

THE CONSPIRACY
TO ASSASSINATE
JESUS CHRIST



A Novel of Historical Fiction by

Chris Seepe

The Conspiracy to Assassinate Jesus Christ
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Dedicated to

Ruby, Christopher, Elena and Brendon, and my close friends whose support and understanding were instrumental in completing this near-decade-long project.

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Preface

It has often been said that history is written by the victors, with many of the voices of the losers in debates being silenced through neglect or repression.

In *The Conspiracy to Assassinate Jesus Christ*, every effort was made to maintain the secular history and biblical accounts surrounding the lives of Jesus Christ, Praetorian Prefect Lucius Aelius Sejanus, Roman governor Pontius Pilate and others. Nowhere within this story is there a deliberate intention by the author to contradict any accounts in the Christian Bible except for the denouement of Judas Iscariot, which artistic license was taken primarily for dramatic effect. However, the author has taken extensive artistic license to speculate on the *motivations* of the various historical and biblical characters to create an entirely new novel of fiction.

The Bible provides little definitive information on many of the relationships, and little or no explanation for the motivations, of many of the personages identified in the New Testament. The myriad interpretations of the Bible available can be counted by the thousands of Christian sects that exist in the world today, each claiming exclusive dominion over the interpretation of Christian Holy Scripture.

Nothing in this novel is intended to be interpreted as the way things were, but rather it offers pure conjecture of how things might have been. Nevertheless, unlike a pure fiction novel, where locations and facts, even impossible events, are all contrived at the whim of the author, this novel is historical fiction. As such, the author took tremendous pains and extraordinary amounts of time—years—to research the facts where they were available. The author hopes that he will be forgiven for errors in dates, people, places and chronology.

In some instances, the author took license to include events which never happened, or to purposely create events which may run in the face of popular conjecture if the author felt it would help the story along.

For those readers looking for something beyond the ‘surface’ story, this novel also considers many historical and biblical aspects of Jesus Christ that are still actively debated today, more than two thousand years after his death. The author spent inordinate amounts of time addressing and reconciling, solely for the purposes of this fiction story, many Christian theological issues. The notes at the back of this book attempt to briefly explain some of the principal research the author conducted, the decisions he made, and sometimes why he made them, in every case strictly to fit the plot of the story.

Once again, there is no hidden agenda or any attempt by the author to impart a particular view, philosophy or belief.

Chapter 1. 3 B.C.

My murder would many times be on the minds of men, but my end time would not be decided by them or any other person.

Wane not your faith in me for the destiny of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of a history already written. While still in the womb of my mother, Mary, I felt her debilitating fear. It made me anxious and unsettled, sometimes nauseous, and I remember the sensations as if they were only yesterday. I sensed my mother's all-consuming conflict between her maternal instincts and her great desire for self-preservation.

God gave his human creations free will. With it come debate, arguments, conflict and sometimes violence. Still in the womb, I heard the early arguments mother had with my stepfather, Joseph, with whom she had not yet consummated their marriage. She worried that others would not believe her claim that she had been visited by a divine guardian bearing a heavenly message: that she was to bear a child—as a virgin. An abortion would have avoided the severe strain my birth placed on my parents' relationship, but mother carried within her great moral integrity befitting the future mother of the Son of God. She would not deny God's plan, no matter what the consequence. But moral conviction and faith did not lessen her quiet anxiety and deathly fear.

To ease my parent's burden, my Father in heaven sent a guardian to visit my stepfather with the same message that mother had received. However, I knew in my stepfather's heart that he didn't truly believe it. I heard his doubts before I was born and, though he treated all his children equally and with great respect, there were times when I saw the doubt in his eyes, felt his doubt in the skipped beats of his heart when he looked at me and remembered. It was many years later, as I grew older and he discovered my special abilities, that father—for that is how I always thought of my earthly stepfather—finally accepted without question that mother had always been faithful to him. It is a testament to father's prodigious character that he successfully weathered God's traumatic test of his faith.

My parents faced an impossible choice. To declare mother an adulteress, a crime punished with death by stoning, was irreconcilable to father; to live a lie was divinely unforgiveable; to abort my birth, inconceivable. The solution was soon apparent. Don't create the circumstance that would require an explanation. Let people assume and believe what they wished.

Untenable to many who would later follow my message and believe in me, their pride impelling them to author creative reasons for my parent's unexplained departure from Nazareth, the simple truth was that we left Nazareth because of mother's crippling fear of death by stoning, and for father's sake, to avoid the humiliation that would almost certainly befall our family from mother's claim of a virgin birth.

Most of the village accepted father's plan to pursue business opportunities in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, away from Nazareth but mostly away from anyone who knew them.

It usually took a fit man like father four to five days to travel directly to Bethlehem, the ancestral town of King David. But this time he would carry mother, laden with me, by mule-drawn cart; and then there was the longstanding bitterness that lay between the Samaritans and Judeans to consider. Travelers from Galilee would not receive any kind of assistance or lodgings in Samaria.

Father decided it best to bear the expense of joining a caravan. We headed due east to the mouth of the River Jordan at the south end of the Sea of Galilee, trudging over the ridges and down the washes of the meandering, cactus-laden trail, all of us weathering a gauntlet of blazing hot days and thought-numbing frigid nights. We then turned south, travelling down along the east side of the

river, past Samaria, until we reached the north end of the Dead Sea, where we crossed back into Judea. The trip took the better part of a week.

