, she also knows how you killed it,” said Joseph.

“She does?” asked Mary.

“Yes indeed,” Joseph replied, “She’s very perceptive nowadays, and she also told me she doesn’t care what you do, as long as you don’t bring people here for us to eat.”

“We would never do that!” Mary exclaimed, “What kind of people does she think we are?”

“She thinks you’re vampires,” answered Joseph, looking to the Magdalene.

“We are vampires,” said Jesus.

“That’s obvious,” Joseph retorted.

“You told her we took them?”

“No son, she figured it out herself, not that it was that hard to.”

* * *

The next day Joseph drove the wagon to town, picking up salt, more tools, roof tiles, lime plaster and other provisions. Inquiring as to the availability of glass windows, Drusus told him Callicles the trader was due in town within weeks and that he would probably have those items aboard his caravan.

“Prefect Gavinal bought the last load of windows for his home,” said an envious Drusus.

“My son told me he carries slaves on occasion.”

“Most times, and off all kinds too, Greeks, Jews, Nubians, Egyptians, and sometimes ones from further east who have strange looking eyes. Along with slaves he carries most everything else too, over eighty wagons usually, some products coming from as far as Hispania and Cathay.”

“You don’t say,” Joseph replied, paying him, “I’m certain we’ll be doing business with him.”

As the weather warmed, Jesus and father used the next weeks to build a salting room, smokehouse, a large slave quarters for up to ten slaves and a stable for horses and oxen. The smokehouse was pressed into use as Jesus brought carcass after carcass of boars, deer and auroch to the farm nearly every night, Joseph remarking they may have to go into the meat business if they kept stockpiling such a hoard. They finished their work on the slave quarters and stable none too soon, for Callicles and his caravan came rolling into town only days after they had completed the structures. Drusus informed Joseph of this when he came to town on a late afternoon, relating that the caravan was a day away, and that Callicles was at the prefect’s mansion, getting drunk.

“Does he do business in the evening?” asked Joseph, knowing he would need Jesus for some transactions, especially for the purchasing of slaves.

“Callicles would do business at four in the morning if money was to be had,” Drusus replied with an amused smile.

“Excellent,” said a relieved Joseph.

Returning to the farm, Joseph unloaded the wagon and walked into the house. Jesus and the Magdalene had risen at their customary late hour, sitting in their dimly lamp lit room in the back, with the window openings shuttered up tight against the western sun. Knocking on the door, Joseph entered, excited about the news of Callicles being in town.

“So, his caravan will be here tomorrow,” said Jesus. “Does he do business in the evenings?”

“Yes, and that’s good for us, considering you can’t walk about during daylight hours.”

“I’ll say,” said the Magdalene, “You certainly have developed a new talent when it comes to understatement Joseph – you sound like Jesus.”

Joseph smiled and said, “Like father, like son.” Looking to Jesus, he added, “I’ve never bought slaves before.”

“Neither have I, but buying slaves can’t be much different from buying oxen.”

“True, Drusus says he has those too.”

“Good, Mary and I will stop by tomorrow evening to buy the slaves. Would you like to head to town earlier to purchase windows and such and we’ll meet you there after sundown?”

“Sure, I’ll get the horses and wagon ready in the morning and arrive there as soon as I can.”

At sunset, Jesus and the Magdalene assumed chiropterian form, flying from town in search of human fare, seeing Callicles’ long string of wagons proceeding southeast on a narrow service road about five miles from Tibernum. Noting heavily armed men on each wagon guarding the train, they headed south toward Mansahir, figuring that bandits wouldn’t have the stomach to attempt robbing such a well-defended group. Returning to human form thirty miles south of Tibernum, they strolled the road near a small village, attempting to lure the dregs of society into what they did best, stealing from those who worked for a living.

“Did you see those men guarding Callicles’ wagons?” the Magdalene asked.

“They’re mercenaries,” said Jesus, “I’ll bet the man has never been robbed, verily I say, he who guards diligently against his attackers shall never be attacked.”

Mary smiled, reflecting on the truthfulness of the statement.

Walking further, they came upon a pair of bandits blocking their path. The swarthy duo appeared as if the pursuit of robbery hadn’t been profitable profession as of late, looking as if they hadn’t bathed in years and acting as if they were moonstruck lunatics instead of thieves.

“Give us your money you Roman bastard!” one growled, drawing a short sword.

“Why?” asked Jesus.

“Because we’re robbers - that’s why!” the thief stammered, his partner moving to Mary, grabbing her arms and holding them behind her back.

“You are?”

“What are you, stupid?” asked the other thief, holding a blade to his consort’s throat.

“No,” said Jesus, “I just don’t feel like giving money to robbers tonight, so why don’t you try to take it from us?”

“Suit yourself,” the robber retorted, raising his sword.

Jesus stood unmoving as his assailant drew back to strike. The sword moving toward him, he put out his left and grabbed the thief by his wrist, stopping the weapon cold. Calmly taking the sword, Jesus threw it to his right, where it sunk deep in the trunk of a tree. Mary, overcome by

hunger, slipped from the other robber's grip, took his dagger and drained him on the spot while his horrified partner looked on.

"Woe unto you simple thief," Jesus declared in his vampiric accent, "Verily I say, beware of Hebrew vampires dressed as Romans."

Jesus plunged fangs into the neck of his tormentor, sucking him dry. Dropping the victim to the pavement, he asked, "Do they have any loot?"

"Not a shekel," a disgusted Mary answered, finished checking the other corpse.

"Let's dump them in the woods," said Jesus. He grabbed one by his filthy tunic; the other by his matted hair and dragged the bodies from the road. Disposing of them fifty feet from the roadside, they transformed and flew toward Tibernum.

Flying over Callicles' wagons a few hours later, Jesus noted they had reached town, slaves setting up a caravansary by torchlight on the main street in the fashion of an open market or bazaar. Transforming in a secluded area, they walked to the main street and browsed the items for sale. The merchandise offered was incredible, all varieties of household items, furniture, clothing, tools, jewelry, farm animals, beasts of burden and of course slaves, with other extended wagons piled high with casks of wine and preserved exotic foods from all over the empire.

"Drusus was right, he carries everything," said Jesus, inspecting the items.

"We're not open for business yet sir," a young Greek of fifteen years announced while they walked among the wagons.

"I understand," said Jesus in passable Greek, "I'm only taking a look at what you have. Is the merchant Callicles of Athens available?"

"No sir, he's at the prefect's residence getting drunk," the teenager replied with a fond smile for his employer.

"That's something I enjoy," said Jesus.

Nodding, the adolescent continued, "We'll be opening tomorrow at noon, I'm hoping he'll be in some sort of condition to conduct business."

"Will your bazaar be open tomorrow evening?" Jesus asked, making certain that he would be able to shop for slaves during the night.

"Of course, uncle Callicles makes most sales in the evening anyway, after everyone else has returned from their work."

"Good, my father will arrive here around noon. He's looking for glass windows and oxen. I'll stop by in the evening, I'm looking for slaves, and do you carry plows for turning earth?"

"We have plenty of those items aboard the wagons," the lad answered, "Tibernum's one of the first extended stops we make on our trips from the ports of the Bosphorus. From here we head south to Antioch, and from there into northern Judea and back."

"How long will you be here?" Mary asked, having picked up Greek during their travels.

“A week or two, depending on sales.”

“Excellent, does your uncle speak Latin; my father doesn't understand Greek at all.”

“Most of us do, even the slaves,” said the lad in Latin, “Why didn't you ask me earlier sir?”

“It didn't occur to me,” Jesus answered, slightly embarrassed, “Please forgive me son, I didn't realize you could speak Latin.”

“Latin's the tongue of all you Roman folk,” the young Greek observed, “You guys run the world, if we couldn't speak Latin we wouldn't be able to sell much merchandise to you would we?”

“I reckon not,” said Jesus, feeling guilty for a moment; masquerading as a Roman citizen. His guilt passing quickly, he took pride in being citizen B. Julius Chrysippus, wealthy wine merchant hailing from Etruria with his wife Maria, they so much better than all lowly barbarians.

“So, what's your name son?” asked Jesus.

“Demosthenes.”

“After the lawyer?”

“Yes, I was told my father always admired him.”

“You're a young man, where's your father?”

“He and my mother died in a plague in Thebes when I was a baby,” said Demosthenes, “My uncle took me in and treats me as if I were his own son.”

“Thebes, in Greece or Egypt?” asked Jesus.

“The city of Oedipus,” Demosthenes replied, a slave calling to him.

“Ah yes,” said Jesus, knowing where he hailed from. “We'll see you on the morrow,” he added, the couple leaving the caravansary.

“Who the hell is Oedipus?” asked Mary as they walked from town.

“Was Oedipus; a legendary guy from Greece who killed his father, was afterward made a king, and then screwed his mother.”

“Really,” said a chuckling Magdalene, “Kind of kinky wasn't he?”

“He didn't know she was his mother when he was screwing her.”

“I find that very hard to believe, did he ever find out?”

“Yes, his mother killed herself upon learning of the news, and he blinded himself for whatever reason.”

“Why?”

“Who knows and who cares, legends like that come down from the past and they're probably a pack of lies anyway.”

“Like the Hebrew faith is?”

“Precisely,” said Jesus.

Returning to the farm near midnight, Jesus found his parents awake, his mother feeling ill. She lay in their bed, an unconcerned Joseph remarking in the kitchen that she had always felt ill when pregnant. “She’s had seven kids and it’s always been the same way,” said Joseph.

“She gets sick while pregnant?” Mary asked.

“Only till the sixth or seventh month, after that she’s fine till the baby’s born.”

“I never had babies when I was alive,” said the Magdalene, thinking of children she would never have.

“The whole damn thing’s overrated!” Mary yelled from the bedroom, Joseph looking to the doorway.

“We stopped by Callicles’ market,” said Jesus.

“What did you find?”

“He carries everything; beasts, furniture, tools, slaves; you name it, he has it.”

“Furniture too?” Joseph asked, looking about their sparsely furnished home, he and Jesus only beginning to create chairs, tables and the like.

“Indeed father, all kinds, that’ll save us work.”

“What about glass windows?”

“He has those too,” said Jesus, “They open at noon, I reckon you should head to his market then. Buy the windows and a pair or two of draft oxen, along with anything else you want. I’ll meet you there at dusk and we’ll buy the slaves.”

“Okay, I’ll bring the wagon and tethers for the oxen.”

“Do you need money?” Jesus asked.

“Are you kidding?”

“Sorry, I forgot,” Jesus replied.

“Jesus,” Joseph asked, “Once you purchase them, how will we keep the slaves from discovering you and Mary are vampires?”

“Entrancement,” answered Jesus, “First, I’ll convince them that you and mother are the masters of this farm, then I suppose I’ll figure out some kind of story to explain Mary and I.”

“You can do that?”

“Never underestimate a vampire, my father,” said Jesus.

Chapter Five: Callicles of Athens

Joseph arrived at the marketplace shortly after one, marveling at items trader Callicles had for sale.

First on his list were windows, of which he purchased ten, six for the house and four to be used as replacements. Borrowing a slave, he carefully loaded them in the wagon, placing woven straw padding between. A pair of iron plows was bought, along with stylish bronze oil lamps, glass tableware, crystal wine goblets, silver dining utensils, articles of clothing, and an exquisitely crafted leather covered down stuffed couch with two matching chairs and table. Sturdy shoes were another item purchased for he, his wife, Jesus, and the Magdalene. Expensive tools were bought for carpentry work and farming. Joseph was spending money like a drunken sailor, buying items he had always wanted but could never have afforded in the past. Having spent 950 denarii by five, next on his list were draft oxen. Several pair were available, offered at the incredibly low price of 50 denarii. Two pair, a set of males and a set of females for breeding fit the bill, Joseph paying Callicles Roman silver for the animals.

Shortly after dusk, Jesus and consort strolled up while his father sat in the wagon eating spiced barbecued pork, washing it down with a bottle of Gaul's finest. The oxen were tethered to the wagon, feeding on hay.

"Hello son," said Joseph while Jesus inspected the oxen.

"These are fine animals," Jesus replied, "How much did you pay for them?"

"50 denarii for each pair, practically a steal!"

"I'll say, I figured they'd be at least 100 a pair."

Prefect Gavinal and merchant Callicles walked up while Jesus was inspecting the windows. "Julius!" Gavinal exclaimed, taking Jesus' hand and shaking it firmly, "Have you met friend Callicles?" The prefect smelled like a brewery, wine heavy on his breath, he and Callicles having continued their drinking during the afternoon.

"Not yet," answered Jesus, "Maria and I have just arrived kind Gavinal; this is my father, Julius Chrysippus the elder."

"Greetings Julius the elder," said Gavinal while they shook hands.

"I'm Callicles," the merchant announced, he and Jesus shaking hands firmly. For having been drinking all day, the man was surprisingly sober, his reddish complexion, especially on his balding head, revealing that he was a very heavy drinker.

"You carry fine merchandise," said Jesus as the others conversed in the background.

"We try," Callicles replied, "So Julius, my nephew told me you're interested in slaves," slapping his hands together, ready to do business.

"Yes," said Jesus, "Four would be nice, six would be ideal."

"I have thirty-six available, mostly Nubians, Egyptians and Greeks, but prices are steep,"

Callicles replied, waving a hand toward the slave wagons.

“Name your price sir.”

“They start at 600 denarii, complete with chain, lock and shackle. My highest priced slaves are 800 each.”

“Six hundred, let’s see, that times six makes thirty six hundred,” said Jesus.

“Yes.”

“Tell you what, I’ll go five hundred each for six in total, that’s three thousand denarii.”

“Cash?”

“Cash is all Bacchus Julius Chrysippus ever deals with,” Gavinal interjected.

“Bacchus, the god of wine,” said Callicles.

“Epicurus’ favorite god,” Jesus replied, Callicles smiling broadly.

“Julius was a wine merchant in Etruria, from Vesuvii,” said Gavinal.

“Volsinii,” Jesus corrected.

“Whatever Julius, I’m drunk.”

“That explains the name, do you imbibe Julius? Callicles asked, “I have fine wine from northern Gaul.”

“Of course, my father and I are very fond of wine.”

“Excellent, we’ll have some together; you said three thousand cash for six slaves?”

“Yes.”

“You have a deal,” Callicles declared, motioning toward the slave wagons, “Shall we pick them out?”

“Why not,” said Jesus, looking to his father and winking.

Returning the wink, Joseph and Mary continued to converse with Gavinal while Jesus headed to the slave wagons with the trader. The slaves were contained in several cage wagons, Jesus surveying the lot. Many were Greeks or Egyptians, along with exotic Nubians and a small number of Jews. An attractive young Jewess was also imprisoned, sitting quietly in one corner of a wagon.

“What are those black slaves in the other cage?” asked Jesus, never having seen Negroes.

“Nubian barbarians, from south of Egypt.”

“Like Ethiopians?”

“Similar, but much more exotic and savage,” said Callicles. “Due to their rarity in Anatolia, my Nubian slaves are 800 each, the males are strong as an ox and make great gladiators.”

“Their color looks similar to the people of India, but the facial features and hair are much

different from anything I've ever seen," Jesus observed, shocked at their appearance.

"Well, they're Nubians," said Callicles, "Tell you what Julius, if you want to buy some, I'll cut the price to – "

"I'll stick with Greeks," Jesus replied, still staring at the unfamiliar Nubians.

"Okay, if you'd like to purchase a group of six, all used to each other, I recently bought a lot from an estate on the Mediterranean coast. They're all Greeks, all skilled, and one is a teacher. One woman is a midwife; I forget her name, but she'll definitely come in handy to the owner for delivering children or veterinary work."

"Really?" Jesus asked, walking to a separate cage, six slaves within. Inside were four men and two women. Looking at the group, Jesus noted all seemed strong and healthy, with one, obviously the teacher, an older bearded man sitting on a bench. "These slaves look fine to me," he said, "I'll take them."

"They're a damn good deal at 500 each," a frowning Callicles replied, thinking he may have made a mistake offering slaves to Jesus at so low a price. "They were with their former master for over ten years, so there's no need to break them in, and like I said, each one is skilled."

"Sold," said Jesus, looking to the group.

"You six, get your asses out here," Callicles barked, opening the cage door. All obediently exited, the trader chaining them together.

Glancing to the other cage, Jesus saw the imprisoned Jewess sitting quietly.

Making eye contact with his Hebrew kinfolk, the vampiric Christ took pity on her. Turning to the trader, he asked, "How much do you want for the Jewess?"

"Oh yes, look at her, she's only fourteen years old and a virgin, she'd make a perfect whore wouldn't she?"

"I suppose," said Jesus, looking to the girl.

"I know," a chuckling Callicles replied, "Jew broads are great pieces of ass, I've laid a slew of 'em. A friend of mine bought her near Galilee and traded her to me in Damascus for some horses. I reckon eight hundred will do it, she's gorgeous isn't she? You know, I'd screw her if I had the time, I'll bet she's tight as a knot, but I'm a businessman, and cute pussy's as common as sestertii."

"Make it five hundred and I'll take her too," said Jesus, hiding his disgust at the trader's remarks.

"Five hundred?"

"Yes, thirty five hundred for all."

"But she's a fine piece of – "

"I don't care, thirty five hundred denarii or nothing," said Jesus, "I can go to Rome and buy slaves like this for half the price you're asking."

“How about thirty six fifty? She’s a fine looking girl, and I have to make a profit on – ”

“I’m sure you’re making a profit friend Callicles, thirty-five,” said Jesus, holding firm.

“Deal,” Callicles replied after a reflective pause, shaking Jesus’ hand firmly, a bit saddened that he had driven so hard a bargain for some of his finest slaves. “You’re going to screw her aren’t you?” he asked, unchaining the Jewess from an iron bar.

“I have a wife,” said Jesus, “But my father may need a concubine.”

“That old man? I don’t mean to offend, but he must be sixty.”

“He’s fifty five and my mother is forty nine, would you believe she’s pregnant?”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, at 34 years of age I’m going to have an infant sibling.”

“It’s not unheard of, but is very rare; I imagine the midwife I just sold you will come in handy after all,” said Callicles, chaining the Jewess to the other slaves and fastening the free end to one of the cage bars.

“Bring them to the wagon, then I’ll pay you.”

“Sure, I have to head to my office to retrieve the titles, I’ll meet you there in a bit.”

Jesus nodded, walking to the wagon, where his father, Mary and Gavinal were still engaged in conversation. Drusus the Illyrian had dropped by, enjoying a pitcher of strong Egyptian beer, making comments on occasion while constantly ogling the Magdalene. “We have seven slaves father,” Jesus announced, nodding to Drusus.

“That’s two more than I have!” Gavinal exclaimed, “I guess I’ll have to buy a pair to keep up with you friend Julius!”

“He still has thirty or so available,” said Jesus, looking to the prefect.

“What kind?”

“Mostly Egyptians, Jews and Nubians, I think I bought all the Greeks he had.”

“I only buy Greeks, maybe next time,” said Gavinal.

Callicles arrived with the slaves, shackled in chains, following behind him. “Here are the titles,” he said, handing seven parchment documents to Jesus, “Everything’s in order, signed by the prefect of Chrysopolis and his notary. I suppose since Gavinal’s here he’ll be witness for the transfer.”

“So noted,” Gavinal replied with a nod, looking to Jesus, “Don’t worry Julius, I’ll have Marcus notarize them tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” Jesus answered.

“No problem,” said Gavinal, turning to Joseph and the Magdalene.

“Climb on the roof of the wagon slaves,” Jesus ordered, “From here you’re going to our farm, there I shall inform you of your duties.” Young Demosthenes had been correct; the slaves

understood Latin perfectly, and obediently climbed aboard the wagon. Reaching into a leather satchel, Jesus produced 3,500 denarii, handing a heavy bag of Roman silver to the trader.

Shaking Jesus' hand, Callicles said with a broad smile, "Thank you Julius, you drive a hard bargain. No matter, I've made a hell of a lot of money today, the only others who spent more than you were friends Gavinal and Marcus!"

"I know Marcus, he's the town notary," replied Jesus.

Noticing the Magdalene, Callicles asked, "Who is this beautiful creature friend?"

"My wife, Maria Hittica."

"She's lovelier than Helen of Troy," said Callicles, bowing to Mary.

"Thank you sir," Mary replied, disdaining the remark, finding Callicles a man that she simply didn't like.

"Care to get drunk?" asked Callicles, thirsty for wine.

Looking to his father, Jesus asked, "Will you run the goods to the farm?"

"I'm going to need a hand with the oxen and slaves son," answered Joseph, "Could we come back later?"

"Hold on a minute folks," said Callicles. Calling a mercenary, he instructed in Anatolian, "Fetch a slave and have him bring a Gallic wine cask and a brick of cheese here for my friends."

Nodding, the mercenary found a slave, who carried the heavy cask to the wagon while the mercenary brought along the twenty-pound brick of cheese. "A present for you and your family Julius," said the trader, "Fine Gallic wine and sharp cheese from Hispania."

"Thank you Callicles," Jesus answered, again shaking his hand, "You're a good man, and if you wish to stop by our farm you are welcome. We have cured meat in our smokehouse, fresh water in our well, wine in our cellar and now, seven fine slaves to serve us."

"I may visit later," Callicles replied, making a mental note that wine was available at the Chrysippus farm.

"He lives just up from Marcus' place," said Gavinal, "Right on the Euphrates."

"Are you coming back to get drunk with us?" Callicles asked.

"Definitely," said Jesus, looking to his father, who nodded eagerly.

"Stop by Gavinal's office when you return, that's where we'll be," Callicles advised, Jesus, Joseph and the Magdalene climbing aboard the heavily laden wagon with the oxen in tow. Looking to the prefect, he added as Gavinal smiled, "We've had a binge going for the last day or so, and I've been working so hard tonight I'm almost sober, can you believe it?"

"At times sobriety can be a curse, we should see you in a few hours," Jesus answered, taking the reins and pulling out.

"I'll need another twenty gross of roof tiles for the store, Julius the elder bought all I had a few weeks ago," said Drusus, drunk on Egyptian beer.

“Okay, Demo will fix you up,” Callicles answered, grabbing a bottle of wine from a slave.

* * *

The pace was slow as the horses strained against the weight, Joseph remarking, “Lousy Arabians, fast as lightning in a race but not worth a damn when it comes to pulling power.”

“We’re almost there,” a patient Jesus replied as they drove onto their property.

“We should have hitched up those oxen, it’s a wonder the horses haven’t strangled from the load we’re carrying,” said Joseph, harnessing for horses in those days simply oxen harnesses, only smaller. When hauling heavy loads they would often cut a horse’s wind, especially on hills.

Arriving at the house, they stepped from the wagon, his mother appearing in the doorway. “Look woman, oxen, slaves, everything!” Joseph exclaimed, while Jesus unhitched the tired horses.

“Yes,” Mary replied, “You’re running late, the dinner I made is cold.”

“I’m sorry,” said Joseph, “But don’t you worry about that anymore, we have slaves to cook dinner for you!” Mary nodded and stepped into the house, the Magdalene following.

“She didn’t seem particularly impressed,” Jesus observed, helping the slaves from the wagon.

“She’s pregnant son, women act weird when they’re pregnant.”

“Maria!” Jesus called to his consort, as the slaves were present.

“Yes Julius?” asked the Magdalene, appearing in the doorway.

“Would you deal with the slaves while father and I stable the animals?”

“Sure,” she replied, ducking inside, returning with a lit table lamp and stepping from the porch.

“Feed them meat and vegetables, and make certain they and the beasts have water,” said Jesus as she led her charges to the slave quarters.

“Right,” she answered.

He and his father leading the beasts to the stable, Jesus said, “Get their names tomorrow, I’ll speak to them in the evening so we can figure out what duties to assign them to.” Leaving the animals in the stable, they headed to the house and entered. Grabbing his cold dinner, Joseph wolfed it down, his wife sitting at the table.

“We have to head to Gavinal’s,” he explained with a full mouth.

“Why?” asked Mary.

“To get drunk mother,” said Jesus.

“Oh,” his mother replied, staring at the pair.

Giving his wife a hug, they left, walking to the trail leading from the farm. “Since I have to unload the wagon and deal with the slaves tomorrow, I’d better not get too drunk should I?” Joseph asked.

“Indeed,” Jesus agreed as they headed for town.

The efficient Magdalene did everything Jesus requested, cruelly leaving the slaves chained in their quarters, but feeding them what all considered a banquet: winter vegetables from Vitellius’ market, a side of smoked boar, a bucket of fresh water, ladle, and several drinking cups. Heading to the stable, she fed and watered the horses and oxen, returning to the house to check on Jesus’ mother.

Making certain she was settled in for the night, Mary Magdalene then went out and killed someone by sucking his blood until he died in her arms, and like any normal vampire, not caring if he was a robber, highwayman, priest or merchant. Though she had no proof, she figured the man was some sort of criminal, as he had skulked in the shadows some miles south of town. Not having Jesus around to prevent her from taking those he considered unsuitable made it much easier, and she took a free hand in obtaining supper. Robbing the victim, she found nine aurei and several hundred denarii in a satchel. Also inside was assorted jewelry and smaller monetary denominations – bronze sestertii, orichalcum dupondii, red copper asses, and bronze quadrans. Finding rolled parchment documents, she ignored those, tossing them in a thicket of blooming briars. Finished, she threw the corpse into the Euphrates, where it floated away in the current.

Unknown to her, the man was no thief; he had been a Roman moneylender on his way to collect interest and principal payments from the many indebted people of Tiberum. In typically efficient Roman fashion, another collector would be sent later, so it didn’t matter. During the time she was taking her victim, Jesus and father were heading past the town pantheon and continuing to Gavinal’s residence. Arriving at the gate, the guard recognized Jesus and let them in, advising them to go to his office instead of the residence.

“Why?” asked Jesus.

“Because his wife will kill you if you wake their baby,” the guard answered, “Nothing personal, but Phoebe Claudia Domitia doesn’t like drunks.”

“We’re not drunk yet, and if she doesn’t like drunks, why’d she marry Gavinal?” asked a smiling Jesus, his father frowning.

“For one thing, he’s wealthy, for another, probably because he knocked her up with their first child a few years back, his daughter Gavinalla Marcia,” the guard replied with a grin.

Jesus nodded to the guard, he and Joseph proceeding to Gavinal’s office, a small annex located off the mansion atrium. Knocking, Callicles opened the door and let them in, greeted by the prefect and the trader as they entered.

“Good evening,” Callicles slurred, looking to Jesus and smiling while he took a gulp of wine from a goblet. In the lamp lit room, Callicles’ barroom tan was all the more evident, his forehead and face bright red from years of drinking wine in excess.

“Welcome Julius the elder and younger,” said Gavinal, sitting at his desk drinking directly from a bottle, almost too drunk to rise from his chair.

“Greetings my friends,” Jesus answered, “It looks like you’re happy this evening.”

“It all depends,” said Gavinal.

“On what?” Joseph asked.

“On if you’re drunk,” said Gavinal, tossing a bottle of wine to Jesus. Catching the bottle underhanded, Jesus broke the clay seal, dug out the wax stopper, and chugalugged from the bottle, handing the remaining half to his father, who quickly drank the rest. “Can you catch another?” asked the prefect, Joseph sitting the empty bottle on his desk.

“Easily,” Jesus answered, clapping his hands and holding them high.

Gavinal threw a bottle to Jesus, who caught the bottle overhand with his left. Breaking the seals, he chugalugged from the bottle, handing the remaining half to his father.

“Sinistere,” Gavinal observed.

“Yeah, he’s a southpaw, so is Demosthenes,” said an unsteady Callicles, putting down the glass and leaning heavily on the desk.

“Gaius Julius was left-handed; so was Marcus Tullius Cicero and Senator Cato,” a superstitious Gavinal replied, not recalling Jesus had signed the contract and deed using his left, “The Delphic Oracle has said those who are sinistere are favored by the gods.”

“Really,” said Jesus, “I imagine after some of the things I’ve been through, the gods must be showing me favor lately.” Callicles collapsed unconscious, Jesus looking to his drunken form on the marble floor.

“Looks like we got here a little late,” said Joseph.

“Not really,” Gavinal replied, “Callicles has been drinking for two straight days, it’s about time he had rest.” Rising unsteadily, he walked over to move the trader to a leather couch.

Jesus, assisting him, hauled Callicles to the couch while Joseph finished their latest bottle.

“Callicles shouldn’t drink so much,” said Jesus, Gavinal handing him another bottle.

“Aren’t you one to talk,” Joseph retorted.

“So, do you like the farm I sold you?” Gavinal asked, as Callicles, an arm lying on the marble floor, snored in the background.

“Very much, and with seven slaves we should have it working this year,” said Jesus, taking another drink.

“Yes, Callicles told me that you’re curing meat over there, the men at the garrison could use some, perhaps you could sell them a few sides.”

“We’ve taken and hung many. Marcus Tullius wrote that split sides, if salted and smoked constantly, cure in only two months or so,” said Jesus, again taking a seat.

“True,” Gavinal agreed, seating himself at the desk, “How much would you want?”

“I’ll give you and they a few sides to be neighborly,” Jesus answered, relaxing in a padded chair, “All I ask is that you give me your opinions of the quality, and next time I’ll sell you some.”

“You’re very kind, what meats have you in your larder?”

“Auroch, venison, and pork; the smokehouse is almost full, we could actually use the space.”

“How did you acquire so much?” Gavinal asked, looking to Jesus unsteadily, “Do you trap them?”

“No, we hunt them for sport with spears or knives, the land’s full of game,” Jesus lied, “My father and I are good with blades, he taught me to throw as a child in Volsinii.”

“My son can hit anything within fifty cubits,” said a boasting Joseph.

“Perhaps you could hunt on my property too,” Gavinal suggested, opening another bottle.

“Certainly,” Jesus replied, “I like to hunt at night when there’s more chance of surprise.”

The conversation continued for several hours, the prefect consuming another bottle of undiluted wine between latrine breaks. “We and our wives will have to get together one evening for dinner,” said a badly slurring Gavinal, walking from his personal lavatorium, Jesus finishing a fourth bottle.

“Perhaps later,” replied a drunken Joseph, “My wife is pregnant and has had sickness lately.”

“Oh yes, Callicles told me, that’s incredible,” said Gavinal slowly, drifting in and out of lucidity from consuming so much wine. “I have to turn in,” he added, looking in double vision at Jesus and his father, Callicles snoring on the couch, an arm on the marble floor.

“We’ll let ourselves out,” said Jesus.

“Thanks,” the weary prefect replied, Jesus and father heading for the door. “Don’t forget Julius, you and yours are always welcome here,” he added, walking unsteadily to the atrium.

“And you are always welcome at our farm friend Gavinal,” said Jesus. Leaving the compound, Jesus nodded to the guard as he opened the gate. A few minutes later they walked past Callicles’ darkened caravansary, heading south of town.

“Gavinal sure was piped, along with that Callicles fellow,” said Joseph, arriving at the farm at four.

“Look who’s talking.”

“You’re drunk too.”

“Yeah, what can you do?”

Entering the house, Jesus noticed Mary Magdalene sitting at the kitchen table, annoyed at him being late. “Where have you been?” she asked, thinking he would have returned about midnight.

“You know, we were drinking wine at Gavinal’s,” said Jesus, sitting down.

“Why did I ask, have you had anyone to eat?”

“I’ve gone without before.”

“It seems wine can replace blood,” Joseph observed.

“For a time,” said Jesus, “As I’ve said, vampires do not live by blood alone.”

“That’s obvious,” a chuckling Joseph replied, heading for his bedroom.

“Have you eaten?” Jesus asked, opening a wine bottle and pouring a goblet.

“I took someone south of here while you were gone.”

“Was he a robber?”

“Who knows, he was there, so I killed him,” said Mary, looking him in the eyes.

“What if – ”

“I don’t care Jesus, you do. I look at them as lunch, and if you’re not around to stop me I’ll take just about anyone.”

“You will not harm our family or friends,” said Jesus, a stern look on his face.

“Are you stupid, I was talking about strangers,” Mary retorted, pouring herself a goblet.

“So, how are the slaves?” Jesus asked, knowing it was pointless to lecture her regarding suitable victims.

“I left them in their quarters, fed them vegetables and a side of smoked boar, and gave them a pail of water and cups.”

“Very good, did you see the young Jewess?”

“Yeah, she’s beautiful, what did you buy her for?” Mary asked, thinking she was a waste of money.

“I took pity on her, she’s a fourteen year old virgin and that amoral trader wanted to sell her to me as a whore.”

“So what, she’d make a good whore with her looks,” an equally amoral Mary observed, at least regarding whoredom and vampirism, taking a deep drink of wine.

“Prostitution is not a proper occupation for a Hebrew woman, nor any other woman for that matter,” said Jesus, finishing his goblet.

“I suppose being a slave is?” asked Mary, her moral outlook regarding slavery coming to the surface.

“That’s not my intention, I intend to employ her to tend to my mother’s needs and will give freedom to her later.”

“I thought I was supposed to care for her,” said Mary, folding hands on the table.

“You still can, she will help you.”

“Okay, but you have too much heart,” the Magdalene replied, realizing she would never understand her Jesus, the kind, just vampire. The sun rising, they moved to their dark room next to his parents’ bedroom and settled into sleep.

* * *

A hung over Joseph rose at ten and drank a bottle of wine for breakfast to kill the hangover;

heading to the slave quarters near noon to inspect his newly purchased servants.

“My name is Jos – I mean Julius,” said Joseph, “I and my wife are the master and mistress of this farm, what are your names please?” Each answered in turn, Joseph noting their names on a piece of parchment. “Thank you, we shall treat you well. For the time being you may rest, my son Julius the younger will assign each of you later,” he replied, turning to leave.

“Can you unshackle us master?” a muscular slave named Ganymede asked with an imploring expression.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t the keys, my son has them and is in town at present,” lied Joseph, ogling the attractive Jewess, she noting his observations and looking to the floor, the rest of the group nodding as he turned and left. ***This is going to be better than I imagined***, Joseph thought as he returned to the house.

At dusk, he walked to his son’s room and roused his son. “Jesus wake up, you have to unshackle the slaves,” said his father, shaking him in the bed.

“Unshackle them!” Jesus exclaimed, rising with a start, “They should have been released last night!”

“They’re sitting chained in their quarters, I told them you have the keys.”

“Give me the keys woman, why didn’t you unshackle the slaves?” asked Jesus, shaking her awake.

Clumsily reaching to the floor and handing him the keys, Mary murmured as she opened her eyes, “They’re all right sitting chained in their shed aren’t they?” Focusing, she added with a frown, “You may not realize it, but I don’t care about them, besides, they might have escaped and then you’d be yelling at me about that!”

“You should care, they’re our slaves,” said Jesus.

“They’re your slaves, not mine, I’ve never wanted to own anyone and never will, the thought is repulsive,” the Magdalene retorted, rolling over and hugging a pillow.

“Oh,” said Jesus, not having known of his consort’s negative feelings regarding slavery.

Leaving the bed, he dressed and headed to the slave quarters with his father.

“I got their names,” said Joseph, “The pretty Jewess is called Ruth.”

“After the prophetess,” Jesus replied, entering the austere slave quarters. “I’m very sorry, I didn’t realize my wife hadn’t unchained you,” he said while Joseph stood quietly, “My name’s Julius, eldest son of Julius the elder here.”

Each thanked Jesus he released them. “You may rest and settle in tonight, later I will assign you to your duties,” said Jesus, “That is with the exception of Ruth; you, young woman, will follow us to our home.” The Jewess nodded, rising to follow them.

Walking to the house, Joseph whispered, “What about the problem we discussed regarding you and the slaves?”

“All in good time, I’ll handle it,” Jesus replied as they walked in. Entering the kitchen and taking

a seat, he looked to Ruth and said, "You are to be my mother's personal servant. She is pregnant and requires attention from a devoted person, are you able to cook?"

"You're not going to rape me?" Ruth asked, looking to the floor, envisioning her rape by Jesus and his father.

"Of course not," a frowning Jesus answered, "Please look at me girl, only barbarians rape women, and trader Callicles informed me that your virtue is intact."

"He should know master, he stripped me naked and checked before he bought me."

"How can people do such things?" said Jesus, closing eyes and thinking of the chaste modesty practiced by both sexes of their Hebrew kinsfolk.

"I can cook master," Ruth added, finally answering his question.

"Yes, please sit down," Jesus ordered. Staring at him, she took a seat. Looking to his father for a moment, he turned to the girl and asked in his native tongue, "Do you speak Aramaic?"

"Yes," said Ruth, astonished at the words coming from a clean-shaven, shorthaired man who looked like any other Roman to her.

"Well then, I bought you to save you from the fate so many other lovely slaves of the empire fall into. A young woman of your fine caliber should be saved for marriage to a good man, instead of the bondage of the brothel."

"Thank you master," said Ruth, tears welling in her eyes.

"Don't mention it, simply help my mother and father, and in time we'll find you a good man for a husband."

"I've always wanted that," Ruth replied, wiping away tears, not believing the words she heard.

"You will sleep in my parent's bedroom on the floor until we build you a separate room and cot," said Jesus, "Their room is down the hall to the right, please go tend to my mother's needs if you would."

After Ruth left the kitchen, Joseph smiled broadly. "Like I've said, I really like your style son."

The vampiric Christ looked to his father and nodded. They sat at the table for a while, drinking wine and planning their next moves.

"So, what are the names of the other slaves father?"

"Let's see," said Joseph, retrieving parchment from a tunic pocket, "Their names are Icarus, Penelope, Electra, Ganymede, Cyril and Brutus."

"Brutus? What kind of a name is that for a Greek, it's a Latin name."

"Go figure, I asked him that too; he said he was a Greek born in Rome."

"That explains it, what skills do they have?"

"The women are skilled in weaving, sewing, cooking, tanning and tending animals; the one called Electra is also a midwife. Cyril, the old one, is a teacher and linguist, Icarus is a skilled

blacksmith, Ganymede's a carpenter, and Brutus said he can do most anything. Incidentally, Brutus worked as overseer on a farm before their master, a fellow named Marcus Trajanus, died last year."

"Excellent, we'll assign the men to clear and plow the fields, using Brutus as overseer, and employ the women to take care of the animals, if that's all right with you."

"Sure, you're the guy who bought them, why do you think you need my approval?"

"I wanted to be sure, as the elder Julius you're considered their master."

"I am?"

"Yes, further, in the empire, as patriarch you have the power of life and death over the entire family, not just the slaves," said Jesus, informing him of the finer points of Roman tradition.

"That's ridiculous," retorted Joseph, "I'd never kill any of my family, what kind of crazy society is this?"

"It's Roman society father, and no crazier than Judean society is if you ask me, it's just the way it is."

"How do you know all that?"

"I lived in Rome, don't you remember?"

"Yeah you did, I'm sorry. What the hell, at least they don't circumcise people around here," said Joseph, having noted Callicles and Gavinal immodestly relieving themselves at the caravansary, practically in front of him.

"That's true," a frowning Jesus replied, looking ruefully to his crotch for a moment.

"They did it to me too, it was uh, tradition I guess," said Joseph, leaning his head on an upright arm, never having understood how mutilating a newborn baby's penis would bring him closer to God.

"I know that father; anyway, Mary and I will have to be moving on later, you and mother will then in fact be the masters of this farm once we leave," said Jesus, returning to the original subject of the conversation.

"The wanderlust of vampires, Herodotus wrote of that in his treatise on legends," Joseph observed, still trying to understand the absolute authority of the patriarch of a Roman family.

"We won't be leaving for a while, but I eventually want to head back to Europe, to Greece and Rome," said Jesus, thinking of his necessary task regarding citizenship, solvable only in the Eternal City.

"Why there and not some place like Scythia?"

"I'd like to see the Parthenon again," replied Jesus, figuring he would keep the task to himself for the present, it not immediately imperative.

"What's that?"

"A beautiful marble Temple on the Acropolis in Athens, dedicated to goddess Athena

Parthenos.”

“Interesting, will you ever return?”

“Of course, I intend to make Tibernum a permanent place that Mary and I can return to.”

“Oh,” said Joseph, wondering when Jesus would decide to take off, recalling his son’s past wanderings through Europe, India and Asia.

“Will you be here for the baby’s birth?”

“Yes indeed, and probably for a time after that. Don’t worry dad, we’re first going to get the farm running smoothly for you.”

“That’s good, I need someone’s help. I don’t know the first damn thing about farming.”

“Neither do I,” said Jesus, “But it can’t be that hard, with our trained slaves it should prove easy.”

The Magdalene stepped into the kitchen, finishing the brushing of her black locks. “Hi Joseph,” she greeted, stifling a yawn and placing her hairbrush on the kitchen table. She looked to Jesus and said, “I’m hungry, let’s find someone to eat.”

“Careful woman, Ruth’s in the house,” Jesus replied.

“Who?” asked Mary.

“The Jewess,” said Jesus.

“Oh yes. So, what are you going to do about that, she has to find out about us eventually you know.”

“Entrancement will take care of it,” a confident Jesus answered.

“How?” asked Joseph.

“Early tomorrow evening I’ll entrance them, but I haven’t decided on how to proceed yet,” said Jesus, swirling wine in his goblet, pondering what suggestion he would employ to accomplish the task.

“If I were you I’d figure out something soon,” Joseph replied, refilling his goblet and offering the bottle to Jesus.

Jesus nodded and continued, “Perhaps I could lead them to believe Mary and I are late sleeping artists or scholars, or maybe I could make them forget we even exist unless we’re in their presence.”