With mother's peace came mine and the remainder of my gestation was a relatively happy time. But peace, once again, was not to be ours for long. My father had not considered that my birth would coincide with the tens of thousands of God's chosen people descending upon Jerusalem for the annual Passover pilgrimage. Bethlehem being south of Jerusalem and Nazareth being to the far north, father had reasoned that meeting other Nazarenes here would be unlikely. Looking back, we all discovered God's will being done for my birth. We were surrounded by throngs of all my peoples, nary a place to sleep. The spillover of pilgrims from Jerusalem as well as gentiles from points southeast to southwest just passing through, created conditions that were in many ways worse in Bethlehem than Jerusalem, save the absence of other Nazarenes. Even with the offer of a premium fee, there was simply no place available at any home or inn.

To my father's eternal shame, I was born in a stable, in a trough from which cattle eat. But I felt mother's immeasurable relief, freed of all her great burdens, in a single birthing event. Under the circumstances, any place that provided shelter and a modicum of privacy was more than happily accepted and she gave thanks to God for the blessing.

In culture and belief, mother was Judean but her ancestral heritage included Phoenician, Syrian, Greek and Hittite bloodlines. Her ancestors were strong and hardy women, used to the demands of a rural lifestyle, and all of them hardly remembered in posterity, their names simply passed on through verbal traditions, with a few accomplished women more impassionedly remembered, including Tamar and Ruth.

In contrast to her inner beauty and immaculate nature—born without personal or hereditary sin—and by the standards of our culture and place, my mother was relatively plain in appearance. Like most Judean women, she wore a simple shawl whenever she was outside the house, which covered her long, coal-colored wavy hair. The small thin strips of linen, which she habitually applied to keep her hair tied back, were of different colors, chosen as to her mood, and being a small allowance of immodest adornment that she permitted herself. She stood four feet ten inches and was most endearing when she stood on her toes to chastise one of her children, all of whom were taller than her by the time we each reached puberty. Her soft-spoken and quiet demeanor usually caused others to strain forward to hear what she was saying, but that was not to say that she didn't allow those close to her to experience the joy of her adventurous spirit and effervescent personality, nor was she hesitant to authoritatively demand to be done what she felt was right or proper. Her nose was characteristic of many women of the region, fleshy and convexed with a slight bend at the tip, and her lips were full, the lower lip marginally protruding past the upper lip. Only the most attentive, who looked past her dark green, dove-like eyes and thick eyelids, were apt to discover her ineffable wisdom. Mother's olive-colored skin was youthfully resilient, and remarkably unblemished and smooth except for her hands, which were calloused and rough, having succumbed early in life to the hardships most rural women experienced from toiling upon a sun-bleached, harsh and unforgiving land.

Father's bloodline was antithetical to mother's; much less cosmopolitan, but honorably traceable back to the venerable patriarch, Abraham, with some earlier hereditary inheritance from the Sumerians and Nodites. More ambitious members of father's extended family laid claim to direct descendancy from the kings David and Solomon, though none were so bold as to claim descent from Adam. My father's most recently remembered ancestors were carpenters, but also included smiths, masons and builders.

Trained as a mechanic in general but specializing in carpentry, he built not only furniture and kitchenware, but he repaired wagons, yokes and tools, and undertook all manner of home frame construction and repairs, especially roofing.

Father was a muscular, barrel-chested man, weighing perhaps one hundred and forty-five pounds, and standing five feet five inches, the average height of men in the region. He had uncommon grey-colored eyes and an equally uncommon clarity of sight at short and long distances, often noting movement in fields and bushes long before anyone else. His ears were disproportionately larger and protruded more noticeably from his head than the average man, which he vainly attempted to cover with his stringy chestnut-colored hair, fastidiously managed to never be longer than the top of his shoulders. Romans were clean shaven, in fact generally having no body hair at all, so it was often a matter of subversive pride and nationalistic resistance against Rome for Judean men to have a beard. Father proudly sported his always neatly trimmed beard and moustache.

His love for mother and his actions to protect her when his faith in God and the human spirit were severely tested, revealed him to be a righteous, kind and sensitive man. He was the consummate family patriarch, raising his six children to the best of his abilities. His high moral character and intelligent understanding were pivotal influences when I was a young child. Even when wronged, he was nevertheless always sensitive to the wrong-doer's shame, and he would seek to find a way to save face for all. This trait led him to have many friends and nary an enemy.

Even before I was born, I was connected to everything, and I felt everything interconnected through me. Mother was seventeen years old and father was twenty-six when I was born. With my first breath, I was in ecstatic awe of all the human senses; the sights, sounds and smells of the stable and the surrounding town, the pinch of pain of my bodily awakening, the taste of mother's milk, and the feelings of security and comfort in mother's arms.

I could feel the essence of life coursing through me, from the fine threads of hair on my head, down to the curiously long-lost individual functioning of my toes. My entry into the world gloriously overwhelmed my senses. I was alive, self-aware and born ready to embrace all that the world had to offer, ready to learn everything I could, impassioned with a keen unqualified sense of divine purpose, although I was then far from understanding God's specific purpose for me. What I did know, though, was that I was charged with living the whole of the human experience, embracing the strengths and weaknesses of the human condition, to be tempted, as I grew, by all the sins of humankind, and evolving bodily over time as do all of my Father's creatures and creations. Otherwise, why would I not have simply appeared by God's hand as a grown man, ready to do God's will?

As a babe, I observed everything, feeling a great urge to communicate with everyone, but words would not form. I had time though, lots of time; but I could still hardly wait.

I drunk in every sensuous experience during my first two years in Bethlehem, the 'house of bread' and city of David, later the place where David was anointed by Samuel as a future king, and prophesied to be the birthplace of the Messiah. It was for that reason that I particularly remembered as a toddler the pungent waft of aromatic oils that momentarily preceded two finely dressed men, themselves accompanied by a host of near-equally well-attired assistants. The two kingly-looking men said they had followed an unprecedented astronomical event, the birth of a new star in the heavens that led them to me. They bore gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, which made my family's life quite comfortable as I grew to adolescence, and empowered me with the means to gain the worldly knowledge I would need to fulfill my Father's purpose.

I later learned that the two princes, as my family liked to remember them, were Zoroastrian astrologers who believed in a universal and transcendental God, the Uncreated Creator to whom all worship must be directed. My destiny would one day lead me back to their culture. Upon discovering what they believed to be my true nature, the two men had confided in father that they had been acting as royal agents of Herod Archelaus, ethnarch of Judea, Edom and Samaria, and one of the sons of Herod the Great. The princes had been charged with seeking out the recently born, rumored descendant of King David, who Herod Archelaus believed would one day threaten his rule. The two princes resolved in their hearts that they would be judged harshly by the Uncreated Creator on their Judgment Day if they were party to any scheme of Herod's that might lead to my harm. They returned to their homeland by a circuitous route that gave my family and me an opportunity to escape the ethnarch and his spies.

Rumor had spread that, upon learning of the two princes' deception, Herod had fallen into a rage and issued orders to murder every male in his kingdom under two years of age. It was a sad aspect of the human condition, as I repeatedly learned over my lifetime, that humankind prefers to destroy that which is a threat or not understood. Or perhaps it was not a flaw at all but a divinely intended character trait made during the creation of man? It certainly was no chance event that my Father in heaven would one day use that very trait to help me achieve my great purpose.

Praise and glory to my Father in heaven that Herod had been convinced by others not to act on his infanticidal desire. If Herod had only been familiar with the Scriptures, the book of the prophet Micah of Moresheth-Gath would have told him where to find me.

That was the second of many times that my murder would be on the minds of men.

Chapter 2. Jerusalem: 26 A.D.

Jerusalem: a bone-dry landscape that is home to the gigantic, nocturnal, hairy, quick and agile Camel Spider, the prolific insect-hunting Carabid Beetle, and, of course the slow, ovoviviparous, nocturnal Yellow Scorpion, with its extremely painful sting.

Transients are scarce, and locals scratch their living from the sun-baked soil, which breeds hard men and women who eke out a meager existence in the shadow of a hostile and arrogant oppressor.

The Roman Province of Judea came into existence in 6 A.D. after Herod Archelaus, son of King Herod the Great, was deposed by Augustus and banished to Vienne in Gaul. Samaria, Judea, and Idumea were then combined and placed under the governorship of a Roman Prefect.

Judea was tiny compared to other Roman territories, measuring roughly one hundred miles north to south and forty-four miles east to west. It comprised three large, ethnically diverse groups; Jews, Samaritans and pagans.

“Viper bastards; all of them.” That was Pontius Pilate’s summation of the people he had been sent to govern in 26 A.D., from his headquarters in Caesarea, Judea. He was the fifth prefect appointed to the post responsible for administrating the areas of Judea, Samaria, and the area south as far as the Dead Sea to Gaza.

For most of the year, Pilate and his wife, Claudia Procula, lived at the luxurious governor’s palace in the city of Caesarea, about sixty miles northwest of Jerusalem, traditional capital of Judea and still the center of Jewish life. Caesarea was primarily pagan and became the province’s capital as well as the territory’s Roman administration headquarters, so the governor’s residence and a small army were also located here.

Pilate and Claudia were sitting alone on separate bronze couches of immaculate craftsmanship in the main atrium, which was usually the center of social activity in the spectacular palace. The atrium was a perfect architectural adaptation to the Mediterranean heat, a room open to the sky to allow fresh air to circulate in and among the corridors and rooms. Most of the atrium floor was a mosaic of highly polished multicolored stones, like many homes of nobility, but the center of the governor’s atrium comprised a large square of *giallo antico*, or numidic yellow marble, quarried in Numidia in North Africa. Out of the center of the gleaming marble floor rose the navel of the atrium, a pool centerpiece, or *impluvium*, made from the same numidic marble, which caught the rainwater that fell through the open ceiling. When the first governor of Judea had arrived, he Hellenized this room. Hidden eaves troughs, channels and pipes collected additional rainwater from the roofs which all conjoined behind, and poured out through the mouth of, a large carved face of the god Jove on one end of the pool.

“We’ve always agreed that this posting was a stepping stone, dear,” Claudia responded. “A few years here and, with a little support from the gods and the good graces of Lucius, you’ll have a governorship worthy of your talents.”

Claudia was referring to Lucius Aelius Sejanus, Prefect of the Praetorian Guard since 15 A.D., who had, from obscurity over an eleven-year period, navigated constant deadly intrigue in Rome to become, next to the emperor, Tiberius Claudius Nero, the most powerful man in the Roman Empire.

Around 21 A.D., Sejanus had successfully lobbied to have the geographically-dispersed Praetorians centralized in one huge barracks on Rome’s perimeter, called the *Castra Praetoria*. In one fateful event, Sejanus converted the Guard from a force charged with keeping the peace in and around the Italian towns, into an elite military and political force that would invariably be at the

epicenter of every subsequent imperial power shift in Rome for centuries to come. The participation of the commander of the Praetorians became pivotal to the intrigues of the emperor as well as to all those who would conspire against the throne.

With unbridled ambition, ruthlessness and hellacious opportunism, Sejanus' meteoric rise to power was fueled by a volatile political climate of contrary and indecisive leadership in Rome, significant judicial loopholes, aristocratic jealousies, and the devilry of a paranoid and unfathomably powerful emperor. Within only a few years, the intelligent and ambitious prefect had rendered himself indispensable to the emperor in all matters. Such was the uncommon manner in which Sejanus rose to prominence, his power steeped in Tiberius' weaknesses and paranoia, and fueled by the fierce animosity which divided Rome's aristocracy.