“Like they’ll forget about you each time you leave?” asked Joseph, placing the bottle on the table.

“Yes,” said Jesus, rising from his chair, “That’s why I told them that you’re the master of this farm, such will prove much easier for all involved. Further, Mary and I have no real use for slaves anyway.”

“I’ll say,” Joseph replied, “I was wondering how you’d do it, either way seems complicated, but

I suppose you know what you're doing when it comes to that."

"Don't be so sure, he's screwed up before," the Magdalene observed. Jesus stood, quiet, turning for the door with her following. "Sorry, I didn't mean anything by that," she said as they stepped from the porch.

"Don't worry about it woman," Jesus answered, "I have screwed up before, and you've made it abundantly clear to me over the past year."

"I'm only trying to watch out for you."

"I know, that's why I'm not particularly upset about it."

"Oh," said Mary, falling silent, still feeling she had hurt him.

"Since it's early, do you want to fly south?"

"Sure," she replied, the couple assuming chiropterian form.

Rising on a draft, they observed Callicles' torch lit caravansary to the north doing business with the people of Tibernum. After a few hours, they alighted and transformed near a village about 40 miles north of Mansahir, surrounded by dense scrub and chaparral.

"It's about another two hours to Mansahir," said Jesus, "Do you want to fly on or find someone around here?"

"This'll do," Mary replied, "You know, that's the second time this week we've flown from town, are you hungry for human blood or do you feel like moving on?"

"A little of both probably," said Jesus, strolling the dark road, "We'll have to stay in Tibernum for a time yet, for mother to have her baby and to get the farm running smoothly."

"I don't mind, when I was alive I never had a place to stay for long. My parents were dead by the time I was thirteen and my aunt threw me out at fifteen."

"I never knew that, why?"

"My aunt, she was just a cranky old bitch, my parents had me late in life and after they died I guess she didn't want to raise another child," said Mary as they walked along.

"So that's why you turned to prostitution."

"That's about it, I needed to feed myself and looked good, so it seemed to be my best option."

"You still do, I'm very sorry you had to turn to that profession."

"Why? There wasn't anything you could have done, that was over ten years ago. You didn't even know me then and were wandering about India, Cathay or wherever."

"If I had known, I would have helped you."

"That's your problem Jesus, you always want to help people. It seems to be some weird compulsion of yours, why, don't you remember what those bastards in Jerusalem did?"

"I know what they did woman, but just because people there treated me badly doesn't give me license to treat others in that fashion."

“So look at it this way then, shit happens and you can’t help everyone.”

“You’re right about that.”

Walking further, they heard a disturbance occurring up the road and moved toward it.

It was a pair of robbers, just having beaten their victim to death.

“What are you looking at?” one asked as Jesus and consort walked up.

“Nothing in particular, we were passing through when we happened upon you,” said Jesus, “So, why were you beating on that man?”

“What business is it of yours?”

“None, I was idly wondering, that’s all.”

The other drew a sword and growled, “If you must know we were robbing him, and since you’re here we’re going to rob you too.”

“I think not,” said Jesus, Mary chuckling at his unconcerned demeanor.

“Who’s the giggling bitch?” asked the first robber, pointing to Mary.

“A friend of mine who doesn’t take kindly to being called a bitch,” Jesus replied, “In fact, she can be really mean at times, just ask her.”

“Isn’t that too damn bad,” the swordsman retorted, starting toward them.

“I warn you, you shouldn’t try to rob us,” said Jesus.

“Why not?” asked the swordsman, pausing.

“Because we’re vampires, that’s why,” the Magdalene answered, smiling and baring her fangs.

Both turned and ran, taking cover in the scrub. Mary started after, Jesus holding her arm and remarking, “Let’s hunt them down, I think it will be sporting don’t you?”

“Can I suck this guy’s blood first?” Mary asked, pointing to the body.

“Sure, we have plenty of time,” said Jesus, watching the thieves run to a cave to hide, seeing them by the heat of their bodies.

Mary drained the corpse, wiped excess blood from her mouth on the victim’s grayish tunic and rose to her feet. “Where’d they go?” she asked, knowing Jesus had been watching them like a hawk.

“They’re hiding in a cave,” Jesus replied, “Even from here I can smell them.”

“So can I, let’s surprise them.”

Transforming, they flew to the mouth of the cave as their terrified assailants cringed inside, hoping they had eluded the vampires. Returning to human form, Jesus clearly saw one from his body heat, standing about ten feet back in the cave. He walked in boldly and asked, “Guess who?”

The swordsman burst from a crevice, gladius raised above his head, intending to cleave the vampire in two. Stopping the sword and breaking his arm at the elbow, a bone piercing the flesh, Jesus intoned, "Silly thieves, verily I say unto you, beware of vampires dressed as Romans." His sword falling to the ground, the robber screamed in pain and dropped to the cave floor, clutching his broken arm.

"You said that last time," Mary observed, moving for the other terrified thief, frozen in place by Jesus' hypnotic power.

"No I didn't," said Jesus, index finger in the air, "If you recall, the last time I said: Verily I say unto you, beware of Hebrew vampires dressed as Romans."

"Oh yes, you're quite right, I'm sorry," Mary replied, plunging fangs in the neck.

"I figured you might like to watch her, I told you she was mean," said Jesus as he knelt beside the moaning, terrified form, writhing in agony on the floor of the cave. "Guess not," he added, grabbing the victim, going for the jugular and sucking his blood until he died. Dropping the corpse, he belched and said, "Get their money, I'll head out and drag the other one in here."

"Okay," replied Mary.

Walking to the road, Jesus lifted the cadaver over a shoulder and carried it to the cave. "It's a shame about this man," he said, dumping the body to the cave floor, "Had we come along sooner we could have saved him."

"Who cares, and he must not have had much money on him, they only had a hundred denarii between them."

"Really? That's the equivalent of four aurei, so I reckon it's a fair haul."

"I got nine off of the guy I took last night."

"Aurei?"

"I forgot to tell you, I put it and some other money in your bag in the cellar."

"Thank you woman, with the way it's mounting up I suppose we'll have to take our latest earnings to the cave."

"Don't mention it," said Mary, dropping the coins in a small leather pouch and handing it to him.

Hurling the remains down a deep shaft, the bodies crashed to the bottom hundreds of feet below. Their cleanup work completed, they left the cave, assumed chiropterian form and flew toward Tibernum. A squall blew up en route, soaking them to the skin during their flight, Jesus and Mary transforming to a pair of damp clothed vampires at the farm entrance. Returning near three, they walked into the house to see Ruth and his mother at the kitchen table.

"Why are you up so late mother?" Jesus asked, annoyed by the itchy feeling of his damp wool tunic.

"I wasn't feeling well, Ruth made me some soup."

"This could become a problem," the Magdalene whispered.

Jesus nodded and said, "Thank you Ruth, please go now, I need to talk privately with my mother." Ruth bowed to him and returned to his parent's bedroom. "Is everything all right mother?"

"I'm fine, and Ruth is very useful, but how are we going to prevent her from discovering you and Mary are vampires?"

"My thoughts exactly," agreed the Magdalene.

"Don't worry, I'll handle it," said Jesus, looking to his consort.

"Yeah right," his consort retorted, walking to their bedroom.

* * *

Forced to play the dubious role of vampire hunting detectives for several months by Emperor Tiberius, Decius Publius and his contubernia finally arrived in Anatolia, led by the obsessed Dr. Thucydides. After interviewing over 200 families in perhaps twenty towns in northern Judea, Lebanon and western Syria, they arrived in Antioch on a sunny spring midmorning. Walking about the town forum for several hours, most of the populace looked upon the interrogatives of the doctor as the babblings of a madman. Just after noon, centurion Decius spoke up, having grown thoroughly tired of the situation.

"There's not a soul here who knows anything either doctor," said Decius while his contubernia ordered lunch at a carryout café.

"Want anything to eat Decius?" his executive officer called from the counter.

"Grab me whatever sounds good Marc," Decius answered, turning from the physician and reaching for coins from his money belt.

"I've got it commander," said Marcus, waving away the coins.

Nodding and turning to the doctor, Decius said, "After today we're heading back Thucydides, we've no evidence this Jesus of yours was ever here, let alone anywhere else."

"He can't have just vanished, he must have come this way," said a frowning Thucydides, staring at the parchment depictions of Jesus and Mary.

"Look, even if he did, there's no proof, and we're doing nothing here but wasting time," Decius replied, Marcus handing him lunch and a cup of diluted wine. Walking to a table, Decius sat down to eat his meal, the doctor joining him.

"You going to have anything to eat?" asked the centurion in a mumble, his mouth full.

"Perhaps later," said Thucydides, looking about the town.

"He's not here, especially during the day, if he was ever here at all," mumbled Decius, grabbing the cup and washing his food down with a gulp of wine.

"You're right centurion, the trail has grown cold," said Dr. Thucydides, admitting defeat.

I wonder where Jesus and his girl are now, thought Decius, finishing his lunch while the defeated physician stared into space. ***Poor bastard, if he only knew,*** he thought, hiding a

smile. An hour later, Decius and company headed south, marching to Judea, leaving Antioch and Anatolia behind.

That evening, Jesus rose just before sundown and walked to the kitchen. Since the room faced east, none of the sun's destructive rays presented any danger, so he sat down and poured a goblet of wine. Joseph had installed two windows in the common area of the house during the afternoon, while slaves Icarus and Ganymede moved in the new furniture. Satisfied with his accomplishments, he headed to the kitchen.

"Aren't you up early," said a surprised Joseph.

"Good evening father," Jesus replied, "How was your day?"

"It went very well, Brutus and the other slaves have started clearing brush and plowing the field by the river, it's about twenty acres and should be good for a start. I also installed some of the windows and they look really nice."

"Why didn't you have one of the slaves install them?"

"Because if they broke one I'd probably kill them, those things cost 42 denarii a piece!"

"Yeah," said Jesus, "Aside from that, replacement windows aren't exactly available at Drusus' store."

"Would you believe the upper part of the frames are hinged and can be opened to let in fresh air?"

"They have sliding ones in the temples and government buildings in Rome."

"What will they think of next?" said Joseph, pouring a libation and sitting down. "So, what's on your agenda tonight, other than the usual?" he asked after draining the goblet.

"Dealing with our slaves I suppose."

"What have you decided?"

"I figure the simple approach will be the best. I'll tell them Mary and I are late sleeping thinkers; philosophers of a sort. If you wish, you can reinforce that suggestion later by telling them I'm just a rich, lazy drunk who sleeps all day."

"You wouldn't mind that?"

"Why should I mind, they're just slaves," Jesus replied, breaking into a laugh, "Besides, none of us have to work anyway, with our money and servants."

"I like to work, I have most of my life, so I guess it's too late for me to quit now."

"Of course father," said Jesus, refilling their goblets.

After sunset, Mary walked from their room, joining Jesus and Joseph at the table. Sitting down, she immediately asked Jesus what he intended to do regarding the slaves.

"Well, I imagine I'll tell them –" Jesus began, his father interrupting him.

"Get this, he's going to tell them he's a rich, lazy drunk who sleeps all day!"

“No, you’re going to tell them that father,” Jesus replied, “I’m going to tell them I’m a philosopher who sleeps late, only rising in the evening.”

“Both statements are true,” said Mary, rising and strolling to the porch for some evening air.

“Well dad, do you want to watch me do my thing with the slaves?” Jesus asked, rising from the table.

“You won’t entrance me will you?”

“It doesn't work that way, only those I wish to entrance are affected.”

“I guess,” said Joseph, stepping to the porch after his son.

“Coming Mary?” asked Jesus, his consort relaxing in a chair.

“I’ll stay here,” she replied, having seen Jesus use his hypnotic power many times before.

“Are they in for the evening?” asked Jesus while they headed to the slave quarters.

“I’m not certain, but they should be,” said Joseph.

Opening the door, Jesus saw that his charges had returned for the evening, the women preparing a meal for the group. “Good evening,” he announced in his Draculaesque monotone, the slaves turning and beholding the vampiric Christ. Waving his left, he mesmerized the group, his father watching. One of the women was motionless, holding a ladle above the stewpot, and a male was frozen in place, rising from a stool. “Verily I say unto you,” he intoned, “I, Jesus of Nazareth, known to you and those in town as Julius the younger, am a philosopher and thinker. I rarely rise before dusk, and never walk upon the earth by day. You will accept this as a normal occurrence, and will never question each other or my family otherwise regarding me or my consort, Mary the Magdalene, known to you as Maria the Hittite. Do you all understand?”

Each nodded in a zombielike fashion, slackjawed before Jesus. Satisfied with their response, he waved his hand and released them from the entranced state.

“Good evening master,” said Brutus as another male slave finished rising from the stool.

Joseph raised eyebrows, amazed at the simplicity of the hypnotic feat.

“Well – how did your work go today?” Jesus stammered, at a rare loss for words.

“We’re plowing the field by the river; the women are tending the smokehouse and the animals,” Brutus answered, apparently as spokesman for the group.

“Very good,” said Jesus, “Your name?”

“Brutus of Rome,” replied the slave, bowing.

“Thank you Brutus, is there anything any of you will need to make you more comfortable with us?”

“Such as, master Julius?” asked Brutus.

“Food, clothing, shelter?”

"These quarters are quite adequate master," Brutus answered, "Each of us has our own room and privacy. As you can see, we have our clothes and the food is very good. I was wondering if I could dig a latrine for us, and perhaps plant a small garden."

"Certainly," said Jesus, "Anything else?"

"Would you have anything to read master?" the elderly slave asked, looking to Jesus intently.

"Your name is?"

"Cyril of Athens."

"You must be the teacher," Jesus replied, "Not much at present, but if you will give my father a list of what you like, we will provide you with scrolls."

"Thank you master," said Cyril.

"Don't mention it, do you women need anything?"

"Do you have a loom master?" asked a female slave named Penelope.

"And perhaps some more cooking pots master?" asked Electra, a midwife in her fifties.

"Yes, and please, don't call me master every time you speak to me," said Jesus, "It's degrading."

"Of whom?" Cyril asked.

"Of yourselves," said Jesus.

"That goes for me too," added Joseph.

"Very well," said Brutus, "What should we call you?"

"Julius will do," said Jesus, "Unless of course we have visitors, at that time perhaps master Julius would be appropriate."

A slave named Icarus raised a hand as if he were a student in a schoolroom.

"Yes?" Jesus asked, "Your name?"

"Icarus, I'm a blacksmith, would you like me to set up a forge?"

"By all means, what will you need to build it?"

"A stone hearth and an anvil, bellows, hammer and tongs," said Icarus.

"Okay, my father will take you to town to pick up the things you'll need."

"I'll have to get out the wagon again," Joseph observed.

"I can build sheds for the forge and the latrine," said a slave named Ganymede in a deep booming voice.

"Very well, please talk to my father during the day about what you'll require, he is the patriarch of this farm, and any of you may feel free to talk with me in the evenings," Jesus replied.

"You sound like an educated man Julius," said Cyril, eyeing Jesus, "Would you care to discuss the sciences and philosophy some evening?"

"Definitely."

"Um, Julius," Penelope spoke up, "What do you do with the skins of the animals you hunt?"

"I've been leaving them in the woods, would you like me to save them to make leather?"

"Yes please, I worked in my former master's tannery with Electra."

"Okay, I'll leave the skins outside the smokehouse, and I suppose we'll have to save bark from oak logs," Jesus replied, recalling that trader Callicles had also asked about leather.

"We'll have to save urine too," said Electra, "A large pot in each latrine should suffice."

"Yes," answered Jesus, familiar the more disgusting aspects of tanning leather. Spending about an hour more with them, he said, "Please forgive us, we must go, and may you all have a good night." Father and son then left the slave quarters, heading for the house.

"That was incredible, it was as if you turned them into statues!" Joseph exclaimed.

"I know not how I do it, but it does come in handy."

"I'll say, and the way you treated them was very kind and noble."

"Slave be kind to your master, master be kind to your slave," said Jesus, stepping to the porch.

"What did you think of that Joseph?" asked Mary, relaxing in a chair on the cool evening.

"It was incredible," Joseph replied, entering the house and closing the door, leaving her and Jesus on the porch.

"So, what are you going to do about Ruth?" asked Mary.

"She's next, after dinner."

They headed into the night, staying near home, taking a pair of deer. The Magdalene carried a cloth for wiping her mouth, blotting excess blood from her face after dropping the emptied doe to the ground.

"You're sloppy with your food woman," Jesus observed while gutting the animals.

"I've never been able to keep the blood from my lips like you do."

"It's easy," said Jesus, demonstrating with one of the carcasses, "First you slash the great artery with your fangs, then press your mouth into the wound and suck them dry."

"I do that, it doesn't seem to work for me."

"Must be a matter of technique," Jesus replied, lifting the carcasses over his shoulders. Holding them by their heads with their backs arched, he made certain they wouldn't drip blood on his off-white Roman tunic.

"I imagine some of us are better than others when it comes to that," said Mary as they came to the smokehouse.

“Probably,” replied Jesus, dropping the animals, “After all, no one is perfect, and at least you don’t have to watch how you speak to people all the time.”

“Very true,” Mary agreed, Jesus skinning and beheading the carcasses.

Finishing the task, he sat the skins and meat on a bench while Mary unlatched and opened the smokehouse door. Salting the flesh first, Jesus suspended the meat on wrought iron hooks hanging from the ceiling while Mary stirred coals in the fire pit with a poker. “We need oak logs,” said Jesus, looking to the smoldering embers, “Have the slaves split wood?”

“There’s a stack of hardwood sitting just outside,” the Magdalene answered.

“I’d best strip the bark from those logs before we burn them,” said Jesus, reaching for a hatchet near the door.

“Why?”

“One of the slaves has offered to make leather from the skins, and oak bark is used for tanning leather.”

“Oh.”

Jesus stripped the logs, sitting the bark in a bucket next to the skins. Stoking up the fire, he pulled a rope hanging overhead, almost closing the vent in the roof, assuring the logs would only smolder, and opened two flue vents at the bottom of the structure to allow ventilation. Gray smoke began to course lazily out of the roof opening once Jesus closed the door. The packed smokehouse operating 24 hours a day, carpenter Ganymede had already started construction of an adjacent structure to be used for containing the cured meats.

“Dad’s going to have to sell some of the meat,” said Jesus, stepping to the porch, “I also have to send some to Gavinal and the garrison.”

“We should offer some to Callicles too,” Mary replied, heading into the kitchen.

“Good idea.”

Frowning, Jesus noticed his hands were itching. He looked to them, scratching especially at his palms. Walking to a bronze kitchen basin, he washed them, relieving most of the discomfort. ***Strange, I wonder what made my hands itch like that,*** Jesus thought, drawing a blank. Sitting down and opening a bottle of wine, he poured goblets, his father walking in.

“Would you like wine father?” asked Jesus.

“Sure,” Joseph answered, nodding to the Magdalene, “You weren’t gone very long.”

“We took a pair of deer by the river,” said Jesus, handing him a goblet, “They’re gutted, skinned, salted and hanging in the smokehouse. I left the skins outside the door for Penelope to tend to for tanning, and I see Ganymede has started building a shed for the cured meat.”

“I told him with the amount we’re acquiring it might be best to build another structure.”

“Excellent,” Jesus replied after draining his goblet, “I want to send some to Gavinal and the garrison tomorrow, along with a few sides for trader Callicles. Perhaps we can arrange to sell them our excess on a regular basis before we’re up to our ears in meat.”

“You can always leave the animals to rot in the woods like you used to.”

“It’s such a waste to do that, besides, we have seven slaves to feed along with you and mother. Now to the matter at hand, would you please bring Ruth in here father?”

“Right,” Joseph answered, rising from the table and heading to the bedroom.

“What are you going to tell her?” asked Mary, pouring another goblet.

“The same thing I told the others.”

His father returning with the slave moments later, Jesus said, “Hello Ruth, how are you this evening?” He waved a hand and she became motionless.

“Is she out of it?”

“What do you think dad, wave your hand in front of her.”

Joseph not only waved his hands in front of her face; he even snapped his fingers. It was as if she had turned to stone, never once moving or even blinking.

“Satisfied?”

“Yes,” said an amazed Joseph, staring at the statuesque Ruth.

“Verily I say unto you Ruth,” Jesus intoned, “This woman Mary, and I Jesus, known to you as Maria and Julius, are creatures of the night, and we do not walk upon the earth by day. You will not perceive this fact, and will only see us as thinkers, philosophers of a sort, passing much of our time in contemplation and study. This will always appear normal to you, and you will never question our family or any others regarding us, do you understand?”

Ruth nodded slowly, the vampiric Christ waving a hand, snapping her from the trance.

“Quite well, master Julius,” Ruth answered, blinking her eyes.

“Good,” said Jesus, “By the way, you may call me Julius, my father is master of this farm.”

“You needn’t call me master either,” Joseph added, “Julius will do just fine.”

“Slaves always call their owners master,” Ruth replied.

“Not here child,” said Jesus, “When we have visitors, it may be appropriate for you to use that title, but at other times our given names will suffice.”

“Yes, uh, Julius.”

“Very good, return and tend to my mother please,” Jesus ordered. Ruth bowed and returned to his parent’s room.

“That was easy,” said Joseph.

“They should present no further problem for us father. With them, the farm should be fully producing within a year.”

“That’s certain, Brutus seems to know everything about farming and has already advised me to find seed to plant the fields.”

“Excellent, Callicles has seed available, why don’t you head there tomorrow and pick some up. Please have the slaves load the wagon with meat for he and Gavinal too so we can get rid of some of it.”

“Okay,” said Joseph, pouring another goblet.

* * *

The next day, as Jesus and Mary slumbered in their darkened room, Joseph had the slaves load the wagon with sides of cured meat. He drove to town, accompanied by Icarus and Brutus. Cyril and Ganymede tended to their chore for the day, constructing an open-faced shed for Icarus’ forge. With cured lumber available thanks to Jesus’ nighttime logging labors, erecting the structure would prove quick and easy.

Arriving at the caravansary, Joseph and slaves walked up and greeted Demosthenes. Barley and wheat seed were on his list of things to purchase, as were items for the forge. “Hello son, where’s your uncle?” he asked.

“He should be along soon, he’s got a bit of a hangover,” the lad replied.

“He’s still on his binge?”

“He’s always on a binge, what can we do for you sir?”

“I’m looking for seed and implements for creating a forge.”

“We have all those things,” said Demosthenes, pointing up the street, “Seed’s in wagons forty and forty-one, tools are in wagons fifteen through thirty. I’ll find my uncle and meet you at the seed wagons.”

Joseph and his slaves headed to wagons forty and forty-one, arriving as the red-faced, balding Callicles and his nephew walked up. “Julius the elder!” he exclaimed, firmly grasping and shaking Joseph’s hand with both of his, “What can we do for you today – I see you’re already putting your slaves to good use.”

“I’m looking for blacksmith tools and seed for my fields,” said Joseph.

“We have many kinds of seed for sale, considering it’s planting time,” Callicles replied, looking to a list nailed to the side of the wagon, “Let’s see, we have barley, carrots, leeks, wheat, cucumbers, lettuce and muskmelon of three types, along with onions, cabbage and garlic. This year we also have something called rice, imported from Cathay. It has to be started in little pots and transplanted into water, like in a swamp from what I’m told.”

“Rice?” asked Joseph.

“I’ve heard of rice,” said Brutus, “My former master spoke of it, he had intended to plant some this year.”

“What does one do with it?” Joseph asked the slave.

“You eat the fruits, little brown things growing from the top of the plant,” said Brutus, “Aside from planting the seedlings in water, it grows much like wheat does, but you eat the grain whole.”

“Can it be it ground in a mill?” Joseph asked.

“That my master did not tell me, he was still studying the information.”

“It’s said one can either grind it into flour or consume it as is,” said Callicles.

“I think I’ll pass this time, perhaps you can get more information on it?”

“Sure,” the trader replied.

“What else have you available?” asked Joseph.

“We also carry herbs, such as basil, borage, fennel, comfrey and dill, together with flax and hemp seed for rope and cloth fiber, and opium seed for medicine,” said Callicles, hawking his wares.

“What do you think we need Brutus, I’m new to all this.”

“Dirt farming’s a lot different from running a winery in Gaul isn’t it?” a smiling Callicles asked, slapping Joseph on the back.

“Really,” Joseph lied, wincing from the hard slap, “Shipping amphorae of wine is one thing, farming’s another.”

“Let’s get drunk again before I leave,” said Callicles, reminded of his beloved wine.

“Definitely,” Joseph replied, “So Brutus, what do you think we should buy?”

“I’d buy five large bags of wheat, four of barley, and one smaller bag of everything else.”

“Really?”

“Yes, with the seed he has available we can plant crops of vegetables and herbs, and will have no need to purchase any locally.”

“Very well, we’ll do as Brutus says, how much do you want for my order?” asked Joseph.

“I usually charge around 80 denarii for an order like this,” said Callicles, scribbling figures on parchment, “For you Julius, sixty will do.”

“Is that a good price?” asked Joseph, looking to Brutus, not at all familiar with the going rates for seed grain.

“A very good price for the amount we need.”

“Done,” said Joseph, shaking the trader’s hand firmly.

“You also said you needed tools?”

“Yes, for building a forge,” Joseph answered.

“Okay,” said Callicles, turning to his nephew, “Demo, fill Julius the elder’s seed order, I’ll take him to the tool wagons.”

“Yes uncle,” Demosthenes replied, unlocking and opening wagon forty.

“Stay here and see to the order Brutus,” said Joseph, “Icarus, please follow me.” They

followed Callicles to the tool wagons, where Joseph let Icarus pick out the implements he needed, this order amounting to 145 denarii. A 600-pound cast iron anvil filled the order, along with a one-pound hammer, a five-pound hammer, a gigantic ten-pound hammer and three wrought iron tongs of various lengths.

"They're fine iron tools, made in Greece," said Callicles as they closed the deal. Calling a pair of slaves, he ordered, "You two will assist this slave carrying these tools to his master's wagon."

"Yes master," the slaves answered in unison, they and Icarus sitting the heavy anvil and other tools on a wheeled cart.

"Will you need a bellows for the forge?" Callicles asked, familiar with the art of blacksmithing.

"Yes," Icarus replied for Joseph, having momentarily forgot one of the most important tools for a forge.

"We have them right over here for only 60 denarii," said Callicles, showing them an elaborate bellows system made in Rome.

"Sixty?" asked Joseph.

"For you Julius, forty-five."

"Take it master, it's a Vulcan bellows," Icarus advised, familiar with the quality Vulcan brand name.

"Sold," declared Joseph.

"Excellent," Callicles replied, shaking Joseph's hand firmly.

"I have something for you too friend Callicles," said Joseph as the group walked to the wagon, slaves following with the merchandise.

"Such as?"

"Take a look in the back of the wagon when we get there."

Brutus and Demosthenes joined the group as they passed wagons 40 and 41, Brutus and another slave pulling a wheeled cart laden with seed, a cloud of dust springing up behind them.

"You'll be planting your spread with wheat and barley," Callicles observed, looking to the cart.

"Mostly," Joseph replied, "One can always sell grain and from what Brutus says, they're not too hard to grow."

"I know little of farming, but barley and wheat are my best sellers."

Arriving at the wagon, Joseph paid for the merchandise. Opening the rear door, he said, "Look at this, we brought meat for you."

"By the gods!" Callicles exclaimed, inspecting the lot, "Nicely salted and smoked, auroch, deer and boar. How much do you want for it?"

“Take some for free, we have too much as it is.”

“You have more?”

“Yes.”

“Is it for sale?”

“Yes, actually,” Joseph stammered, he not much of a trader.

“I’ll buy it all if you like,” said Callicles, “I can sell every bit of it during our trip south, both Syrians and Jews are meat eaters.”

“We do want to keep some for ourselves and Gavinal, but there is a quantity of cured sides I can sell you.”

“How many?”

“I’d say perhaps thirty carcasses are hung, smoked and cured. A lot of pork and venison, and some auroch.”

“Have you any horsemeat?” Callicles asked, it one of his favorite foods.

“No, wild horses are scarce around here.”

“A shame, so, how much do you want for the meat, and when would you like to sell it to me?”

“I’ll have to ask my son, he’s in charge of meat sales; if you’d like to come by, please do, but preferably during the evening.”

“I’ll come by tomorrow night, is that all right?”

“Certainly, for now, take a few of these and see how you like them.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course, we have plenty.”

Callicles picked out several sides, had his slaves unload the meat, and ordered them to load the wagon with Joseph’s purchases.

“Please assist his slaves with loading the anvil,” Joseph ordered his slaves.

“Yes master,” they answered. The heavy anvil and tools were loaded first, followed by bags of seed.

“What are you doing with the other meat?” Callicles asked after Joseph closed the door.

“I’m heading to Gavinal’s to drop it off,” Joseph replied, he and slaves climbing aboard the wagon.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night about eight,” said Callicles while Joseph pulled out and headed to Gavinal’s mansion.

“Right, take it easy.”

“Easy’s the only way I take it!” Callicles yelled as Joseph drove off.

Arriving at Gavinal's mansion, Joseph showed him Jesus' gift of smoked meats, one side of auroch, two of boar and one of deer. "These are top quality aren't they?" said Gavinal, inspecting the food.

"My son wants you and the men at the garrison to try these for starters and perhaps buy from us in the future."

"I'm sure we will. The shipments for the garrison are never as fine as this, and are always moldy salt pork or venison."

"Very well," Joseph replied, "Icarus, you and Brutus take this meat to the prefect's larder."

"My slave will show them there," said Gavinal, having called a slave to the wagon. While they unloaded the wagon, Gavinal again observed the meat was of fine quality.

"Thank you kind Gavinal," Joseph replied, "I'm sure you and the men will enjoy it."

"Most of us will, excepting for centurion Caius, he's one of those vegetarians."

"He is?"

"He's a follower of the Mithric faith, many of them abstain from eating meat," said Gavinal, "I think it's weird, we Etrurians usually like meat when we can get it."

"What the hell, to each his own," Joseph replied as the slaves returned.

"I thank you very much, Julius the elder," said Gavinal, shaking his hand.

"Don't mention it; I have to head home, my son and Icarus plan to build a forge during the next few days."

"We need a blacksmith in this town, there hasn't been one here since Isaac of Megiddo died about a year ago," said Gavinal. "Let me know when you're set up, if you're interested the garrison will have plenty of work for you."

"I definitely am, thanks," Joseph replied, he and slaves climbing aboard the wagon. He headed home, pleased with the news he would tell Jesus – that the meat was sold, the seed was purchased, and that they would soon have blacksmith work for Icarus, making even more money for the farm.

This pleasant news was told to Jesus when he rose in the evening, he observing that his father seemed to have a natural talent when it came to conducting business.

"It also helps if you have good merchandise to sell," said Joseph as they sat in the kitchen drinking wine.

"You say Callicles will be stopping by tomorrow night?" asked Jesus.

"Yes, he wants to buy the meat and get drunk with us."

"Good, we'll have wine available for him to get drunk, then we'll sell him the meat."

"Shouldn't we sell him the meat first?"

"Not if you want to get a good price for it," said a smiling Jesus.

Later, the Magdalene walked out, she and Jesus going about their nighttime depredations, taking a rare pair of robbers lurking outside town, looting and dumping the bodies in a cave. Jesus, feeling the need to work, had decided to assist Icarus and Ganymede in constructing the forge, so getting supper early allowed him to pursue this task.

“Why do you want to help your slaves?” Mary asked, walking back to the farm.

“Who knows, maybe I just want to get to know them.”

“Do what you feel like,” she replied, heading into the house.

Long past dusk, the two slaves were working by torchlight as Jesus walked out to them. “Good evening master Julius,” said Ganymede, forgetting Jesus had stated they could call him Julius, dispensing with any titles.

“Julius will do my Ganymede, and good evening to both of you, aren’t you working a little late tonight?”

“I want to have the forge operating as soon as possible,” said Icarus.

“That’s very industrious, but you needn’t overwork yourselves in the process of doing so,” Jesus replied, raising an eyebrow at their accomplishments.

“Your father let us rest during the afternoon after we unloaded the wagon,” said Ganymede, standing on a ladder, nailing down the last of the roof planks.

“Would you fellows want assistance?”

“From you sir?” asked a surprised Icarus.

“Sure, I could use the exercise,” Jesus replied, the slaves looking to him incredulously, “So friends, what needs done?”

“Okay,” said Ganymede, stepping down from the ladder. “Most of our work is finished for today, but we still have to place the anvil on the stone,” pointing to a flat boulder sitting in the middle of the structure, “It’ll be hard, though I think the three of us can manage it.”

“Certainly,” said Jesus, looking at the anvil, “Let’s do it.”

The slaves moved to the anvil, Jesus kneeling down to assist them. “Please be careful, it’s very heavy sir,” Ganymede warned, he and Icarus kneeling down.

“I’m good at lifting weights,” said Jesus, the three lifting the anvil. Using vampiric strength, he lifted most of the weight, the slaves feeling the 600-pound anvil had strangely lost some of its mass. Sitting it on the stone with a thud forcing the rock an inch into the earth, Jesus observed, folding arms across his chest, “That wasn’t so hard was it?”

“Not with three strong men!” Icarus exclaimed.

Looking about the structure, Jesus noted it was nearly finished, with the exception of the hearth. “You’ll need to move stones from the riverbank for the hearth, you can do that tomorrow if you like. Are either of you masons?”

“No,” came the replies.

“I am, so I’ll help you build the hearth during the next few evenings,” said Jesus. The slaves staring at him, he added as an afterthought, “It’s a good thing we have some concrete left, it’ll save my father a trip to Drusus’ place.”

“You want to help us with it?” asked Icarus.

“Why not, neither of you know how to lay stone and I do. Now friends, would you care to join me in a bottle of wine?”

“Yes, if it’s all right with you,” Icarus answered.

“If it wasn’t all right with me I wouldn’t have asked you,” a smiling Jesus declared, walking out and returning with a magnum he had hidden nearby. Digging out the stopper with an awl, he took a long drink and passed the bottle to Icarus.

“There’s a law in Rome against slaves drinking wine,” said Ganymede as Icarus passed him the magnum.

“We’re not in Rome,” Jesus replied, “We’re on my father’s farm, and if you recall, they also have laws in some Roman cities against slaves using brothels.”

“Yes Julius the younger, but what does that have to do with us standing here drinking wine with you?” asked Ganymede.

“Slaves or not, you’re still men aren’t you? And men have their needs don’t they? There’s a brothel in town, and I was thinking if you help my father in running the farm well, good wine and a visit to the brothel on occasion would be a reasonable reward.”

Both Icarus and Ganymede stood thunderstruck at the words of Jesus. Here was a man they saw as a Roman slave owner, not known for treating slaves in any manner other than property, drinking wine with them and treating them like men instead of common animals.

“Are you serious Julius?” asked Icarus.

“Verily I say, though we may own you, you and your fellows are still people. A master who treats his slaves well will never have to worry about slaves becoming recalcitrant or of them plotting against him,” intoned Jesus, an index finger in the air.

“What of Electra and Penelope?” asked Ganymede, noting they would have no use for whores.

“What about them?”

“Well, they’re women sir,” said Ganymede.

“I’m sure they have their needs, so we shall find them satiation too. Men and women do not live by toil alone, but by relaxation also: verily I say, strong wine, revelry, and good sex, all in moderation of course, definitely have their uses in leading a pleasant life.”

“I’ll say,” a smiling Icarus replied, growing inebriated from the undiluted Gallic wine.

“Master Julius,” said Ganymede, still not comfortable calling an owner by his given name,

“Cyril asked me if you have found anything for him to read.”

“Not yet, but I’ll make a point to find him reading materials over the next few days.”

“I shall tell him Julius,” Ganymede replied, forcing himself to call his master by his given name.

“Why don’t we walk to your quarters so I can tell him myself?” asked Jesus, motioning in the direction of the slave quarters. The slaves followed Jesus, he knocking softly and opening the door, stepping into the slave’s lamp lit common area.

“Greetings Julius the younger,” said Cyril, opening eyes and sitting up in a chair.

“Good evening Cyril,” Jesus replied, Icarus and Ganymede moving past and sitting down in simple but functional chairs. “I’m attempting to find scrolls for you to read, having some perhaps as early as tomorrow evening.”

“It has only been a few days, if you are occupied with something else – ”

“No, no,” said Jesus, putting up a hand, “You’re an intellectual, and will need good literature to pass your leisure time, so I will provide them as soon as possible.”

“I thank you,” Cyril replied, studying what appeared to be a wealthy Roman man, speaking to him as if he were an equal.

“You’re welcome,” said Jesus, “Forgive me, I have to go. Will you tell the women we’ve gathered extra cooking pots, and that we also have a loom for them, sitting at the house?”

“I shall,” Cyril answered as Jesus turned and left, closing the door behind him. The teacher looked at Icarus and Ganymede, sitting quite pleased with themselves. “What is up with you two?” he asked, watching Icarus break into a broad smile.

“You’re not going to believe this, Julius the younger helped us place the anvil, then he drank a huge bottle of wine with us, and told us he wants to take us to the whorehouse sometime soon!”

“He did?” asked Cyril.

“Yes,” said Ganymede, “He said even though we’re slaves, we’re also men, and that along with work we have need of life’s pleasures.”

“He is an Epicurean, that explains it,” Cyril remarked.

“A what?” asked Icarus.

“An Epicurean, I believe that Julius the younger is a follower of Epicurus of Samos. He was a philosopher who lived in Greece about 300 years ago. Epicureans believe pleasure is the ultimate good, and that this ideal should be the goal of life.”

“Not a bad idea, I like wine, women and song,” said Icarus.

“That is not what I meant,” Cyril continued, “Epicurus stated the pursuit of intellectual pleasure is the ultimate goal, and that sensual pleasures, while fulfilling a need, are subordinate to the intellect.”

“What?” asked Icarus and Ganymede.

“Pleasing the mind is better than pleasing the body.”

“It is?” asked Ganymede, staring at him.

“Theoretically,” said Cyril, looking to the pair and breaking into a smile.

* * *

Jesus awoke before dusk, intent on finding reading materials for Cyril the teacher. With Callicles due to arrive at eight, as soon as the sun dipped below the horizon he took a horse and headed to the caravansary. Riding along, he hoped he would catch the trader before he headed to the farm, to see if he had scrolls available for purchase.

“Julius the younger!” Callicles exclaimed while Jesus tied up the horse, grabbing and shaking his hand firmly. “What brings you to my humble market sir, I only saw your father yesterday!”

“Greetings Callicles of Athens,” said Jesus, “Since you seem to carry everything, I was wondering if you had literature for sale.”

“You’re talking about scrolls?”

“Yes.”

“I have some, not much, most of what I have is poetry and philosophical trash penned by clowns who lived centuries ago, nobody wants to read that crap today.”

“Such as?”

“Who knows, I’ve never read them,” said Callicles, “They’re in my wagon, just over there.”

“Shall we?” asked Jesus, looking to the wagon.

“If you insist.”

They headed to wagon one, an oversized, ostentatious vehicle on gilded wheels. Callicles unlocked the door and moved down hinged steps, used for ease of entry. “Please come in Julius,” he said, motioning to Jesus.

Jesus entered, noting an oil lamp burning brightly in the oversized wagon, a bronze chimney above, fed with oil by a lead pipe connected to a tank mounted on the roof. The trader’s personal wagon, built in Rome, was complete with a down stuffed bed, running water fed to a sink from another tank on the roof, and a desk equipped with hinged slots for papyrus or parchment documents, serving as an office and file cabinet for the trader.

“Welcome to my mobile home,” said Callicles, moving a pile of papyrus from the top of a short, oblong wooden box. Lifting the box, he added, “This is what I have, ten denarii will cover it, and if that’s too much I’ll give you them for free, I’ve had them for over ten years!”

Jesus opened the box, perusing the parchment scrolls. Some were written in Greek, with which he was unfamiliar, but most were written in Latin, which he read and understood perfectly, many Latin translations from the Greek as he noted the authors.

He calls these works trash, the man is truly a barbarian, thought Jesus, noting priceless works in the box, selections penned by the storyteller Homer, the contemporary Roman poet

Ovid, and the Greek philosopher Diogenes, also known as the cynic of Sinope. Looking further, he noted writings of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Marcus Seneca, father of the stoic, Lucius Seneca, along with copies of speeches by Marcus Tullius Cicero, Roman statesman. History texts were represented with works originally penned by Herodotus, Greek historian and contemporary of Pericles, who had lived over 400 years earlier. "I'll take them," he said, feigning disinterest as he closed the box, "You said ten denarii?"

"That'll cover it," Callicles replied, not knowing or even caring about the true value of the literature, "It's almost time for me to head to your farm to buy your father's meat, do you want to get drunk with us when we get there?"

"Of course," Jesus answered, "Let me pay you for these scrolls and we'll head there."

"Sure," replied Callicles, Jesus dropping ten denarii in his hand. Leaving the wagon and walking to his horse, Jesus tied the box to the saddle as the trader said, "My slaves have to hitch up a wagon first, I'll see you in about an hour."

"Do you know where we live?"

"Gavinal gave me a map, he said you're by the south pond, tract twenty one, near Marcus' place."

"That's right," Jesus replied, mounting an Arabian gelding.

"I'll see you in a bit," said Callicles, Jesus riding off with the literary treasures.