Claudia added, "Did I overhear one of the recently arrived imperial messengers say that the emperor now lives on Capri?"

Pilate replied, "Yes, Sejanus mentioned it in one of his recent correspondences to me. Tiberius loathes Rome—"

"Surely Sejanus didn't write that?" Claudia said.

"No, he didn't but what one reads between the lines can be as important as what is actually written. Sejanus doesn't confide in me but he does help me stay informed by dropping hints and bits of private information. He is a master at knowing who not to disappoint and he's a man who can make and break careers with one command." Pilate lightly and slowly punched his right fist into the palm of his left hand; a mannerism Claudia recognized all too well when Pilate had something on his mind. "Uhm, sweetheart," Pilate continued, "Do you remember our discussion before we left about why Sejanus posted me here?"

"Of course; it wasn't that long ago," she smiled.

"Well, there was more that I couldn't tell you then."

Intuitively, Claudia replied, "Don't tell me anything that a lady shouldn't hear, darling."

Pilate hesitated and then spoke quickly, "One of the reasons he sent me here is to ensure that his portion of the annual tithe to the Temple of Jerusalem is secured and flows back to him."

"Tithe?"

"The Judeans are required by their faith to donate—"

"Isn't that a contradiction—required and donate?"

Pilate tilted his head with a quizzical look and then smiled; such a clever woman, he thought. "I never gave it a thought. Anyway, there are about four million Judeans spread across the empire. They call this international cultural and religious entity their Diaspora and every member ... sends," Pilate made a differential bow to Claudia, "a drachma once a year to the Temple."

"You receive a percentage of Sejanus' portion?" Claudia asked, already knowing the answer.

Pilate nodded.

Claudia raised her eyebrows and nodded back, "You promised Lucius that you'd do your best. He expects no less, you know."

"And I give no less." How do I disclose the whole truth to Claudia about my mission for Sejanus without losing her? Will she ever forgive me? "I still remember my disappointment—my resentment, to tell you the truth—when he asked me to accept this post. All those years of dedication and work; all the pig dung jobs and dirty—"

Claudia shot Pilate a stern look, "Language, dear."

"Sorry; all the ... dirty tricks and subterfuge to advance Sejanus' career and gain the emperor's favor. And then he offers me governorship of this third-rate province of no value to anyone."

"He must have thought he was bestowing an honor upon you."

“To some extent, perhaps, but Sejanus has been rapidly using up his considerable wealth as well as his inheritance from his father who died, hmm, about five years ago if I recall, to acquire political influence. He needs money and he wants me to help him collect it. I suspect his motivation for *promoting* me to this post was a little more self-serving.”

“We share in that need,” Claudia replied matter-of-factly. She stood up, walked over to Pilate, pulled him up from his couch and embraced him tightly around his waist. “The solution is mutually beneficial, dear. He is a very clever man. He always has his reasons.” She looked up into Pilate’s eyes, “This isn’t what you really want to discuss, is it.”

Pilate looked over her shoulder and stared off into the distance as if he hadn’t heard her. “I’d feel more useful, and could possibly extract more out of this dung heap sooner if I knew what his real reasons were for sending me to this land of habitual complainers, none of whom can get along with their neighbors, let alone with the rest of the world.”

“It’s not so bad. There are plenty of opportunities here and we’re still young. Let’s make the most of it and plan to be in a good financial and social position to make the next move when it comes.”

Pilate gently broke away from Claudia, sat on the edge of the center pool and stared at the rhythmic ripples that danced across the water, while Claudia returned to her couch.

On record, Pilate’s family heralded from Samnium, a region of the southern Apennines in Italy. The Samnites battled the Romans for control of Italy from about 354 B.C. until the Romans final broke the Samnites’ power in 290. In 82, the Roman dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla instigated a campaign of genocide against them. His efforts were so successful that it was recorded that the towns of Samnium had become villages, and many vanished altogether. The Samnites were assimilated as Roman citizens and Pilate’s family descended from a long line of subsequent knights. A few members even rose to occupy senatorial honors.

However, in other circles, Pontius Pilate was rumored to be the son of a Roman officer and a local girl in a Scottish hill fort called Dun Geal next to a Roman camp in the hamlet of Fortingall, Perthshire, which lay at the entrance to picturesque Glen Lyon, Scotland’s longest glen.

Pilate never spoke of his adventures before meeting Claudia or of his upbringing, and he’d close her out whenever she brought up the topic. Still, she gleaned bits and pieces over time and believed that he met, and became closely associated with, Sejanus during the mutiny of the three legions in Pannonia.

Unlike Pilate, Claudia heralded from an aristocratic bloodline as a granddaughter of Emperor Augustus, Tiberius’ predecessor.

Claudia and Pontius made an unlikely couple. It was Sejanus who arranged for his faithful but undiplomatic and vulgar lieutenant to marry the sophisticated, intelligent and sensitive Claudia. Pilate’s marriage to Claudia kept him accessible by Sejanus but far away from the Roman court. And, because wives were not generally permitted to accompany their military husbands, it was Sejanus who also acquired permission from Tiberius, Claudia’s stepfather, to let her go to Judea with Pilate.

Most wives of Roman diplomats naturally preferred the comfort and social life of Rome rather than face the very real routine dangers and relative discomfort of a Roman province. Claudia’s desire to stay with Pilate, especially considering his posting to the reeking armpit of the Roman Empire, spoke volumes for the love that had grown in her for him.