Cyril will certainly be pleased, thought Jesus as he rode to the farm. Arriving, he carried the box of scrolls into the kitchen. He was greeted by Joseph, who asked where he had been.

"I rode to Callicles' market to buy literature for Cyril," said Jesus, sitting the box on the table.

"Oh," Joseph replied, "I take it the scrolls are in the box."

"Yes."

"What selections did he have?"

"History, philosophy and poetry. Perfect reading material for a man of Cyril's tastes."

"Excellent," said Joseph, "I like how you're treating the slaves, making them feel like they're part of the team."

"I feel if we treat them more like servants instead of slaves, they will come to like being owned by us."

"I agree, we should also make it a point to reward them when it comes to exceptional work."

"I already had that in mind father. Last night, I drank wine with Icarus and Ganymede, making them such an offer."

"You drank wine with them – what was your offer?"

"That we'd let them get drunk once in a while, and that we'd allow them to head to the brothel occasionally, provided they performed well for you."

Raising eyebrows while thinking of his Hebrew upbringing, Joseph replied, breaking into a smile, "You know son, I wouldn't have approved of such a thing in the past, but what the hell, I suppose it won't hurt, giving them some of the pleasures of life."

"My thoughts exactly."

Changing the subject, Joseph said, "I'm glad you're here, Callicles will arrive shortly and I'm going to need you for pricing the meat."

"Of course, I believe we should receive six denarii a side, or twelve denarii per animal."

"Okay, I figure we'll sell him 40 cured sides, leaving 10 to sell to Gavinal and another 10 for ourselves."

"No, we have perhaps ten more curing that will be finished soon. I think we should sell him 50 sides."

"You do?"

"Indeed, Callicles won't be back till fall, and at the rate we're going we'll have three times that when he returns, regardless if Gavinal buys from us."

"I see, that's a good idea."

"The settling price should be around 300 denarii," said Jesus, figuring the amount in his head, "Therefore, we'll start out asking 550."

"Why?"

"Because if I know Callicles, he'll jew us down to 300 denarii, even if he's drunk."

"That covers a fair portion of what we spent with him," a smiling Joseph observed.

"Exactly."

"So you're a meat vendor today," said the Magdalene, walking into the kitchen and taking a bottle of wine from a cupboard.

"Dad needs my help and Callicles wants to get drunk when he gets here, so I figured I'd hang around a while."

"Yeah, probably for the wine, that figures," replied Mary, heading to his mother's room to converse with her and Ruth.

Callicles arrived at eight thirty, accompanied by two slaves and nephew Demosthenes, Jesus and Joseph walking out to greet them. "Quite a spread you have here," he observed in the moonlight, he and his group stepping from a wagon.

"It's only a thousand acres," said Joseph, shaking his hand, "Not as big as our place in Gaul, but I suppose we'll have to make do."

Callicles laughed at the remark, asking, "Say friends, would you like to get drunk?"

"Wouldn't you rather look at the meat first?" asked Jesus.

"Hell no, I saw what your father had earlier, if the meat here is of the same quality, I'd be

wasting time looking at it, instead of using it wisely by getting drunk with you.”

“Since you put it that way,” said an amused Jesus, looking to his father, “Come in friend Callicles, welcome to our home.”

“Stay here and look after the slaves Demo,” Callicles advised. Demosthenes nodded as the trader joined Jesus and Joseph. Stepping to the porch, he said, “Interesting, your house is made mostly of wood.”

“Yes, my son and I are also carpenters and there are a lot of trees in this part of Cappadocia,” Joseph replied, walking to the kitchen.

“True, but that’s not what I mean Julius the elder. I have lime whitewash aboard my caravan you could use to paint it with,” said Callicles, sitting down at the table, looking about to see if anything else was needed that he could sell them.

“Really?” asked Joseph.

“Yes, lime whitewash protects wood from rot and if applied properly can make a wooden domicile look as if it were made of marble,” Callicles answered, embellishing a bit.

“I’ve heard of it,” said Joseph.

“What’s the price?” asked Jesus.

“It’s cheap, thirty denarii would buy enough to paint this house four times over.”

“They also paint concrete with it in Rome,” said Jesus, having seen the Eternal City in his mid-twenties.

“That’s right,” Callicles replied.

“Let’s have a drink shall we?” asked Jesus, producing a fresh bottle and three goblets, filling them for his father and guest.

Callicles, having been sober for a short time due to his earlier hangover, grabbed and drained his goblet, looking to Jesus for a refill. Jesus refilled his goblet, topping off he and his father’s, emptying the bottle.

“That’s one down,” Callicles declared, again draining his goblet.

“There’s plenty more where that came from,” Jesus replied, opening another bottle.

Holding up his goblet for another libation, Callicles said, hawking his wares, “I forgot to tell you, there’s another item I picked up you may be interested in, perhaps you’ve heard of it. It’s called soap, imported from Gaul.”

“Yes I have,” Jesus replied, refilling the trader’s goblet, “It’s used for washing clothes, leather and sometimes even people, I believe.”

“That’s right, a lot more effective than using olive oil and scraping the skin with a strigil, I tried it during this trip and after that, I’ll never go back.”

“How much do you want for the soap?” asked Joseph.

“It’s sold in yellow bricks a cubit long, a hand deep and a hand wide,” said Callicles, using his hands to describe the size. “Cheap too, only three denarii for a brick, you cut them into smaller pieces for use.”

“Would you like to try some son?”

“Sure, I’ve even used it when traveling, at that price we should get at least ten bricks, and probably some whitewash too.”

Needing a refill, Callicles raised his goblet, and for the next few hours the group sat in the kitchen, talking of everything and getting drunk on strong wine. “They say Tiberius had another stroke at Capri about a month ago,” Callicles related as the conversation continued.

“Really?” asked Jesus, having seen the Emperor one day when in Rome, “When he dies, who’s in line for the throne?”

“Some kid named Caligula. I heard that from the procurator in Antioch.”

“Little boots?” asked Jesus, referring to the nickname Caligula.

“It’s said that’s what they call him,” said Callicles, “His real name’s Gaius Caesar.”

“I like Caligula better,” replied Jesus, taking a gulp of wine.

Needing to use the latrine, Joseph rose from his chair as his wife walked into the kitchen.

“Who is this friends?” Callicles asked, nodding to Mary.

“My wife Maria,” answered Joseph, introducing her, “Maria, this is our friend Callicles of Athens, a Greek trader.”

“Good evening,” said Mary.

“Good evening to you ma’am,” Callicles replied with a slow nod.

“Is there anything you need mother?” asked Jesus.

“No, I came out to see what was going on and get a bottle of wine for your wife, Ruth and I.”

Joseph handed her a bottle and three goblets. Accompanying her to their bedroom, he quickly returned and walked out to the latrine.

“So, you’re using her as a house slave,” Callicles observed, thinking of the attractive Jewess.

“She’s taking care of my mother during her pregnancy.”

“Yes, I forgot, your mother’s going to have a baby,” said Callicles, starting to slur his Latin, “That’s very rare for a woman her age.”

“Shall we have a look at the meat?” asked Jesus, wanting to sell the sides before Callicles drank himself into unconsciousness.

“Sure, let’s go,” answered Callicles, rising unsteadily from his chair as Joseph returned.

“We’re headed to the smokehouse dad,” said Jesus, Callicles staggering along behind him.

“Right,” Joseph replied, grabbing a table lamp, “I’ll follow you.”

Walking outside, a reeling Callicles exclaimed, leaning heavily against the chimney, “I have to piss!”

“So do I,” said Jesus, both pausing and relieving themselves next to the chimney. “Truly the pause that refreshes,” he added, adjusting his tunic.

“I’ll say,” Callicles replied, still relieving himself.

Nature’s call satisfied, they headed to the smokehouse. Joseph had walked on carrying his lamp, using it to light a pair of torches placed at the entrance.

Opening the door, Jesus said, “Have a look at this!”

“By the gods!” the trader exclaimed, looking to the hung carcasses, smoke rolling from the structure. “How much do you want to sell?” he added, blinking his eyes, his sobriety returning temporarily, as it always did when he had to conduct business.

“We have 50 cured sides available,” said Joseph while Callicles stared at the smoked meats.

“Price,” Callicles replied, leaning against the smokehouse.

“I figure 600 denarii is a good price,” said Jesus, raising the asking price a little more.

“No,” replied Callicles, shaking his head, “That’s too damned high Julius – will you cut me slack my friend?”

“How about five?”

“Three and a half.”

“Four fifty.”

“Four, no higher,” said Callicles, staring Jesus in the eyes.

“Done,” Jesus declared, offering his hand to the trader.

Callicles shook his hand heartily in the warm evening, remarking, “My friend Julius, your hand is cold tonight isn’t it?”

“I get that way, especially when it’s warm outside,” said Jesus, shaken that he had been able to detect his lower body temperature.

“Cold hand, warm heart,” a smiling Callicles replied, yelling to his nephew, “Demo, get the slaves over here to pick up this meat!”

“Yes uncle,” the lad answered, taking the reins and moving the wagon to the smokehouse.

“We agreed on four hundred?” asked Callicles, reaching in a tunic pocket.

“Yes,” said Jesus.

“Okay, let’s see, 400 denarii is, dividing by 25, sixteen aurei, right?”

“Yes.”

Counting out 16 aurei, he placed the coins in Jesus' hand.

"The meat is sold," said Callicles, his temporary sobriety fading.

"I thank you sir," Joseph replied.

"Don't mention it. Your son drives a hard bargain, but I'll double my money on this in Syria and northern Judea."

"Sell the pork before you get to Judea, those Hebrews can't stand the stuff," said Jesus.

"Food is food, whatever the animal, they're a weird bunch aren't they?" Callicles asked as his slaves loaded smoked meat in the wagon, Joseph counting each side leaving the smokehouse.

"That's an understatement if I ever heard one," Jesus replied, recalling his dealings with his kinsmen.

"My son doesn't get along with Jews very well, he had a run-in with them some time back," said Joseph, Jesus laughing loudly.

"Neither do I, they seem a greedy lot, but I just look at them as challenging customers," Callicles replied.

"I've noticed that too," said Jesus, thinking of filthy rich rabbis like Joseph Caiaphas, along with his former disciple and friend, the traitorous Judas Iscariot.

"So, what'd they do to you?" Callicles asked, leaning against the wagon and farting loudly.

"I had trouble from their religious leaders," said Jesus, Joseph looking to the night sky and smiling at the gross understatement.

"From selling them pork?" asked Callicles with a sly grin, believing Jesus and his father had been smoking and selling meat for a long time.

"No, but it may as well have been as bad," Jesus answered, the conversation continuing for about another hour.

"It's getting late, I have to head back, we're closing up and heading to Mansahir tomorrow night," said a sobering Callicles, "Do you want the lime and soap before we leave?"

"Sure," Jesus replied, looking to his father, who nodded.

"Come by tomorrow morning, I'll fix you up before we go," said Callicles, climbing on the wagon and taking the reins. "Fetch me a bottle of wine Demo," he added, sitting beside his nephew.

"I thought you'd had enough," Jesus replied as Demosthenes handed his uncle a bottle.

Pulling the cork with his teeth and spitting it to the ground, Callicles took a deep gulp and answered, "Hell no, one can never have enough wine!" He motioned the horses forward, the wagon driving off and heading to town.

"You got four hundred denarii, more than we even wanted!" Joseph exclaimed, walking into the house, Callicles driving off in the distance.

“Here’s the money,” said Jesus, handing it to his father.

“I thought it was your money,” Joseph replied, looking to the coins in his hand.

“I have plenty,” Jesus answered, sitting down at the table and folding hands.

“Why did you sell him the meat for 400 instead of 300?” asked Joseph, slipping the coins in a pocket.

“One must be shrewd when it comes to vending, he’ll triple his money on that meat, so I figured I’d get our fair share from him.”

“He will?”

“Easily, don’t take his word for it on what he’ll sell it for. Calicles is a businessman, and didn’t become a wealthy trader and Roman citizen by being foolish or charitable in his dealings with people. Further, regarding our position this evening, when it comes to selling one starts out high and goes low, not the other way around.”

“He’s a Roman citizen?” asked Joseph, having understood the last part of Jesus’ sentence.

“Didn’t you see the signet ring on his left hand?”

“No, you wear yours on your right.”

“That’s because I’m left handed,” said Jesus, annoyed that his father’s powers of observation were not as acute as his had become.

“Oh yes,” answered Joseph, heading to his bedroom, “I’m sorry son, I’ve had it for tonight.”

“Good night father,” Jesus replied as his father closed the door.

Almost immediately, the Magdalene walked to the kitchen from his parent’s bedroom, remarking, “It’s about time, I’m famished!”

“You haven’t died yet have you?” asked Jesus, leaning back on two legs in his chair.

“Yes I have, thanks to you.”

“You know what I mean,” said Jesus, moving the chair to the floor and rising from his seat.

“What do you want to do?” Mary asked, still thinking of supper.

“It’s very late, I suppose we should take something around here,” Jesus answered, heading for the door.

“I guess it’s deer or boar tonight,” said Mary, starting after him.

“What can you do?” Jesus replied, the couple heading into the woods on their quest for an evening meal.

Finding a pair of porcine creatures sleeping near the property of Marcus Pertinax, they sucked them dry, with Jesus, not wanting to waste the leftover meat, gutting them afterward.

“We’re low on meat,” said Jesus, preparing the animals for transport.

“Yeah, Joseph told me you sold that drunk fifty sides for 400 denarii. I can’t believe it, you got a good price and I’m damn proud of you.”

“Thank you,” Jesus replied, hoisting the carcasses over a shoulder and starting toward the smokehouse.

“You’ve done a lot of good things for your folks, and your father told me you’re treating the slaves as if they’re your own family,” said Mary while they headed through the woods.

“I always try to treat those I encounter as I would wish to be treated by them, that is of course with the exception of criminals, or those who would wish do us harm.”

“I understand that, and believe me, I think it’s an admirable thing to do,” the Magdalene replied, her words trailing off.

“What are you getting at?”

“It seems you’re doing the same things you did during your ministry, in a disguised fashion.”

“Yes, that’s quite true.”

“Why, in the end people treated you like shit, they hated and killed you – you don’t owe them anything!”

Jesus paused, dropping the gutted carcasses to the ground. “Please sit down woman,” he said, standing about 200 yards from the smokehouse.

“Here?”

“This place is as good as any,” Jesus answered, sitting on the ground and folding hands in his lap. She did as told, he continuing, “I remember you telling me over a year ago that I hadn’t changed, even as a vampire, and I submit you were correct in that observation.”

“Okay,” Mary replied, not knowing where the conversation was going.

“It’s obviously not my nature to be an individual who simply takes advantage of any opportunity coming my way, regarding those we take.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Mary retorted, staring at the treetops.

“Well, to those I encounter in our travels, if they show me no ill will, I allow them to continue in their lives.”

“I know that too,” said a frowning Magdalene, feeling that he was lecturing her.

“However, it is not my place to tell you how to conduct your life, though I do prefer you abide by my criterion regarding people.”

“I know that, you didn’t want me to kill centurion Decius, or your parents, or the pair of Greeks while on our way to Mansahir.”

“Precisely, I feel just because a group of fanatics had me killed in Judea, doesn’t mean that I should behave in the fashion that they did. Such would make me a hypocrite, countering all I profess to believe in.”

“Aside from hypocrisy, you mean turning the other cheek don’t you?” she asked, thinking of a man Jesus had spoken to in the distant past, outside Capernaum.

“Not exactly, I may have been wrong regarding that. I now feel if one should strike you, strike him back fast, and hard! However, as a vampire, I believe when people are innocent we should allow them to pass unmolested.”

“Innocent when it comes to those who are not threatening others, or only to us?” asked Mary, listening intently to her former teacher, the undead rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth.

“Both.”

“I understand, though at times I may not agree with you.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning like I told you some months ago, I look at people differently now. I see them as food, without any moral considerations whatsoever.”

“Oh,” said a shocked Jesus, feeling he hadn’t succeeded informing her of his convictions regarding the taking of mortals. “So, you think there’s nothing wrong with killing anyone you encounter?”

“That’s right, but I will and must defer to you as my master when we are together, regarding people you say I cannot take.”

“Very well,” said Jesus, wondering why she didn’t seem to get the point of the conversation, that only those deserving such a fate should be taken by a vampire. Hoisting the carcasses to his shoulders, they headed to the smokehouse. He split the remains by ripping out the spines, leaving the meat to be dehaired and hung by the slaves in the morning.

Fixated in one of his contemplative moods, they retired to their dark bedroom. Mary settled into sleep while Jesus sat in a chair, recalling the events of his life over the past few years. ***Am I wrong?*** he thought, considering her words. Remembering his travels through India, he determined to explore that possibility, using a method of meditation he had learned on the subcontinent. Moving to the floor, he assumed the yoga position, and focused on his inner self for the first time in several years. Hands in his lap, the tip of his left index finger touching the tip of his thumb, he slipped into a higher state of being, an altered state of consciousness.

“Jesus my son! Why have you forsaken me?” called out the jealous desert god Yahweh.

“Who are you, why do you call me your son? I died in the name of Yahweh for the sake of the good – who forsook who!”

“I am the one true God of your fathers.”

“Sure you are.”

“You doubt me?”

“Yes I do.”

“You are my greatest creation, even greater than Gilgamesh.”

“You abandoned me on the cross,” Jesus retorted.

“Surely not,” said Yahweh.

“Yes you did!” declared the Leviathan of the deep, the ultimate first cause, the progenitor of the god Yahweh or Elohim, his brother Baal laughing heartily at the folly of his jealous sibling.

Yahweh fell silent. A burst of light came across Jesus’ tormented mind, his vampiric self cringing from the brilliance.

“Who are you?” asked Jesus of the shining Leviathan.

“I am that I am – the alpha and the omega.”

“You speak in twisted riddles like Yahweh,” said Jesus, turning from the brilliance.

“Fear not child of my child, the light of wisdom cannot harm you,” the Leviathan intoned,

“Behold, you have yet much work to do on this earth, and in the fullness of time a wise teacher will be sent unto you, revealing many secrets. Walk justly upon the path before you, and guard Mary the Magdalene well, for she is to you as the moon is to the sun!”

Chapter Six: The Chrysippus Farm

Joseph awoke early, intent on heading to Callicles' caravansary for woven sacks of lime whitewash, and the exotic creation imported from northern Europe, soap. Hitching the horses, he was greeted by Brutus, who asked him where he was going.

"I'm heading to Callicles' market to pick up more items before he leaves."

"Would you like me to come along to assist you?"

"Sure, I could use the help and the company."

Brutus climbing aboard, Joseph drove to the caravansary. Callicles' slaves were taking down tents and awnings, and packing unsold merchandise in preparation for leaving town. The trader was standing by his personal wagon with his nephew, going over inventory lists, as Joseph and Brutus stepped from the wagon and walked up.

"Good morning Julius," Callicles said with a weak smile, having another hangover.

"Greetings Callicles, did you enjoy yourself last night?" asked Joseph.

"Definitely, but I always end up paying for it in the mornings. You're here for the merchandise?"

"Yes."

"I had my slaves pull it from the wagons, ten soap bricks and 15 sacks of lime whitewash. It's sitting next to this wagon on a cart."

"The price is?"

Callicles smiled and answered, "For you Julius, 40 denarii will do, just so my slaves won't have to load it back in the wagons."

"That's a deal," said Joseph, handing him coins from a leather pouch.

"Thanks," Callicles replied, again looking to his inventory list, "Do you need a slave to haul it?"

"I have Brutus."

"Good, I'm rather busy, so forgive me if I seem preoccupied, we have to pull out at three."

"Where are you heading?"

"South, stopping at Daphinos for a few days, then onto Heraclea and Mansahir, then to Antioch, Damascus, and Jerusalem, then to the port of Caesarea for resupply. That's our last stop, we start back on Mare Internum coast road for Nicomedia and Chrysopolis from there."

"When will you be returning?"

"Five or six months, depending on sales and availability of stock," Callicles answered, looking Joseph in the eyes, "You'll have more meat for me when I get back here, right?"

"Yes indeed."

“Well, I thank you again, for the fine meats, and for your fine hospitality,” said Callicles, shaking his hand. As Joseph walked off with Brutus hauling the cart of goods, the trader called, “We’ll see you in late summer or early fall Julius!”

Joseph turned and waved, Brutus opening the door of the wagon.

* * *

Summer 34 CE arrived a few weeks later. The slaves had planted three fields of grain, with Joseph, rising at dawn, assisting every day, as every able hand was needed. Planting another field with vegetables, herbs and opium poppies, the sap of the latter used at the time for pain relief, they accomplished the task, working from dawn to dusk. While the men did the heavy work, Electra and Penelope cared for animals, wove cloth, mended clothes, tanned leather and tended other chores. Brutus, acting as overseer, reported to Joseph that although the planting was somewhat late in the season, a relatively bountiful harvest should arrive by late September or early October.

Jesus, true to his word, assisted Icarus and Ganymede with building the forge hearth, completing it over several evenings, the slaves watching him set the stone masonry. Mary continued in her pregnancy, tended to by Ruth and the Magdalene, along with Electra and Penelope, she treated almost as a queen by her slaves.

Joseph delivered the smoked meat to Gavinal, earning 60 denarii, and finished installing the windows. Brutus and Cyril, once the planting was completed, whitewashed the house, the latrine, the slave quarters, the smokehouse buildings, and Icarus’ forge, over several days. Cyril received his literature gifts, grateful for the works of poetry and philosophy. During early evenings, Jesus visited him, discussing the sciences and arts, the two becoming fast friends.

As summer wore on, life on the farm settled into mundane routine. The slaves continued working at tasks assigned to them, with Jesus’ pregnant mother usually sick in the mornings, though as time progressed the severity was lessening. Joseph and Jesus got drunk occasionally, sometimes in the kitchen playing latrunculi on the weekdays, sometimes with Gavinal on the weekends, or at other times at the forge talking and drinking with three of their male slaves.

In late July, Joseph provided funds and gave Icarus, Ganymede and Brutus permission to head to Antigone’s brothel, where they enjoyed themselves for several hours on a hot afternoon, finishing their lascivious revelry relaxing in the town bathhouse.

Cyril flatly stated that he wanted nothing to do with prostitutes, Joseph raising eyebrows, surprised at the reply from the stoic slave. Nor did the teacher ever drink wine, as he was a cerebral man, shunning many pleasures of the flesh. Proving he was still human, he and Electra had been close for many years, and when the need for physical contact arose, she had always been there for him.

Jesus and Mary continued in their predatory ways, killing people and animals by sucking their blood, filling the ravines or the smokehouse, depending on the victim, with the by-products of their depredations. They also continued to fill their pockets with loot taken from human victims. Having amassed another hundred aurei, in mid August they decided to take a vacation. Informing his parents that they were leaving for a few weeks, they flew south.

After several hours flight, they appeared in the vicinity of the decadent, blighted town of Mansahir, where Jesus had helped traders Euripides and Thales. They had considered Antioch before the trip as there were always plenty of victims, but the criminals there never seemed to have money, while those in Mansahir were almost always loaded.

In an unusual turn of events, the vampiric Christ was openly confrontational with his victims, he and Mary walking into taverns and gambling halls in the middle of the night, looking for criminals to feed on. More often than not, he found them, and after some fun, they gave them the fate they deserved. Cunning, Jesus rented a room in a different hotel, making certain they weren't recognized, each evening heading out, looking for trouble along the dark and lonely roads. Easily finding suitable victims, by the tenth night they had slaughtered over twenty people and fattened their pockets with several hundred denarii.

Walking from their room shortly after sundown on a cool evening, Mary asked, "So, who's on the menu for tonight?"

"Who knows, maybe thieves, rapists, or even simple troublemakers. We seem to have run out of highwaymen for the time being, and from what you've said they're all the same to you anyway."

"I was just wondering," said Mary as they strolled into a tavern.

"What'll you have citizen?" asked the Roman bartender, Jesus stepping up to the bar.

"Gallic wine, undiluted please."

"Sorry, all we have is Egyptian beer or Anatolian grog."

"Make it grog," said Jesus, settling for the inferior drink.

"Anything for the lady?"

"I'll take a beer," Mary replied, having no taste for grog, looking about and sizing up other customers, noting two men, one very muscular, sitting in a corner at the far end of the tavern.

"Coming up," answered the bartender, quickly returning with the drinks. "That'll be four dupondii."

"Have a denarius," said Jesus, tossing a coin to the bar top, one of the men watching intently from the corner.

"I'll have to make change."

"Keep it and bring a couple more drinks when we need them."

"Thank you sir!" the bartender exclaimed, leaving to tend to another patron.

"Look at that rich Roman and the good looking bitch he has with him," a burly Anatolian thief named Darius growled, looking in the direction of Jesus.

"She's wearing a stola, that woman is his wife," a much smaller man named Paris observed.

"So what, they're both as good as dead," said Darius, not realizing how accurate his statement was.

“He’ll be easy pickings,” Paris agreed, ogling the Magdalene, more interested in her than any money they might have. With those words the thieves made their fateful decision – that before the night was out they would rob and murder the placid man sitting on the barstool, afterward raping his woman to death, waiting to strike after they left the tavern.

“It’s the clowns in the corner isn’t it?” Mary whispered, finishing her second beer, Jesus nursing a fourth cup of grog.

“Exactly. Tell you what, we’ll let them follow us out of town.”

“When?”

“May I finish my drink woman?” asked Jesus, annoyed at her impetuosity.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jesus replied, downing the grog. Leaving another denarius as a tip, they left the tavern, pretending not to notice that the Anatolian trash had left their table and were shadowing them.

“What do we do now?” Mary asked for the benefit of their pursuers.

“I imagine we should rent a room since I have all this money with me.”

“You’re laying it on too thick,” said Mary, concerned he might spook their prey.

“I am?”

“Let them come to us, they will.”

“I thought you were hungry.”

“I am, but even stupid thieves can see a trap like that.”

Walking further, just outside town they observed the thieves skirt past, running through low brush, seeing them by body heat.

“They’re going to try something soon,” said Jesus.

“No shit,” replied the Magdalene.

Appearing in front of them, the thieves blocked their path. “What are you doing out here?” asked Darius, ogling the Magdalene.

“Enjoying the night,” Jesus answered, eyeing the pair for weapons.

“You shouldn’t be walking around here with folks like us around,” said a smiling Paris.

“Yes I should, I’m a Roman citizen and can walk anywhere I want.”

“You’re also stupid if think you can do something like that,” said Darius, chuckling.

“Where are your daggers boys?” asked Mary.

“I don’t need weapons, I use my bare hands,” the muscular Darius growled, clenching his fists, “I’ll break your man in two and tear you a new asshole Roman bitch!”

"I'm not Roman, I'm Hebrew, half Benjaminite and half Jew."

"Pussy's pussy," said Paris, confused by Mary's Roman appearance and unconcerned demeanor.

In disgust, Jesus pushed her aside and threw off his toga, looking down at Darius, remarking, "I'm sorry Mary, I'm tired of this. Come on thief, try me."

"Are you kidding?" asked Darius, looking up to a man striking him as a taller and thinner than usual Roman, easy pickings for a man like himself. At 5'11" and 190 pounds, he was considered a tall and muscular man in those days.

"Go ahead, you and your friend, I'll take you fair and square, no tricks," Jesus declared, clad in a tunic, holding up his fists.

Darius, never intimidated by anyone, saw his words as a bluff challenge. He laughed heartily and replied, "Prepare to die!" He threw a fist at Jesus with all his might, punching him hard in the face, the vampiric Christ's face flying to the right from the blow. Following through with a hard left, he struck him again, and then hit him with a hard right uppercut, an unfazed Jesus smiling at him afterward.

"That's your best?" Jesus asked.

Darius stood dumbfounded, not understanding how his mighty hammer blows that had killed others hadn't bothered this tall Roman at all.

"You fight like a woman does," said Jesus.

"Kiss my ass!" Darius yelled, lunging for him, Jesus sidestepping the foolish thief. Falling to the ground, Darius rose, brushing dust from his clothes and glaring at him. His partner Paris, smelling defeat, turned and attempted to flee.

"Not so fast," said the Magdalene, grabbing the small man by his tunic.

"Let me go," pleaded Paris, looking her in the eyes.

"No, I want you to watch my husband flatten your friend," Mary retorted, shaking her head.

"Hit me again, see if you can hurt me," said Jesus, holding out his chin for another punch.

"I'll kill you!" Darius screamed, hitting Jesus in the face with all his strength, breaking several bones in his hand as he connected, the Christ not moving this time, his face like a slab of granite.

"Not likely," said Jesus, looking to his crippled assailant.

"What the hell are you?" asked a confused and frightened Darius, clutching his broken hand.

"I'm a vampire."

Darius, terrified, continued to stare at him, his shattered hand starting to throb. Using his left, Jesus struck back, punching him so hard that his fist went through the man's head as if it were butter, sending flesh, bone and brains flying everywhere. "Take that you son of a bitch!" he exclaimed, the nearly headless body hitting the ground with a heavy thud. Shaking gore from

his hand, he spat in disgust, "This is ridiculous, I have to remember that I'm stronger than these idiots."

"You took his head off!" Mary exclaimed.

"Yes, and I see you've learned to entrance them quickly."

"It just took time to learn how to do it, that's all."

"I understand," Jesus replied, looking to the statuesque Paris. "So, what should we do with him?"

"The other one's blood is running all over the ground," said Mary, looking to the headless body, the blood sinking into the sand.

"Feed on him."

Mary flew to the remains of Darius, gulping blood from the jugular as it was pumped from the torn arteries by the dying heart. Sated, she sat heavily on the ground, laying her head on the chest of the body.

"Mary," called Jesus, no response forthcoming.

"Mary!"

"Yes?" asked the Magdalene, turning her face to him.

"It can't be that good, I should know!"

"It is," she answered, feeling dizzy.

"Never mind that," said Jesus, "I think we should torture this little bastard like we did with Judas."

"Forget that, kill him and get it over with."

"He seems deserving of it, they wanted to rape you."

"Who cares," said Mary, relaxing and snuggling up to the cooling corpse.

"Goddamnit snap out of it woman!"

"What?" Mary asked, shook from her rapture.

"What do you want to do with this asshole?" Jesus asked, the terrified Paris standing helpless, unable to move.

"Kill him," said Mary, remembering the last blissful moments, "Don't waste time torturing him, it'll give you a bad attitude like it did in Jerusalem."

"But – "

"No buts, finish him off," said a sighing Mary, clumsily rising to her feet.

Knowing she was right, Jesus lifted the little man with one arm. "How do you like this you little bastard?" he asked, the entranced man unable to utter a word. Jesus plunged fangs into the

neck, sucking the blood until Paris died, the lifeless body collapsing in a heap. Looking at his left hand, he wiped the remainder of Darius' gore on the tunic of the little thief. He looted both, not finding much, but enough that it was worthwhile. Mary following him, he dumped the bodies a few hundred yards from the roadside. Pausing, he asked her, "What was the matter with you back there, you acted as if you were enthralled or something."

"Sometimes taking them does that to me," she answered, not realizing Darius had been high on hashish that he had eaten, his blood intoxicating.

"It's never been that way for me."

"Perhaps each of us react differently," said Mary, looking to the bodies.

"Maybe."

"You can be really violent can't you?" she asked, observing the mutilated corpse.

"That muscle bound bastard pissed me off, thinking he was so much," said Jesus, folding arms across his chest.

"I'll say," Mary replied as they headed to the road to pick up his toga.

Having difficulty arranging it, Jesus asked, "Will you please help me with this thing?"

"You should use a pin or clasp to hold it on instead of these folds," she answered while assisting him, still high on Darius' blood.

"No Roman uses pins to hold on a toga," said Jesus, getting the cumbersome garb in proper arrangement.

"I use pins on my stolas."

"That's because it's customary for a woman to do so," said Jesus, the couple starting back to town.

"If you ask me, togas are a pain in the ass. Why do you bother to wear one?"

"I don't most times, you're the one who suggested that I start wearing them," Jesus replied as they headed through the gates of Mansahir.

"You could pin it from the inside, that way no one could see."

"Good idea," said Jesus, looking to her with approval. Returning to their room, he remarked, "We've been gone a good while, we should return to the farm to check on mother and dad."

"Yes love, but before we take off I'd like to pick up a few things for the slave women first thing tomorrow evening, if you wouldn't mind me doing so."

"Why?"

"I don't know, perhaps some things you've said have rubbed off on me."

"Really?"

"You're still a good teacher, many things you say do make sense, especially after one thinks about it a while," Mary answered, the hashish-laden hemoglobin clouding her thoughts.

“Meaning?”

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

“Oh yes, it’s much more pleasant when you treat people well, if they deserve it, instead of treating them like shit under your feet.”

“Well put, so I figure what you did for the male slaves, I would do for the women.”

“I understand,” said Jesus, surprised at her sudden altruism toward mortals, particularly lowly slaves. “It’s really because you don’t approve of slavery isn’t it?”

“Perhaps,” a yawning Mary replied, moving to the bed, “I’d just like to pick up some items for Ruth, Penelope and Electra.”

“Such as?”

“Maybe fancy cloth like silk, and perhaps jewelry and cosmetics for them to use in their leisure time,” said Mary, her eyelids heavy.

“Sure,” replied Jesus, “I have no problem with that.”

A snore was the reply, he joining her in the bed.

* * *

They awoke early the following evening, so Mary could purchase gifts for their female slaves. As soon as the sun dipped below the horizon, they headed for downtown Mansahir, a block containing shops, salons, and a pair of brothels. Walking into a tailor’s shop, she inquired if he had silk cloth.

“Certainly,” the tailor answered, “Imported from Cathay by way of India, but it is not inexpensive, ten denarii buys only a square cubit.”

“Measure off thirty square cubits,” said Jesus, fumbling in a tunic pocket for money.

“Yes sir,” the tailor replied, reaching for a bolt of silk and his shears. “That will be 300 denarii,” he added after carefully measuring off the cloth, “I’m sorry sir, I must be paid before I cut it.”

“Will twelve aurei cover it?” asked Jesus, holding out coins in his left.

“Of course,” said the tailor, staring at the gold.

Sitting coins on the counter, Jesus retorted, “There’s your money. Cut it, we don’t have all night.” The tailor quickly cut the cloth, wrapped it in a piece of cheap burlap and handed it to Jesus.

“I thank you sir,” said the tailor as they left.

“Yeah,” Jesus replied, passing through the doorway.

“You were a bit rude to him weren’t you?” asked Mary while they headed to a jewelry store.

“He was a jerk, demanding money before he cut the cloth.”

“You always have to pay for expensive cloth before it’s cut,” said Mary, having dealt with tailors

many times.

“You do?”

“Everywhere,” Mary answered, a taciturn Jesus ruminating on the statement and finally agreeing with her. Walking into a jewelry shop, she picked out several necklaces made of electrum, otherwise known as amber, and three made of pearls. Spending 11 aurei at the jewelers, they headed to a salon where she picked up henna, kohl and other cosmetics, along with three polished silver mirrors, hairbrushes and three pairs of shears.

“Mother said she was interested in henna too, perhaps we should buy some for her,” Jesus suggested, placing their selections on the counter.

“I can even show her how to use it properly,” said Mary, returning to a shelf containing jars of the cosmetic.

“You’ve used henna?”

“Of course, I used to be a whore you know,” the Magdalene answered quietly, heading to the counter.

“Oh yes,” said Jesus, recalling her colorful past.

“That’ll be a hundred denarii,” the clerk declared, figuring the total using an abacus.

“Here you go,” Jesus replied, dropping four aurei at this establishment. “You have very good taste when it comes to clothing and accessories Mary, where did you learn such things?” he asked, the couple heading to the hotel.

“Thank you, remember, I was a whore once and know how to make a woman look her best.”

“I’ll say,” said Jesus, looking to his smartly dressed, beautiful consort, attired in a tight fitting light blue stola and delicate leather shoes. Returning to the hotel, he remarked as he closed the door to their room, “I imagine we should check out and fly home woman.”

“We’ll have to find someone to eat first,” Mary observed, tucking some purchases into a small leather bag, others into nooks in her stola.

“That should prove easy around here,” said Jesus, checking the room for mislaid belongings, both walking out and heading for the office. Handing the clerk the key, they bid farewell and left town. Heading north, they came across and dispatched another pair of society’s dregs, looting the bodies and heaving the remains over a hillside, adding another fifty denarii to their kitty. Alone, they assumed chiropterian form and began the long flight home.

Near ten, they flew over Callicles’ wagons, stopped in Heraclea, Jesus observing Callicles far below, showing another customer his many wares, nephew at his side. Five hours later they arrived at the farm, transforming on the porch. Taking seats in the dimly lit kitchen, they conversed until dawn, heading to their room and settling in for the day.

“If it isn’t the return of my prodigal son and his pretty wife,” said a smiling Joseph while they walked into the kitchen the following evening.

“Hello my father,” Jesus replied.

“How was your trip?” asked Joseph, embracing his son.

“It went well, thank you,” answered Jesus, returning the embrace.

“You were only gone a little over three weeks but we all missed you,” said Joseph, looking to him.

“You did?”

“It certainly wasn’t the same here without you. You’ve made quite an impression on the slaves, especially Cyril. He’s been asking when you would return.”

“Really?” Jesus asked, surprised but pleased that the old slave would be so intent on associating with him.

“You underestimate yourself son, even as a vampire people love or hate you, there are no in between, just like when you were alive.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“Who knows. But here we love you, and are all joyous at your return, just like your mother and I were when you returned to Nazareth the first time.”

“What about the second time?”

“That time you almost gave me a heart attack, considering you were a dead man, but your mother and I got past that pretty quick.”

“I’m still a dead man father, Mary and I are vampires, and vampires are not truly alive, nor really dead for that matter, we are undead.”

“I know, remember I’ve read Herodotus, according to him you and your lady are in an ageless stasis, for lack of better words.”

“Stasis?” Jesus asked, pleased that his father was becoming familiar with Greek, as he had become, conversing with Cyril in that tongue for the past few months.

“What I mean is you may be dead in a fashion but you’re far from a corpse, after all, you’re not rotting away,” Joseph observed, arms in the air.

“Yes, that’s quite true,” said Jesus, Mary looking to him.

“Further, you and your girl may be undead, vampires, going around killing folks and sucking their blood and all, but you’re still good company.”

“I am?” asked a confused Jesus.

“Of course,” said Joseph, pouring a goblet of wine, “Even when you were alive, I and your mother always enjoyed the conversations we had with you in the courtyard, sitting with a finger in the air, saying, Verily I say unto you – and so forth.”

“But you thought I was lazy too,” Jesus replied, thinking of his days in Nazareth, the Magdalene standing quietly in the background.

“That didn’t mean you were stupid,” said Joseph, waxing philosophical.

“What did it accomplish, all it did was get me killed.”

“I told you that would happen.”

“I remember.”

“I’m going to look in on your mother,” said Mary, wanting to leave, heading to their bedroom.

“Want wine?” asked Joseph, holding the bottle while Jesus sat down.

“That would be nice,” said Jesus, his father taking a seat.

Joseph poured him a libation, Jesus asking, “How’s the farm doing?”

“Very well, the wheat and barley are almost ready for harvest, Icarus is running the forge with work sent from the centurion, and your mother’s sickness has finally stopped.”

“The baby will come soon.”

“In another four months or so. She only has trouble in the beginning, the child should be here by early December.”

“It’s a boy you know.”

“It is?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell your mother,” said Joseph. Sitting quietly for a moment, he smiled with satisfaction and said, “A boy, I’m going to have another son.”

* * *

Later, the Magdalene presented her gifts to the slave women, starting with Ruth, the girl dutifully tending to Jesus’ pregnant mother. “I thank you Mistress Maria Hittica,” she said, looking at her reflection in a silver mirror.

“Please Ruth, call me Maria will you?”

“Yes Maria.”

“Now then Ruth, please follow me to the slave quarters, I have gifts I wish to present to the three of you.”

“You do?”

“You will be pleased, I promise,” answered a smiling Mary, heading for the door.

Ruth nodded, following the Magdalene to the slave quarters. Knocking and entering with Ruth, Mary greeted the slaves, Cyril looking up from a scroll he was reading.

“Good evening Maria the younger,” said Cyril.

“Greetings Cyril,” Mary replied, “Are Electra and Penelope here?”

“They are in their quarters, I shall fetch them for you,” Cyril answered, rising from his seat and walking to their rooms. A few moments later the slave women appeared, Cyril returning to a

seat and resuming reading, a scroll penned by Herodotus.

“Good evening, I’ve brought gifts we purchased during our trip south, jewelry, cosmetics, and fine silk,” said Mary, producing the items from a sack.

“Silk fabric?” asked Penelope, “Why?”

“Why not?” the Magdalene replied, “In your leisure you can make fine dresses with it, and using the jewelry and cosmetics, can make yourselves the best looking slaves in Tibernum.”

“I knew it, master Julius is going to open a private brothel, using us for the whores,” said Electra.

“No,” a surprised Magdalene protested, shaking her head, “That’s not my intention, you’ve helped us, so I’m rewarding you for your efforts.”

“Why?” asked Electra as Cyril looked up from his scroll, “No one gives anyone gifts without a price, what do you want from us in return?”

Mary fell silent for a moment, gazing at the slave women with a compassionate look. “You must realize by now that we are not your typical slave owners, we look at you as members of our extended family, good people helping us tend our farm. The least we can do is to make you feel more at home with us,” she replied, hurt by Electra’s candid remarks.