Her imperial relationship helped her to secure some of Rome’s best historians and philosophers in preparation for her husband’s undetermined length of stay in Judea. Claudia had also received hands-on accounts from Praetorian officers who had once served as legionaries in Judea and Syria, as to what to expect when they arrived.

All of the accounts she had heard were more or less true. The place had few redeeming qualities. Still, a good job done here would hopefully lead her husband to a governorship of some more desirable Roman territory.

“Did you learn anything useful from all those teachers you commissioned?” Pilate asked. It was uncanny the number of times in their married life that one of them would speak about what the other was thinking.

“I picked up bits of history, culture and, of course, the current political climate.”

Pilate poured himself a goblet of Faustian Falernian wine from his highly coveted stock and strolled back over to his couch. “One of the great advantages that I enjoy about having so many Roman gods and goddesses is that it gives me a generous choice by which to invoke and curse.”

Claudia turned to look at Pilate and saw his smile, “Oh, Pontius, I know you’re just having some light fun at the gods’ expense but you truly ought to show more respect.”

“You’re right, of course. I don’t mean to offend you but perhaps you could be a little less sensitive too?” It was not a subject that he wanted to have yet again with his pious wife. Why can’t I just keep my big mouth shut? He thought. Before Claudia could reply, he said, “Tell me something—anything—that you remember about the history of this refuse pile.”

Claudia pondered a moment, “Well, it was Julius Caesar who first granted certain exclusive rights to the Judean communities, apparently because he respected the fact that their ancestral laws predated those of Rome. He gave them *collegia* privileges; the right to assemble as a religious group, to govern and tax themselves ... uhm ... to enforce their own discipline, and to be exempt from military service and emperor worship.”

“Now that you mention it, I can’t think of any other religious group in the empire that has these rights,” Pilate said, “aside from our own, of course.”

“Not only that, but Caesar forbade all other religious societies other than our own and Judaism to have a presence in Rome. My teachers suggested that the granting of these exclusive rights explains why the contempt for Judeans seems so widespread across the empire.”

“It’s not so much the rights, well, yes it is partially about their rights,” Pilate corrected, “but what really aggravates me is how they are quick to exploit and lord their rights over everyone else,” Pilate said bitterly.

“Would any culture behave differently?”

Pilate ignored the question, “Did you know that they claim to be the chosen people of the One True God?”

“So are we with our gods.”

“It’s these kinds of subtleties Claudia that makes me think that you are ill-equipped to deal with the vagaries of politics and government administration.”

“There’s no need for that, Pontius. Vent your annoyance on someone who is paid to take your abuse and temper tantrums.”

“I’m sorry, Claudia. It came out wrong. What I meant to say is that their religion hides their supreme arrogance. They declare their god as the only god, and then proclaim themselves god’s preferential people.”

“I understood that.”

“Did you deduce that they will never be happy under Roman rule; that they will remain a problem forever?”

“Truthfully, no.” Claudia smiled thinly.

Pilate sipped his wine, swirled it about his taste buds, and then gulped noisily.

“That, sweetheart, is why this region has always had, and always will have, revolt after revolt, and there will never be peace. Why did Sejanus send me here? What did I do to him?”

Claudia strolled over to Pilate again, sipped the remaining wine in his goblet, and passed the goblet back to him. Pilate looked into the empty goblet and then cast a mock frown. Claudia strolled away sideways, enough that Pilate could see the feigned indifference in her face.

“Caesar erred when he created special rights for one group to the detriment of all others,” Pilate reflected. “It was inevitable that it would lead to wide-spread anti-Judean sentiment. I heard that a year or so ago, we were forced to reduce one of our centurions to the ranks after representatives of the people complained incessantly to Rome about his overt display of contempt for the priests by lifting his skirt in the Temple precinct and farting.”

Claudia twisted her nose, “Oh, Pontius, I don’t need that kind of detail, but, as you say, flaunting their privileges and exemptions certainly doesn’t help. Perhaps you are right, Pontius. I admit that I don’t have a head for the nuances of government, nor the patience to oblige foreign cultures.” She shook her head and waved her hand as if to shoo away a foul image inside her head.

“Anyway,” Claudia continued, “Caesar decided to place the authority for all these exclusive rights under the auspices of the Judean synagogue and its legal body, called the Sanhedrin.”

“How did Caesar get involved in all this local intrigue in the first place?” Pilate asked. “It seems so ... beneath him. Judea certainly isn’t of any military or economic importance.”

Claudia shrugged, “I can’t speak for his motivation, of course, but I can tell you the state of things before he became involved.” Pilate nodded and reached for a refill of Falernian. “Before Caesar, there was a patriotic, warlike, priestly Judean family called the Hasmoneans, who led the Judeans for the previous hundred and thirty years. They belonged to a part of the Judean nation which remained loyal to their god, whom they called, uhm ... Yahweh.”

Pilate rolled his eyes, “Oh, I know all about Yahweh.”

“Of course you do, dear.” She beamed a sincere smile and then continued, “About ninety years ago, there were two Hasmonean brothers, Hyrcanus and Aristobolus, who co-ruled but quarreled bitterly about who should be king and eventually became deadlocked in their dispute. To make matters worse, a large group of priests called the Pharisees refused to accept either brother as ruler. The brothers invited Pompey and his armies into Israel to mediate. Pompey graciously accepted the mediation request. When Pompey arrived in Jerusalem he proceeded to take the city by assault. The city fell to him after a three-month siege, I think on the Passover of 691 A.U.C.”

“You never cease to amaze me with your recollection of names and dates. You would have made an excellent educator.”

“Women as educators? Oh, Pontius, what Roman would ever listen to a woman teacher?”