“They are truly different, especially Julius the younger,” said Cyril, looking to Electra.

“But – ”

“No buts my dear woman, they are very different,” said Cyril.

Electra looked to the floor and replied, “I’m sorry mistress Maria, life has not been kind to me. When I was younger I was sold into slavery as a prostitute by my uncle, having been raped for several years by my father.”

Mary pursed her lips in reflection and answered, “I understand.”

“You do?” asked Electra, staring at who she saw as a pampered, wealthy Roman woman, thinking of terrible nights when she had been violated by up to fifteen men at a time, many of them Roman soldiers.

“Not personally, but a long time ago a close friend of mine had a similar experience in Rome,” she lied, thinking of her past employment in the trade of prostitution, until Jesus of Nazareth happened upon her in Magdala, just as the townspeople were about to stone her.

Saving her from certain death, the Christ had walked up with disciples John, Judas, Peter and Thomas; livid at the scene he was seeing. “May he who is without sin cast the first stone!” Jesus exclaimed, grabbing an arm of a zealous Benjaminite, pulling a rock from his hand and throwing it to the ground. “Verily I say, stone me first you hypocrites, if you have the guts!” he shouted, moving between Mary and the hypocritical people of Magdala.

“But you haven’t…”

“Really?” asked Electra, breaking Mary from her reverie.

“Her parents died when she was young and her aunt threw her out in the street when she was a teenager. She had to sell her body to live, life was cruel to her too.”

“Where is she now?” asked Electra, looking for an end to the story.

“She is dead,” Mary replied. Cyril looked to her, raising an eyebrow at the statement.

“Oh,” said Electra, having nothing further to say.

The Magdalene talked with the slave women for several hours, gaining their confidence, leaving near midnight while an exhausted Cyril snored in a chair. His scroll of Herodotus had dropped to the floor – the treatise on legends. They returned to the house, Ruth heading for the bedroom to tend to Jesus’ mother.

She met Jesus in the kitchen. He remarked, finishing a goblet of wine, “This is a change woman, I was heading out for supper without you.”

“I have before, I was talking to Electra and Penelope.”

“And?”

“Electra thought we were going to make them into whores when I showed her the cosmetics and jewelry.”

“What about the silk?”

“That only added to it, Electra was a whore in the past, forced into doing so as a slave.”

“Unfortunate, verily I say, if there is a God somewhere he must not care at all about man, with pain, death and misfortune all around us.”

“Jesus Christ, your words sound like the utterances of an atheist!”

“I’m damn close to atheism now,” said Jesus, rising from his chair. They walked into the dark night, transforming in the shadows, finding and killing a trio of highwaymen fifteen miles west of Tibernum, enriching themselves physically and materially. A heavy bag of gold and silver, amounting to nearly 300 aurei, was in the haul, the vampiric Christ having to walk back due to the weight.

“Why don’t you throw some of the gold away?” Mary asked after walking several miles.

“Because it’s gold. At this rate, given a few years, we could buy Tibernum.”

“Why?”

“What else have we to do?”

“We don’t really need an entire town do we?”

“No, it was just a thought,” said Jesus.

* * *

The harvest came a few weeks later, all the slaves working the fields, tending to the bountiful crops of wheat and barley. The herbs and other vegetables were coming in too, assuring the Chrysippus larder would be well stocked for the winter. Jesus and the Magdalene did their

part, killing and draining deer, boars and aurochs of their blood, stocking the nearly overflowing smokehouse with another fifty sides of meat and providing skins for the slave women to make into leather. Ganymede built a granary shed, assisted by Joseph and son, erecting and completing the structure in less than four days. Jesus, now a skilled mason, had built the foundation the first evening, assisted by his consort, and during the following three days, Joseph and the slaves completed the wooden floor, walls and roof.

While crickets, the charges of Artemis, saluted summer's end, the slaves finished cutting grain, the men separating wheat from chaff, the women plucking barleycorns from stems. Joseph smiled with satisfaction, watching his slaves tending their chores; his newly built granary shed later filled nearly to the brim with wheat and barley. In the span of a little over eight months, Jesus and father had created an efficient, productive farm, tended by seven slaves, with 'Julius the Elder' as he was known, considered a pillar of the community. Nodding to various townsfolk, he stopped by Gavinal's office one fall afternoon and paid his property taxes of seven aurei, rounded by Jesus from a little over six and a half.

"The taxes are only six and a half aurei for this year Julius, you've given me seven, let me make change," said Gavinal, staring at coins in his hand.

"Forget it," Joseph replied while the prefect handed him a receipt, "We have plenty of money, keep the extra if you like or apply it to next year's bill."

"I shall apply it to next year's bill."

"Right," said Joseph, walking from the office.

Callicles' caravans came to town from the south a little over a week later, with the red-faced trader hawking his merchandise for only a week as he had to return to the Hellespont for resupply by November, and then to a one-month vacation at his palatial villa in eastern Thrace. That is, he was selling his wares in Tibernum between getting drunk with other local luses, good people like Gavinal Septimus, Jesus, Joseph and the town notary, Marcus Pertinax. The evening before he left, Callicles made his way to Joseph's farm, naturally while inebriated, and purchased eighty sides of smoked meat for 650 denarii.

"Thank you friends," said Callicles, standing on the porch while his slaves loaded a wagon with meat, shaking Jesus' and Joseph's hands.

"You're quite welcome," answered Jesus, "Care for a drink?"

"Need you ask?" Callicles replied, walking into the kitchen.

Sitting at the table drinking Gallic wine, Callicles remarked, "Do you know about the new road west of here, it leads straight to Chrysopolis, saving my caravan 200 miles in travel!"

"Yes, Procurator Vitellius Caius Africanus opened it about month ago," said Jesus, familiar with the western Roman highway 'Via Tiberius Romanus' and its ruthless hordes of highwaymen and cutthroats lurking in the shadows.

"We'll use that road from now on, it'll cut a week from our schedule," Callicles replied, slurring his Latin.

"Be careful friend," said Jesus, knowing the caravan was well protected, "Once you're fifteen

or twenty miles west of here many thieves lurk by the roadsides.”

“That’s why I employ mercenaries like my buddies Kago and Aeschesles,” Callicles answered, narrowing eyes in contempt of thieves while downing another gulp of wine. “Get this,” he added, holding out his goblet for a refill, “Anyone crossing our path with intent to rob gets nothing but death for their efforts. My men are heavily armed and have no qualms about killing thieves.”

“Really?” asked Joseph, unaware that Callicles was not only a shrewd businessman, but had been using his men for years to slaughter thieves prowling the highways. For this service, he received a bounty from the procurator for heads of criminals killed during their travels.

“Some of my men fought as professional gladiators in Rome and Capua. I let them loot thieves who attempt to rob us, naturally after they’ve killed and beheaded them of course, it makes them a lot of money,” said Callicles, Jesus refilling his goblet.

“Is that so?” asked Joseph, smiling and looking to Jesus.

“Yeah, I get 250 denarii in bounty for each one killed, I had fourteen pickled heads in a barrel I dropped off in Antioch two months ago.”

“A proper method for handling thieves,” said Jesus, thinking it was exactly the same method he used to deal with such people.

“Indeed, but my men usually spend all they make from robbers on wine and whores, I guess that’s why they tag along and keep working for me,” replied a chuckling Callicles, rising unsteadily from the table.

“Leaving so soon?” asked Joseph.

“No, I have to take a piss.”

“So do I,” said Jesus, the group heading out to answer nature’s call.

“You and your folks are good people Julius,” said Callicles, relieving himself by the chimney. “Tiberum colony is my favorite of stops, a pleasant place, with you and your father, friend Gavinal, Drusus the Illyrian, Caius Felix and that silly Marcus.”

“He does tell good jokes,” Jesus replied, adjusting his tunic.

“I don’t know where he gets them,” said Callicles, heading to the porch. He tripped up the steps and landed on the porch with a heavy thud.

“Are you all right uncle?” Demosthenes asked.

“Yeah, I just drink too much,” he replied, rising unsteadily. Enjoying the warm night, Callicles stood on the porch getting drunk, later falling to the floor unconscious, his goblet shattering beside him.

“I’m very sorry, we will replace it from our stock at once,” said Demosthenes, the fine crystal goblet having been expensive, imported from Rome.

“Forget it,” Jesus replied as his father rose from his chair, “We’ll buy more from you next time, no point worrying about broken glass.”

“But it was a crystal goblet.”

“Who cares,” said a drunken Joseph, skirting the shards and weaving through the door.

“If you say so,” the incredulous lad replied while looking to the doorway, knowing the goblet had cost at least five denarii.

“I do indeed say so,” Joseph called from the kitchen.

“Are you sure?” Demosthenes asked, looking to Jesus.

“It’s nothing,” Jesus replied.

“My uncle drinks too much,” said Demosthenes, looking to his unconscious form.

“Yeah, what can you do?” replied Jesus, rising from his seat and walking to the snoring trader, rolling him on his back.

“I’ll help you carry him to the wagon,” said Demosthenes.

“That’s the idea,” Jesus answered, the pair moving Callicles from the floor, an arm over the lad’s shoulder, another over Jesus’ shoulder. Demosthenes took the reins after Jesus lifted the unconscious trader into the wagon.

Bidding farewell, the lad said they would return in late March or early April, depending on availability of stock.

“Take it easy kid,” Jesus replied as Demosthenes took a deep gulp of wine, following in his uncle’s footsteps.

“I always do, and guess what – I got laid for the first time two weeks ago by a slut in Daphinos!”

“Good for you,” said Jesus, the boy cracking a whip over the horse’s heads, galloping away over the bumpy road leading from the farm. “We’ll have to get the road fixed before somebody gets killed,” he added, watching the wagon heave to one side on two wheels.

Heading out with the Magdalene while his father snored in a kitchen chair, the couple flew to the west road, finding and killing a pair of thieves seventeen miles west of Tibernum. After a few lean months, they had found a windfall, flying off for a few days to prey about Mansahir, or to stroll the newly opened highway from the west. This much-needed road ultimately connected to a distant city named Nicomedia, many hundreds of miles away on the Sea of Marmara.

Staying far enough from Gavinal and his centurion’s grasp, thieves had taken up residence by the roadsides, providing Jesus and Mary with plenty of blood and cold cash. From the increased amount of money they were acquiring in Mansahir and the heavily traveled west road, Jesus took time to visit his cave every few weeks or so, instead of once every other month as he had since moving in with his parents. Each time they entered the dark labyrinth, he added more booty to his treasure trove, a princely sum amounting to nearly 4,500 aurei in coinage, not counting priceless jewels and jewelry, their value perhaps three times that. Thanks to their newfound preying ground on the west road, they were growing richer with each passing night.

One evening in early November, Jesus brought another sack of denarii to the cave, weighing nearly fifty pounds. "We're loaded now aren't we woman?" he asked, dropping the sack, "My dad always thought I'd be poor, and now I have enough money to buy a thousand slaves."

"I'll say, and then some," Mary replied, looking to the glittering pile of treasure.

Staring at silver menorahs stolen from the rabbi of Nazareth, sitting next to a pile of aurei, Jesus frowned, reminded of the Hebrew faith he had turned his back on immediately following his death and triumphant vampiric resurrection.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Jesus answered, not wanting to bother her with his contemptuous opinions regarding religion, "It's just we've been concentrating on acquiring money and jewelry, those menorahs and goblets are out of place."

"We haven't been robbing anyone's homes lately, maybe we'll get more later," said Mary, not understanding why he was so annoyed at a pair of menorahs and two goblets.

"That's not what I mean, we have no use for them. I suppose I'll have Icarus melt that crap down," Jesus replied, pointing to the menorahs and goblets. Since they were not money or jewelry, he considered them useless gold and silver scrap, better suited existing as ingots of precious metal.

"That can wait, we have a ton of money, besides, you could give those goblets to your parents as a congratulatory present for the baby."

"Good idea," said Jesus, lifted from his dark mood and breaking into a smile, brushing aside the offending menorahs and lifting the goblets from the pile. Presents in hand, they headed for the house, walking into the kitchen as Ruth was clearing the table. "Where's my father?" he asked.

"In their bedroom talking with your mother," she replied.

"Thank you."

Knocking on the door, Joseph let them in, walking to a chair and sitting down next to his wife, lying in bed. His mother was very pregnant, having less than two months to go before her new baby, a healthy Hebrew boy, would come into the world.

"Good evening father, how are you my mother?" asked Jesus, he and Mary entering.

"I'm fine," his mother answered, Jesus taking a seat beside Joseph.

"She waddles like a duck and looks like she's about to burst," his father observed, smiling and laying a hand on his wife's arm.

"Carry this much weight in front of you and see how you walk," Mary retorted.

"I don't mean anything by that woman," Joseph replied.

"I've brought a gift, in honor of the baby," said Jesus, producing the pair of goblets from

behind his back and sitting them on a nightstand.

“They’re beautiful,” replied his mother.

“Expensive too, worth a small fortune I’d say,” said Joseph, lifting one of the heavy goblets, “Where’d you get them?”

“We took them from a rabbi we killed in Nazareth, we robbed his house,” an unthinking Magdalene volunteered, Jesus looking to her darkly.

“Oh well, I suppose he didn’t have any further use for them,” said Joseph, placing the goblet on the table.

“Samuel Bar Saklas, the rabbi who wanted to have you stoned for blasphemy,” said his mother.

“Exactly,” Jesus replied, still frowning.

“Please don’t feel bad, he got what he was asking for. They’re very nice goblets too, thank you very much,” she added, accepting the stolen gifts.

“You’re welcome mother,” said Jesus as Ruth entered the room.

“The kitchen’s cleaned up already?” asked Joseph, looking to lift Jesus from his darkened mood.

“Yes Julius the elder,” Ruth answered.

“Let’s have wine son,” said Joseph, rising from his seat.

“Are you coming my woman?” asked Jesus.

“I want to talk with your mom for a while if you don’t mind.”

“Suit yourself,” said Jesus, following his father to the kitchen.

Entering the kitchen, his father reached for a bottle of wine and two crystal goblets.

“Sometimes Mary says things she shouldn’t,” Jesus observed, sitting down, Joseph opening the bottle and pouring libations.

“She is a little blunt, but don’t worry, your mother doesn’t care about that anymore.”

“Be that as it may, it’s disrespectful, she isn’t used to hearing such things.”

“That’s not exactly true. Your mother’s seen a lot more than you may think, especially before you were born.”

“What do you mean?”

“Killing’s one thing she may not be comfortable with yet, but regarding thievery, when your mother was pregnant with you there was a census taken in Judea by Caesar Augustus. Back taxes were being collected in Bethlehem where your mother and I were born.”

“I know, that’s where I was born too, in a stable near an inn.”

“Right, but what you don’t know is that I robbed a publican’s house to pay off my back taxes, otherwise they would have sold your mother and I into slavery.”

“I always thought you were a successful carpenter.”

“Successful because I stole enough money from the publican to move to Nazareth and buy tools and a house.”

“What happened to the publican?”

“Him? I heard they crucified him for absconding with state funds,” Joseph answered, a guilty look crossing his face.

“Oh,” said Jesus, thinking if his father hadn’t stolen the money, the tax collector probably wouldn’t have been crucified, but also realizing if his father hadn’t stolen the money, he and his parents would be lowly slaves, a paradox Jesus figured had turned out for the better.

“So, what do you think of that revelation?” asked Joseph, finishing his goblet.

“I suppose you did what you had to do, and I’ve never cared for publicans, excepting for my friend Matthew.”

“He was one of your disciples wasn’t he?” asked Joseph, pouring another and refilling Jesus’ goblet.

“Yeah, I wonder what he’s doing now,” Jesus mused, his mind drifting to his ministry in Galilee.

“Didn’t you kill him?” Joseph asked, goblet of wine in hand.

“No, I only killed Peter and Judas, I haven’t the foggiest notion of what happened to Matthew.”

“I guess that means there are ten of your people blundering about Judea, telling folks you’re God.”

“I suppose, along with my brother James; I’m sorry father, I truly thought I was God once.”

“Don’t let it bother you, everyone has the right to be crazy sometimes, people have believed stranger things,” said Joseph, an elbow on the table, resting his chin in a palm.

“They have?”

“Of course, don’t think you have the sole claim to looniness, many others in this weird world make you look like a piker.”

“Are you serious?”

“Come on, you’re a hell of a lot smarter than me; you know what I’m talking about. You’ve been over half the world in your quest for the truth, whatever that is. Like for example, people down south who think burning babies to death in furnaces will make the rain come and the crops grow.”

“They do that in Syria,” said Jesus, taking a deep drink of wine.

“Yeah they do, and other crazy folks worship carved blocks of stone or the chirping birds, or toothy crocodiles from Egypt. Some people even pray to stupid dogs and cats, for what

reason, who knows.”

“I get what you mean, in Kush and India they worship odd looking cows that have humps on their backs, and some people in Rome say the emperor is a god.”

“I’ve heard that too,” said a sighing Joseph.

“People are strange aren’t they?” Jesus asked after a few moments of silence, pouring another goblet, forgetting he was once in that category.

“You don’t need me to answer that, after all, they killed you because you told them the truth about themselves.”

“Mary has said the same thing.”

“She’s a smart woman.”

“Yes she is, but lately I’ve been changing my mind on religion. I told her a few months back I was drifting toward atheism, she didn’t seem to care for those remarks.”

“She’ll get over it. Just remember, even as a vampire she’s still a woman, and women seem to need a reason to explain existence, so they turn to a god who controls all things.”

“That’s the truth, in some ways I feel blind faith is a woman’s province, men question everything too much.”

“I’ve thought that too.”

Jesus nodded. “I’ve been wondering since we talked in Nazareth last year, what do you think of religious philosophies, do you think they bring man closer to God, if there is one?”

“I’ve no idea, my answer to that would only be an opinion.”

“I know, but what do you think?”

“Honestly, I doubt it. I’m not a believer anyway and I’ve felt that way since long before you were born.”

“Really?” Jesus asked, refilling their goblets, father and son growing drunk on Gallic wine.

“Yes, I haven’t believed in any religion since I was a teenager,” said Joseph, looking him in the eyes.

“Why?”

“I loved my father Jacob very much, and if you recall me telling you as a child, your grandmother died giving birth to me, after she died he was all I had.”

“I know,” said Jesus, putting his hand on his father’s in an attempt to comfort him.

“And when I found him dead in his bed when I was thirteen, God went out the window,” a frowning Joseph spat, pulling his hand away, recalling finding his father’s body on a fall morning in Bethlehem, finally letting Jesus see more of his true self.

“But you scrupulously followed the admonitions written in the Torah, even having me circumcised, and you went to Temple every Saturday when I was a child,” said Jesus, looking

at the table where his father's hand had been.

"That doesn't mean anything, it's tradition, rote bullshit one does to fit in with the herd. When you're part of a culture, willing or not, you have to abide by its rules to avoid problems with the simpletons who really believe it," retorted Joseph, shaking his head at his son's naïveté.

"That makes sense, you don't believe there's a God either?" asked Jesus, thunderstruck at his father's words.

"Not really; I simply realized a long time ago none of us know the answer to the mystery of life and death and what may lie beyond this, if anything. Life's much too short to determine such incredible things."

"Indeed."

"We're nothing but foolish mortals, with the obvious exceptions of you, your woman and perhaps others like you."

"Yes," Jesus replied.

"Further, if there is a God, he, she or it will do as it pleases with us, and there's nothing we can do about it," declared Joseph, arms in the air.

"I agree, Protagoras said that too."

"Who was he?" asked Joseph, downing a gulp of wine.

"A Greek atheist from the past."

"Really? I think he was right; well, I wish you'd listened to me earlier, it certainly would have saved you a lot of problems," said Joseph, rising from the table.

"I'll say," Jesus replied, thinking of his crucifixion.

"Why do you let such shit bother you?" asked Joseph, walking to a cabinet, grabbing and opening another bottle of wine.

"I don't know," said an exasperated Jesus, thoughts of God crossing his mind.

Pouring another libation, Joseph replied, "Simply remember this, none of us really know anything. Accept that and get on with your uh, life."

"You're probably right father, but I've always wondered – "

Appearing in the doorway, the Magdalene remarked, "Let's find someone to eat."

"Yes, go out and kill someone evil, it is your very nature to do so, and to deny your nature would be foolish," said Joseph, pointing a finger at Jesus.

"You're a wise man," Jesus replied, emptying his glass of wine.

"Yeah right," answered his father, draining his goblet while Jesus and consort walked from the house.

"What were you and Joseph talking about?" asked Mary, walking along the road leading from the farm.

“Various things,” said Jesus, troubled by his father’s admissions, particularly regarding his atheism.

“You don’t feel like talking about it?”

“Perhaps after we have someone to eat,” Jesus replied, his slight inebriation quickly wearing off.

“Okay.”

“Let’s fly to the west,” said Jesus, the couple transforming, flying to the highway leading to Nicomedia. Alighting at their usual spot fifteen miles west of town, they assumed human form. Raising an eyebrow, the vampiric Christ noted that the garbage of humanity had selected the same spot another pair of thieves had, until they came along one dark evening. Having encountered highwaymen at this very place just over a month earlier, they had relieved them of their lives and twelve aurei. The latest pair had moved into a clever trap that Jesus had set, he having moved several fallen trees next to an overhanging sandstone promontory, creating a convenient place for thieves to hide.

“Hold it there,” one growled in Anatolian, coming from the brush, gleaming gladius in his right hand.

“What do you want with us at this time of night?” asked Jesus in kind, familiar with the language of the thieves of Turkey.

“We want tribute,” the thief answered, his partner appearing at his side.

“I’m Roman and pay tribute to no one.”

“In other words, go screw yourself,” said Mary, she having also picked up the tongue of the indigent population.

“You will pay us to pass.”

“This isn’t a toll road, make us pay you,” Jesus replied, folding arms across his chest.

The thief raised his sword, Mary moving like lightning toward his partner, ripping his throat with her fangs and gulping blood as he died in her arms.

“Top that,” said Jesus, the thief dropping his sword and turning to run. “Not so fast,” he added, grabbing the robber by his tunic and pushing him to the ground.

“Evil vampire, by the holy god Baal I banish you and your murderous Lilith to Gehenna!” shrieked the thief.

“Baal, the brother of El, or Elohim, Yahweh of the Hebrews,” said Jesus, looking to his victim.

“Baal is the one true God, I banish you and the Lilith in his holy name!”

“Holy my ass, Baal’s bullshit like his brother Elohim; crap dreamed up by idiots.”

“He is?”

“Why don’t you see for yourself you stupid bastard,” said Jesus, lifting him, plunging fangs in his throat, sucking his blood until he died and throwing the corpse to the pavement.

“He pissed you off didn’t he?” asked Mary, dropping her victim beside his lifeless partner.

“He was a damn fool,” Jesus spat, staring at the corpse.

“That’s obvious,” said the Magdalene, looking to the body.

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“You feel like a fool too, because you once bought into that stuff.”

“Yeah,” said Jesus, “Let’s loot these bastards, it’s too bad we can’t sell their heads to Callicles.”

“I don’t think he’d buy them would he?”

“Sure he would, if we could sell them to him for 50 denarii or so, he gets 250 each for the heads of thieves from the procurator in Antioch.”

“It’s not worth it, too many questions would follow, we should just loot and dump them.”

“Of course, get serious woman, it’d be hard to explain to that drunk how we took them wouldn’t it?”

“I’m sorry,” said Mary, understanding his macabre jest.

Finding only a few denarii on the pirates, Jesus hurled them by their legs from the road, the bodies landing in crumpled heaps in a dense thicket. Not uttering a word, he started back to town.

“You’re not yourself tonight are you?” asked the Magdalene, putting a hand on his arm.

“I’m all right,” said Jesus, pulling his arm from her.

“It’s what your father said at the house isn’t it?”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’ve known you a long time, I can tell.”

“You’re right,” Jesus replied, annoyed that she could so easily read his emotions.

“So?”

“My father told me he’s an atheist.”

“Big deal, so are you.”

“Not quite, but close,” said Jesus, “It just bothers me that my father never told me he was an atheist. If he had, perhaps I wouldn’t have begun my ministry, and would’ve saved myself a crucifixion in the process.”

“You wouldn’t have listened to him, you thought you were God.”

“Yeah,” a wistful Jesus answered.

“And you wouldn’t be a vampire today.”

“That is true.”

“I like being a vampire, we’ll live forever,” said Mary, smiling at the thought.

“I don’t mind, but we can never have children.”

“That’s the way it goes, maybe you’ll bring others to our realm like you did at the graveyard with me – they can be your children,” said Mary, having gotten past her regrets of not having offspring.

“It’s not the same thing,” Jesus replied, thinking of his brother in his mother’s womb.

“Perhaps not, but if we’re careful, we can bring others to our realm, if the situation warrants it. Further, we can know the world of the future, existing on this earth hundreds, if not thousands of years from now! I think that’s exciting, who knows what lies in the far off future!”

“Man will be the same through all times in history,” Jesus declared, “A miserable creature whose foremost predilection is blatant hypocrisy of the first order, most of them, male or female, nothing but cunning, deceitful, disgusting liars and rogues.”

“We’d have nothing to eat if they weren’t.”

“You’re right,” said Jesus, “My woman, what would I do without you?”

“If you kept this attitude up you’d probably kill yourself, if you could.”

“You think so?”

“Definitely,” the Magdalene answered, changing the subject, “You know, that clown back there thought I was the Lilith.”

“I heard that too, who knows, maybe you are,” said Jesus, pausing and sitting on a boulder near the roadside, looking to the night sky.

“The Lilith?”

“Well, maybe not the Lilith, but I’ll tell you one thing, we sure scared the piss out of him didn’t we?” asked Jesus with a slight smile.

“Yeah,” said Mary, recalling the robber’s terrified face, Jesus towering over him.

Talking for a few hours sitting by the roadside, the Magdalene finally lifting his crestfallen spirits, they transformed and returned to the house, Jesus dumping the paltry amount of silver he took from the thieves on his nightstand before going to sleep at sunrise.

Chapter Seven: Julian of Tiberium

Fall passed quickly, becoming a colder than usual winter for eastern Cappadocia, snow falling in early December for the first time in many years.

Electra now visited Mary every day. She put an ear to her belly, listening for sounds of the child moving and then put a hand to her forehead, checking for signs of fever. Frowning, she sat on the bed, figuring the gestation time on a piece of papyrus.

“Is something wrong?” asked Mary.

“Not exactly mistress, you say you missed starting in February?”

“Late February, I figure I’m a week or two overdue.”

“Sometimes children are late, but if the child doesn’t come soon I may have to induce labor.”

“How?”

“Have no fear, there are herbs one can use, causing no harm to the mother or child,” Electra replied, placing a hand on her arm.

Jesus and consort had taken to staying close to home, as his mother’s time would come very soon. Another two weeks passing, it was now the third week of December. The baby nearly a month overdue, it was only a matter of days before the mother of Jesus would bring a new healthy life into the world, after some difficulty.

The male child, born on the eve of the winter solstice, would one day run the farm with his Roman wife Marcia Divia. She, yet to be conceived, would be born three years later as the lovely daughter of their neighbor Marcus Pertinax. He, the future patriarch of the clan, would be charged with carrying on the legacy of Joseph and Mary, his Hebrew parents, and would also come to know and safeguard the incredible truth about his eldest brother – the ageless man called Jesus Christ, the vampire.

“Her time has come!” a hysterical Ruth cried just after dusk on the twentieth, “Her water has broken on the sheets, please fetch Maria, Electra and Penelope, I know not what to do!”

A startled Joseph, getting drunk in the kitchen with Jesus, quickly sobered up and answered, “Right away, Maria’s in the slave quarters, I’ll bring them!”

“Shall I follow?” asked Jesus.

“You’d better, I’m pretty drunk, there’s snow and ice out there and you can catch me if I fall on my ass,” Joseph answered, turning for the door.

“Right,” said a sober Jesus, having much greater tolerance for wine.

Walking to the slave quarters with his father, Jesus knocked on the door. The Magdalene was conversing with Icarus, Electra and Penelope. Cyril was asleep from a long day of reading scrolls Jesus had brought from Gavinal, Brutus was snoring away in his room, and muscular Ganymede was sleeping in his room, exhausted from chopping wood for their hearths and for the smokehouse.

“Yes Julius?” the Magdalene asked, opening the door.

“Mother’s having her baby, we need you women to assist her,” answered a stoic Jesus.

“My God, she is?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve delivered many babies,” said Electra, placing a hand on the Magdalene’s arm, grabbing a satchel from a table containing a first-aid kit.

“I’ve never done it in my uh, life,” Mary replied as the women scrambled for the house, leaving Jesus and Joseph in their wake.

“What should I do, I’m just a blacksmith,” said Icarus.

“Would you like to come to the house for fine wine?” asked Jesus.

“Sure, I’ve delivered calves and shoats before, but I don’t know anything about foaling human critters.”

“Neither do we, that’s why we’re leaving it to the women,” said Joseph with a nervous laugh, the trio making their way to the house. During the next hours, cries of the labors of childbirth came from the bedroom as Joseph, Jesus and Icarus sat in the kitchen drinking strong wine.

The labor growing difficult at ten-thirty, Electra remarked to Ruth, “Please bring me tar of opium to ease her suffering.”

“Where is it?” asked Ruth.

Electra looked to her and retorted, “Ask the master, if he doesn’t know go to my quarters and open my apothecary box, I have resin there wrapped in cotton cloth.”

Joseph was drunk and Jesus didn’t know where any opium was, so Ruth headed to the slave quarters, retrieving the painkiller. Mixing the strong drug with wine, Electra handed the concoction to Mary.

“Drink this mistress, it will ease your pain.”

“Thank you,” said a tired Mary, downing the pain relieving opium.

“It’s a breach birth!” the Magdalene exclaimed near midnight, beholding one of the infant’s feet protruding from a screaming Mary, other still in the womb, trapping the helpless child within her.

“It’s been much too long, the child could die, bring a sharp knife from the kitchen,” Electra ordered.

“Why?” asked Penelope, not very intelligent when it came to such things.

“Get it stupid, you’ve seen me do it before!” Electra exclaimed, using her authority as a midwife to order family and slaves alike.

Penelope did as told, the Magdalene asking, “I’ve heard of this, they call it caesarian, right?”

“Yes,” answered Electra, “Done properly both will live, done wrong, one or both will die, should I proceed mistress?”

“Do what you have to do!” a tearful Magdalene exclaimed.

Penelope returned with a sharp steel knife, followed by Joseph, Jesus and Icarus.

“Hold her down, I’ll do it fast,” Electra ordered Ruth, Penelope and the Magdalene.

“What’s wrong woman?” Joseph cried to his delirious wife.

“Don’t worry father, I’ve seen this done in Rome,” said Jesus.

“What’s she going to do to her?” asked a terrified Joseph, ready to go to his wife’s rescue.

“Save the baby and mother.”

“With a knife?”

“It’s called caesarian, it’s said Julius Caesar was – ”

“You men get the hell out of here!” Electra barked.

“We should do as Electra says,” said Jesus.

“She’s my wife, she needs me!”

“No she doesn’t, Electra knows what she’s doing more than we, verily I say, if there is a God my father, all is in his hands now,” declared Jesus, he and Icarus helping Joseph from the bedroom.

The Magdalene holding Mary down, Electra cut into her belly, a shriek of pain coming from the mother of Jesus. “I’ve got him, he’s okay,” she said seconds later, cutting and knotting the umbilical, afterward freeing his right leg from the birth canal. Lifting the boy from his mother’s womb and slapping him hard on his bottom, the newborn Levite cried loudly. “Quickly Ruth, fetch my apothecary box, I’ll need gut for the internal stitches,” she ordered, wrapping the babe in swaddling clothes and handing the child to Penelope.

“I wish you’d told me that earlier,” said Ruth, reaching for her cloak.

“Do it, I haven’t time for your backtalk!”

A subdued but dutiful Ruth made her way to the slave quarters, returning with the heavy box, placing it at the side of the bed. “Open it and fetch fine silk thread and a sharp needle of bronze,” Electra ordered her reluctant assistant in the manner of a doctor ordering a nurse, the midwife reaching into her box for animal gut preserved in strong vinegar. Producing the other items from a bedroom drawer, Ruth handed needle and thread to her. “This shouldn’t take long,” the midwife added, removing a threadlike piece of gut from the vinegar.

The Magdalene, fascinated at witnessing her first caesarian section, had relaxed her hold on the mother of Jesus. Electra threaded the needle with gut, removed the placenta from the womb and proceeded to sew her up, starting with the uterine incision. Mary cried out in agony, writhing at the stabs of the needle, threaded with silk, piercing her nerve-laden outer flesh.

“Hold her down, are you stupid?” Electra yelled, looking the Magdalene in the eyes.

“I’m sorry,” said the Magdalene, tightening her grip while Electra continued stitching Mary up, punctuated by cries of pain. She finally slipped into unconsciousness, exhausted from the

ordeal.

“That’s the last baby she’ll ever have,” said Electra after closing the wound, wiping her brow on a cloth.

“It is?” asked Ruth.

“Hopefully,” said Electra, looking to her fellow slave, “Another child would probably kill her, if she survives this. Should she still be able to conceive there are herbs I can prescribe which will keep this from happening again.”

“Why would you do that?” a curious Ruth asked.

“For one thing, caesarian birth is extremely dangerous and is damaging to the womb, for another, this woman’s too damn old to have another child,” said Electra with a loud exhale.

“Will she be all right?” asked the Magdalene.

“Only the gods know,” answered Electra, taking the newborn from Penelope and putting him to his mother’s breast only five minutes after delivery, the little one latching on and suckling well.

“You saved the baby!” Ruth exclaimed.

“Perhaps,” said a tired Electra, “You’ve seen this before child?”

“No, it’s said I was born that way but my mother died,” Ruth replied, for a moment wondering what her unknown mother had been like.

“Forgive me, I must pray to Athena Parthenos and Demeter for help in saving them,” said Electra, nodding to the group. Walking from the house to her private altar in her room, the devoted slave prayed for three long days to her powerful goddesses, neither eating nor drinking during this time. Only leaving to clean and care for the newborn and his mother, she carefully inspected and changed the dressing on Mary’s belly at each visitation, her bedside manner comparable with any physician of the time. Applying a fresh poultice of antibiotic herbs to the wound every eight hours for a week, she noted with calm satisfaction there were no signs of infection in her patient. Her skillful nursing and humble supplications to the Greek goddesses of wisdom and fertility were successful, for Mary and her son, named Julian Marius Chrysippus, survived their ordeal and thrived.

* * *

The year 35 arrived on a cold morning. After the new mother had recovered enough to walk about, Jesus and his parents, with the Magdalene, discussed on a January evening how the child should be raised, either secretly as a Hebrew or openly as a Roman.

Dismissing the slaves from the house, including Ruth, the four gathered by lamplight at the kitchen table and debated the fate and education of the male child.

“I’d raise him Roman,” said Joseph, opening a wine bottle, “We had enough trouble with the Hebrew religion in Galilee, practicing such a faith here would be a disaster.”

“But Joseph, it was the religion of our parents,” Mary replied.

“And a lot of good it did them,” Joseph spat, filling goblets for he, Jesus and the Magdalene.

“My father was a priest in Bethlehem!”

“And he died a pauper, accused of heresy by those goddamn Pharisees, who also gleefully murdered your firstborn son!”

Mary looked to him, not knowing what to say.

“Tell me I’m wrong woman, only a fool would practice the Hebrew religion here!” Joseph thundered, downing his goblet.

“What do you think Jesus?” asked his mother, folding hands on the table and looking to him with an imploring expression.

“I’m sorry, but I agree with father, to even mention something like Hebrew beliefs to the child would be inviting trouble for the family,” said Jesus, taking a deep drink from his goblet.

“I admit you have a point, but it was our religion,” Mary replied, thinking of their experiences in Nazareth.

“Forget it, it was bullshit,” Joseph retorted, “We don’t need our new kid growing up like Jesus did do we?”

“Father!”

“I’m sorry son, but you did go overboard with religion in the past.”

“Yeah,” said Jesus, growing silent, reflecting on his admission, realizing his father, as usual regarding such things, was right.

“What do you think?” asked Mary, looking to the Magdalene.

“It’s none of my business,” said the Magdalene, staring into her goblet, swirling the wine within.

“Yes it is, you’re my son’s wife and a member of this family, so it is your business.”

“Jesus and I are vampires; you and Joseph are his parents, not us. The decision is yours, the child must be raised as you see fit.”

“I don’t care what you are – I’d like your opinion please.”

The Magdalene paused, carefully sitting her glass on the table. Frowning, she replied, “Very well, if you must know I agree with Jesus and Joseph. The Hebrew religion is obviously a fraud, and to mention such beliefs here would do nothing but court disaster.”

Mary sighed, looking to the ceiling for a moment.

“It’s the only way, we have to live in this town and think of the child’s future,” said Joseph.

“It bothers me but I think you are correct,” Mary agreed, “Since we’re living in Cappadocia, we probably should raise Julian in the ways of the Romans.”

“Then it’s settled,” said Joseph, “Julian will be raised Roman.”

Over the following years, the young Levite male would be raised Roman, never circumcised nor hearing of the Torah and other Hebrew superstitions. When the time came, Cyril taught him of the gods. He told the lad of the myths of Jupiter and Saturn, along with the rest of the

great pantheon of gods passed down from the Greeks and Romans, the child raised pagan.

An early March spring arriving, the slaves prepared the farm, while Jesus and consort continued to rid the land surrounding Tibernum of thieves, cutthroats and highwaymen, along with the occasional boar, auroch, or deer. His mother and Julian were tended to by the female slaves, even the male slaves stopping in to check on the little one, vigorous and perfect he was, looking with bright eyes at his fellows one late afternoon.

The baby dropped a rattle made by Jesus to the floor for the third time, sending Joseph scrambling from a chair to pick it up. Seeing this, Brutus remarked, "We know who the master of this farm is, it's little Julian!"

"It seems so," said a proud Joseph.

Even the town prefect, Gavinal Septimus, dropped by the farm one evening in late March to greet the latest citizen of Tibernum, on his way to Marcus Pertinax's home to notarize land titles. Trader Callicles was also in town, the prefect relating this news as well.

"By the gods, he's three months old and has no bulla," a superstitious Gavinal observed, looking upon the child and turning to Jesus.

"Don't worry, Maria and I are heading to Antioch to have a goldsmith create one for him so the gods will protect him from harm," said Jesus, feigning just the right amount of concern.

"He needs a bulla now to protect him from evil demons and malevolent vapors, you know that Julius."

"Our slave Electra has invoked Athena Parthenos to intercede until we get him one," said Joseph, completely familiar with the Greek pantheon.

"You mean Minerva," Gavinal corrected, using the goddess' Roman name.

"Of course," Jesus answered for his father.

"I'll take care of this," said Gavinal, "My brother in Etruria is a goldsmith and can create a powerful bulla blessed by the Oracle at Delphi. Thanks to the Oracle my children are protected by the great and powerful Jupiter."

"They are?" asked Joseph.

"Great Jupiter is King of all the gods and can do wonders far above other gods," replied Gavinal with a nod.

"How soon can you do this?" asked Jesus.

"Within a month," said Gavinal, "No Roman child should ever be without the blessing of Jupiter."

"Will you need money?" asked Jesus, reaching in a tunic pocket.

"No, it will be my family's gift to you and your family," a solemn Gavinal answered.

"We thank you kind Gavinal," said Joseph.

"Don't mention it friend Julius, neighbors always help one another," replied the prefect with a

smile, beholding the Roman boy in his mother's arms.

Callicles and Demosthenes dropped by a few evenings later as his caravan was preparing to leave for Daphinos. Both enjoying getting drunk with Joseph and Jesus, the trader and nephew admired the child held at his mother's breast – a still embarrassed Mary having been informed by her eldest that Roman women were not ashamed of their bodies when among friends like Hebrews were. "I must say, it's a miracle," said Callicles, walking from the bedroom, envious of the domestic bliss of the Chrysippus family.

"Would you believe he was born caesarian?" asked Jesus.

"It takes a highly skilled physician or midwife to perform such a feat," said Callicles.

"Don't you remember, our slave Electra is a midwife," Joseph replied.

"I figured I sold her and the others to you too damn cheap!" Callicles said with a chuckle, sitting down in the kitchen, leaning to one side and farting loudly. "Sorry friends, I forgot we were inside," he added, fanning his crotch, embarrassed at the foul odor filling the kitchen.

"Shit happens," replied Joseph, moving from the table and opening the front door, hoping the burning hearth would take up the noxious fumes.

"I hope not," Callicles retorted, looking to his crotch as Jesus laughed heartily. Later, he purchased excess meat in the smokehouse, paying the vampiric Christ in Roman gold. His slaves loading the wagon on the moonlit night, the trader produced a tightly wrapped package, handing it to Joseph. "A present for the baby."

"Thank you, what is it?" asked Joseph, taking the package.

"Open it."

Joseph unwrapped the package, revealing a bolt of fine Egyptian cotton cloth, and another bolt of exquisite woven white Roman wool, threaded with gold.

"For your son's first tunics," said Callicles. Nodding, Joseph handed them to his son for inspection.

"This is beautiful cloth," said Jesus, looking at the fine fabrics, "Thank you very much friend Callicles."

"I got it cheap in Chrysopolis," replied a winking Callicles, climbing in his wagon.

"Take care Callicles, till next time," said Jesus, heading to the house with the gift.

"Right Julius," Callicles answered, taking the reins.

Bidding farewell to Joseph, Callicles and nephew left for their caravansary.

* * *

Three weeks later, a blessed bulla from the Delphic Oracle arrived for Julian, delivered by a Roman Army courier riding an Arabian horse at breakneck speed for over fifty miles along the Via Tiberius Romanus highway. Arriving in the late afternoon, the exhausted horse collapsed and died on the spot when it reached the residence of Gavinal Septimus.

“Thank you centurion Pontius Illius,” said Gavinal while the officer handed him the parcel and gave him a Roman salute.

The padded package was marked: “SPQR - RUSH IMMEDIATELY UPON RECEIPT – OFFICIAL EMPIRE BUSINESS – OF PRIME IMPORTANCE FOR PREFECT T. GAVINALUS SEPTIMUS”.

“We’ll have to find you another horse won’t we centurion?” asked Gavinal, looking to the carcass.

“I suppose so sir,” said the centurion.

“Guard!” Gavinal barked to his assigned enlistee.

“Yes sir,” the guard answered, walking up.

“Tell the immunes at the livery stable we need a horse for the centurion.”

“Right away,” said the guard, saluting before leaving.

As summer approached, the Levite infant was presented with great fanfare at the town pantheon, wearing his protecting bulla, proving to all he was a Roman child, blessed by the king of all gods, Jupiter. Jesus and his good mother Mary had finally taken the road Joseph had long ago, one that simply accepted local traditions without giving credence to them. It made for a much simpler, less stressful life, and helped in being accepted by the local citizenry.

His mother and little brother healthy and the farm running smoothly, Jesus, as of late, had taken to the idea of moving on, or at the least taking an extended vacation into Europe.

“I’ve never been to Europe,” said Mary one evening just after dusk while they sat conversing on the porch.

“You’ll love it woman,” Jesus replied, “Especially Athens and Rome, they’re the greatest cities in the Empire, Rome has a population of nearly a million people.”

“A million, I imagine plenty of food with numbers like that.”

“Truly an endless supply, we can prowl the slums at night looking for thieves like we did in Antioch,” a smiling Jesus answered, recalling the seedier sections of the Eternal City.

“When do you want to leave?”

“Not for a while yet, perhaps toward the end of this year or early next year. Once we reach Rome I’ll have to head to the Tabularium – ” said Jesus, noticing his father walking up.

“To do what?”

“I’ll tell you later,” said Jesus, not wanting his father to hear the conversation.

“What are you two talking about?” asked a tired Joseph, stepping to the porch, coming from his fields.

“Vacation plans,” replied Jesus, “I was telling Mary of interesting places in Europe.”

“You’re going to take off again?” he asked, facing the inevitable.

“Not for a while yet, and we will return quickly, perhaps in a year or two.”

“You call that quickly?” asked Joseph with a stifled yawn, leaning against the porch rail.

“I was gone for over seven years once.”

“You were at that,” his father replied, heading into the house.

“Your parents have come to depend on you,” said the Magdalene.

“It seems so doesn’t it?” asked a frowning Jesus, looking to the fields.

“This is a strange land, you are much worldlier than they, perhaps they still need you to adjust.”

“But for how long?” a sighing Jesus asked, rising from his seat, “Let’s find someone to eat.”

“It’s rather early isn’t it?”

“We have time to fly to Daphinos or Heraclea, wouldn’t you like a change of pace?”

“Why not?” she replied as they walked into the darkness and transformed.

Flying to Daphinos took only a few hours, Jesus and consort alighting north of town and walking into a tavern. A town originally founded by Greeks, it was quite Romanized now, most inhabitants being Roman tenant farmers or craftsmen. The bar they entered was quiet, Jesus sitting down and ordering a cup of strong grog to pass the time, looking about for suitable victims while conversing with Mary.

“Do you want anything?” asked Jesus.

“Maybe Gallic wine or beer, I can’t stand grog.”

“Bartender,” called Jesus.

“Yes?” came the reply as a man walked over.

“I need a beer for my lady.”

“I’m sorry, your wife seemed preoccupied talking with you, I didn’t think she wanted anything.”

“No problem,” Jesus answered, tossing a denarius to the counter.

You only owe me five dupondii for both drinks,” said the bartender, delivering the beer, staring at the denarius coin.

“Keep the change, bring a few more drinks if we need them.”

“Yes sir,” the smiling bartender replied.

“There’s hardly anyone here, I don’t think it’s going to work tonight,” Mary whispered.

“No matter, I was just looking for grog.”

“Oh,” said the Magdalene, nursing her beer.

Later, a group of boisterous revelers entered the bar, laughing and talking, one ordering three large pitchers of grog. As they appeared harmless, Jesus finished his drink and stepped from the bar, nodding to the bartender. "Hey Roman fellow, why don't you join us?" one of the group called while Jesus was heading for the door.

"No thanks, we have to find supper friend," Jesus replied.

"Come on, have a drink with us," said another.

Jesus looked to Mary, who shrugged, the couple heading to their table.

"Have grog," said the man who had called him Roman, passing a filled cup to Jesus. "My wife had twin boys tonight, just like Romulus and Remus. We're celebrating."

"Congratulations," said Jesus, downing the grog and placing the cup on the table.

"Would your wife like some?" asked the new father.

"I never touch it," the Magdalene said with a smile, if only to lessen the sting of refusal on such a happy occasion.

"Suit yourself madam, have another friend," he said to Jesus, filling his cup from the pitcher.

"One more and that's enough for me," replied Jesus.

"What's your name citizen?" asked the new father, handing Jesus grog, noting the golden signet ring on the right hand of the left-handed Jesus.

"Julius Chrysippus, from Etruria," Jesus answered, "Yours?"

"Adrian of Daphinos," the man replied, offering his hand, a silver signet on the third finger of his left.

Shaking his hand firmly, Jesus said after downing the grog, "I'm sorry, but we must be going, thanks for the grog, and may you all enjoy yourselves this evening."

"We will, thanks for having a drink with us," answered a smiling Adrian as they turned and left the tavern.

"That was pleasant, they were nice people," said Jesus, strolling down the main street.

"I suppose," Mary replied, more interested in finding dinner.

"Nice people are a rare commodity, woman."

"They are at that," said Mary, not commenting further on the statement. "So, what were you talking about regarding Rome?" she asked while they headed from town, reminding him of the earlier conversation he had stopped in mid sentence.

"Oh that, there will be a census taken a few years from now."

"And?"

"I'll have to head to Rome to establish citizenship for my parents before then."

"Why?"

“Dire circumstances await those who do not respond to the census truthfully.”

“No shit, how are you going to do that?”

“Once we reach Rome, I imagine I’ll hypnotize a scribe at the Tabularium and have him forge the necessary records.”

“I guess that’ll work, is it that important?” asked Mary, thinking they could move if necessary. After all, one could hide in a city if one wanted to, becoming lost in the population.

“Very important indeed, not for us, but for mom, dad and Julian,” said Jesus, informing her of the precarious position his family was in.

“What could happen to them?” she asked while they continued along the dark road.

The penalties very severe for those masquerading as Roman citizens, Jesus calmly told her that for such a crime, his parents and little brother could be sold into slavery or even killed by the authorities, using crucifixion. “Don’t worry woman, we’ll take care of it.”

“We’ll have to,” said Mary, very fond of Jesus’ parents and his little brother, knowing that Joseph and family were quite content where they were settled.

Walking south of town, they found sustenance in the form of thieves, dispatching and robbing them, disposing of the remains in a cave. A delicately crafted gold and silver necklace was among the loot taken on this hunt, Jesus handing it to his consort. “Thank you,” she replied, looking at the necklace and putting it around her pale neck.

“You’re quite welcome, it’s beautiful and much better in your hands than in the hands of thieves.” The Magdalene smiled and embraced Jesus.

“That takes care of that,” remarked Jesus, holding her in his arms, “Shall we head home?”

“Sure, I’d like to show this to your mother,” said a sighing Mary, knowing that Jesus, unfortunately, was not the romantic type. They transformed and flew north, arriving at the farm a few hours later.

Walking to the house via the access road, Jesus said, “Something’s wrong, I feel it.” Looking to the slave house, Jesus noted the door was blocked with logs and a huge boulder.

“It doesn’t smell right either,” Mary replied, looking about for anything out of place.

The whinny of an unfamiliar horse broke the silence, they noticing it and three others by body heat. “Visitors?” she asked.

“At this time of night I think not,” said a frowning Jesus, looking to the house.

“Hold it,” came a voice speaking Anatolian accented Latin from behind the smokehouse.

“Who are you?” Jesus asked.

“Shut up!” the voice ordered, a man stepping from behind the smokehouse, gladius in hand.

“Robbers!” exclaimed Mary, moving for the thief.

“Let’s see what this idiot wants first,” said Jesus, blocking her with an arm and freezing him to

his spot. Walking to the statuesque thief, he intoned, taking his sword, "You didn't expect this did you? No matter, tell me what I want to know and I may let you live." He released him from entrancement and asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for loot to steal," came the frightened voice.

"How many others are with you?"

"Three."

"Where?"

"In the house."

"How long have you been here?"

"Only a few minutes."

"We don't have time for this," said the Magdalene, "The family could be in danger."

"Yes we do, my father's very good with blades, don't you remember?" Turning to his assailant, Jesus continued his questioning.

"What did you do at the slave house?"

"We locked them in by blocking the door."

"Did you harm them?"

"No, they were asleep."

"Very well, he's yours Mary."

"I thought you were going to let me live!" the robber cried.

"I am going to let you live, but she isn't," said Jesus, walking from the thief as Mary Magdalene lunged for his throat, sucked him dry and dropped the body to the ground.

Walking to the house, Jesus could hear his father's voice in the brightly lit common area. Mary walked to the bedroom window to check for his mother and little brother. Seeing no one in the darkened room, she headed to the porch, joining her consort at the door. Looking to Mary, Jesus motioned for her to follow him. Walking to the window of the common area, they observed a stalemate, a thief holding a knife to Ruth's throat and another with a sword, towering over his mother as she held his baby brother. His wounded father was armed, holding a sword across the throat of another man. Heading to the door, Jesus turned to his consort. "It's now or never," he whispered, "You go for my mother and the baby; I'll take care of the rest."

"Right," Mary answered.

Jesus kicked the door down, appearing in the doorway. The Magdalene transformed, flew to his mother, returned to human form and grabbed the baby from her arms within a second, an astonished robber dropping his knife from Ruth's throat. Diving through a closed window, she leapt to the roof, holding the child in her arms. Joseph continued holding a sword to the throat of his assailant while a livid Jesus, not uttering a word, determinedly walked toward the other

thieves. Moving an arm across his chest and releasing, he punched one in the face with a backhand hard enough to break his neck, the body sailing through another window.

“You dared to attack my family on our own property!” yelled Jesus in his Dracula voice, moving to the other thief, grabbing his sword and sinking fangs in the neck. Sucking his blood in front of his mother, father and Ruth, he threw the corpse to the floor in disgust.

Joseph stood, sword in hand, never having seen his son so angry.

“Try me!” Jesus spat through gritted teeth, turning to the man his father was holding.

“I can take you vampire!” the thief exclaimed, slipping from Joseph’s grip, his father falling to the floor.

“Go ahead, try,” Jesus retorted, human blood dripping from his bare chin.

A muscular man, brave beyond belief, the thief attacked Jesus with all his might, giving him pummeling blows with his fists, the rapid flurry knocking him hard against a far wall and to the floor.

Rising from the floor unfazed, Jesus said, “Verily I say unto you, I have ten times your strength, you’re no match for me.” He dove for the thief, missing and punching a fist through a plastered oak beam as his quarry ducked for cover behind a couch. Pulling his tattered fist from the broken wall, he grabbed the criminal while crawling along the floor toward the kitchen, lifting him bodily. Holding the helpless man two feet from the floor, Jesus slammed him against a wall. He strangled him with one hand, yelling, “Die you bastard, die!” crushing his throat in his grip. He threw the body to the floor and exhaled loudly, looking about the room for other assailants. Seeing none, he turned to his father and asked, “You all right dad?”

“I got nicked but I took his sword,” said Joseph.

“Good,” Jesus replied, turning to his mother. Ruth stood motionless, eyes wide, staring at him. “Are you all right mother?” he asked, his left hand starting to give him discomfort.

“Mary has the baby, I think she’s on the roof,” his mother answered, looking to the ceiling.

Ruth continued to stare at the vampiric Christ, her jaw agape.

“What’s with her?” asked Joseph, wincing in pain from his wounded arm.

“She’s seen a little too much tonight, but it’s nothing I can’t cure later,” said Jesus.

“You’re a vampire,” Ruth stammered, unable to be afraid, shock dampening her fear.

“That’s right, stay here and shut up while I fetch my woman.”

Ganymede appeared in the broken doorway, asking, “Is everything all right, someone locked us in our quarters. I broke out when I heard glass breaking.”

“Everything’s fine Ganymede, go back to your quarters, I’ll talk to you in the morning,” Joseph ordered.

“Are you sure Master Julius, your arm is bleeding,” said Ganymede, looking at Joseph’s blood dripping to the floor.

“Never mind that, tell you what, I’ll come over to see Electra in a while, please rouse her, I’m going to need stitches for this,” Joseph replied, glancing at the gaping wound.

“Very well,” said Ganymede, noticing a pair of bodies on the floor before he left.

“It was a good evening,” Jesus spat, walking past the broken doorframe to the porch. “You can come down Mary, it’s all clear.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I killed them all.”

Leaping from the roof with the child in her arms, Mary replied, “I’m sorry, I figured I’d save the baby.”

“That’s nothing to be sorry about, thank you my woman,” Jesus answered, fingers caressing her face as they headed into the house.

The Magdalene handing the baby to Jesus’ mother, Joseph said, “I don’t know about you son, but I need a belt of wine, care to join me?”

“I want to get rid of these bodies first, please give me a hand Mary.”

“Right,” the Magdalene replied, effortlessly lifting a pair of corpses from the floor as a shocked Ruth stared at her. “What are you looking at you stupid bitch?” she asked, dragging the bodies from the house.

Jesus followed her to the side of the house, unconsciously grabbing a body with his left and quickly dropping it. Wincing in pain, he switched to his right, heaving the corpse over a shoulder, following his consort to the smokehouse to retrieve the other cadaver.

“Would you stack the other one on my shoulder, I seem to have hurt my hand,” said Jesus.

“Maybe we should have a look at you,” Mary replied.

“Not now, let’s get rid of these bodies, the sun will be up in less than four hours,” said Jesus, looking to low hanging constellations that set near dawn during the summer.

“Okay,” answered Mary, lifting the body to his shoulder, the couple heading to the river. Dumping corpses on the riverbank, she observed, “Two still have blood in them, shall we?”

“Of course,” said Jesus, sinking fangs in the neck of one as Mary sucked the other dry. “You’re right about them going stale,” he added, emitting a loud belch after he spoke.

“Yeah, it’s not the same,” she replied.

Looting the corpses of nearly 400 denarii, they hurled the remains into the Euphrates where they floated away in the swift current. “Rotten bastards, they ruined my evening,” said Jesus as the bobbing cadavers disappeared in the distance.

“And we ruined theirs,” Mary replied, Jesus looking to her and smiling at the remark.

Returning to the house, he walked to the kitchen, stepping over the broken door and placing a sack of coins on the table, nodding to his father.

“Got rid of them?” asked Joseph.

“We dumped them in the river father, no need to worry about them.”

Sitting down with his son, Joseph poured libations.

“Let’s have a look at your hand,” said the Magdalene, his mother appearing in the kitchen.

“What are we going to do about Ruth?” she asked, Ruth standing in the background, unmoving, apparently in shock.

“Let me tend to that; take Ruth to your room mother,” said a tired Jesus, rising from the table.

“Please come with me Ruth,” ordered Mary.

The slave girl followed, still staring at Jesus while she entered the bedroom.

“Sit down,” he ordered after following them, placing a lamp on a bedside table, dimly illuminating the room. Ruth did as told, Jesus waving a hand and entrancing her. “Sleep child, a long restful sleep. When you awaken, you will remember nothing of what has transpired on this evening,” he intoned in his vampiric monotone. Her eyes closed, and Jesus lifted her slumbering body, moving her to the cot.

“That was easy,” his mother observed.

“Yes, rest mother, and take care of the baby,” said Jesus, closing the door. Walking to the kitchen, he noted that Ganymede had returned with Electra, carrying her apothecary box.

“When you didn’t come by I feared something may have happened to you,” Ganymede explained while Electra was tending Joseph’s wound.

“Thank you Ganymede,” said Joseph.

“You definitely need stitches, at least twenty,” Electra remarked, inspecting his gashed arm, “It’s a wonder you haven’t bled to death from this.”

“It is?” asked Joseph, drunk from consuming two bottles of wine in less than an hour.

“Stop drinking that wine, it makes you bleed even more!” ordered Electra, pulling a bottle from Joseph’s hand. “Please hold his arm Mistress Maria,” she added while threading a needle.

“Sure, I won’t mess up like last time,” Mary replied.

Luckily, the wound was not particularly deep, and the alcohol had at least served to numb Joseph’s arm. Electra closed the wound relatively painlessly, her drunken patient watching her stitch him up like a garment. Jesus was next, he showing her his left hand. Feeling the swollen hand, she said, “By the gods your flesh is cold Julius the younger, nothing seems broken but these splinters will have to go.”

“Indeed,” a frowning Jesus replied.

Pulling splinters up to an inch long from his hand with tweezers, a shocked Electra remarked as Jesus looked on impassively, “Your threshold for pain is the highest I’ve ever seen in my life.”

His hand hurt, yes, not from splinters being pulled from his flesh, but because of what they had been made of. After she removed the last of them, Jesus said, "Thank you Electra, my hand feels much better now."

"Then you must be dead – if I did what you did my hand would still hurt like hell," she retorted.

His hand did hurt like hell, but there was nothing Electra could do about it, so Jesus simply told her it felt better.

"Is there anything else you need?" Electra asked, moving graying hair from her face.

"No, thank you Electra, get some sleep," said Joseph, reaching for the bottle.

"Stay off the wine till the skin knits!" Electra barked, grabbing the bottle.

"You should listen to her, she knows what she's doing," said Jesus, Electra handing the bottle to him.

"Yeah," replied Joseph, looking to the wound on his arm. Her work finished, Electra headed to her quarters, leaving Jesus, his consort, Joseph and Ganymede in the kitchen.

"What happened?" asked Ganymede as the Magdalene sat quietly, nursing a glass of wine.

"Robbers came by so we killed them," said Jesus.

"By yourselves?"

"It wasn't easy, but yes, and never say anything about it to anyone outside of this farm."

"Of course, how did you do it?"

"My father's good with blades, and I know how to use a sword as well," said Jesus, hoping Ganymede wouldn't notice the lack of bloodstains in the house.

"I can use the gladius, my former master taught me," said Ganymede.

"You can?"

"Yes, and I'm very sorry I wasn't here to assist in defending our home," Ganymede replied, forgetting for a moment that he was only a slave.

"No matter, you were trapped in your quarters," said Jesus, pleased at his loyalty.

"They blocked the door with logs and a boulder. I had to break through a wall to get out."

"Oh," said Jesus, pouring wine.

"I guess we have repair work to do over the next few days," Joseph observed, rising from the table, wincing from his wound as the wine wore off.

"You all right dad?" asked Jesus.

"Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow, I'm going to bed," his exhausted father answered, heading for the hall.

"Good night father."

“Yeah,” said Joseph, closing the bedroom door.

About an hour left before dawn, the Magdalene retired to her room, leaving Jesus and Ganymede in the kitchen.

“Well, that takes care of that,” said a sighing Jesus, looking to his swelling hand.

“Takes care of what?” asked Ganymede.

“The robbers and such.”

“Incidentally, what do you want me to do with their horses?”

“Take them to the stable before you retire.”

“Shall I stable them with our horses?”

“No, put them in the corral, we’ll figure out what to do with them tomorrow.”

“Very well,” said Ganymede, rising from the table.

“Would you care for wine before you go?” asked Jesus, pouring a goblet for him, looking to finish the open bottle.

“Sure,” Ganymede replied, returning to his seat.

“You said you can use a sword?” asked Jesus, looking to the slave.

“Yes, but obviously not as good as you,” said an envious Ganymede.

“I learned from Kushan warriors, would you like to learn their ways from me?” asked Jesus, thinking it would be good to have someone else around who could guard the family in his absence.

“Very much so,” said Ganymede, downing his goblet, realizing there was far more to the placid philosopher than met the eye.

“Once my hand recovers, we’ll arrange for you to come by in the evenings and I’ll show you the finer points.”

“I’d like that very much master Julius,” said Ganymede, jumping at the chance to learn more of the sword.

“Julius will do.”

“Well, I must deal with the horses, and have a lot of work to do tomorrow,” Ganymede observed, rising from his seat, looking to the broken door and frame.

“I have to get sleep too,” said Jesus as Ganymede left.

Retiring to his room, a wounded Jesus settled into well-deserved slumber. He awoke the next evening in agony, his left hand and lower arm was hurting and had swollen so badly that he could barely move his fingers.

“Are you all right?” asked Mary, rising from her slumber.

"No," said Jesus, sitting on the side of the bed, "My hand looks as if it's grown to twice its size and it's torture for me to move it."

"What do you think it is?" the Magdalene asked, looking to his swollen hand.

"It took a while to figure it out, but I believe I know what it is," Jesus replied, flexing his hand with difficulty.

"What?"

"The beam I punched through last night was made of oak."

"Meaning?"

"Legend has it vampires can be destroyed with an oak stake through the heart. There seems to be something in the wood of oaks that affects us; I recall some months ago when I stripped bark from oak logs for the tannery, my hands itched for days."

"I remember," said Mary, "What you're saying is oak must be poison to us."

"It seems so," Jesus replied, adding as it dawned on him, "The shoes in the cave, I know why they made my feet red, they were tanned with oak bark, not urine."

"But I wear leather shoes too."

"Perhaps some of us are more sensitive to oak, or the shoes you have were tanned with urine."

"I have eight pair, I doubt all were tanned the same way."

"Then, evidently, some of us are more sensitive to oak than others," said Jesus, looking at his swollen left hand.

"Do you think you'll die?"

"I'm already dead," answered a weakly smiling Jesus, "If you mean do I think this will destroy me no, but I don't think I'll be feeling very well for a while."

"Oh," said the Magdalene, worried, wondering if only wearing oak tanned shoes should make his feet red, what would happen with oak splinters having pierced his hand? Rising from the bed, a pain-wracked Jesus walked to the kitchen, greeted by Ruth as he sat at the table, forcing a smile to her while clumsily opening a bottle of wine with his right.

"What happened to your hand master Julius?" asked Ruth, preparing a meal for his mother, remembering nothing from the previous evening.

"You don't recall the cutthroats?" Jesus asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"Mistress Maria mentioned thieves happened by last night, when I saw master Julius the elder and Ganymede replacing the windows and fixing the door."

"Yes, I struck one hard on the face, hurting my hand in doing so."

"Have you seen Electra about it?"

"She said I bruised it, you don't remember anything about last night?" asked Jesus, making

certain his hypnotic powers had done their job.

“Your father said one of them hit me and knocked me out.”

“That explains it,” said Jesus while the Magdalene entered the kitchen. “Ruth was knocked unconscious by a bandit last night.”

“Indeed,” Mary replied, looking to her convalescing consort, seating herself beside him. Ruth left the kitchen for his mother’s bedroom. Joseph headed in from the porch, his left arm in a sling. He greeted the couple, joining them at the table.

“The door and windows are fixed, Ganymede did most of the work,” said a tired Joseph.

“If this shit keeps up we’re going to have to stock at least a dozen extra windows to replace the ones we break,” Jesus retorted, looking at his swollen hand in disgust.

His father looked to Mary, tightening his lips. Mary shrugged, raising hands in a manner signifying she didn’t know what to say. Changing the subject, Joseph said after a long exhale, “You should see their horses son. Huge, strong, muscular animals and swift for their size. Ganymede said he’s never seen such beasts, and believes they may be related to cavalry horses, but are much bigger, they strike me more as draft animals.”

“They’re Scythian war horses,” Jesus replied, “I’ve seen them before, they have twice the strength of an Arabian.”

“Can they be used to plow fields?” Joseph asked, now much more comfortable as a farmer.

“Years ago I saw Scythian farmers of the steppes using them in that fashion.”

“Then they’ll come in handy for working the farm,” said Joseph.

“Once I feel better, I’ll see Gavinal and Marcus about getting proper titles for them,” Jesus replied, determined to keep up legal appearances.

“How will you do that?”

“It’s easy, I’ll apply for a claim to title as abandoned property, stating they appeared on our farm one evening. That’ll work, considering their owners are no longer with us,” Jesus answered with a weak smile.

“That’s true.”

Jesus nodded and asked, “How’s your arm?”

“It hurts, but not as much as before. How’s your hand?”

“Fair, I imagine it will take a few days for me to recover.”

“He punched through an oak beam last night and figured out that oak is poisonous to us,” Mary explained.

“Really?” asked Joseph, “I remember reading that a wooden stake through the heart was deadly to those like you, but I never knew why.”

“It’s not so much a wooden stake through the heart is deadly, it seems only an oak stake

through the heart is," said Jesus, "Two years ago Judas Iscariot plunged a dagger into my heart and it didn't bother me at all."

"He did?" asked Joseph.

"Yes."

"That's why you killed him?"

"No, I killed him because he betrayed me."

"I don't blame you, I would have killed him for that."

"Spoken like a true Roman," a smiling Jesus replied, pouring glasses of wine with his right.

* * *

After a few days of painful convalescing Jesus recovered, his hand returning to its usual appearance. His father's arm was healing, thankfully with no trace of infection due to the skillful care of Electra, who applied a poultice of mosses and herbs to the wound, changing the dressing every day. Not needing his sling after the fifth day, Joseph resumed light duties around the farm, accompanied by Brutus the overseer. Having plenty of swords to practice with thanks to the thieves, a recovered Jesus walked out one early evening with a pair of oil soaked torches, hanging them from support fixtures on the porch pillars. Attired in a light Roman tunic, he headed to the slave quarters and asked Ganymede if he still wanted to engage in innocent swordplay.

"Definitely," said Ganymede, "Has your hand recovered sufficiently?"

"Yes, thank you for asking, if you like we can start this evening."

"By all means, let's do," Ganymede replied, stepping out into the warm evening. They arrived in front of the house, where Joseph and the Magdalene were relaxing on the porch.

"Please fetch a pair of swords for me father," said Jesus.

"Why?" asked Joseph.

"I'm going to teach Ganymede some of the finer points of sword fighting tonight."

"Mind if we watch?"

"Not at all," replied Jesus.

"Its getting rather dark isn't it Julius, how will we see each other?" asked Ganymede.

"Please hand me the lantern Maria," said Jesus, pointing to a lit lamp on a table. Using it to light the torches, the area in front of the porch was illuminated brilliantly within seconds.

"How's that?" asked Jesus.

"It'll do," said Ganymede.

Returning with the swords, Joseph handed them to Jesus. Taking a fine gilded sword, he tossed a lesser weapon to Ganymede, who deftly caught it with his right.

“What do we do now?” asked Ganymede.

“Attack me,” Jesus replied, raising his sword in the torchlight.

“You’re a lefty,” said Ganymede, noting that Jesus was holding the sword in his left hand.

“Yes, attack me.”

“Are you sure?” asked Ganymede, wondering if his master’s skill would be enough to protect him.

“I’m certain that you present no problem for me, and I will be more than careful when it comes to defending myself.”

“You will be careful with me,” said Ganymede, holding his sword by his side.

“Exactly,” replied Jesus.

Raising the sword above his head, Ganymede came for Jesus, who easily deflected the expected attack, both men responding fiercely, the mock battle lasting more than twenty minutes.

“You’re pretty good,” a smiling Jesus declared, easily fending off a sweating Ganymede’s hacking attack.

“He certainly is,” said Joseph, the Magdalene cheering them on.

Sidestepping the slave, Jesus disarmed him with one stroke, Ganymede’s sword falling from his hand and sticking in the earth. Looking to the slave, he said, “Your approach is fine, but your style is all wrong.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ganymede, out of breath.

“You fight like a marauding gladiator, lots of force and power, but no real direction in your attack.”

“My former master fought as a professional gladiator when he was young,” replied a panting, thirty-five year old Ganymede.

“That explains it,” said Jesus, “To be an efficient swordsman you need not only power and strength, but also grace, along with the ability to foresee what your opponent intends to do.”

“How?”

“That’s for tomorrow evening’s lesson, if you wish to continue fencing with me.”

“I intend to,” Ganymede answered, picking up his sword, with Jesus, not having broken a sweat, walking to the porch. He took a seat, joining his father and the Magdalene. “Here’s your sword,” the slave added, offering the weapon by the handle.

“It’s your sword now,” said Jesus, “Would you care for wine before you go?”

“Please,” Ganymede replied, stepping to the porch and leaning his sword against the rail.

“Have a seat Ganymede,” said Joseph, pointing a chair next to he and the Magdalene.

The slave took a seat, Jesus pouring and handing him a crystal goblet of wine.

“Thank you,” said Ganymede, taking the goblet and drinking deeply from it.

“This man has great potential as a swordsman, what do you think?” asked Jesus, looking to his father.

“I’ll say, it’s too damn bad we didn’t have him here a week ago.”

“We did father, we just didn’t know Ganymede was good with a sword.”

“That’s what I meant,” retorted Joseph, annoyed at his know-it-all son.

“You learned how to fight with swords in uh – ” said Ganymede, not recalling the name of the country.

“Kush,” said Jesus, “I learned only the finer points there, my father uses the gladius and taught me the fundamentals as a child.”

“When you lived in Gaul.”

“Yes,” Jesus lied, recalling blissful summer days in Nazareth, his father showing him and younger brother James how to throw knives and fight with swords.

Ganymede sat silent, drinking another goblet of undiluted wine on the moonlit evening. The Magdalene walked into the house, joining Mary and Ruth in the bedroom with Julian, knowing Jesus would soon grow hungry for blood and call her to his side.

Later, Ganymede asked, “I was wondering sirs, why do you treat us as if we are equals?”

“What do you mean?” asked Jesus, looking to the slave.

“I and my fellows have talked of this, and agree that you and your father are the kindest, wisest and most decent Roman gentlemen we have ever met.”

“Thank you kind Ganymede,” an embarrassed Jesus replied, answering for he and his father. “Verily I say, as I told you and Icarus: you may be slaves but are people also; kindness to one’s slaves brings the reward of good service and fine companionship on a beautiful night like this.”

Ganymede smiled. “You’re a remarkable man Julius the younger, Cyril has said you and your family are very special people.”

“How is Cyril, I haven’t seen him for a week or so.”

“Quite well, he’s making preparations for teaching Julian, for when he grows older.”

“Excuse me, I’m heading in to check on your mother and brother,” said Joseph, rising from a chair after finishing his wine.

“Yes father,” Jesus replied, turning to Ganymede, “Cyril will be a fine teacher for my brother, please send him my thanks for his concern for Julian’s future.”

“Why not tell him yourself?” asked Ganymede, “He’s been wondering how you were since your injury and would very much like to see you.”

“Tell him I’ll drop by early tomorrow evening,” said Jesus, pouring wine.

Languishing on the porch for another hour, a drunken Ganymede clumsily made his way to the slave quarters, collapsing hard on his cot, Cyril looking up from a scroll and smiling.

Later, Jesus and consort strolled out for their evening meal, finding sustenance on the Via Tiberius Romanus highway, some miles west of Tibernum. Three aurei were in the take, along with a cache of denarii and lesser coins, adding more loot to their kitty. Dropping the pouch of money on a nightstand, they retired to slumber shortly before dawn.

Chapter Eight: Cyril's Revelation

Waking shortly after sunset, Jesus made a point of visiting Cyril, greeting him in the common area of the slave quarters while Penelope was serving a meal for the group.

"Hello Cyril," said Jesus as Icarus let him in.

"Greetings Julius the younger," Cyril replied, looking up from a scroll of Diogenes, the cynic of Sinope, Penelope handing him a bowl of warm venison stew.

"Please eat it before it gets cold," said Penelope, the teacher known to leave a bowl sitting for hours while he continued reading, at times asleep in the wee hours of the morning, food still uneaten, sitting beside him on a low table.

"Thank you Penelope, I will," Cyril replied, rolling up the scroll.

"Would you care for some Julius the younger?" Penelope asked.

"Thank you just the same, I've already eaten," Jesus lied, hoping his attentive slave would not be offended by the reply.

"Maybe next time," Penelope replied, handing a bowl to Brutus.

"So, I've heard you're preparing lessons for my brother Julian," said Jesus, taking a seat beside the elderly slave.

"One can never start the education of a child too early," Cyril answered, starting on his light dinner, "In these modern times, the young Roman must be quickly taught in the ways of the world."

"Of course, and how are you this fine evening?"

"Quite well thank you. After I finish this meal, would you care to join me in discussing the sciences, philosophy, or whatever comes to mind?"

"For a while, certainly."

"I think we should walk to the river for our discussion," said Cyril, sopping up the remainder of the stew with bread.

"Why?"

"There is a matter of importance that I must discuss with you privately," Cyril replied, rising slowly from his chair and handing the emptied bowl to Penelope.

"All right," said Jesus, wondering what was of such importance that it must be discussed in private. They headed to the beach, jutting out to a huge boulder on the swiftly flowing upper Euphrates. Cyril, his back stiff due to advancing arthritis, sat on a fallen log with a wince, looking to the starlit sky.

"I have been a slave since I was eleven," Cyril began, recalling not the best of childhoods.

"And?" asked Jesus, sitting on the beach and looking to the teacher.

“My first master intended me to be a scribe, but my teacher, the slave Hephaestos, stated I had an aptitude for more cerebral things.”

“That’s more than obvious,” said Jesus, agreeing with the long dead mentor.

“So they trained me as a teacher.”

“No better choice could have been made.”

“You think so?”

“Of course, I wish I’d been given a teacher as brilliant as you.”

“Thank you,” said Cyril, “Julius, I have never enjoyed discussions more with anyone than I have with you. You have incredible insight, like Socrates or Plato had; it has been an honor to have met a man such as you.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning there is much more to you than meets the eye. There are things you must hide from people, but can be detected by those like myself.”

“I don’t understand,” said Jesus, arching eyebrows in confusion.

“I think you do,” Cyril replied, turning to Jesus.

“What are you getting at?”

“You and your woman Maria are not what you seem to be; appearances can be most deceiving,” said Cyril, looking Jesus in the eyes.

“Don’t talk to me in riddles, what do you mean?” asked Jesus, wishing his undead heart could beat strongly at least one more time.

“The historian Herodotus of Halicarnassus wrote of it long ago, at the time of the Athenian statesman Pericles. Thucydides did as well, they helped defend the Athenians during the first Peloponnesian war, and you are one of them.”

“What is that?” Jesus asked, fearing the worst.

“You are a vampire,” said Cyril, “So is Maria, your mortal parents know this as well.”

Jesus Christ was taken back. Vampiric instinct told him he should kill Cyril, for perceiving his undead nature, but he fought off the compulsion, allowing the teacher to continue. “How did you discern that sir?” he asked, looking intently to the slave.

“I suspected you from the time you brought us to this farm, the pale complexions of you and Maria, your cool hands, moving about only at night, your heightened senses coupled with the precise movements of a predator: all are the qualities of a vampire.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Not to most people.”

“What’s so different about you?”

“I am incapable of being entranced,” said Cyril, “I recall you coming to our quarters shortly after you purchased us, telling us you were a late sleeping philosopher and thinker. I feigned entrancement and knew, according to Herodotus, that you were a blood sucking vampire.”

“So you can’t be hypnotized; why didn’t you confront me about this earlier?”

“I needed time to think, to size you up, and in time found you are a good man, even as a vampire.”

“But I was sure all of you – ”

“I have lived a long time, and with age not only comes wisdom, but cunning, assuring my survival. Do you have any idea how old I am, even though I am mortal, unlike you?”

“You’re fifty or so; my father’s age.”

“Wrong, I am nearly seventy.”

“I’ve seen you work unfettered in the fields, and Electra – a man your age – ”

“Electra is fifty-four and seems to go for older men,” said Cyril, “Aside from a touch of arthritis, I am more than capable of manual labor sir. Oh yes, she told me of the splinters she pulled from your hand and the swelling that ensued, they were made of oak, were they not?”

“You know.”

“Yes, you are a vampire, so is the pretty younger woman calling herself Maria.”

“Well, though you’re aware of our true natures, I feel you are no threat to us.”

“Not at all, I actually admire those such as you, especially yourself.”

“Why?”

“You are a brilliant man,” Cyril replied, looking down and flicking a centipede from the log.

“Mary – Maria to you, is not like myself,” said Jesus, “Not that she is unintelligent, but she’s very impulsive and does not limit herself to taking only those deserving.”

“And you do?” Cyril asked, unaware that Jesus had strict specifications when it came to his victims.

“I believe only those deserving of such a fate should be taken by a vampire; that is, evil people, criminals, thieves and such.”

“Interesting,” said Cyril, looking to Jesus, impressed by the words he was hearing, uttered by a vampire, a creature he had read of in the past, not usually known for mercy or decency, let alone kindness, virtues of which Jesus had in abundance.

“Maria does not have the same beliefs, you could almost say she’s amoral when it comes to that.”

“I understand, and she is obviously more in touch with her nature than you are,” said Cyril with a slight smile.

“She is?” asked Jesus, digging the heel of a shoe into the sand.

“Yes, I learned from the writings of Herodotus.”

“What else do you know about us?” asked Jesus, looking to the slave, sitting on a log by the riverbank, unafraid, not unlike Socrates.

“I know your woman’s true name is Mary Magdalene, and that your name is Jesus of Nazareth. Further, you are not Roman citizens, nor even Greek Etruscans from Gaul, but are actually Jews from Judea.”

“From when I entranced the others at the slave quarters; incidentally, Mary is half Jewish and half Benjaminite, and I’m not Jewish at all, I’m a full-blooded Levite,” said Jesus, thinking of the evening when he had entranced them.

“You and yours hail from Judea, what’s the difference?” asked Cyril, not familiar with the twelve tribes of Israel.

“Not much, evidently,” said a sighing Jesus, finally realizing why Gentiles referred to his kind as Jews and nothing more, Judea was the key, inhabitants of that land referred to by Romans and others as ‘Jews’.

“No matter, I like you just the same.”

“Do the others know?”

“No, and I have no intention of making them aware.”

“Why are you telling me this?” asked an incredulous Jesus, staring at the aged slave.

“Above all Julius, like you I value truth and honesty. Due to your undead nature, you must masquerade as you do to survive in a world that despises you and all your kind. I truly think there is nothing wrong in doing that, and were I in your place I would do the same.”

“You could have said nothing and avoided this situation; I could have killed you for your revelations, why did you do so, risking death?”

“After much observation I deduced rightly that you would not kill me, and you are much too good of a man to lie to. Further, deceitful actions such as that are immoral in my opinion,” said Cyril, his personal morality binding on no others than himself.

“I see, do you want anything for your continued silence?” asked Jesus, knowing he could kill him if he wished, but realizing it would be terribly wrong to kill a man such as Cyril.

“What do you mean?” asked Cyril, insulted, looking to Jesus with a frown.

“Do you want freedom, or money, I’m very wealthy and can give you anything you wish,” said Jesus, figuring the slave had an angle.

“Freedom is a subjective term at best, and I do not need money as I am a slave, dependant on you and yours for my needs.”

“I can also give – ”

“You cannot give me immortality because I do not want it,” Cyril retorted, having already deduced what Jesus was going to offer next, “At my advanced age, I am perfectly content with

my station in life. Perhaps in the distant past such offers would have made a difference, but not now. Further, if I live long enough, I look forward to teaching another child, your brother Julian. No, there is nothing I want from you, excepting for while you are here, we may enjoy more enlightening conversations together.”

“You want nothing?”

“No, excepting for your continued friendship,” said Cyril, looking to Jesus with a resolved expression revealing that he was telling the truth.

“You know we’ll be moving on?” Jesus asked, picking up on the subtle nuances of his replies.

“All vampires do, they have to according to Herodotus and Thucydides. It is written that it is your nature to behave in such a fashion.”

“I must look at this scroll of Herodotus and the one of Thucydides. My father said he read Herodotus’ treatise on legends, but he no longer has the scroll.”

“I have a copy of Herodotus. You purchased it from that Calicles fellow a while back, a coarse rogue he is, but the world must have rogues for those who are not to recognize them as such. Thucydides’ writings are much harder to obtain, I have not read of him since I was in my thirties.”

Jesus smiled at the pronouncement and asked, “May I read the scroll?”

“Why not, you bought it, and may study from the copy if you like, but why, even with the limitations you place on yourself, you are apparently quite a successful vampire as it is.”

“You may find this odd friend, but I’ve always tried to follow a proper moral outlook regarding the manner in which I conduct myself.”

“A proper moral outlook? All moralities are subjective determinations, you know that,” said Cyril, staring at the night sky, the elderly teacher more of a cynic than he would ever admit.

“True, perhaps I should call it self-discipline,” Jesus replied.

“A much better description.”

Both sat quietly for a while, listening to the flowing Euphrates, other noises from animals and insects adding their voices to the clear night. “Would you like to peruse the scroll tonight?” the teacher asked, breaking the silence.