Pilate awkwardly cleared his throat and pointed at himself.

“Of course *you* would dear. That’s why I love you.” Claudia took Pilate’s empty goblet from his hand and gave him a peck in return. “Pompey entered the holiest place of the temple, and thus forever estranged the Pharisaic party from Rome. However, he did not spoil the temple. He appointed Hyrcanus as its high priest, thus marking the end of Judean autonomy. The kingdom of Judah ceased to exist when we incorporated it into the empire as the province of Judea.”

Pilate added, “And the strong relationship Rome had with King Herod did not survive his death ... what, twenty years ago now?”

“So you were just toying with me about not knowing any of this country’s history,” Claudia said coyly.

Pilate suddenly turned to Claudia, his brow furled, eyes squinted, teeth gritted, “I think I have done you a great injustice by bringing you here, sweetheart.”

Claudia turned and strolled briskly over to Pilate and wrapped her arms around him. “Oh, darling, we’ve talked about this many times. I did the research. I knew exactly what I was getting myself into.” She pulled her head back so that she could look into his eyes, and then smiled, “Well, in theory anyway.” He stared deeply into her eyes and beamed a rare smile, the kind that only she could coax from him. He pulled himself out of her embrace, stood arms length from her and held each of her hands in each of his. “I didn’t tell you . . . everything. I couldn’t. It was—is—a matter of state security. Sejanus put me in an irreconcilable situation. I couldn’t tell you the whole truth because Sejanus wouldn’t allow it. He’d—“

“Couldn’t tell me what?” Pilate could feel a slight tremble in Claudia’s hands.

“Come sit down with me.” Pilate and Claudia sat down on Pilate’s bronze couch. “Sejanus made my promotion to Judea contingent on my not telling you everything. But seeing the sacrifices you have made, enduring the inhospitableness of these people, never once complaining . . . I . . .”

Claudia had not seen her husband so emotionally vulnerable since the day he proposed to her, “What do you want to say, darling. You can tell me anything. I’ll always stand by you. What have you done?”

“It’s not exactly like that but I may have inadvertently put you in harm’s way . . . if anything ever happened to you, I think I’d—“

“Sshh.” Claudia placed her index finger on Pilate’s lips. “Just tell me. We’ll solve it together, whatever it is.” She cupped Pilate’s face in her hands and kissed him on his lips. “Come, I’m the wife of a military commander in a hostile country. There will always be risks. I accept them as our way of life.”

Pilate looked into her hazel eyes, “I know you do and I love you all the more because of it; and I know you had other suitors and could have lived very well within the ranks of nobility rather than marry me and follow me into this human cesspool.”

“It’s not so bad—“

“It is, and I’ve made it worse.”

“Okay, Pontius. I understand you feel guilty about something. Now, for my own sanity, tell me what it is.”

Pilate stood up and took several slow deliberate steps, then turned around, “Sejanus wants me to instigate a revolt here in Judea.”

Chapter 3. Jerusalem: 26 A.D.

Claudia's back straightened like a Roman *pilum*, "A revolt ... here?" She gazed about the room, eyes wide, staring beyond the room's walls. Color flooded across her face and just as quickly drained. Pilate reached out as all the muscles in her body collapsed and she slumped into his anticipating arms.

After a moment, she regained consciousness, breathing heavily, "Why in all the infinite pains of Orcus would he want that? How could a revolt in Judea possibly benefit the empire? Why would you—"

This was the closest Pilate had ever seen Claudia curse or lose her famed reserve. "Take a deep breath, sweetheart. I wanted to tell you many times but Sejanus would have terminated my promotion, or possibly worse. You don't understand how complicated the situation is."

Claudia blinked and bore a gaze deeply into Pilate's eyes as her voice rose in velocity and pitch, "How serious? You must be joking! This couldn't be any less serious than if you told me he was going to assassinate the emperor."

Pilate looked around nervously, "Please, Claudia. Keep your voice down. Being prefect here doesn't make me immune. Just by being in Judea, I ... we, have gained enemies. By being governor, I have enemies. By being a military commander, I have enemies, being connected to Sejanus—"

Claudia gestured a quick half nod and looked away, a single tear escaping and rolling down her practiced look of calm, "You've made your point. Are you going to tell me why?"

"Of course, I wouldn't have brought it up if I wasn't going to tell you everything."

Claudia slid away a short distance from Pilate, and said simply, "Good."

Pilate was familiar with Claudia's defensive stance. Her attempt to put up a brave front only made her look more vulnerable to him. It made him feel weak with shame. He stood up, rubbed his hands and then cupped them tight.

"You asked about Tiberius residing in Capri." Claudia nodded faintly without looking at Pilate. "He simply left Rome with a brief announcement that he was taking a vacation, at the same time dedicating a temple to Jupiter at Capri. Sejanus mentioned in his letter to me that the royal astrologers had declared that Tiberius left Rome in such a conjunction of the planets as to forever prevent his return. Just about everyone in Rome seems to have agreed that he will never go back, but will soon die there in retirement."

"Poor Tiberius," Claudia lamented. "They're all sycophantic scavengers in Rome, swirling around him, waiting for him to die so they can feed off his carcass."

"True as that may be," Pilate replied, "it's more likely that Sejanus was influential in convincing the emperor to leave Rome."

"Why would Sejanus want to do such a thing?"

"Do which; the revolt or convince the emperor to leave Rome?" Pilate asked genuinely.

Claudia twitched at the ambiguity and then sputtered, "B-both, I suppose."

Pilate sat down and reached for Claudia's hands but this time Claudia resisted and again slid a short distance away. Pilate didn't make a move to try again, "Let's take this slowly, but before I begin, I want you to swear on your own life that you'll never repeat anything I'm about to tell you."

"Why would you even think I'd—"

"Please sweetheart, just swear. Your life and mine would be forfeit in an instant if anyone—and I mean anyone—should ever learn anything of what you have just heard."

Claudia furled a lower lip and rocked her head once, "Who would I tell?"

Pilate's voice raised a notch, "Just swear. It's not about mistrust. It's for your own protection. Your oath would remind you if you ever inadvertently ventured near the topic."

Claudia's voice was strained, "By the memories of my ancestors, may I be struck dead by Zeus if I ever breath a word of what you are about to tell me."

Pilate straightened and smiled thinly, "I didn't mean for you to petition for such a horrible demise, darling. I just don't want you to tell anyone else, ever, for any reason whatsoever."

"You have a terrible habit of over-emphasizing your point. You have my oath. Continue," Claudia commanded sternly.

"And no more outbursts; it is difficult enough without the distractions."

Claudia nodded curtly.

"As I have enemies, sometimes simply because of my station—"

"We don't always make our enemies or get to choose them." Claudia interjected to demonstrate her understanding of the reality of Roman politico-military life.

"Precisely; Sejanus has many enemies too."

"Certainly not the emperor."

"Correct. In fact, the emperor may be Sejanus' only protector."

"Which only makes his desire for a revolt more outrageous; and Sejanus has you."

"I hardly count." As Claudia was about to reply, Pilate crooked his head to the left and scrunched his mouth into a knowing half smile. He continued, "Sejanus is surrounded by enemies; some envious, some fearful, some known to him, many more unknown."

"You're saying that his enemies in Rome are forcing him to start a revolt in Judea?"

"I hadn't thought of it in that way but actually, I think there would be some truth in that. He has several very powerful enemies in particular. If Tiberius was no longer emperor—"

"That hardly seems plausible, let alone likely," Claudia said.

"The emperor's life is constantly under threat. It comes with the job, lest we forget how Julius Caesar died."

"Maybe he wouldn't be under such threat if the emperor made himself more popular with the people. He's not very well liked."

Pilate replied, "Popularity is no defense against regicide. When you have power, someone else will always covet it. Recall Germanicus, perhaps the most popular general and imperial son that the Roman Empire was ever blessed to have? Yet he was cut down in his prime."

Claudia made a small shrug.

Germanicus was the son of Drusus, Tiberius' only brother. Germanicus' fame spread far beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. He had grown to be an extremely popular Roman general whose victories were enthusiastically celebrated by the Roman people and grudgingly respected by Rome's enemies. By all accounts, he was charismatic, an excellent soldier, an inspired leader, and loved by the legions. In 19 A.D., after several successful military engagements in Cappadocia and Nicopolis, Germanicus instantly lost favor with Tiberius when, amid great adulation and personal acclaim, he knowingly transgressed the unwritten law which forbade any Roman of senatorial rank or higher from setting foot in Egypt without the emperor's express permission.

When Germanicus returned to Syria, he found that his rival, Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso had been posted there by Tiberius. Armed with the powers of imperator, which technically made him the highest authority in the East, Germanicus ordered Piso to leave Syria. Shortly thereafter, Germanicus suddenly fell ill near Antioch and died on October 10, 19. Everyone in the empire was outraged by Germanicus' death.

Claudia replied simply, "Piso was arrogant and self-centered. He killed Germanicus and paid with his own life."

"In Rome, everything is rarely what it seems. Piso may or may not have done it but my point is that even the most popular general in Roman history was assassinated."

"I am becoming very uncomfortable with where this is going, Pontius."

"I know. I can see it in the way you sit and talk. Let me finish this quickly then. With Germanicus gone, Tiberius' natural son, Drusus, was next in line for the throne. Drusus made his hatred of Sejanus obvious. He even physically assaulted Sejanus in public. If Drusus had succeeded to the throne, Sejanus' life would have been immediately forfeit."

"And, as his protégé, you would have been guilty by association." Claudia shook her head slowly as the implications began to crystallize. Well ... fortunately then for us, Drusus is gone, although I find it distasteful to speak ill of the dead."

"Yes, that is somewhat fortuitous but now there remains Agrippina and her entourage," Pilate replied.

"I've seen myself that Agrippina is no friend to Tiberius," Claudia said.

"Agrippina wants one of her own sons on the throne and has used the people's outrage about Germanicus' murder as a powerful platform to try to oust Tiberius. If she is successful, Sejanus, again, would undoubtedly fall."

Claudia, Pilate and most of the extended Roman world were very familiar with the recent events surrounding Germanicus and his family. In 19, when it was discovered that Germanicus' corpse bore black and blue marks, foaming at the mouth, and a heart that appeared not to burn on the funeral pyre, Germanicus' wife, Agrippina, and most of the Roman world, viewed these signs as evidence that Germanicus had been poisoned. And it didn't take much imagination for most people to conclude that Piso was behind it, almost certainly encouraged by some obtusely uttered offhand remark from a jealous and paranoid emperor.

After the death of her husband, Agrippina formed a high profile group of citizens loyal to Germanicus and began an implacable war upon Tiberius. She became the most vicious and outspoken of all his enemies. Being ferociously passionate about Tiberius' wrongdoings and possessing no judgment at all, she abused the same imperial relationship that protected her, as well as the pity which her misfortune had aroused around her.

Still unaccustomed to the absolute power he wielded, Tiberius appeared weak and undecided in his resistance to this unexpected internal opposition, and he refused to use violence against his aristocracy or against his own house. Tiberius responded with only weary and disdainful inertia, allowing at most an occasional rebuke.