“Not tonight, perhaps we can review it together later. I do need to make myself familiar with the finer points,” said Jesus. “So, you intend to stay on with us?”

“Of course, I have no other choice available, and truly enjoy the company of you and yours, even if you and Maria are vampires. I am an old man Julius, where would I go if I agreed to your generous offer?” Cyril asked, using the names Jesus and Mary now preferred.

“I understand. I’ll inform Maria that you are aware of us but are no threat, this will save you from possible harm by her.”

“What will that accomplish? If she is vicious like you say, as a vampire nothing can stop her, excepting for an oak stake to the heart, and I am too damn old for that.”

“I can stop her easily, I’m her master.”

“So you are the one who made her a vampire.”

“Yes,” said Jesus, placing a hand on the old man’s arm, “Always remember my friend, you have nothing to fear from us.”

“That is good to know,” Cyril replied, “So, who is the vampire that brought you to the realm of the undead?”

Jesus paused a moment. “I don’t know, Cyril.”

“You do not know - how?” asked Cyril, “All vampires have masters!”

“I was crucified a few years ago in Jerusalem; when I awoke in my grave I had become a vampire.”

“You were crucified; of what crime were you guilty?”

“Nothing in my opinion, it’s a long story. In short, the Hebrew Pharisees there convinced the Judean procurator, a man called Pontius Pilate, that I was guilty of the crime of blasphemy against the god Yahweh.”

“Yahweh, I have never heard of him,” said Cyril, raising an eyebrow at the unusual name.

“Neither has anyone else outside of Judea.”

“That is unfortunate, all wise men know the gods are not real, they simply exist to explain the vicissitudes of life to those who are not wise.”

“Definitely,” Jesus replied, realizing Cyril’s words rang bitterly true.

“It must bother you greatly that you were not guilty of the crime you were convicted of,” said Cyril, looking to Jesus.

“You believe me when I say I was not guilty of blasphemy?”

“Of course, there are no gods, at least none we can perceive as simple men. How can one be guilty of blaspheming that which does not exist?” asked Cyril, arching eyebrows.

“You’re an atheist.”

“All wise men are,” replied Cyril plainly, but not arrogantly, the learned teacher not knowing if such a being as God existed.

“I see,” said Jesus, looking to the Euphrates.

“And my statement does not mean that there is not the possibility of an entity or deity who may have created our existence. It simply means that God, if such a being exists at all, is unknowable and unreachable for us, something far beyond the realm of this reality.”

“Very, very true.”

“I take it from your reply that you did not feel that way in the past.”

“No, but I do now.”

“Such admissions are the mark of true wisdom.”

“Wisdom you say, had I been wise I would have listened to my father and wouldn't have been murdered in Judea by my fellows for preaching about God,” spat a bitter Jesus.

“What did he have to say about it?”

“He said for years that I was wasting my time trying to change people's attitudes toward each other and toward God, if such a being exists.”

“I am sorry to say you were wasting your time, and that your father was right regarding that. Attempting to reason with people on such matters is bound to fail, as most individuals are irrational beings, especially when it comes to religion,” said Cyril, leaning back on the log.

“What do you mean?”

“Most people are like sheep, nothing more. They have their beliefs, taught to them by their parents, and if someone comes along and tells them differently, they are bound to resent, and perhaps even hate the one who contradicts what they have come to believe.”

“I understand that now,” Jesus replied, looking to the starlit sky.

“Proving the gift of wisdom comes only with age and experience Julius.”

“Very true, especially for me,” said a sighing Jesus, thinking back to his short-lived ministry in Judea.

“Especially for anyone who is wise,” Cyril replied, stroking his beard.

Jesus, relaxing, changed the subject. “So Cyril, the others say you do not drink wine.”

“I never touch it. Wine does not taste good to me, so I will not drink it.”

“An honest man, many of those who do not like it drink wine to fit in with their peers, Diogenes would have admired you,” said Jesus, he and the teacher rising and heading to the slave house.

“Diogenes searched for an honest man and never found one in all his travels.”

“I have found one in you friend.”

“Evidently, so have I, in you,” Cyril replied while they walked along.

Arriving at the slave quarters, Jesus offered his hand. “I'll see you in a few evenings Cyril, and we'll peruse your scroll of Herodotus.”

“I shall look forward to it,” said Cyril, shaking hands with the vampiric Christ.

* * *

Later, Jesus met Ganymede for his fencing lesson, on this evening showing him the fundamentals of fancy sword fighting. Icarus and Brutus joined as spectators, drinking strong wine with Joseph, watching from the porch. The slave learning the moves quickly, while relaxing on the porch Jesus told his father he wouldn't be surprised if Ganymede became as skilled as he was within three months.

“He’ll never be as good as you are,” said Joseph, having watched him play with the slave like a cat with a mouse.

Near midnight, Jesus and Mary walked into the cool night and transformed, heading south in search of dinner. Finding their quarry near Daphinos, they sated their hunger with warm human blood, filled their pockets with cold silver denarii and flew back to Tibernum near three, alighting and transforming on the cliffs overlooking the farm. Jesus sat down, dangling legs over the cliff, leaned back, and stared at the clear night sky.

“Have you enjoyed the evening, my woman?” asked Jesus.

“Why do you ask?” she inquired with a satisfied yawn, laying her head on his chest.

“I was just wondering, and have interesting news to tell you,” said Jesus, staring at the belt of Orion.

“What news?”

“Well, Cyril knows we’re vampires,” Jesus replied, figuring the direct approach would be the best.

“What?”

“The teacher Cyril knows that we are vampires.”

“How?” asked Mary, sitting up.

“He can’t be entranced, he’s known about us all along.”

“We’ll have to kill him then, I’ll do it,” said Mary, rising.

“There’s no need, why do you think killing will solve problems?” asked Jesus, holding her arm.

“Because killing does solve problems.”

“Sometimes yes, but Cyril’s no threat to us – you will not harm him,” Jesus intoned, his accent returning as he finished the sentence.

The Magdalene sighed and nodded. Looking to him, she smirked in disgust. “So, why can’t I kill Cyril?” she asked, lying down and resting her head on an arm.

“Because he’s an honest man, he has no intention of betraying us and will be the teacher of my brother.”

“How do you know?”

“The same way that I knew Decius would not betray us in Jerusalem.”

“So, what else does he know?”

“He knows that we’re not Romans, and that you are a Jew-Benjaminite and I am a Levite.”

“Terrific,” said Mary, “Why did he tell you all this?”

“I suppose he wanted to get it out in the open. It must have been bothering him, he also has a scroll of Herodotus, the treatise on legends.”

“So?”

“So Herodotus wrote of vampires over four hundred years ago, and what he has to say may be of use to us.”

“True, do the other slaves know?”

“No, and I’d like you to join me one evening when I converse with Cyril.”

“Why?”

“So you can see for yourself that he’s no threat and perhaps learn something from him.”

“Okay,” said the Magdalene, still not convinced that Cyril was trustworthy, but having to defer to Jesus, her master. Transforming near dawn and flying down the cliff, they alighted and returned to human form on the porch. As it was late, they walked into the darkened house, retiring to their room for the day.

* * *

Joseph woke early; feeling mostly recovered almost a week and a half after their ordeal with the thieves. The wound was still a little tender but had healed over, and soon even the tenderness would disappear, leaving only a scar. Stepping out to greet the new day at a little after seven, he saw Ganymede was tending the animals, with Icarus busy firing up his forge. Centurion Caius Felix had sent a junior officer to the Chrysippus farm the day before, requesting an order of a dozen hardened spearheads and two sets of iron horseshoes for the garrison. Working with wrought iron stock purchased from Calicles, Icarus had begun shaping a pair of spearheads with a hammer. Electra and Penelope were about, tending chores, presently working by the smokehouse.

Overseer Brutus reported to Joseph a short time later and said, “We have a problem Julius the elder, over by the meat storage shed.”

“What problem?”

“Under the eave at the rear of the shed is a hornet’s nest, papyrus wasps,” Brutus answered, “Electra discovered it this morning.”

“That is a problem,” said Joseph.

“Yes, smoke doesn’t work on them as with bees and they’ll attack at the slightest disturbance.”

“What do you recommend we do?”

“That we wait till sundown, carefully detach and drop the nest into a bucket of olive oil or water.”

“Which is better?”

“Olive oil, you submerge the nest in it and it kills the wasps.”

“Really.”

“Yes, afterward you burn the nest, for it’s said more wasps can come from the papyrus,” Brutus replied, no one at the time truly understanding how insects reproduced.

“I’ve heard that too.”

“After the wasps are killed you can use the oil for lamp fuel, or strain it and use it for cooking.”

“Have Ganymede place a barrel of oil at the rear of the shed, my son’s good at dealing with things like wasps and other vermin. He’ll assist you this evening, if you don’t mind helping him.”

“Not at all sir, I’ve dealt with bees and wasps many times,” said Brutus, parting from Joseph to check on the crops.

Five fields were cleared and planted. Thankfully, Joseph had recently signed a contract with Gavinal, stating that the garrison would be supplied exclusively with meat, grain and vegetables from the Chrysippus farm. Trader Callicles had also mentioned interest in grain, assuring that any surplus would find a buyer. Even then, if the farm ever reached full capacity, Joseph realized disposing of any further surplus would become a problem. As it was, the arable land was perhaps ten percent planted, and with the small amount of slaves he had, planting more would be impossible. Spending most of the day walking about the farm and talking with the slaves, Joseph decided to discuss the idea of expansion, if any was needed, with Jesus after sundown. At dusk the vampiric Christ opened eyes and rose in their darkened room, walking to the kitchen and pouring a goblet of wine.

“Good evening son,” said Joseph, walking in from the porch, having heard his stirrings.

“Good evening father,” Jesus replied with a respectful nod, pouring a goblet for him while he sat down.

“I need to talk to you a little later about the farm’s production, and Brutus told me this morning that there’s a hornet’s nest on the back eave of the cured meat shed. Can you handle that?” Joseph asked, taking a deep drink from his goblet.

“Easily,” Jesus answered, rising from the table, “I’ll do it immediately.”

“No son, Brutus wants to help you, he should be by shortly,” said Joseph, sitting down the goblet and motioning for him to return to his seat.

“All right, but I have to fence with Ganymede later, and there is a matter of some importance I wish to tell you of.”

“Anything serious?”

“Not really, but I believe you’ll find it interesting.”

“Tell me.”

“Later,” said Jesus, a knock coming on the door.

“That’s him.”

“Greetings Brutus,” said Jesus while opening the door, “My father told me of the wasps, would you care for wine before we deal with them?”

“Certainly,” Brutus answered, taking a filled goblet and downing it quickly. Later, he and the slave, carrying torches, walked to the shed, Jesus noting the nest and oil barrel beneath.

“We’re going to drown them in oil?” asked Jesus, carefully standing a ladder next to the nest.

“It’s the best way.”

“Right,” said Jesus, ascending the ladder.

“Be careful Julius.”

“No problem, just have the barrel ready,” Jesus replied, carefully snapping the nest from the eve, holding it motionless while he descended. He plunged the nest in the oil and held it down with a stick. Both watched angry wasps pour from the nest, only to be engulfed in oil, drowning in the thick liquid.

“I’ve never seen anyone do that without getting stung at least once!” exclaimed Brutus.

“It was nothing, I just have steady hands,” Jesus replied, leaving the nest to soak in the oil for a time.

“I’ve always been stung whenever I did it, thanks for the help.”

“Let’s burn it,” said Jesus, pulling the nest from the barrel and tossing it to the ground, Brutus lighting it with a torch. Wiping his oily hands on a rag, Jesus ordered, “Please have the women strain the oil tomorrow and have Ganymede return the barrel to the cellar.”

“Right,” said Brutus as Jesus walked to the house with his torch, placing it in the fixture on the porch post. Ganymede had arrived, sitting in the kitchen drinking wine with his father and the Magdalene.

“Did you deal with the hornets?” Joseph asked from his repose next to the hearth.

“Yes, and I was thinking, we should set up an apiary, perhaps at the edge of the south woods.”

“What’s that?” asked Joseph, unfamiliar with the terminology.

“The husbandry of bees.”

“Oh yes, I’ve heard of that, one keeps them in a hive for honey, correct?”

“Exactly, I’ll ask Brutus if he’s familiar with beekeeping,” said Jesus, rubbing his stubbled chin.

“He seems familiar with everything else, I’d imagine he knows about that too,” replied Joseph, grabbing a bottle, refilling he and Ganymede’s goblets.

“Don’t drink too much wine Ganymede, or we won’t be able to fight tonight,” said Jesus.

“Come on son, he’s only having a glass of wine.”

Finishing his goblet, Ganymede walked from the house carrying his sword, followed by Jesus carrying his. Heading to the porch, Joseph and the Magdalene were joined by slaves Icarus and Brutus, who had come by to enjoy the mock battle.

“Defend yourself,” said Jesus, coming for him this time while Ganymede raised his sword. Disarming him in seconds, Ganymede looked to Jesus and frowned.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get this,” he scoffed, pulling his sword from the earth.

“Sure you will, raise your sword and come for me.”

Ganymede did as told, concentrating. He made a very effective attack on Jesus, who easily defended himself, noting that practice was quickly improving the slave’s skills. Showing the slave some of his personal tricks, they practiced for nearly an hour, an exhausted Ganymede finally asking Jesus to relent.

“Certainly Ganymede, your skills are already improving,” Jesus replied, while Joseph, Mary, Icarus and Brutus applauded both men. Walking to the kitchen, Jesus joined the others in a goblet of wine, the slaves retiring to their quarters near ten o’clock.

Joseph was growing tired but still wanted to talk regarding the farm, Mary remarking, “It’s time to eat Jesus.”

“Can I converse with my father first?”

“Of course,” Mary replied, relaxing in a chair, “It’s not that I’m starving.”

“That’ll be the day,” said Joseph while Jesus sat down.

“So father, what do you need to discuss?”

“It’s not that important, it’s just that we have such a huge piece of land and it’s a shame we can’t plant more of it. I was thinking about expanding the fields earlier today as a passing thought, but we already have so much with the five fields planted it’s ridiculous. We can barely sell what we have now.”

“Exactly,” said Jesus, “Actually, the farm is producing much more than you may think, even from the fallow fields and woodlands, remember the meat Mary and I take.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Yes, and with the contract you signed with Gavinal we’ll have to employ the slaves to take meat while Mary and I are on vacation.”

“I’ve already spoke to Brutus about that.”

“He’s a hunter?”

“Yes, so is Ganymede.”

“Then we won’t have to worry about running low,” Jesus observed.

Gavinal also spoke about hunting on his property.”

“Yes, he had mentioned that some time before. You know, it’s too bad we don’t live on the Italian peninsula.”

“Why?” asked Joseph, not following his son’s meanderings.

“There the government pays farmers for not growing food, kind of funny really.”

“They do?”

“Yeah, go figure,” said Jesus, not understanding the concept of economic subsidies.

“So, what did you want to speak to me about?” asked Joseph.

“Well father, this may be kind of hard to explain.”

“Oh brother,” said Mary, knowing exactly what Jesus needed to tell his father about – Cyril the teacher.

“Just come out with it son, I’m used to all this.”

“Velly, I mean very well father,” Jesus stammered while Mary giggled, “Cyril knows that Mary and I are vampires.”

“You’re kidding,” said Joseph, “I thought hypnosis fooled them all.”

“So did I, but Cyril’s a very rare type of person, he cannot be entranced.”

“Really,” said Joseph, “That means those like him are immune to the powers of vampires.”

“Exactly, but don’t worry, he’s no threat to us.”

“So son, how did you deduce that?”

“I asked him the same damn thing,” said Mary.

“Cyril’s a good man and has revealed nothing to anyone save me,” Jesus replied, “He’s known of our natures since we bought him and only told me yesterday.”

“Why did he do that, he should have kept his mouth shut,” Joseph retorted.

“He is honest.”

“Oh well, you seem to know what you’re doing regarding these things, so I’m not going to say anything further,” said Joseph, holding up hands.

“Thank you, I wish for Cyril to visit us later to discuss it among ourselves, for he will eventually be teaching Julian.”

“Not a bad idea, if he’s trustworthy,” replied Joseph.

“He is, and he also has a scroll of Herodotus’ legends.”

“He does?” asked Joseph, brightening for a moment.

“It was in the literature that I purchased from Callicles.”

“That should be interesting reading for you two,” said Joseph, his tiredness returning with a vengeance.

“What about you?”

“I’ve read it, it holds no surprises for me.”

“You would like to read it again wouldn’t you?”

“Probably, and I was just thinking, how the hell did Cyril fool you and Mary, aren’t you supposed to be able to sense those things?”

“That’s a good question,” said Jesus, his consort looking to him with a frown.

His father retiring, they walked into the evening, staying close to home, satisfying their hunger with a pair of deer. A determined Jesus rose the next evening just after sundown, walking to the slave quarters while accompanied by Mary, looking to converse and obtain badly needed answers from Cyril.

“Greetings Julius,” said Cyril, looking up from another of his ever-present scrolls.

“Hello Cyril, my wife and I would like to talk with you this evening.”

“Down by the river I suppose,” Cyril replied with a polite smile, rising from his seat, his back not bothering him on this evening.

“Yes,” said Jesus.

Walking from the slave quarters, Cyril observed, “It is going to be a beautiful night, look at the full moon rising.”

“Indeed it is, perfect for hunting,” spat the Magdalene.

“Please be civil to the man,” said Jesus as they approached the riverbank.

“So what are you going to do Mary, suck my blood and throw me in the river?” asked Cyril, stopping and turning to her.

“Jesus Christ, he even knows our real names!”

“I told you that, what’s the problem?”

“He is,” answered Mary, pointing to the Greek teacher with her thumb.

“I assure you, I am not any kind of problem, madam,” said Cyril.

“Famous last words,” Mary retorted, staring at him, fangs baring in her mouth.

“Enough!” exclaimed Jesus, “We’re here to talk with this man, not argue with him.”

“Why bother?”

“Because I said so woman,” said Jesus, invoking his power as her master.

“Shall we sit by the river?” Cyril asked, hoping sounds of moving water would ease the tension.

“Why not,” replied the Magdalene, relenting as they seated themselves on a fallen log at the sandy riverbank.

All were silent for a while, Cyril finally remarking, “So Julius, I imagine you told Maria of our conversation.”

“My father too.”

“I can imagine what Maria said, what did your father have to say?”

“That he would defer to me regarding this situation.”

“Good, what did Mistress Maria say?”

“You don’t want to know,” said the Magdalene.

“She said we should kill you,” Jesus replied.

“I figured that,” said Cyril, looking to the night sky.

“You think you have all the answers don’t you old man?” Mary asked.

“No, I believe I can reason with you, to prove I am not a threat to anyone.”

“He’s telling the truth woman, he’s known about us for over a year and has said nothing.”

A defeated Magdalene sighed. “So Cyril, you know we are vampires and say that you will not betray us, may I ask you why?”

“I have no reason to madam, why should I think of throwing away a pleasing existence on this farm that I enjoy?”

“Because you are a slave.”

“Some are slaves, others are masters, that is the way of the world.”

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“Why should it?”

“It would bother me.”

“Perhaps it would, but you are judging me by your own criterion.”

“I see,” said the Magdalene, floored by his candid responses, “And it doesn’t bother you that we are vampires?”

“Not at all, I honestly do not care what you are, both of you have been truly kind to me and the others, much more than any slave owner I have encountered. I believe that I should return the favor, and genuinely like both of you.”

“Oh,” said Mary, stopped cold, not expecting such a detailed set of answers.

“Further, my job is to assist you and your family running this farm, and to educate Julian when he grows older.”

“I suppose there are a few things you can teach us too,” said Mary.

“Only that which I have learned from the scrolls of Herodotus and Thucydides.”

“Yes, Jesus told me about that.”

“Perhaps you should tell us of the scroll,” said Jesus.

“It would be better if we had it with us, since we do not, I will give you an oral synopsis of what it contains, later we can peruse it together if you like,” Cyril replied.

“Lead on old man,” said Mary.

“Very well, legend has it that your kind are from a very old clan, from thousands upon thousands of years ago, moving about only at night, hailing from northwest of Macedonia.”

“Where’s that?” the Magdalene asked.

“North of Greece, a place called Dacia in Europe,” said Jesus.

Cyril nodded. “Before the first Peloponnesian war began, it is said the Spartans were the first to attempt to destroy the vampires, with oak stakes driven through their hearts while they slept during the day.”

“Why?” asked Jesus.

Cyril paused and replied, “Because, unlike you dear Julius, most vampires are not so choosy, and will take almost any victim crossing their path.”

“I told you,” said the Magdalene, Jesus staring off at the Euphrates.

“Anyway,” continued Cyril, “The vampires took refuge in Athens under a truce with the ruling council under Pericles the statesman. Finding themselves safe from their enemies, Pericles and the vampires convinced the population to attack the city of Sparta over the protests of Socrates and others. In doing so, the Athenians were nearly destroyed in the Spartan counterattack, until the vampires helped save Athens from total destruction.”

“They helped save them?” Jesus asked.

“Yes, under Pericles, who died in a plague that ensued after the beginning of the second war. During the first war he helped the vampires to attack their enemies under cover of night, and they destroyed the Spartan army just south of Athens, leading to the thirty year peace.”

“What happened afterward?” asked an intrigued Magdalene, despite herself.

“Before Pericles died he sent the vampires from Athens, where they went marauding across the Aegean peninsula, always on the move, heading north toward their homeland of Dacia.”

“Is that all?” asked Jesus.

“No, Athens was ultimately defeated at the end of the second war by the Peloponnesian league about 435 years ago, but the city has survived unto the present.”

“No Cyril, I mean is that all the scroll says about vampires?”

“Heavens no Julius, the legend scroll of Herodotus is over nine cubits long, much is in there about vampires that I haven’t told you of.”

“What happened to Athens after the war?” Mary asked.

“After the first war, on the Acropolis the Athenians finished erecting the Parthenon, dedicated to goddess Athena Parthenos, or Minerva of the Romans.”

“I’ve seen it, what does that have to do with the war?” asked Jesus.

“If you will let me finish, on the north portico of the temple is a detailed frieze on the upper wall depicting Athens being saved, with the vampires attacking the Spartan army.”

"I've never seen that," said Jesus, wondering what the depiction looked like.

"Why did they even bother to defend the Athenians?" asked the Magdalene, finding the story difficult to believe.

"Because, evidently, there were vampires then who behaved like Julius does today," Cyril observed, "Further, legend has it that any man who lives in Athens shall never be attacked by a vampire, in their remembrance of the Athenians."

"Are those vampires still around?" asked Mary.

"One would think so as they are basically immortal creatures," replied Cyril, "But vampires, according to Herodotus, are a rare breed, yet very powerful. It is said that only a group of fifty or so defeated the combined armies of the Athenian's enemies."

"That means we may never meet another of our kind," said Jesus.

"Given enough time Julius, perhaps a hundred years, you probably will. It is also said you can instinctively recognize each other when you cross paths."

"Interesting," said Jesus.

"What about oak?" asked Mary.

"It is said in Herodotus and Thucydides' scrolls that vampires can be destroyed with an oak stake to the heart," Cyril replied, "That is all there is in the treatises regarding oak."

"Then the scroll is incomplete, we've found that even being in close contact with anything made of oak can cause us harm," said Mary, opening up to the teacher.

"Indeed, please continue," Cyril replied, looking to Mary, fascinated by the discussion.

"Well, for example, Jesus stripped bark from oak logs for the tannery a while back and his hands itched terribly for days."

"Did they?" asked Cyril, raising eyebrows.

"And unlike me, he can't wear leather shoes tanned with oak bark without them making his feet red and itchy after only a few nights of wear."

"Is that so?" asked Cyril, ruminating on the subject.

"Yes," Mary answered, "I'm sure you saw his swollen hand after he punched through an oak beam a few weeks ago."

"Yes I did. From what I have seen and heard from you, I believe that something invisible contained within oak can cause vampires harm. I find that very interesting, further, it also appears that there are degrees of sensitivity among your kind."

"We deduced that too," Jesus replied, "Also, proving oak, and evidently only oak is harmful to us, I was stabbed in the heart in Jerusalem with a dagger and it didn't bother me at all."

"Judas Iscariot, at the whorehouse," said Mary.

"I imagine that happened after you had become a vampire," Cyril ventured.

“Yes, I don’t think I’d be sitting here if it had happened when I was alive.”

“You have a talent for understatements Julius the younger,” said a chuckling Cyril.

“I’ve said that many times,” the Magdalene remarked, breaking into a relaxed smile.

* * *

Talking into the moonlit night, they conversed about other legends regarding vampires.

“It is written that lower animals instinctively fear vampires and can sense their undead presence,” Cyril related near midnight.

“That’s bullshit,” said Jesus, “Mary and I have rode horses as vampires and have also taken lower animals when there are no suitable people around.”

“I see, and it was written by Thucydides vampires can take lower animals, which would seem to contradict the text of Herodotus. Further, it also seems that running water does not bother you either, which Thucydides spoke of in his treatise.”

“What do you mean?” Mary asked, lying on her side, relaxing on the beach.

“In his scroll it says all vampires fear running water.”

“Why should we?” asked Jesus.

“I have no clue friend, it is what Thucydides wrote.”

“They didn’t seem to know very much about vampires did they?” asked Jesus.

“Perhaps, but they apparently got the main points right, like avoiding the sun, oak stakes, and fire.”

“Quite true,” Jesus replied, “Who was it that wrote of garlic?”

“Thucydides, I take it that garlic does not bother you either.”

“No,” said Jesus, recalling the centurion and party heading to Nazareth in search of him.

“How about silver?”

“What of it?” asked Jesus.

“Thucydides states in his scroll that silver will burn into the skin of a vampire, and that it is also effective against werewolves.”

“Doesn’t bother us at all,” said Jesus, thinking of piles of silver denarii stashed in his cave.

“Do you actually think that there are werewolves Cyril?” Mary asked.

“Before I met you two, I did not think there were vampires.”

“We’ve learned a lot from you this evening,” said Jesus, looking to the river.

“Like what?” You have simply proven that Herodotus and Thucydides were unable to tell their asses from a hole in the ground.”

“But you’ve helped fill in some of the blanks,” Mary replied.

“I try, even with inaccurate references.”

“One other question,” asked Jesus, “I know how you knew we were vampires, as you cannot be entranced by us, but how come Mary and I couldn’t tell that you knew?”

“I have no answer for that,” Cyril replied, “The scrolls do not even begin to address such a phenomenon, the writings I cite are sketchy regarding that. It would seem by inference that Pericles was also incapable of being entranced, but that is all I know.”

The moon had risen into the heavens, it long past midnight, a tired Cyril yawning.

“Shall we turn in?” asked Jesus.

“I will have to soon,” Cyril answered, “I have work in the fields tomorrow.”

“You shouldn’t push yourself so hard, you’re an elderly man,” said Mary.

“I am glad to hear you say that madam; I imagine that you do not wish to kill me anymore.”

“I’m sorry Cyril,” said the Magdalene, “It’s just with Jesus here blunders can be made. In the past he seemed to trust everyone, and all it did was get him killed. I was simply looking out for us and the family.”

“Understandable,” Cyril replied, looking to Jesus, “Julius is quite unique when it comes to vampires, especially when contrasted to what is written in the history texts.”

Jesus looked to his companions and frowned, then to the flowing river.

“Please don’t sulk on us Jesus,” Mary protested, “You know what I’m saying is true.”

“Don’t remind me,” said Jesus, staring pensively at the river.

“He has a bit of a temper, does he not?” Cyril asked.

“Yes, but I’ve found it passes quickly,” said Mary.

“Wise men never let anger last or rule their thoughts, as it clouds judgment,” Cyril replied.

“You’re a wise man,” said Jesus, turning to the teacher.

“You are too Julius.”

“It’s a shame we can’t bring a learned man such as you to our realm,” said Jesus.

“I am sorry sir, I have no desire to be a vampire.”

“Why? A man like you, a brilliant man, is near the end of his mortal life, all that knowledge wasted in death. I can give you immortality!”

“There is no need for that,” a yawning Cyril answered, shaking his head.

“Why?”

“Because I have lived my life, a good life even as a lowly slave, and I as a mortal, I will not encounter the many pitfalls that you, my friend, will encounter in the future.”

“Meaning?”

“All you have known, your dear mother, your good father, will pass from you before your eyes, and you, unaging, will be there to witness it. Your baby brother, at this very moment suckling at his mother’s breast will become an old man before you and will die, leaving you and this ageless woman to mourn his passing as well.”

“That’s cruel to say to him,” said the Magdalene.

“It is the truth of your existence,” Cyril replied.

“He’s right Mary, you can’t damn a man for telling you the truth,” said Jesus, thinking of the time his beloved parents would be gone from the earth.

“Must he be so damn plain about it?” asked Mary, frowning.

“Verily I say, the only real truth is plain, so all who wish to see the truth will easily understand.”

“Truer words have not been said,” Cyril agreed.

“I suppose,” said Mary, not wishing to be lectured by either Jesus or Cyril.

“I would very much like to continue our conversations, would you like that?” asked Cyril, rising to his feet and stretching on the beach near three.

“Of course, you would too, right Mary?”

“Sure, I did find much of our talk fascinating.”

“Good,” said Jesus, rising to his feet, “We’ll also have to properly introduce you to my parents friend Cyril; you are now more like a part of the family anyway.”

“Thank you Julius and wife.”

“Thank you kind sir,” the Magdalene replied.

Heading to the slave quarters, Cyril remarked, “I was thinking Julius, there will be times that we will need to converse among others, how many languages to you speak?”

“Why?”

“Perhaps we share a common tongue between us only, and can converse openly among others when we need to share important ideas without fear of others overhearing.”

“He’s right,” said Mary.

“I understand,” Jesus replied, revealing most his linguistic repertoire, “Let’s see, I fluently speak Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin, Anatolian, Greek, Cathar, Tibetan, and Kushan. I can also read most of them, excepting for Anatolian and Greek.”

“You cannot read Greek?”

“Only a little, I didn’t spend much time in Greece when I was traveling, except in Athens and Sparta for a few weeks when on my way to Rome, and that was over ten years ago.”

“Then the only languages we share are Greek, Latin, and Anatolian; the others understand

both and some Anatolian. Is there any other language we may share; do you speak Macedonian or Egyptian?”

“I speak Egyptian, but I’ve never been able to master their hieroglyphs.”

“I can read hieroglyphs and demotic, and will teach you the Greek script if you like,” Cyril replied in the language of the pharaohs.

“You can?” Jesus asked in kind.

“Of course, I can teach you to read Greek and the Egyptian hieroglyphs within a month.”

“Egyptian is a very rich language, and I would appreciate you teaching me the hieroglyphs and the demotic script too.”

“Then I shall my friend.”

“What the hell are you two saying?” asked the Magdalene.

“We were speaking Egyptian,” said Jesus, approaching the slave quarters door, “Cyril and I will use that tongue when we need to talk among ourselves in the presence of others.”

“I’ll need to learn it too.”

“If you learn it as quickly as you learned Latin, it’ll be no problem for you,” Jesus replied.

“It is also written that vampires learn languages easily,” Cyril observed in his usual Latin.

“Who wrote that?” asked Jesus.

“Herodotus,” Cyril answered, opening the door.

“Good night friend Cyril,” said Jesus.

“Good night to you and yours,” Cyril replied, closing the door.

* * *

During the next weeks, Jesus and Mary sat in the kitchen in the early evenings, learning a little more about their undead natures, gleaning information from the scroll of Herodotus with the help of Cyril. As it was written in Greek, Cyril read it aloud, Jesus occasionally looking at the script and recognizing many of the words.

“I told you it would be easy,” said Cyril, Jesus looking over his shoulder, goblet of wine in hand, quickly mastering the written aspect of the Greek language. One other item mentioned in the scroll was that vampires could assume the form of a bat, Cyril remarking, “From what you have told me, I suppose that passage is facetious too.”

“No, that is in fact true,” Jesus replied as Mary smiled.

“It is?” asked Cyril, taking a sip of tea while Jesus poured wine for he and Mary.

“We’ve transformed many times,” answered Jesus.

“Fascinating,” said Cyril, looking to the vampiric Christ, “How do you do it?”

"I don't really know," Jesus replied, "We concentrate on the idea and it happens."

"I wonder if you can become anything else?"

"Don't know," said Jesus, staring out a window at the distant smokehouse, a light rain falling that evening.

Noticing a latrunculi board on a table in the living room, Cyril asked, pointing to it, "Do you play the game Julius?"

"Yes," Jesus answered, returning to the conversation, "My father and I play often."

"Would you care to play?"

"Sure, but I'm a formidable opponent for most."

"If you are a player I am sure of that, but I warn you, you have not played me," replied Cyril.

"Really," said Jesus, smiling at the challenge.

Setting up the board, they played latrunculi, Jesus losing three games in a row to the teacher over a period of five hours.

"Damn, you are a good player," said Jesus near dawn.

"So are you, but are too impetuous in your moves."

"Meaning?"

"You only allow yourself so much time to deduce a move, and then, even if you are not sure, you make a calculated move, regardless of the consequences."

"I always take my time planning strategy," Jesus replied, "One can't take forever you know."

"Yes, but it is not long enough, evidently," said Cyril, "You have a great potential regarding this game and should be able to beat someone like me easily."

"How?" asked Jesus, looking about for his consort, she having long since retired to their room.

"By taking more time in planning your moves. You are too intent on trapping my eagle and that mistake gives me advantage in trapping yours."

"I see," said Jesus, staring at the board.

"It is high time, I should be getting back to my quarters," Cyril remarked, noticing the horizon lightening.

"Please sleep late today friend, if my father asks, tell him I said you should," Jesus replied, rising from the table.

"He may think me a vampire," said Cyril, pushing in his chair.

"Believe me, dad wouldn't mind."

* * *

Joseph and wife met with the teacher, at first warily in the kitchen, but quickly learning that

Cyril was an honest, intelligent, and quite charming man. After a few evenings they accepted the elderly teacher and philosopher, leaving him to converse privately with Jesus and Mary.

As Jesus studied the writings one stormy summer night with Cyril, one troubling aspect for him was that Herodotus' scroll explicitly stated that a vampire is always brought to the realm of the undead by another vampire, a 'master', offering no explanation for he being a part of the undead. Inexplicably, the vampire Jesus Christ had no master.

Relating his thoughts on that subject to the teacher while Mary conversed with Joseph and wife in the common area, Cyril replied, "I am truly sorry Julius, there is no explanation I can give you, nor could I even begin to conjecture a theory that would explain your unusual situation. According to the scroll all vampires have masters, the one who brings them to the realm of the undead."

"There has to be some other way, I'm here aren't I? Believe me, I died on a cross and awoke in the tomb three days later, no one made me a vampire!" Jesus exclaimed, the wind growing stronger as it blew through the open kitchen window, parting the curtains. A thunderclap punctuated the conversation after a bolt of lightning striking behind the house momentarily illuminated the slave house, the smokehouse, and the Euphrates in the distance, visible from the kitchen window and front porch.

"I believe you Julius, but according to the scroll, there is no other method of bringing one to the realm of the undead, nor the slightest mention of an alternative that would make possible the creation of a vampire," said Cyril, hands in the air, the rain coming down very hard.

"It doesn't make sense," Jesus spat, holding a goblet of wine, "Every action has a cause."

"Not to us perhaps, but that does not mean there is no another way, a hidden cause that we are unaware of. There is simply no mention of it in this scroll, nor in the one written by Thucydides."

"But how?"

"I imagine that Herodotus and Thucydides were unaware of this aspect of vampiric existence."

"No – how the hell did I become a vampire in the first place?" Jesus asked with a helpless expression, a bolt of lightning striking near the river, brightly illuminating the kitchen and his countenance.

"Who knows, perhaps you should look at it this way. For example, how did the first man get here, or the first bird?" Cyril asked after another thunderclap pierced the air.

"I don't know," Jesus answered, thinking of the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis.

"That is correct, no one does," said Cyril, "So, accept it, and go on."

"I do, but I'm not the first vampire," Jesus replied, resting his chin in the palm of a hand.

"That is true," said Cyril, raising eyebrows in confusion while scratching his beard.

Jesus sat in silent contemplation for the next few minutes, the teacher filling his teacup, the storm continuing violently outside.

“They hardly ever had storms like this in Judea,” said Joseph, entering the kitchen, walking to a cupboard and grabbing a bottle of wine.

“Huh?” Jesus asked, broken from his reverie, Cyril occupied sweetening his tea.

“I said this is a hell of a storm,” Joseph replied, staring at the downpour, “Let me close that window.”

“Of course father,” said Jesus, ruminating on how he, of all people, a Hebrew preacher from Nazareth, had become a vampire.

After several evenings of intense discussion, Jesus relented; realizing further conversation on the subject of his origin was pointless. Cyril didn't know the answer, neither did he, nor did historians Herodotus and Thucydides, so he dropped it, figuring he could ruminate on it later, perhaps finding out one day.

* * *

As the summer wore on toward the fall of 35 CE, they continued their kitchen discussions, moving from vampirism to other legends, along with talking of science and philosophy. The family found that the teacher was not only brilliant, but a genius. It was revealed that he fluently spoke and wrote ten languages, knew a great deal about botany and zoology, was a historian, philosopher and rhetorician, and was well versed in the disciplines of astronomy and mathematics.

Cyril had also learned another valuable lesson which most of his contemporaries had never been able to master: when and how to speak in order to capture the imagination of his listener, so not to be considered dull or boring. He explained to Jesus and consort one evening that his former master, Marcus Trajanus, after having him educate his children, had kept him around until his death a decade later, mainly as a conversational companion and personal tutor. This arrangement had also allowed him to pursue his quest for further knowledge, adding the Anatolian language, botany and zoology to his vast resume during that time.

“We shall do that too,” Jesus declared, “Father, I think we should provide Cyril with whatever he needs to pursue his learning, this will also help Julian later on.”

“Why not?” his father said from the porch through an open window.

“I would still like to work in the fields to keep fit,” said Cyril.

“Good idea, I'm going to need him to, especially in the next weeks,” said Joseph before Jesus could make a reply.

Ruth walking in a short time later to make finely ground porridge for the eight-month old Julian, Cyril remarked quietly in Egyptian, “Watch that girl, she is a pretty one, but also nosy.”

“My thoughts exactly,” replied Jesus.

“A cock tease, look how she swings those hips like a common whore,” said Mary in the language of the pharaohs. She had quickly learned Egyptian so that she also could speak plainly to the teacher or Jesus when in company of others.

“That she does,” Cyril agreed, not particularly caring for Ruth, nor she for him.

Most times they slipped into Egyptian only in the presence of Ruth when she was tending the child's needs or preparing dinner for his parents. Other times, in the presence of other slaves, they simply changed the subject matter they were discussing with Cyril until the unwanted listener left the vicinity.

The fencing lessons continued for Ganymede, the muscular slave learning Jesus' exotic swordplay within three months. Becoming a formidable opponent even for Jesus, he was now more than a match for any highwayman or cutthroat.

"Ganymede's doing well. He'd be incredible in the arena wouldn't he?" Jesus asked of his father after the slave left.

"Yes, we're going to need someone like him after you're gone," Joseph replied, facing the inevitable as they entered the kitchen.

"We won't be leaving that soon," said Jesus, sitting down and pouring wine.

"You'll be gone by the summer of next year," Joseph declared, sitting down, "I'll stake my life on it."

"Sooner than that actually, in the fall, but we shall return," Jesus replied, handing his father a goblet, almost constantly feeling the urge to move on.

"When, five or ten years?" I'll probably be dead by the time you come back!"

"No, we should be gone a year or two at most, out of deference to you and mother."

"I'm sorry son, we can't keep you here forever, it's just with you around everything seems so much safer."

"You'll have no problems, I've instructed Ganymede to teach the other slaves to be proficient with swords and other weapons, like you did with me when I was young."

"That makes me rest easier," said Joseph, emptying his goblet.

"As for other things, the town accepts us as Romans, income and taxes are no problem thanks to the contracts we signed with Gavinal, and with Calicles buying any surplus, all should run smoothly while we're gone."

"Will you write?"

"Of course. We'll be in Greece much of the winter, moving on to Rome toward the spring; my letters from there will have no problem reaching you here; they're delivered monthly to the garrison."

"That's good to know."

"Besides, there is something very important I must do in Rome to ensure our personal safety in the future," said Jesus.

"Such as?"

"The census will be taken within another three years, father," answered Jesus, taking a drink of wine.

“Yes, and we have no proof of our – ”

“Exactly,” said Jesus, shaking his head, signifying the negative, Ruth walking into the kitchen. “Good evening Ruth.”

“Good evening to you Julius the younger,” she replied, fetching dates, cheese, and bottle of wine for Jesus’ mother.

After she left the room, Jesus remarked, “I wish you could speak Egyptian dad.”

“Why?”

“Cyril said she’s nosy, that’s why I cut you short,” said Jesus, “If you could speak Egyptian we could talk plainly around her.”

“I see, perhaps Cyril can teach me,” said Joseph, getting back to the original subject and asking almost in a whisper, “How are you going to fix it for us?”

“With a scribe, a notary and a censor,” Jesus replied.

“How’s that?”

“Entrancement, when I arrive in Rome, I’ll have our assumed names placed on the rolls at the Tabularium, so when the procurator’s censor arrives here our family will be on the list.”

“Sounds risky,” said a frowning Joseph, shaken by the revelation, pouring another goblet of wine.

“It’s nothing I can’t handle,” Jesus replied, narrowing eyes, “Even if I have to kill someone to do it.”

“You’d kill an innocent?”

“To protect you, mother and Julian of course I would,” Jesus said with firm resolve, his darker side coming to the surface. Joseph nodded in understanding, recalling a time when he had made such a choice, his actions resulting in the unfortunate crucifixion of a publican.

* * *

Fall approaching, Jesus and Cyril continued in their nightly discussions, covering practically all aspects of man’s collective knowledge, Jesus settling one evening on a subject most were loath to think of, let alone speak of – the subject of death. Sitting in the kitchen in the late evening after they had fed, Jesus was nursing a goblet of wine while Cyril snacked on dried dates and a cup of herbal tea. Mary, not wishing to intrude on the intense discussion, had walked out to enjoy the night, his parents and Ruth were asleep.

Explaining some of the Hebrew religious myths to the Greek teacher, a disgusted Cyril said at a little after one, “That is ridiculous, what kind of god would make people exactly the way they are supposed to be in life, and then damn them forever in death to a place like Sheol or Hell for behaving like they were ordained to be by him?”

“I don’t know, it doesn’t sound right to me either,” Jesus replied, “But it’s what they believe in Judea, even I had trouble with it.”

“You did?”

“Yes, that’s why I traveled the world in my youth, in search of a better explanation regarding God, for by the time I was fifteen, much of the Hebrew religion struck me as fallacious.”

“Fallacious, they must be crazy, such a belief system is illogical!”

“Perhaps, but even I bought into it once.”

“Everyone makes mistakes, that simply proves we are human,” said Cyril, hands out in a deferential shrug, “You, my good friend, have become wise due to learning from your experiences, proving above all you are an intelligent man.”

“Intelligent, if I’d been truly intelligent I wouldn’t have gotten myself killed,” Jesus retorted, rubbing his hairless chin.

“That is not necessarily true, but if you had continued in such obtuse beliefs after what happened to you in Judea, I would have to consider you stupid.”

“Really,” Jesus scoffed with a bitter laugh, looking to the teacher.

“Yes, really,” said Cyril.

After a few moments of silence, Jesus asked, “So Cyril, I know you’re an atheist, but what do you think happens when one dies?”

Taking a sip of tea, Cyril answered, “I do not know, but am certain there is no such place as Sheol, for if there are gods, they certainly do not behave like petty, mortal men, like that Yahweh character of the Hebrews does.”

“I agree, but what do you think about death?”

“Death for me is inevitable, especially since I have no desire to continue in this existence as a vampire, and if there is such a thing as an afterlife I shall deal with it as it comes to me.”

“Do you believe there is one?” asked Jesus, pouring another goblet.

“No, especially since no one in provable history has ever returned to tell us of such an existence beyond death.”

“I and Mary are dead.”

“Are you truly dead?” Cyril asked, pointing a finger at Jesus, “You have no real proof of that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Death, by definition, is always accompanied by stillness, decay and disassociation, you and your lovely woman are vital, ambulatory, show no signs of putrefaction, and seem on the surface to be as alive as I.”

“I hadn’t looked at it in that way.”

“No matter, self examination is subjective at best, now, finishing the answering of your original question, in my opinion, true death is oblivion.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, but since I do not know for certain, akin to Protagoras, I will not venture an absolute negative judgment toward the idea of an afterlife,” Cyril replied, looking Jesus in the eyes.

“The sophist from Thrace, what if you find there is one?” asked Jesus, finishing his goblet.

“Like Socrates is alleged to have said, I will ask the first man I come across if he knows anything.”

“And prove him a fool.”

“Like we all are,” said a smiling Cyril, “You have read Plato?”

“Yes,” answered Jesus, having read a Latin translation of Plato’s dialogues in his twenties.

“A good and wise man, if just a bit queer.”

“I read about that too.”

“Everyone has their faults,” Cyril replied, resting his head on an upright arm.

“Quite true,” said Jesus, “Well then, if Mary and I are not truly dead, what are we?” He sat his empty goblet down, looking for some explanation to define their existence.

“I do not know, but have formulated a theory. May I be candid?”

“By all means, please.”

“The tick and the leech consume blood to survive.”

“And?”

“They are considered parasites upon the living, no offense meant, but you and Maria fit that criteria.”

“None taken, and I understand what you mean, but though they behave in a similar fashion to us, they live and die after a time for whatever reason. Herodotus proved that; we don’t die ever, unless the sun destroys us,” Jesus countered, challenging Cyril’s theory.

“That, along with oak stakes and fire.”

“True, but nothing else can destroy us as far as I know.”

“Then I must concede that your pronouncements disprove my theory,” said Cyril, yawning.

“So, who was the man who stated the gods were fabricated by greater men to keep lesser men in line?” asked Jesus, recalling a character from Plato’s dialogues.

“Critias, I think,” Cyril answered with another deep yawn.

“You need sleep.”

“Yes; you and your woman need to find blood before sunup,” Cyril replied, rising from his chair.

“We fed earlier, a pair of thieves on the west highway,” said Jesus, heading to the slave house with the elderly teacher.

“What did they try to do to you?” Cyril asked as they walked along.

“They wanted to rob us so we killed them.”

“So, you are keeping the roads safe for the citizenry,” an Egyptian speaking Cyril observed, chuckling as he opened the door, “Now I know why Pericles liked the vampires of Athens, good night, good Julius.”

“Good night to you Cyril,” said Jesus as the door closed.

Jesus stood, staring at the closed door, reflecting on the wisdom of the elderly slave. ***I wonder if he's the wise teacher who would be sent to me in my vision of the Leviathan,*** thought Jesus, glancing to the whitewashed eaves of the slave quarters. All he heard was the silence of the night and the chirping of crickets. Looking about for his consort, Jesus spotted her by the river, relaxing on the beach.

Heading along the path to the river, he joined her and remarked, “Why didn't you stay woman, Cyril and I were discussing religion and the subject of death.”

“That question answers itself, I'm not fascinated by those subjects like you are, and didn't want to keep you from your conversation.”

“You don't mind me talking with him, do you?”

“Not at all, I just wanted to enjoy the cool evening, would you like to take a dip?”

“Certainly,” said Jesus as Mary rose to her feet.

Disrobing, they entered the chilly water, enjoying the refreshing feel.

Wading in the still pool created by the boulder and sandbank, Jesus floated on his back, staring at the night sky while his consort swam several breaststrokes around him.

Swimming to him, Mary asked, “Jesus, why are you so preoccupied with religion and death?”

“I don't know. It's been that way since I was a child.”

“If I were you I'd forget about it, you're never going to find the answer.”

“Probably, but that doesn't mean I won't stop trying to find the answer.”

“You're so obsessed, let's have fun,” said Mary, splashing him with water.

“What kind of fun?” asked Jesus, taking her in his arms.

“I think you know,” Mary replied, giving him a passionate kiss.

An hour later, they strolled from the riverbank, refreshed physically and spiritually, heading to the darkened house, as the kitchen lamp had run out of fuel. Retiring to their room, Jesus remarked, sitting down on the bed, “I was thinking, what if we take off for Europe this fall before winter sets in?”

“What of your folks?”

“They'll be fine with Ganymede and Brutus here to protect them, and I was also thinking Cyril could use our room during our absence.”

“When do you want to leave?”

“After Callicles comes by in a few weeks, I have to show father how to handle grain sales, and told him I also want to offer him some of our oak tanned hides.”

“You’re saving the urine tanned hides for yourself?”

“They’re softer and don’t bother my skin the way oak tanned ones do,” said Jesus, lying on the bed in his tunic after having removed his shoes, crafted from the special leather by Electra.

“What about selling more to the garrison first, that drunk only buys them wholesale,” Mary suggested, attempting to maximize their profits.

“We already have, the centurion bought all he can take for the time being and we still have nearly a hundred left,” a yawning Jesus answered, rubbing his temples.

“I guess we’ll have to sell them to him, the women have made shoes and cloaks from the very best leather, enough to last the family for years.”

“Maybe we should sell those too,” said Jesus.

“How?”

“Callicles always has shoes and cloaks for sale, he has to buy them somewhere, so why not buy them from us?”

Mary smiled at Jesus, the vampiric businessman, and lay down beside him, both falling into slumber.

Chapter Nine: Parting for Rome

Calicles arrived in early September, nearly two weeks before Jesus expected him.

Spotting the caravan heading east one evening while flying overhead, Jesus and Mary returned from their depredations on local criminals. Assuming human form, they strolled to the porch from the shadows, where his father was drinking wine with Ganymede and Icarus.

“Good evening father,” said Jesus, walking up the stairs, the Magdalene nodding to Joseph and continuing into the house to visit Mary and Ruth.

“Good evening son, care for wine?”

“Certainly, and I have news, Calicles will be in town tomorrow.”

“Isn’t he a bit early?” asked Joseph, handing him a bottle.

“My thoughts exactly, but no matter, the granary’s half full, and since the fall harvest is coming in we should get rid of last year’s excess. Further, we have meat and hides to sell too,” said Jesus, taking a deep drink of wine.

“He comes to town to make money from us and we end up making money from him,” a smiling Joseph observed, handing his bottle to Icarus.

“Don’t worry,” said Jesus, raising his bottle, “He buys from many along the way, and the way we’re consuming his wine, I’m sure he’ll make at a thousand denarii from us on that alone.”

Joseph laughed and replied, “That’s the truth!”

Sitting down next to his father, Jesus said, “Perhaps Calicles would be interested in our other wares, for instance, the extra shoes and cloaks the women made during the summer.”

“They’re still making them,” said Ganymede.

“Really?”

“Electra surmised that you may wish to sell them and figured with nothing else to do at times, she and Penelope would put the extra leather to good use.”

“I want to reward them for that,” Jesus replied.

“Just being here seems to be reward enough for us,” declared a smiling Icarus, “Aside from planting and harvest time our duties are light, our quarters are spacious, warm and dry, we eat like kings, and you generally let us do whatever we want.”

“And all of you serve us well, thank you,” said Jesus.

“Our pleasure sir,” Icarus replied.

“How long do you think he’ll be in town son?” asked Joseph.

“A week or so, only in spring does he stay longer,” Jesus answered, looking to the rising moon.

“It’s getting late,” said a drunk Ganymede, leaning heavily on the porch rail, “I’ll have to be

getting back.”

“So do I,” Icarus added, rising from his seat, “I have to run the forge all day tomorrow.”

“What are you making?” asked Jesus.

“A plow adapter for the horses you acquired a while back,” Icarus replied, heading down the stairs, “They’re so tall that the oxen adapter won’t work properly, it raises the blades too high.”

“That’s a good idea, thanks.”

“Don’t thank me, Brutus suggested I do it.”

“Thank him for me,” Jesus called, the slaves heading unsteadily to the slave quarters. “So, how do you like this life dad?”

“It’s not bad,” said Joseph with a satisfied sigh.

“Not bad, you’re starting to sound like me.”

“No, you sound like me, after all, I’m your father.”

“I guess,” said Jesus, opening another bottle.

The caravan pulled into town in the late afternoon, Callicles strolling to Gavinal’s to get drunk while his slaves set up the caravansary. Not that he needed much help that day, he was already drunk when he arrived, and needed just that extra splash of fine Gallic wine to make him feel more like himself. Unsteadily heading to Gavinal’s compound, Callicles greeted the guard as he let him in, and proceeded to the prefect’s office.

“Friend Callicles!” Gavinal exclaimed, rising from his desk littered with paperwork and putting out his hand, the trader walking in through the open door.

“Greetings Gavinal,” replied Callicles, giving him a firm Roman handshake.

“You’re here early,” said Gavinal, reaching for wine.

“Stock was easy to obtain as the weather has been fine this summer. Would you believe the docks at Chrysopolis and Nicomedia are filled to overflowing?”

“Really,” replied Gavinal, pouring goblets, “I suppose prices on your items have fallen.”

“My yes, even finished goods are cheap this year, a bundle of terracotta roof tiles are only 15 denarii, a bag of lime whitewash is three, lime plaster is five, and glass windows of two types are 28 denarii a piece.”

“I’ll take six windows for my slave quarters, what do you have that’s new?”

“Lots of things, Gallic beer, tools made in Illyria, and little brown seeds for a type of root plant that taste hot on the tongue; I think they’re called radishes.”

“Gallic beer?” Gavinal asked, having forgotten the remainder of Callicles’ peroration.

“You’ll have to try some friend, it’s delicious and nearly as strong as Gallic wine,” Callicles said with a wide grin.

“Excellent,” replied Gavinal, putting away his loathsome paperwork for another day. Both enjoyed libations, the trader downing two bottles in a little over an hour and a half. At dusk, Jesus walked through the door with his father.

“If it isn’t Julius Chrysippus and son,” said a slurring Callicles.

“Greetings Julius the younger, how’s your family?” asked Gavinal.

“They’re quite well, thank you,” said Jesus.

“How’s the baby?” asked Callicles, turning to them.

“Julian’s fine,” Joseph replied, “Almost nine months old, and already trying to walk and speak.”

“He’s a precocious tyke,” said Gavinal, reaching for another bottle, “So, what brings you two here this fine evening, and would you like wine?”

“We certainly would, thank you kind Gavinal. We heard Callicles had arrived, and came from the caravansary when his nephew told us he was here,” Jesus answered.

“I’m letting Demo run more of the show lately, it gives him experience in the craft of trading, and gives me more time to relax and get drunk with folks like you,” Callicles slurred, Gavinal handing Jesus and Joseph goblets.

“Indeed,” said Jesus, looking to the red-faced trader, “We came by to see if you were interested in more grain, along with meat and hides.”

“Sure,” Callicles replied, “Good meat’s always hard to come by. As for grain, I’ll take some but prices are much lower this year due to bumper crops coming in all over this part of the empire.”

“I know,” Joseph observed, “There’s so much coming in we don’t know what to do with it.”

“I bought as much as I could for the garrison,” said Gavinal, looking to Joseph.

“So that’s why you don’t buy my grain anymore,” Callicles retorted with a sly grin, belching after he finished the sentence. He shook his head in an attempt to sober up a bit.

“Not that yours is of any less quality, they’re much closer,” said Gavinal.

“Of course, I don’t care,” replied Callicles, pouring another goblet and downing it quickly. “You have hides?” he added, looking to Jesus.

“Many, the slaves have been preparing them after our hunts,” said Jesus.

“Tanned?”

“Yes, nearly a hundred are ready.”

“I’m definitely interested in those, I’ll come by in a few days to have a look at them. Incidentally, do you folks need anything?”

“Several things, items for the house, tools, wine, you know, the usual,” Joseph replied.

“Good, we’ll fix you up tomorrow, I’d best return to my market. Demo’s bright, but he needs me to show him the finer points,” said Callicles, rising unsteadily from his chair. “I’ll see you later.”

He headed through the open door, weaving as he went.

“Callicles drinks too damn much even by my standards,” said Joseph.

“And I’ll bet it’ll kill him one day,” Gavinal replied.

“His nephew’s headed in the same direction,” Jesus observed.

“It’s said his father Callicles the elder was the same way,” said Gavinal, “He died around twenty years ago, about ten years after Tiberium was founded. At the time it was only a garrison and was a long time before I arrived here.”

“His father was a drunk?” asked Joseph.

“Yes, heavy drinking seems to run in their family.”

“Does he have children?” asked Jesus.

“Not that I know of, but he has a wife somewhere in Greece, I guess he’ll leave the business to his nephew when he dies.”

“At least she’s a wealthy woman,” said Joseph.

“I reckon,” replied Gavinal, leaning back in his chair and looking to the open door. Jesus and his father spent several hours drinking wine and conversing with the prefect, over such subjects as meat and grain production, property taxes, women, wine and the emperor’s health.

“It’s amazing he’s still alive, the courier said he had another stroke a month ago,” Gavinal remarked, quite drunk.

“What have his physicians said?” asked Jesus.

“That it’s due to his age.”

“Young Caligula’s first in line for the throne?”

“It’s said so, rumor has it that he’s a very bright young man, and a good and fair administrator.”

“What the empire needs,” said Joseph, “A capable man who can fill Tiberius’ shoes.”

“Let’s hope so,” Gavinal answered, lifting his glass, “To Rome!”

“To Rome,” said Jesus, raising his glass and toasting the Eternal City with Gavinal and his father.

Leaving Gavinal’s near midnight, they headed to the farm, arriving an hour later. Explaining along the way that he and Mary were thinking about leaving before winter set in, Joseph replied, “I’d leave in the spring, you of all people know how cold it gets in Rome during the winter.”

“Yes, but cold weather doesn’t seem to bother Mary or I now.”

“Suit yourself,” said Joseph, stepping to the porch, the Magdalene relaxing in a chair.

“You don’t mind father?”

Joseph turned and answered, "Look son, I can't stop you from leaving, I never could when you were alive. It's your nature to be a wanderer, vampire or not, and you evidently need this – to tour the world in search of truth, adventure, and now blood. Don't worry, we'll be fine with Ganymede and Brutus. I know how to handle the farm, so you may leave whenever you wish."

"Thank you father."

"For what?"

"For understanding."

"Yeah, and don't forget to take care of the problem in Rome," Joseph retorted, slamming the door to the house and heading for bed.

"Yes father," Jesus answered to the closed door.

"Hello Jesus," said the Magdalene from her repose in the chair.

"Good evening Mary."

"You took off before I woke up, where did you go?"

"To Gavinal's, Calicles was there."

"Does he want to buy the stuff?"

"Yes, but the price of grain is low, so we'll have to make it up on the meat and hides."

"Did you offer him the shoes and cloaks?"

"I forgot, Calicles was pretty drunk anyway," said Jesus, taking a seat beside her.

"I suppose you got drunk too," Mary replied.

"Not really, dad did, it takes a lot of wine to get me going nowadays."

"True, have you eaten my love?"

"You've a lot of questions tonight don't you?" asked a smiling Jesus, looking to Mary and breaking into a laugh.

"I was just wondering," Mary replied, feeling a little hurt by the remark.

"No I haven't eaten, let's enjoy the night together," said Jesus, rising from his seat and taking her hand in his.

"I imagine we'll be staying close to home tonight," Mary observed, walking from the farm.

"Not necessarily woman, let's head to the west road."

They transformed and flew in the direction of the highway to Nicomedia. Finding suitable fare proved easy that evening, the garbage of humanity appearing only a short time later in the center of the highway, only to be mercilessly slaughtered for their efforts by predators Jesus Christ and his beautiful consort Mary the Magdalene.

"These bastards barely had an aureus between them," Jesus spat, finished looting the corpses

lying on the stone paved highway.

“They had plenty of blood,” said Mary, making certain her lips were wiped clean with a cloth.

“They did at that,” Jesus replied, heaving the remains into a stand of cedar trees. One bounced off a tree trunk, tearing a leg off, hungry jackals almost immediately devouring the bodies. Dropping coins in a tunic pocket, they transformed and flew back, making their way to their room and falling into slumber.

* * *

Joseph awoke a little past seven, his wife occupied nursing Julian. Clearly having another hangover, he called for the slave girl Ruth, making his head pound even more.

“Yes Julius?” asked Ruth, coming from the kitchen.

“Bring a bottle of wine,” Joseph ordered, sitting on the edge of the bed rubbing his eyes.

“Would you like breakfast?” Ruth asked in a soft voice, realizing he had another hangover.

“Just the bottle,” Joseph replied, nauseated at the thought of food. Focusing on his wife, he smiled weakly and said, “Good morning woman, how’s the baby?”

“He’s fine, how are you?”

“I’ve been better, but it’s nothing a good belt of wine won’t cure.”

“Here you are,” said Ruth, returning with an open bottle.

“Thanks,” a yawning Joseph answered as she returned to the kitchen. Looking to his wife, he added, “I have to head to Callicles’ at around noon.” He sighed and took a long drink from the bottle.

“To get drunk?”

“Hell no, it’s much too early for that, he has items at the caravansary I want to buy.”

“Oh yes, he’s the trader,” Mary replied, remembering who Callicles was.

“That’s right, I have to get rid of this hangover before I head there,” said Joseph, rising from the bed and putting the bottle down on a chest of drawers. Pulling out a drawer and retrieving a fresh tunic, he asked her while putting it on, “I want to buy spare windows and tools, is there anything you want?”

Mary smiled and answered, “I can’t think of a thing, we have everything thanks to you and Jesus.”

“Of course, if I see anything you might like I’ll pick it up,” said Joseph, slipping on shoes and heading for the door with the bottle. “I should be back near dark; I’m heading out to check on the farm.”

“Yes dear,” Mary replied as he shut the door.

Walking to the sunlit porch, Joseph finished the bottle and headed for the forge. Icarus was busy hammer welding a sickle, Ganymede running the Vulcan bellows. “Hi guys, where’s

Brutus?" he asked, walking up.

"Probably at the stable," Icarus replied, "Getting the wagon ready for you."

"Thanks," said Joseph, continuing to the stable.

Icarus was right, Brutus was in the stable, horses hitched to the wagon, he mounting the wagon when Joseph entered.

"Good morning Brutus," said Joseph.

"Good morning to you Julius the elder, I didn't expect you until eleven."

"Why, I usually rise early," replied Joseph, his headache lessening a bit.

"The trader's in town, I assumed you got drunk with him last night," said Brutus, sitting behind the reins.

"Yes, but we got drunk at Gavinal's," Joseph replied, climbing up beside him, "We were there till after midnight."

"That's why I didn't expect you until eleven," said a smiling Brutus. Pulling in front of the house, they stepped from the wagon. "I'm taking a horse from the stable to inspect the fields," the slave remarked, tethering the horses near a water trough, "Do you want me to come with you to the trader?"

"Yes, we'll head there about noon."

"I have ideas about things we could purchase," said Brutus.

"Such as?"

"We should buy another plow, a few more goats for cheese making, and perhaps some ducks."

"I thought about extra goats, but ducks too?" Joseph asked, not questioning the need for more tools.

"Yes, for their eggs," Brutus answered, "They have very good eggs."

"I love eggs."

"So do I, but remember Julius, most ducks are bred from wild stock, so you may have to break or cut their wings, I'd suggest cutting them as it does less damage."

"You have to cut their wings?"

"Yes."

"I'll leave you do that if you don't mind," said Joseph, not at all familiar with duck husbandry.

"Sure, it's actually trimming their feathers, but is called wing cutting."

"I see, we'll look into some when we get there," said Joseph, turning to the porch as Brutus walked to the stable. Finally in the mood for breakfast, he headed to the kitchen. "Is there anything to eat around here?" he asked, taking a seat at the table.

“I see you’re hungry now,” Ruth answered, placing a bowl of porridge in front of him, sweetened with dates and honey. “I figured you’d get hungry after you were up for a while so I took the liberty of making extra, your wife and child have already eaten.”

Joseph lifted a silver spoon beside the bowl. “Damn, this is good,” he said, wolfing down the porridge.

“Thank you master Julius,” Ruth replied, walking to his bedroom, still unable to refer to her master as Julius.

Joseph watched the girl enter the bedroom and close the door. Finishing his porridge, he remarked, “That old bastard Callicles was right about her, she’d make a fine piece of ass.” Rising from the table, he grabbed another bottle of wine and headed for the porch. It was still early, around nine-thirty, and with time to kill he sat down in a chair and opened it, enjoying the beautiful late summer morning. Sitting for about an hour, he had drained half when Brutus walked up, finished inspecting the fields.

“Are you ready to go Julius?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Joseph answered, holding out the bottle, “Want a belt before we leave?”

“Sure,” Brutus replied, taking the bottle and drinking deeply from it, passing it back to Joseph.

“Finish it, if I have any more I’ll end up drunk and it’s too early for that.”

Nodding, the slave emptied the bottle, walking over and untying the horses. Both climbed aboard the wagon and headed to the caravansary. Arriving at half past eleven, they walked up to Demosthenes, now sixteen years old and every inch a man, sporting a short beard.

“Greetings Demosthenes, where’s Callicles?” asked Joseph.

“Sleeping in his wagon, he got really loaded last night,” a smiling Demosthenes answered, looking to his uncle’s wagon.

“He left Gavinal’s early.”

“Yeah, but when he got here he drank Gallic beer till sunup with Kago and Aeschesles.”

“Oh,” said Joseph, again thinking Callicles drank too much, he being one to talk, considering the way he consumed wine.

“He’ll be along soon, he always rises before noon,” Demosthenes added, “So friend Julius, what can we do for you and yours today?”

“Tools and windows, goats and ducks,” Brutus replied for his master.

“We have all those things,” said Demosthenes, “With lower prices too, as suppliers in Nicomedia and Chrysopolis were all overstocked this year.”

“Let’s have a look at the tools,” Joseph replied, the trio heading to the tool wagons.

Passing Callicles’ wagon, they stopped as the door opened wide, a refreshed Callicles stepping from his ostentatious abode. “Friend Julius!” he exclaimed, walking to Joseph and

grasping his hand firmly with both of his, while a subdued Demosthenes looked to his seemingly indestructible uncle.

“Good morning Callicles,” said Joseph, his hand hurting from the crushing grip, “How are you today?”

“Never been better,” Callicles answered, happily realizing the wonderful Gallic beer he had drunk all night long hadn’t given him a hangover and had every bit the kick of Gallic wine for less than half the price.

“They’re looking for tools, windows, goats and ducks,” said Demosthenes.

“Let’s get them taken care of Demo,” Callicles replied, motioning the group toward the tool wagons. “What sort of tools are you looking for this time?”

“Brutus is overseer, ask him.”

“Let’s see, we need another plow, Icarus needs a small square anvil for bending metal, and the women need awls and small hammers for leatherwork,” said Brutus.

“Anything else?” asked Callicles, taking out keys as they arrived.

“I could use some planes and perhaps a saw or two,” Joseph replied.

“We have plenty a few wagons down, first have a look at this,” said the trader, opening the door of a wagon, several examples of triple-bladed plows coming into view.

“How much?” asked Joseph, looking at the quality implements, complete with harnesses.

“Thirty denarii, made in Etruria province of the finest wrought iron,” said Callicles.

“Is that a good price?” Joseph asked of his slave.

“Very good,” Brutus answered.

“Sold,” said Joseph.

Buying other tools for farming and carpentry work during the next hour while Demosthenes tended to another customer, Joseph also bought a small anvil and another set of tongs for the forge. Coming to the fine tool wagon, Callicles opened it, showing Joseph and Brutus a set of awls, leather punches and a pair of small hammers, made in Illyria, complete with an oiled wooden case.

“Price?”

“Steep, seventy denarii, they’re imported from Illyria,” said Callicles.

“What do you think Brutus?”

“They’re made in Illyria, known across the empire for top quality tools,” Brutus answered, “The price is reasonable.”

“We’ll take them.”

“Excellent,” said Callicles, his mind again reminding him of alcohol, “I’ll have my slaves haul the items to your wagon. Would you like lunch and a drink?”

“Certainly, would you have some for Brutus?”

“Of course, we’ll all enjoy good food and drink.”

Heading to his personal wagon, Callicles ordered a slave to fetch food from a nearby grill mounted on a wagon. The aroma of cooking food issuing from the grill indeed smelled good, Joseph finding himself very hungry. Bringing a loaf of fresh bread from a small oven adjacent to the grill, the slave also brought a large polished copper platter filled with roasted vegetables, lean pork, a side of kid, and Callicles’ personal favorite, horsemeat tenderloin, sitting the food on a low table with dishes and cups.

“I’m starved,” said the trader, sitting on a stool and pulling off a chunk of well-done horsemeat, Joseph tearing loose a piece of pork and putting it on a plate, together with helpings of bread, carrots and onions.

“What are you going to have Brutus?” Joseph asked, seating himself on a stool.

“Horsemeat, and roast kid.”

“Help yourself slave,” Callicles mumbled, his mouth full, “The horsemeat’s from an old nag of mine that died yesterday.”

Joseph almost choked at the remark, one, finding horsemeat revolting, and two, the thought of an animal having died and scavenged for food was not appealing to his appetite. Not bothering Brutus in the least, the slave grabbed a chunk of horseflesh and another of kid, along with vegetables, sitting down on the ground.

Seeing the look on Joseph’s face, Callicles remarked, “I forgot, you Roman folks aren’t too keen on horsemeat, or any kind of meat for that matter, are you?”

“We’re Etrurians,” Joseph lied, “We eat meat, but not that of horses.”

“So that’s why you don’t have any in your smokehouse.”

“Not really, my son hasn’t come across horses during his hunts.”

Callicles nodded, his mouth full, asking in a mumble, “Would you like beer?”

“You have beer?”

“Gallic beer,” said Callicles, motioning to a slave.

“Yes master?” the slave asked, walking over.

“Bring the amphora of beer we were drinking last night if there’s any left in it, otherwise bring a fresh one.” The slave quickly returned with a large earthenware container filled one-quarter with beer.

“I haven’t drunk beer in years,” remarked a wistful Joseph, recalling a time many decades earlier when he had visited Egypt with his father Jacob and eldest brother Simon.

“You’ve never drunk beer like this,” said Callicles. He smiled and continued, “It’s not Egyptian, it’s a fine Gallic beer imported in wax-lined amphorae or barrels from the far north, near an island called Britannia; it tastes sort of like grog but isn’t as heavy. It doesn’t give you a

hangover either, and at twelve denarii an amphora is definitely worth the price.”

“What the hell, I’ll try some,” Joseph replied while the slave opened the amphora.

“You should try some horsemeat too,” Brutus spoke up, like Callicles, his Thracian forebears having eaten horsemeat by the wagonload.

“Dip it in the amphora,” said Callicles, handing Joseph a wooden cup and tossing another to Brutus.

“Do you want me to have beer master?” Brutus asked, knowing it was against Roman law for slaves to consume alcoholic beverages, even though he and his fellow slaves often got drunk at the farm.

“Why shouldn’t you?” the trader asked, “I let my slaves drink, even wine when we run out of Egyptian beer.”

“But in Rome – ”

“Rome’s a thousand miles from here, enjoy yourself slave,” said Callicles, pulling a cup of beer from the amphora.

Dipping cups in the amphora, Joseph and Brutus drank deeply of the brew, enjoying the pleasant taste. “Truly the nectar of the gods,” Callicles declared, downing the beer in an instant.

“What gods are they?” asked Joseph.

“Any gods who drink beer I guess,” Callicles mumbled, his mouth again full of tasty horsemeat.

“That’s the truth,” said a chuckling Joseph, taking another gulp. Their lunch lasting into late afternoon, the climax came with an inebriated Joseph trying a bite of horsemeat tenderloin near two and finding it delicious.

“Shall we return to our shopping?” a drunk but responsible Brutus asked, Demosthenes walking by with other patrons, smiling to the group.

“Why bother, I’ll be here for a week,” said a slurring Callicles, staggering over and dipping his cup into a new amphora of beer.

“Well – ”

“Well what?” Callicles asked, “Isn’t getting drunk more fun than being a slave?”

“I’d think so,” said Joseph, breaking into laughter. Brutus looked to them, not knowing what to say.

“That’s the trouble with slaves, they’ve no sense of humor,” Callicles scoffed, leaning to one side of his stool and farting loudly.

“I’ll say,” Joseph replied, looking to Brutus, “Look here man, loosen up and enjoy yourself, why should we do today what we can put off till tomorrow?”

“If you say so master,” Brutus answered, taking another drink of beer.

“I insist,” said Joseph.

At dusk, while they continued in their unbridled drinking, Jesus walked up to the torch lit caravansary with Mary Magdalene. Callicles collapsed to the ground unconscious, attempting to remark to Joseph with a severe slur, “You know, Julius my friend, I think we should – ” Slaves quickly arrived to tend to the trader, carrying him to a cot near his personal wagon.

“Hello son,” Joseph slurred, looking to Jesus. Brutus smiled and nodded, unable to say anything from drinking too much beer.

“Hello dad,” said Jesus, hiding his dismay.

“Would you care for beer?”

“Perhaps later, first we have to make our purchases.”

“Callicles has passed out.”

“No matter, Demosthenes is available, what have you bought so far?”

“Tools, we still need to buy goats and ducks,” Joseph answered.

“Okay,” said Jesus, turning from his father.

“What’s the hurry, Callicles will be here for another week, sit down and have beer with me.”

“We must first – ”

“Bullshit, try some of this beer, it’s really good.”

“Shall we?” asked Jesus, looking to Mary in deference to his father.

“What the hell, you’ve never been one to pass up a drink anyway,” said Mary.

Sitting down with his father, Joseph took a wooden cup and drew a libation from the amphora. Handing it to Jesus, he said, “This is Gallic beer son, delicious indeed, a man could grow fond of this stuff very quickly.”

Taking a sip, Jesus tasted the fermented nectar, raising an eyebrow at the pleasant flavor. He smiled and downed the brew, handing the cup back. “More,” he said, looking to his father with expectation.

“It’s good isn’t it?” asked a smiling Joseph.

“Incredible, we’ll have to buy some if we can.”

“We should buy it all if there’s any left when we’re done,” Joseph replied, filling Jesus’ cup and another for himself.

“Would you like to try some woman?” Jesus asked.

“Sure,” the Magdalene replied, sitting down while Joseph grabbed a cup for his undead daughter-in-law, filled it and handed it to her.

“It is good,” she said after taking a sip.

“Smooth as silk with a kick like a mule,” Joseph replied as Brutus fell over in a heap, passed out. Mary looked to the unconscious figure and frowned. “So much for him, he’s not a seasoned drinker anyway,” he added, ignoring Brutus and taking another gulp of beer.

The Magdalene walked over and rolled Brutus on his back, as he had lain snoring in the dust.

“Why’d you do that?” Joseph asked.

“I don’t like breathing dust, do you?”

Jesus smiled, noting that some of his admonitions regarding humanity had been taken to heart by his consort.

“Come to think of it no,” said Joseph, looking to the unconscious Brutus as Demosthenes walked up.

“I suppose none of you are in any condition to conduct business,” the lad ventured.

“On the contrary, I’d like to buy goats and ducks from you,” said Jesus.

“I’m sorry sir, my uncle and your – ”

“Yes, it’s a habit both acquired some time ago,” Jesus replied, rising from his seat.

“You’re looking for animals?” asked Demosthenes, looking up to Jesus.

“Yes, goats and ducks.”

“We have eleven goats for sale and practically an entire flock of ducks.”

“Good, two goats should suffice, and perhaps six ducks,” said Jesus as they headed to the animal cages.

“You should buy at least a dozen if you don’t have ducks presently.”

“Why?” asked Jesus.

“Because a lot of them die for whatever reason, with a dozen it’s assured that you’ll be able to create a breeding stock for eggs. They’re cheap too; ten sestertii per bird.”

“At that price I’ll take a dozen.”

Arriving at the animal cages, near other cages stocked with slaves, Jesus observed the little torch lit zoo, containing horses, ducks, mules, goats, and pigs.

“Quite a selection you have,” said Jesus.

“We purchase them from vendors along the way; do we have other animals that may interest you?”

“No, we only need goats and ducks for now.”

“How about slaves?” Demosthenes suggested, pointing to a wagon filled with Negroes from Nubia, other wagons containing chained Greeks, Germans, Jews, and one loaded with exotic Chinamen, imported from Cathay via the Silk Road.

“No thanks. We’re fine on slaves presently, just two goats, one male, one female, and a dozen ducks, six of each sex. How much do you want for your goats anyway?”

“12 denarii each,” Demosthenes answered, turning from the slave wagons, “Let’s see, two goats will be 24 denarii, and twelve ducks at ten sestertii each would be uh – “

“120 sestertii, for a total of 28 denarii, five sestertii.”

“You’re good with math sir, shall I have a slave bring the animals to your wagon?”

“Yes, I’ll pay you when they deliver them,” Jesus replied.

“It’s a deal,” said a smiling Demosthenes, putting out his hand in imitation of his uncle. Firmly shaking the lad’s hand, they headed to Callicles’ wagon, where Joseph was still getting drunk drinking beer. He had already arrived at drunkenness, but was determined to proceed further down the road of pleasant inebriation. Brutus was lying on the ground passed out, with Callicles blissfully snoring away on a cot.

“I purchased more animals father,” said Jesus as he walked up.

“What kind?”

“Two goats and a dozen ducks for 28 denarii.”

“Good price, did you ask about the beer?” Joseph asked, handing Jesus another cup.

“No,” said Jesus, taking the cup and turning to the lad, “Say son, how much beer do you have available?”

“Perhaps fifty amphorae, how much do you want to buy?”

“All of it,” said Joseph.

“What’s the price?” asked Jesus.

“Eighteen denarii per amphora,” Demosthenes answered, figuring the price would be declined.

“Your uncle said twelve earlier,” said Joseph, trying to focus on the lad.

“Twelve’s what it cost him, we have to make a profit,” Demosthenes replied, looking to his unconscious uncle, wishing that he would rise up and explain that if they sold items for the same price that they bought them for, they wouldn’t be in business very long.

“I see,” said Jesus, finishing his cup, “Make it fourteen denarii per amphora and we’ll buy it all.”

“Seventeen and a half.”

“No, fourteen and a half.”

“Sixteen.”

“Fifteen, no higher, take or leave it,” Jesus replied, while his father looked to him with trepidation, thinking they may lose the wonderful Gallic beer.

Demosthenes sighed, looking to his unconscious uncle.

“He’s out cold,” said Jesus, “Really son, you’d better learn to vend like a professional, you’re going to own all this one day.”

“But my uncle – ”

“I think it’s best if you learn how to handle such things on your own.”

The teenager pursed his lips tightly, looked again to his unconscious uncle, and replied, “Okay, it’s a deal.” He put out a hand to Jesus.

“Good,” said Jesus, shaking his hand, “Have your slaves tally the amount available, my father and I will be here tomorrow evening to pick it up.”

“Are you kidding, we’ll have to use our wagons. Fifty amphorae of beer takes up a lot of space.”

“True, we also have meat and skins for your uncle, perhaps you can purchase them tomorrow after you drop off the beer.”

“I just hope uncle Callicles doesn’t kill me first,” said Demosthenes, looking to the trader snoring away on the cot.

“Why would he do that?” asked Joseph, putting down his cup, fearful that his wife would react with displeasure if he came home drunk for a second night in a row.

“For selling you the beer too damn cheap,” Demosthenes replied, getting a cup for himself.

“So, why do we need all that beer?” asked the Magdalene, interrupting the conversation.

“For enjoyment?” asked Jesus.

“Don’t we have plenty of wine in the cellar?”

“Yes we do, but we don’t have plenty of beer.”

“Really,” said Mary.

A slave arrived, informing Demosthenes that the goods were delivered to Joseph’s wagon, twelve caged ducks and a pair of goats. Jesus handed the lad 29 denarii, five sestertii, with one denarius as a tip, he and Mary enjoying a few more brews with him during the next hour. Later, they bid farewell, gathered up his father and Brutus and headed home in the wagon.

Approaching the entrance to the farm, a loud snapping sound came from the rear of the overloaded wagon, the right rear wheel jamming against the side of the wagon, dragging and cutting a rut in the dirt road as the horses attempted to pull it along.

“Whoa animals,” Jesus shouted, pulling on the horse’s reins.

“What the hell was that?” Joseph asked while Brutus leaned against him, snoring away.

“Let me check,” said Jesus, handing Mary the reins. Stepping from the wagon and walking to the rear, he shooed a goat aside following on a tether. “We broke a suspension shackle father,” he observed, looking under the wagon.

“Will you please hold this drunken slave?” an exasperated Joseph asked the Magdalene.

“Sure,” she answered, Joseph moving Brutus next to her, stepping down to join his son.

“What can we do?” asked Joseph, looking at the wheel jammed against the side of the wagon.

“Put something between the axle and the floorboards, in place of the leather strap,” said Jesus, “That’ll get us home, you’ll have to tell Icarus to make another shackle for it tomorrow.”

“What should we use?”

“A log, let me look in the woods,” Jesus answered, heading into a stand of trees. Returning minutes later, he dropped a small log beside the wagon and looked underneath to check if the clearance was right.

“How the hell are we going to get the log in place son?”

“I’ll lift the wagon, you place it between the axle and floor,” said Jesus, moving to the rear.

“You can lift this?” Joseph asked, looking to the heavily laden wagon.

“Easily, any time you’re ready dad.”

Joseph nodded and picked up the log as Jesus raised half a ton of dead weight with one arm. He moved the log between the axle and floor, remarking, “Okay son, let her down easy.” Jesus relaxed his grip, setting the wagon down gently, the wheel free.

“Let’s get this rig to the house,” said Jesus, the pair climbing into the seat and resuming the journey home. Pulling up to the house, they disembarked, Jesus helping a conscious but very drunk Brutus to the slave quarters while Joseph headed inside to greet his wife, accompanied by the Magdalene.

“Good evening Julius,” said a yawning Ganymede, opening the door to the lamp lit room. Cyril looked up from a scroll and nodded as he noticed Jesus.

“Good evening to all of you,” Jesus replied, sitting Brutus in a chair, “Where’s Icarus?”

“He turned in early,” said Cyril, “He worked the forge almost all day.”

“Will you please tell him when he wakes that we broke a shackle on the wagon and need it repaired as soon as possible?”

“Shall do,” replied Cyril, “Will you and Maria be dropping by for conversation?”

“Certainly, perhaps tomorrow evening,” Jesus answered, starting for the door, then correcting himself, “I’m sorry, Callicles is coming by tomorrow evening, so it’ll have to be the next evening.”

“Very well, have a good night,” said Cyril, looking back to his scroll. Jesus, politely nodding, left the slaves, closing the door behind him.

* * *

Demosthenes of Thebes woke early, fearing bitter retribution from his uncle for selling Gallic beer much too cheap. For a change, Callicles had risen with the sun, walking over on the bright morning to converse with his nephew.

“My slave woman told me you sold all the Gallic beer to Julius Chrysippus last night,” said a frowning Callicles.

“Yes uncle,” Demosthenes replied, looking to the ground, “He would only give me fifteen denarii per amphora.”

“That’s all you could get?”

“Yes uncle, I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?” Callicles asked, arms folded across his chest.

“That I couldn’t get eighteen denarii, as his father said you paid twelve denarii for it.”

With that remark, the trader could hold in his pleasure no longer and broke out laughing.

“I’m sorry uncle.”

“For what, you got fifteen denarii for the beer, that’s great!” Callicles exclaimed, slapping him hard on the back.

“Why?” asked Demosthenes, wincing from the slap.

“Because I actually paid only eight denarii for each amphora, I would’ve settled for thirteen.”

“You didn’t tell them the truth?”

“Why should I?”

“It’s said one should always tell the truth.”

“Perhaps in most cases, but the truth my dear nephew has nothing to do with the profession of vending. Don’t you remember what caveat emptor means?” asked a chuckling Callicles, walking off to find breakfast and more beer. The lad watched him call for a slave, smiled, and found he completely agreed with his uncle’s statement.

Joseph’s wagon was parked next to the forge during the morning. Ganymede and Brutus carried the blacksmith tools to the forge, while Icarus inspected the broken shackle. “This is a problem, perhaps I can repair it,” he remarked.

“Repair it?” asked Ganymede.

“I’ll have to, shackles are made of Damascus steel and I don’t have suitable stock available to make another one.”

“How will you do it?” asked Ganymede.

“I’ll try to repair it by hammer welding the break, if that doesn’t work, we’ll have to replace the leather strap with a shorter one; then I’ll reshape the broken end of the shackle.”

“Oh,” said Ganymede, not really understanding what Icarus was talking about.

“Can you pull the shackle for me later?” asked Icarus, Ganymede unloading a box of plow fittings.

“Sure, but we have to finish unloading the wagon first.”

“No problem, I have to finish a set of horseshoes before I can do anything else,” Icarus replied, turning to his forge.

In the evening, after Icarus skillfully repaired the wagon by hammer welding the broken shackle, Jesus, Joseph and Brutus pulled up at the caravansary to complete the purchase of the beer, Callicles walking up to greet them as they arrived.

“My friends! How are you this fine evening?” Callicles asked, holding a cup of Gallic beer.

“Never been better,” said a smiling Joseph, “You were right about the beer – I didn’t have a hint of a hangover.”

“How about Brutus here, how does he feel?” asked the trader, looking to the slave.

“He was up with the sun, no worse for wear,” Joseph replied, walking into the bazaar.

“I told you it was good,” said Callicles.

“Indeed it was,” replied Jesus.

“And the younger Julius?” Thanks to my beer, were you up with the sun?”

“Never,” said Jesus.

“Good beer or not, he likes to sleep late,” said Joseph.

“What the hell, so do I,” Callicles replied.

“Not as late as he does,” retorted Joseph, Jesus looking to his father with a frown.

“Demo said you bought our Gallic beer,” said Callicles, looking to Jesus.

“Yes, my father suggested that I purchase it.”

“I know that he sold you the entire stock, but would you mind if I kept back ten or so amphorae for myself?”

“Of course not.”

“Good,” Callicles replied with a relieved sigh, “That means we have 44 available for sale, at fifteen denarii a piece, so that comes to, uh, let’s see, that would be – ”

“660 denarii.”

“He’s faster than an abacus,” said Callicles, nudging Joseph in the side with an elbow.

“He was good at his studies,” Joseph replied, looking to his son while they walked along.

“I thought your nephew said fifty were available,” said Jesus.

“We started with 72, Kago, Aeschesles and I have been drinking it on and off since leaving Chrysopolis last month,” Callicles answered, arriving at the beer wagons. “We won’t need your wagon for hauling, we’ll just take these and hitch them to a team of oxen.”

“It is a lot of beer isn’t it,” said Joseph, looking to the loaded wagons, nearly stacked to the ceilings with brew.

“You wanted to buy it father.”

“Yes, but it’ll fill the cellar.”

“And then some,” said Brutus.

“You don’t have to buy any if you don’t want to,” said Callicles.

“I want it,” Joseph replied.

“Then it’s done,” said Jesus, “Say Callicles, would you go an even six hundred for the beer?”

“Yeah, just cut me slack on your meat and skins.”

“Sure,” Jesus replied.

Calling over a trusted slave and Kago, the head mercenary, Callicles said, “I need you to watch the bazaar this evening, close up early if business drops off.”

“Shall do boss,” Kago answered, a muscular native Anatolian of six feet in height, wearing bronze and leather body armor, together with a long Scythian broadsword in a sheath.

An hour later, two gigantic wagons pulled by eight oxen pulled up in front of the Chrysippus farmhouse behind Joseph’s wagon. The Magdalene and Cyril were sitting on the porch engaged in conversation, while Mary and Ruth were in the kitchen preparing to feed Julian his evening porridge. Six slaves were sitting on top of the wagons, a bemused Magdalene looking up and asking, “What did you do Julius, buy more slaves?”

“No Maria, they’re my slaves for unloading these wagons,” answered Callicles, Jesus and the trader walking to the porch.

“So what’s in the wagons?” asked Mary, having been present when Jesus purchased the beer, but not realizing the immense quantity acquired in the deal.

“The beer I bought last night,” said Jesus.

“What else?”

“Nothing, just the beer.”

“There’s beer in both wagons?”

“Nothing but,” Jesus replied while his father smiled.

“It figures,” said Mary, Cyril smiling.

Callicles’ slaves unloaded 44 amphorae from the wagons. Most went to the cellar, an additional twelve stacked in the common area of the house while Joseph’s wife forlornly observed their living room turned into a beer warehouse. “Don’t worry woman, we’ll find another place for it,” said Joseph.

“Did you have to buy so much?” Mary asked, heading to the bedroom with the baby and Ruth.

“It’s really good beer,” Joseph replied.

“It must be if you bought that much,” said Mary, closing the door.

“She’s pissed at you isn’t she?” Callicles asked, standing in the kitchen.

“It passes quickly,” said Joseph while Jesus took out a moneybag.

“Wives, you can’t live with ‘em, can’t live without ‘em,” Callicles observed, “My woman Helena in Thrace, it’s a good thing I only see her maybe twice a year, that way our love for each other takes precedent above all else.”

“I know what you mean there,” Joseph answered, leaning against the doorjamb.

“Here’s 24 aurei, covering the beer,” said Jesus, sitting coins on the table.

“That’s what I like about you Julius, you always pay in gold,” replied Callicles, sliding the coins across the table and pocketing them.

“You pay me in gold, why shouldn’t I return the favor?”

“Would you care for a drink?” asked Joseph.

“Wine or beer?” asked Callicles.

“Either.”

“Well then, let’s start cleaning out your living room, it’ll keep the wife off your ass,” said a chuckling Callicles, sitting down heavily in a chair. During the next hours, the trader got drunk, afterward purchasing heavy sacks of wheat and barley, fine sides of cured meat, stacks of oak tanned skins, and a large quantity of finished leather goods made by slave women Electra and Penelope. Spending 106 aurei, while his slaves loaded the merchandise in the wagons, he exclaimed, “Hell Julius, I come to this town to make money from you, and you end up making money from me!”

“I sold it to you for a very good price,” said Jesus, feigning indignance.

“Of course friend, I’ll easily double my money on this top quality stock,” Callicles replied, offering his hand.

“Excellent,” said Jesus, firmly shaking his hand.

Near two, Callicles and nephew, with their six slaves, made their way from the Chrysippus farm to the caravansary. As they drove off, a smiling Jesus remarked, “Here’s the money,” dropping a pouch of gold coins in his father’s hand.

“A hundred and six huh?” asked Joseph, staring at the coins within.

“That’s right.”

“Damn, that’s nearly three times more than he made from us.”

“We haven’t bought the extra windows from him yet my father.”

“Yeah,” Joseph replied, still looking at the pouch of coins.

The Magdalene strolled into the kitchen, looked to Jesus and asked, “Well?”

“We made 106 aurei from Callicles tonight,” said Jesus.

“Who cares, we make that much looting corpses every few months, let’s find someone to eat.”

“It’s about time son, it must be near three.”

“Thanks Joseph,” said Mary, looking to Jesus, “He was so busy making money off that drunk he forgot he’s a vampire.”

“We have time, I was simply enjoying the evening,” Jesus replied, rising from his chair.

“There’s not much of an evening left, so let’s go,” Mary retorted, walking to the door.

“Please remember to pick up the windows tomorrow father, I’ll see you in the evening,” said Jesus, walking through the threshold.

“Right,” Joseph replied as Jesus closed the door.

“All the thieves must be asleep, I imagine we’ll have to take boars or something tonight,” said Mary, heading down the road leading from the farm.

“We do need more meat for the smokehouse,” Jesus observed, she frowning at the statement. Finding porcine fare within fifteen minutes, Jesus gutted the leftover carcasses, carrying and dropping them at the door of the smokehouse shortly after four. A sated Mary following, they made their way to their dark room and settled into slumber.

Joseph, controlling his urge to get completely plastered the previous evening, rose early to head to the caravansary for the windows. Brutus was at his side in the wagon, pulling up to the bazaar shortly after ten, Demosthenes greeting them.

“What brings you here today sir?” he asked.

“Windows, we forgot them yesterday,” said Joseph.

“We have two types available, sliding and hinged ones, which do you prefer?”

“The hinged ones.”

“Perfect Gavinal bought most of the sliding ones anyway,” said Demosthenes while the group headed to the wagons.

“Where’s Callicles?” asked Joseph.

“Still sleeping, he got loaded with Kago and Aeschesles last night.”

“Imagine that,” Joseph replied.

Arriving at the wagons, Joseph purchased eight windows for 28 denarii a piece.

“I wonder how they make these things?” Joseph mused as Brutus and two other slaves moved a laden cart to his wagon.

“Windows?” asked Demosthenes, looking to him.

“Yes.”

“It’s said that master glassblowers take a lump of red hot glass on the end of an iron rod, and rotate it fast in some sort of fixture so it flattens out into thin sheets,” said Demosthenes,

having learned of the method from his uncle.

“Really?”

“Then they cut the finished sheets using an emery stone and artisans set the panes into sashes.”

“They use emery to cut it?”

“It’s said that emery cuts glass as easily as one cuts cloth with shears.”

“Incredible,” said Joseph, arriving at the wagon.

“The procedure’s been in general use for the past forty years or so according to Lucien the trader at the Chrysopolis warehouse, probably invented about 100 years ago. Before that, artisans would pour molten glass into a mold, but the panes were much smaller and thicker in those days.”

“You know a lot about glass,” Joseph replied, handing him 224 denarii from a leather pouch while the slaves stacked the windows into the wagon between mats of woven straw.

“We have to know about all items we stock Julius the elder, after all, people ask questions, and it isn’t proper for a vendor not to know the answers,” said Demosthenes, pocketing the coins and holding out his hand.

Shaking his hand, Joseph nodded to the lad, he and Brutus climbing aboard the wagon.

“Is my uncle coming over to visit again before we leave?” asked Demosthenes.

“I hope so, we have to get rid of some that beer don’t we?” a smiling Joseph asked, taking to the reins and pulling out. Heading to the farm at a leisurely pace, he remarked, “It’s a good thing Callicles wasn’t up this morning.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because we’d probably sit around all day and get drunk with him, and we have more harvesting to do,” said Joseph while they rode along, Brutus smiling at the remark.

Pulling into the farm, Brutus asked, “Why did you buy so many windows Julius the elder?”

“I want to put an addition on the house to be used as a sleeping quarters for Ruth, and I also think windows in the slave quarters would be a nice idea, don’t you?” Joseph answered, coming to a stop in front of the house.

“Yes, thank you Julius the elder.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Joseph with a wave of a hand, stepping from the wagon, the slave taking the reins. “Find a safe place for the windows and run the rig to the stable,” he added, walking to the house.

“Right,” Brutus replied, motioning the horses forward.

Stepping into the kitchen, Joseph was greeted by Ruth, asking, “Have you eaten master Julius?”

“No, and please call me Julius!” Joseph exclaimed, sitting down at the table.

“I’m sorry, what would you like to have from me today, Julius the elder?”

You don’t want to know, thought Joseph, ogling the attractive, petite teenaged Jewess, for a moment imagining her standing nude in his kitchen. “Anything will do, you’re an excellent cook,” Joseph answered, dismissing the lascivious thoughts.

“We have boiled eggs, fresh bread I made this morning, honey porridge and cheese,” Ruth answered, Joseph still coveting her shapely body and pretty face, much to his chagrin.

“I’m starved, give me some of each,” said Joseph, leaning back on a chair and closing his eyes, thinking of his beloved wife. The meal was served quickly, the slave placing his late breakfast on the table.

“Would you like water too?” asked Ruth, Joseph wolfing down the food.

“Hell no, bring me beer, this is delicious,” Joseph answered, his mouth full, starting on peeled, salted hard-boiled eggs after virtually inhaling the porridge.

Ruth returned with a cup of Gallic beer for the patriarch of the Chrysippus clan.

“Thanks kid,” Joseph replied.

“Is there anything else you may require of me Julius the elder?” asked Ruth, she having perceived his ogling of her while moving about the kitchen.

“Tend to my wife’s needs,” Joseph ordered, noting his teenage slave was being a tease to a much older man, who wasn’t interested and knew that she was only playing a game.

“Yes master Julius,” said Ruth, leaving the kitchen and walking to the bedroom, seductively shaking her hips as she went.

I’ll have to have to put her in her place if this keeps up, thought Joseph, finishing his eggs and grabbing a slice of cheese. For all of his bitter cynicism and atheism, Joseph was a one-woman man who dearly loved his Mary of Bethlehem, a love for his mate that had lasted and still burned brightly for 35 long years. ***Calicles was right about that little tease, with her moves she’d make the perfect whore***, he thought, finishing his cheese and beer.

Walking from the house, he mounted a horse, heading out to find his trusted overseer, Brutus of Rome. Finding him and the other slaves working in the north field, harvesting the last of the wheat with sickles, a surprised Joseph remarked, “So Brutus, I see you and the others have almost finished the fields.”

“Yes, there’s only one left, we must get the grain harvested before the freeze sets in.”

“It’s early, the freeze is weeks away, what’s the rush?”

“We’ve several days of threshing to do, besides, Icarus and Ganymede have to work the forge all next week filling the centurion’s latest order, and the women have to deal with the hides Julius the younger has taken.”

“You’re right, thank you my slaves,” said Joseph as Cyril looked to him. “What are you doing out here Cyril?”

“Getting exercise,” a sweating Cyril replied.

“Shouldn’t you be studying scrolls?”

“I do in the evening, oftentimes with your son and Maria.”

“Of course,” Joseph replied, recalling that Cyril liked the concept of physical labor for health reasons, afterward spending many of his evenings talking with friends Jesus and Mary, discussing philosophy, the arts and science.

“Very well, carry on,” said Joseph, mounting his horse and riding to the house.

* * *

Jesus and consort rose at dusk, the Magdalene making her way to his mother’s bedroom to check on her and the baby, Jesus moving to the kitchen for a tasty glass of beer.

“Good evening son,” said Joseph, stepping in from the porch.

“Good evening father, how’s the farm doing?”

“Very well, would you believe Brutus and crew have almost finished the harvest?”

“Then it’s good that Callicles and his people came by early, otherwise we’d have no room for it in the granary,” Jesus observed.

“They still have to thresh it,” said Joseph, dipping a pitcher in an amphora of beer sitting next to the kitchen table.

“That should take about a week.”

“Yes, just after Callicles takes off, along with you I imagine,” Joseph replied, pouring beer from the pitcher.

“Exactly,” said Jesus, finishing his glass.

“He’s coming by the night before he leaves.”

“As usual, it should be fun.”

“So, what route are you taking to Europe?” Joseph asked, taking a deep drink.

“I figure we’ll head to Chrysopolis and fly over the Hellespont into Thrace.”

“Oh, I forgot, that bat thing of yours,” said Joseph, stretching and letting out a yawn.

“It comes in handy when one has to cross rivers,” Jesus replied, filling his glass.

“I imagine so,” his father agreed, taking the pitcher and refilling his glass. Taking another sip, he remarked, “I’m glad you’re here, I need to talk to you about Ruth.”

“And?”

“Would you believe she’s trying to seduce me?”

“She is?”

“Only after a fashion,” said Joseph, “She’s a silly kid, it’s probably a game to her, seeing if a foolish old man with a hard on will take the bait. Sure, she’s good-looking all right, but even if I were so inclined, I wouldn’t bother – you know what I mean.”

“Very typical for a girl her age,” Jesus replied, “I recall when I was young a girl named Hanna stripped nude in an olive grove, trying to get me to indulge in her comely favors. I wouldn’t worry about it dad, she’s just teasing you, ignore it and she’ll stop after a time.”

“I know that, so, what did you do regarding Hannah?” Joseph asked, not knowing the particular story, but recalling the young girl from long ago, a hazel-eyed beauty named Hanna of Nazareth.

“Nothing, I wasn’t interested in women at the time, I was only fourteen.”

“That’s no excuse, my brother Simon had sex when he was twelve and I knew my first woman at fifteen, she was an older broad too,” said Joseph, downing his beer.

“You don’t say?” Jesus answered, raising an eyebrow.

“I do say,” Joseph replied, “She wanted it, she was cute, so I gave it to her in the woods; she liked it too.”

“How old was she?”

“Who knows, maybe nineteen or twenty.”

“Was she a virgin?”

“Nope, just a slut, if you ask me that gorgeous bitch probably screwed half of Bethlehem before I got hold of her; she really liked sex as I recall.”

“What was her name?”

“I don’t remember, Esther, or Ester, or maybe Abigail, hell, that was forty years ago.”

Jesus sat thunderstruck at his father’s blunt admissions of what was regarded in Judea as wanton sinfulness, not knowing what to say.

“Got you with that one didn’t I?” asked Joseph.

“According to Roman law you could take Ruth’s virtue with no legal reprisals, due to her being your slave,” said Jesus, plainly ignoring his father’s question, sounding like a Roman lawyer while refilling his glass.

“What do you think I am, I’d never do such a thing, raping a woman, even if I do own her ass, it’s disgusting,” Joseph retorted, vestiges of his Hebrew morality coming to the surface, reaching for the pitcher and topping off his glass.

“Yes father, I was only pointing out the law of the land.”

“Law or not, any man who’d take a woman without her consent is nothing but a goddamn animal,” said Joseph, taking another long drink from his glass.

“You know, Pontius Pilate was having sex with a pair of young slave girls on the night that I killed him,” said Jesus, downing his glass, reliving the bitter memory of the enslaved twins,

keeping the fact he slaughtered them to himself.

“So that’s why you killed him isn’t it?” asked Joseph, knowing the story and his son’s strict moral standards, even as a vampire.

“That’s right, he pleaded with me that he tried to save me from death, but I saw him with the girls before confronting him and figured he deserved such a fate.”

“He did, never fault yourself there.”

“I don’t, but Mary has pointed it out, especially regarding Pilate.”

“I wouldn’t be concerned, I think she’s simply trying to show you that you’re still human,” said Joseph, reaching for the pitcher.

“Probably.”

“So, when did you lose it?” asked Joseph.

“Lose what?”

“Your virginity for God’s sake,” said Joseph, resting his head on an arm.

“I lost it when I was eighteen, in Rome,” Jesus replied, admitting his carnal sin.

“See, you are human after all,” Joseph observed, smiling.

“I never said I wasn’t.”

“Who was she?”

“A Gallic girl I liked, the daughter of a fabric merchant, if you really need to know the lurid details,” answered Jesus, looking to his father.

“Oh,” said Joseph, realizing he should press no further.

“Well, regarding Ruth, would you like me to hypnotize her so she won’t bother you, or would you rather deal with it yourself?”

“I can handle her, I just needed your opinion,” Joseph replied, shaking his head at the suggestion.

“Incidentally, does mother know about what you told me?”

“No, and if I were you I wouldn’t tell her,” Joseph retorted, knowing he would never do such a thing.

“I have no intention father, it’s just you’re so much different than I believed you were,” said Jesus, looking out a window.

“Perhaps you were gullible in the past,” Joseph replied, holding up hands.

“Perhaps, but not that gullible I think,” said Jesus, refilling his glass and taking another drink of beer.

“What do you mean?” asked Joseph, rising from the table to refill the pitcher.

“The fact that you robbed a publican who was later crucified for your thievery, and that you knew a fallen woman before marriage, along with claiming to be an atheist after all those years of practicing the Hebrew faith, theoretically makes you a hypocrite,” Jesus answered as diplomatically as possible.

“So what, we’re all hypocrites or haven’t you noticed, after all, your woman was once a whore,” said Joseph, filling the pitcher, not caring or offended by Jesus’ blunt answer.

“Yes she was, but is no longer, and that doesn’t mean I’m a – ”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” Joseph retorted, pointing a finger at Jesus. “You screwed some broad in Rome when you were in your teens, and now you slaughter people by the wagonload for the blood in their veins, deserving or not, and remember in Exodus the fifth commandment says that thou shalt not – ”

“I get your point, you think so?” a frowning Jesus asked, holding up hands in protest to his adversarial father.

“Yeah, and between you and me I don’t care. Further, after what you’ve been through, neither should you, so don’t worry about it,” Joseph answered, sitting down and refilling his glass.

“I don’t really worry about it, but what do you mean?” asked Jesus, not following his father’s reasoning.

“What do I mean? It’s obvious that all the crap the priests said in Judea, along with what’s written down in the Torah is nothing but a crock. Hell, to me you’re proof of that,” said a bitter Joseph, taking a deep drink.

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean – are you crazy?” Joseph asked, staring him in the face.

“I’m sorry father, I don’t follow, please explain.”

“Explain? You can’t be that stupid, verily I say unto you, tell me wise one, what kind of god would let my wife almost die while giving birth to my eighth child?”

“Mother and Julian survived their ordeal.”

“Only because of Electra’s skill and nothing more.”

“True.”

Further, what kind of vicious, monstrous god would condemn my firstborn, my own flesh and blood, to be slaughtered in agony on a cross, and then out of sheer spitefulness force him to resurrect from the grave to walk the earth as a vampire?” asked Joseph, growing angry.

“I don’t know,” Jesus replied, filling his glass from the pitcher.

“At least you admit that,” Joseph answered in disgust, in no mood for discussing theology.

The Magdalene walked into the kitchen, having played with Julian while conversing with Mary in the bedroom. “Hi Joseph,” she said, sitting down at the table beside Jesus.

“Good evening, care for beer?” asked Joseph, thankful she had intruded on a conversation

that had filled him with bitterness.

“Why not, it’s early yet,” the Magdalene replied, Joseph moving to retrieve a cup. “Your wife told me Julian said his first real word today.”

“He did?” asked Joseph, turning from a cupboard.

“Yes, it was ‘me’, spoken in perfect Latin.”

“Excellent,” said Jesus as Joseph smiled.

* * *

The conversation continued for several hours, Cyril dropping by, informed that Jesus and consort were preparing to travel to Europe within the week. “You will stop by to bid us farewell before you leave?” he asked, nursing a cup of herbal tea.

“Of course, have no concern, we will return,” said Jesus.

“When, in a hundred years?” asked Cyril, his father breaking into laughter.

“No, in only a few years, I simply want to show Mary the sights of Athens and Rome,” Jesus answered, not realizing the humor of the situation.

“You will be gone a good while,” Cyril observed, “There is a lot to see in Athens and Rome.”

“I’ll write, not only to my parents but to you.”

“I shall look forward to it.”

“It’s good you came by Cyril, I need to discuss contingency plans with you and my father.”

“Contingency plans?”

“Yes, as you are aware, Mary and I have to head to Rome to establish citizenship for the family, and should we run into an unfortunate happenstance, we’ll need another plan.”

“In the event that you are destroyed before returning,” said Cyril, Joseph frowning at the remark.

“Yes,” Jesus replied, looking to the Magdalene.

“It does have to be addressed,” Mary agreed as Joseph looked to her.

“So, what are your suggestions son?” asked Joseph.

“Should we fail to return by the time of the census, you, mother, Julian and Cyril will have to head to Rome to establish citizenship for the family.”

“How?”

“People are easily bought everywhere,” answered a cynical Jesus. “With the money we have and Cyril’s knowledge of Roman law and procedures, it should be easy to bribe an official at the tabularium and have the necessary documents forged.”

“It should be possible, but I feel that you give me more credit than I am due,” said Cyril.

“I have faith in you,” Jesus replied, an unsure Cyril frowning.

“How much money would it take?” asked Joseph.

“For citizenship I’d be prepared to spend a thousand aurei.”

“That’s a bit steep,” said Joseph.

“If it saves your life it’s cheap. Aside from that, there’s at least 5,000 aurei sitting in the cave; I’ll show you and Cyril where it is before we leave.”

“Okay,” said Joseph, resting his head on an arm.

“I should make a note of the location once you show us,” said Cyril.

“No need, I’ll draw you a map after I move the loot further back in the cave for better security.”

“You – can’t die son,” said Joseph.

“No, as the Magdalene and I are already dead, but we can be destroyed father.”

* * *

Callicles came by a few evenings later to get drunk, thoroughly enjoying himself with Jesus and family. He brought along Demosthenes, mercenary friends Kago and Aeschesles, Gavinal Septimus and Marcus Pertinax, all riding to the Chrysippus farm in his touring wagon. Pulling up at a little past eight, the men observed Jesus and Ganymede having a sparring match by torchlight, the muscular slave now expert with the gladius. Quitting for the evening, Jesus and Ganymede walked to the wagon, the vampiric Christ greeting their guests.

“Good evening friends, welcome to our farm,” said Jesus, his father waving from the porch.

“What were you trying to do Julius, kill each other?” Callicles asked, stepping down and tying the horses to a hitching post, looking to Jesus and the slave.

“Heavens no, we were sparring, Ganymede wanted to learn the finer points of sword fighting. I’ve been teaching him for the past few months.”

“You fight well,” an impressed Kago observed, he considered an expert swordsman.

“Thanks,” said Ganymede, wiping sweat from his brow while the others stepped from the wagon and headed for the porch.

“May I spar with your slave?” Kago asked, feeling he could use practice while Callicles inquired if beer or wine was available, Joseph answering in the affirmative, calling for Ruth.

“Ask him, or you can spar with me if you like,” Jesus replied, standing on the steps, sword in hand.

“I’d like to try you both,” said Kago, looking to his sheathed gladius.

“What do you think?” asked Jesus, turning to Ganymede, standing a few feet from the porch, sword in hand.

“I’m game,” said Ganymede.

“Okay, who’s first?” asked Kago, walking down the steps and unsheathing his gladius.

“Don’t get rough with them Kago, they’re friends of ours,” said Callicles.

“No problem boss,” Kago acknowledged with a wave of his sword.

A confidant Ganymede stepped forward and said, “Defend yourself friend.”

Jesus moved to the porch. The slave went for the mercenary in a determined attack, swords colliding for the next fifteen minutes, the pair in a mock dance of death before the others.

“Your slave would do very well in the arena,” an impressed Gavinal remarked to Joseph while Ruth passed cups of beer to the spectators, slaves Icarus and Brutus also there, drinking beer and delighting in the revelry.

“That’s what my son says,” Joseph answered, intently watching the match.

“You’re pretty good,” said Kago, making a gallant attempt to fend off Ganymede.

“Not half as good as Julius is,” Ganymede replied, pressing the attack and disarming the mercenary seconds later.

“Shit!” Kago exclaimed, staring at his gladius sticking in the earth.

“Looks to me like you’ve met your match Kago,” said Aeschesles.

“I need a drink,” a sweating Kago replied, pulling his gladius from the earth and returning it to its scabbard.

“Want to try me again?” asked Ganymede, holding his sword in an attack position.

“I’m too tired, you beat me fair and square, that’s enough for today,” said Kago, both men heading for the porch.

“What about me?” Jesus asked as the mercenary walked past, grabbing a cup of beer from a table.

“Forget it, if you taught him to fight that well I’m no match for you either,” a frowning Kago observed, taking a deep drink of beer. Later, the party headed to the kitchen where a buffet table prepared by Ruth was stocked with various fare. Each man helping himself to a plate, they moved out to the torch lit porch in the warm fall evening, Jesus leaning against a porch rail drinking beer from a pitcher. Drinking and talking over the next hours, a curious Kago was engaged in conversation with Ganymede, asking him how he learned to fight with a sword so well.

“I’ve fought with them for years, my former master Marcus Trajanus was a professional gladiator in his youth,” said Ganymede, refilling his cup from a pitcher.

“So was I, but they never taught us to fight that well in Capua.”

“Julius the younger taught me the finer points only this year; he learned from warriors in a country called Kush.”

“It’s too bad you or he couldn’t teach me your moves,” a drunk Kago replied, Jesus and consort having excused themselves near midnight so they could head out and sate their need

for blood. Not that they put it that way, they were gone less than an hour, finding, slaughtering and robbing thieves on the west road.

“Perhaps we can if the master doesn’t mind,” said Ganymede, rather drunk.

“I’d appreciate it, you fight well with the gladius, how are you with a long sword?”

“I, Julius the younger and his father can use either weapon, but they and I prefer the gladius for close fighting.”

“A long sword has more power, I took a thief’s head off with one last month,” said Kago, slurring his words.

“True, but the gladius is much easier to handle,” Ganymede replied, their conversation continuing for the next half hour, the drunken slave attempting to show him attack moves from his repose in the chair, fortunately without a sword. Their hunger sated, Jesus and Mary flew to the farm, transforming in the shadows, returning as Brutus fell to the porch floor unconscious.

“That Brutus of yours drinks entirely too much,” said Callicles, looking to the still form on the floor.

“That’s the pot calling the kettle black is it not?” Gavinal asked, looking to the trader as Marcus Pertinax smiled, he leaning heavily against the porch rail.

“Come to think of it Gavinal, yeah – get me another beer will you girl?” asked Callicles, looking to Ruth while the rest of the group laughed. Ruth returned with beer as Callicles asked Jesus, “You and the wife are heading back to Europe?”

“Yes,” said Jesus, “I miss Rome and Etruria.”

“I’d never miss Rome, much of the place is a pigsty, excepting for the Emperor’s palace on the Palatine, along with the temples and the forum,” said Gavinal, having been in Rome many times on government business.

“That’s only in the slums Gavinal, further, we still own land in Gaul, I want to see how our vineyards are doing,” Jesus lied.

“I see, a business trip,” Gavinal replied, trying to focus on Jesus.

“That and a vacation,” said Jesus.

The unbridled drinking continued through most of the night, the slaves falling to the floor one by one, Jesus looking to the east for the rising sun near five. Callicles finally collapsed to the floor unconscious while notary Marcus snored away in a chair. The Magdalene had retired near three, with Jesus, feigning drunkenness as the sky was lightening near six, remarking, “I don’t know about you folks, but I’ve had it.”

Joseph nodded, looked to his son and replied, “I’ll bid them farewell and see you later today after you sleep it off.”

“Right dad,” said Jesus, rising unsteadily for better effect.

“May you and your wife have a safe trip to Europe Julius the younger,” Gavinal called as Jesus

started for the door.

“Thank you friend Gavinal,” Jesus replied, shutting the door to protect him from the rising sun.

“I love that guy, but your son’s so pale, he needs some sun,” said Gavinal.

“He and his wife Maria are thinkers, spending their evenings in introspection and studying scrolls,” Joseph replied, “Most times he rarely goes to bed before sunrise.”

“Like my uncle Sextus in Rome does,” said Gavinal, dropping the subject and pouring a glass of beer as the sun broke the horizon.

Joseph and Gavinal sat on the porch for another hour, sleepy slaves helping him, Demosthenes and a plastered Marcus Pertinax to the touring wagon at seven, a brilliant fall sun rising over Tibernum. The unconscious Callicles, with a pickled Kago and Aeschesles, were loaded aboard as human cargo and spirited away from the farm while Joseph waved from the porch.

“Life is good,” said a smiling Joseph as he shut the door, his slaves snoring away on the porch. Heading for his bedroom, he fell into bed, the rest of his household in blissful slumber.

* * *

Over the next nights Jesus prepared for their journey to Europe, making sure the farm was in order, his parents safe, and the slaves happy and content in their surroundings. In addition, he made certain their hoard of loot was safely hidden from possible explorers, deep in their cave. Moving their treasure five hundred feet further back in the cavern, almost 6,000 aurei was stashed in neat piles down a shaft twenty feet deep, along with smaller piles of gems and jewelry.

“How much do you want to take with us?” Mary asked, standing in pitch darkness, Jesus dropping a handful of aurei into a leather pouch.

“I figure we’ll carry a couple hundred aurei, just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“In case we don’t find anyone to rob along the way.”

“That’ll be the day, I’ll bet by the time we reach Rome we’ll have another thousand thanks to the jackasses lurking the roads,” Mary declared as Jesus leapt up the shaft, she following.

“Probably,” said Jesus after landing.

“So, what will we do with the money we steal along the way?”

“Maybe we’ll buy a vineyard in Etruria or Gaul, just for the hell of it,” Jesus replied as they headed to the mouth of the cave.

“I suppose,” said Mary, not realizing it was a game to Jesus, an immortal man who didn’t care about money at all and never did even when alive, his only real use for money being to help those in need.

Electra, hearing the news of their trip, dropped by with an amulet acquired in her travels,

presenting it to Jesus and Mary. "I want you to have this Master Julius," she said, looking to him. Bearing an image of two-faced Janus, god of beginnings and endings, Electra added, "This god is said to protect one during journeys and will assure your safe return."

"Thank you Electra," Jesus replied, taking the charm by its chain.

"To assure protection for both, please weave yours and your wife's hair into the chain, then place it around your neck and never remove it," Electra advised as a careless Jesus put it in a tunic pocket.

"I shall do so before we leave," said Jesus.

Each slave made a point to drop by, all relating they would miss their friend and son of the master of the farm, Julius Chrysippus the younger.

"Why do you have to leave now Julius?" asked Brutus over a beer, "It's getting near winter."

"We'll spend time in southern Greece till spring and head to our holdings in Gaul then," lied Jesus.

"Delos, probably," said Brutus.

"There and Lesbos."

"The isle of Sappho."

"Exactly," Jesus answered, having perused the lyricism of Sappho during his travels, albeit in Latin. Spending their last evening in the kitchen talking with his parents and Cyril, Jesus handed his father a detailed parchment map revealing where their loot was stashed in the cave. Pitcher of beer on the table, Jesus and Mary conversed with them into the wee hours of the morning. Pouring a beer, he remarked near midnight, "I was thinking dad, during our absence perhaps Cyril should move into our bedroom."

"I remember you saying that," replied Joseph.

"Since he knows of our true natures I feel he's more like family than anything else."

"I agree," said Joseph, looking to his wife, "What do you think?"

"It's fine with me."

"Good," said Joseph, looking to the slave, "You're welcome to their room Cyril, if you like, until they return."

"What of the other slaves?" Cyril asked, sitting down his cup of herbal tea.

"What about them?" asked Jesus.

"They may feel slighted at my moving in with you," the teacher answered, looking to Joseph.

"Nonsense," said Joseph, "We'll tell them you're teaching me history, science and philosophy, and that I wish for you to reside here while you do."

"My former master said the same thing," Cyril replied.

"Then it's settled," said Jesus.

“Say, would you care to play a game of latrunculi with me to pass the time Julius?” Cyril asked, Joseph laughing out loud.

“No thanks,” Jesus replied, “I’ve only beaten you twice in fifteen games and will have to work on my strategy during our absence.”

“You and a friend of his named John are the only people who were ever able to beat him,” said Joseph with a touch of pride.

“He told me that the night we first played the game.”

“Then you beat him,” said Joseph, yawning.

“After three hours, and only by two or so moves. Julius is a very formidable player, once he learns to take more time planning crucial moves, I doubt I will be able to take him again.”

Jesus smiled at the declaration. “Have no fear good Cyril, while I’m traveling I shall further hone my skills at latrunculi and play you again when I return.”

“If I am still alive,” Cyril replied.

“Why shouldn’t you be?” asked Jesus.

“I am nearly seventy-one years old, and for a mortal of any age just a few years can be a very long time, but for a vampire, a year or even a dozen is but a moment.”

“You’re right,” said Jesus, looking to the elderly teacher, thinking what a waste it would be for him to die and reflecting how wise Cyril was, his knowing that the past few years had indeed passed very quickly for them, it seemingly only months to he and Mary.

His parents retiring near two, Cyril and the couple were left in the kitchen, passing the hours discussing politics, philosophy and finally, vampirism.

“It would be interesting if you could find a copy of Thucydides’ legend scroll in your travels, to compare it with the writings of Herodotus,” said Cyril, straining tealeaves from his cup and adding a spoonful of honey.

“I’ll look for it,” Jesus replied, pouring another beer, “Along with anything I may think of interest to you.”

“Thank you, when you return may we both know more about vampirism,” said a yawning Cyril, noticing from a far window that the sky was beginning to lighten.

“Indeed,” Jesus answered.

“Dawn is approaching,” Cyril observed, “I must head back once I finish this tea.”

“We have to turn in too, we need rest for the journey tomorrow night.”

“At what time are you leaving?”

“Just after sunset, I figure it would be best that way, no long good-byes and such.”

“True,” said Cyril, regret in his voice, taking a deep drink of tea.

“Is something wrong?” asked Mary, looking to him and placing her hand on his.

“Nothing really Maria, I have grown rather fond of you both,” Cyril answered, lips pressing tightly while looking at her hand.

“Parting is as bitter as gall, may our next meeting be as sweet as honey,” said Jesus, rising from the table as Cyril finished his tea and rose.

“If we should meet again.”

“We shall, I assure you,” Jesus replied. Walking to the door, the vampiric couple stopped at the threshold, noting from the lightening sky that dawn was arriving.

“Take care Cyril,” said a tearful Mary, giving the old man an embrace.

“And you take care dear Mary,” Cyril replied, returning the embrace, calling the Magdalene by her true name. Looking to Jesus, the teacher put out his hand, giving Jesus a firm Roman handshake. “I shall miss you friend Jesus of Nazareth.”

“And I you, friend Cyril of Athens,” said Jesus. The door closed, Cyril walking to the slave quarters, Jesus and consort moving to their darkened room and falling into slumber.

Awakening shortly before sunset, Jesus roused Mary, dressed, headed to the kitchen and poured a glass of fine Gallic wine.

Joseph walked to the kitchen and asked, “You’re taking off tonight?”

“Yes, I figured we’d say goodbye to you and mother, leaving via the west road,” Jesus replied, downing the wine.

“We’re going to miss you son.”

“I shall miss you and mother, but we must be moving on.”

“Of course,” said Joseph, “Be sure to say goodbye to your mother and Julian; I have to see Brutus about the hunting schedule.”

“Yes father,” replied Jesus, leaning back in his chair. Joseph headed through the doorway, closing the door, just as the Magdalene appeared from their room. “Hello woman, father said that we should say goodbye to mother and my brother before we leave.”

“Didn’t he want to say goodbye to me?” Mary asked, feeling hurt by Joseph’s absence.

“He doesn’t want us to leave, this is his way of dealing with the situation,” said Jesus, looking to the door, dropping his chair to the floor and rising.

“I see,” Mary replied, walking to Joseph and Mary’s bedroom with her consort. Julian, a very precocious child, blue-gray eyed like his father and Jesus, looked to his brother and said, ‘me’, in Latin, his mother smiling at her firstborn.

“I love you my little brother,” said Jesus, holding the baby and hugging him, handing him to his mother.

“Ma-ra,” said Julian, looking to his undead aunt, pointing a stubby finger at her, clumsily attempting to stand up on the bed for a hug from her. The Magdalene hugged the child and returned him to his mother, placing him at her breast. She smiled tearfully, thankful to whatever

gods who were that she had her beloved Jesus, a good and wonderful man she had loved for so many years, also thankful that she, so denied of love in the past, had the love of his family and baby brother.

Bidding farewell to his mother and brother, they set out on their journey to Europe. The vampiric Christ was carrying a light leather satchel of appropriate clothing and money for the trip, both looking back in the direction of the farm occasionally while leaving Tibernum. For the traveler Jesus, it was just a brief parting from his latest residence, but for Mary Magdalene, Tibernum and the Chrysippus farm was the only true home she had ever known.

Near eight, Cyril knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Joseph called, sitting alone at the kitchen table drinking beer.

“Greetings Julius the Elder,” said Cyril, taking a seat.

“Good evening to you,” Joseph replied, “Are you moving in tonight?”

“No, not yet, there are items I must collect from the slave quarters; I just dropped by to visit.”

“My son and his wife have already left.”

“I surmised that, and figured since they were gone you could use the company.”

Joseph smiled and said, “Yes, I probably could, the place already seems empty without him.”

“He is a remarkable man.”

“That he is; I wonder if he’ll ever return,” said Joseph, looking to the door as if expecting Jesus to walk through any moment.

“He will,” Cyril answered, also looking to the door.

The End