Using not words, but staged scenes and actions, which impressed the public more strongly than open accusations ever did, Agrippina seized every opportunity to taunt Tiberius with his pretended crimes to escape her. Rumors spread that Tiberius was a poisoner. Agrippina and her supporters pushed forward as a replacement emperor, Germanicus' firstborn son, Nero (not the future emperor), who was fourteen in 21 A.D.

Tiberius at first tried to defend himself against the charges of high treason, his most often-used tactic being that he was not aware of the many goings-on throughout Rome and the empire. This naive political tactic only served to strengthen his adversaries' resolve and deepen his own depression and paranoia. He began making long sojourns out of the capital, effectively turning over the city to his enemies, around which was quartered the increasingly powerful Praetorian Guard and its prefect.

Claudia surmised, “I really didn’t pay that much attention before but now I can see that Sejanus does appear to have some powerful enemies.”

“And most of the senators fear or hate him,” Pilate added. “They may be ineffective political minions but they represent incredible wealth and are not above their own conspiratorial goals.”

Claudia sighed, “We’re back to Julius Caesar.”

“You need to understand, sweetheart, that the assassination of Caesar left an inerasable mark on the whole of the Roman way of life. If a group of senators had the immoral audacity to murder a legally appointed leader of the Roman Empire, then no one would ever be safe.”

“But Caesar was a tyrant,” Claudia replied, echoing the sentiments of the assassins and their supporters.

“Whatever one might think about the rightness of their motivations, murder is never justified. The fabric of society would unravel. The empire would collapse. We’d be no better than the barbarian hordes.”

“I never realized how dangerous life was in Rome. Perhaps it is better that you are some distance from Sejanus and Rome. I can see now that we would not have fared well in such a climate.” Realizing the implications of what she had just said, she hastily added, “I don’t mean that unkindly, dear. I just mean that you are a soldier, not a politician.”

“I’m not offended, sweetheart. I know I don’t have the social skills needed to succeed in Rome. I belong in the field. I just wanted something better than this ... uhm, dung pile.”

Pilate saw some of Claudia’s stiffness drain as she came to terms with the implications. She slid towards Pilate, taking her hands in his. After a moment, he continued, “Sejanus has nevertheless involved me deeply in his political machinations.”

“The revolt; did he tell you why?”

“No, Sejanus would never confide such details in me but I’ve had plenty of time to think about it. I think Sejanus has chosen to play for very high stakes. He can’t just resign, retire or even flee. The way I see it, he’s decided that it is either him or them. I can see only three ways that Sejanus can survive. He can remain in power as long as Tiberius is alive and—”

“And stays in Tiberius’ favor,” Claudia interjected.

“Yes; or Sejanus is made regent of one of the under-aged heirs to the throne, which means all three of Agrippina’s sons would have to be dead since Agrippina would never allow Sejanus to become regent, no matter what Tiberius’ last will stated. At the very least, it would lead to another civil war and no one wants that.”

“Except Sejanus,” Claudia concluded.

“Actually, no, not even Sejanus. Starting a civil war between Romans is infinitely different from starting a revolt among the Judeans,” Pilate corrected.

“So who’s left for Sejanus to become regent of?”

“Drusus’ son, Tiberius Gemellus,” Pilate said.

“Well, with all the other heirs in line before Tiberius Gemellus, Sejanus becoming regent seems unlikely,” Claudia surmised.

“Highly unlikely, unless Sejanus plans on eliminating the whole Julio-Claudian line,” Pilate replied thinly.

“So that leaves us with Sejanus’ third option, which is?” Claudia asked.

“You tell me,” Pilate challenged.

“I really don’t know enough about all the political intrigue of Rome—who’s doing what to whom.”

Pilate pressed a little more firmly, “What is Sejanus’ only remaining option?”

“Ensure that nothing happens to Tiberius?” Claudia replied, then with more commitment, “Keep the emperor alive.”

“How old is Tiberius?”

“I’m not sure ... sixty?”

“He’s sixty-eight,” Pilate said, “but even if he was sixty, he could die at any time from any number of natural causes, so keeping Tiberius alive may well be out of Sejanus’ control. As soon as Tiberius dies, which could be any time, Sejanus is also dead ... from unnatural causes.” Pilate allowed himself the small joke.

“But I don’t see any other option for Sejanus. He retains his power through Tiberius.”

“Sweetheart, it would seem that neither of us would have done well in Rome. The only option I see open for Sejanus, unless he can eliminate four or more heirs before Tiberius dies, is to seize the throne for himself.”

Claudia’s eyes widened. She stood up and took several unsure steps backwards. Pilate quickly followed her to catch her in case she stumbled.

“Th-that’s unthinkable. It’s high treason. The people ... the Senate, would never accept him as emperor. You’re wrong, Pontius!”

“Darling, please calm down. I warned you that what I had to say had to remain between you and me. We’re buried deep in this. Please come here.” Pilate took Claudia in his arms and squeezed her tightly. Tears began to well up in her, and Pilate could feel her heavy breaths as she began to register the dire implications.

In between large sobs, Claudia said, “He is making you an accessory to every great evil imaginable; murder, assassination, high treason, revolution ... thousands could die, maybe tens of thousands. It’s insane.” Pilate tried to pull Claudia closer to him she struggled to break free, “No! Sejanus is insane. He’d murder thousands in pursuit of his own agenda. You have to do something. You have to tell Tiberius.”

Pilate drew Claudia back into his powerful arms, “Do you not think that I would have already done that if I thought it was possible. Do you not think that Sejanus wouldn’t have already considered that possibility before involving me? Sejanus knows loyalty can only be counted on for so much. He has all the options covered. And if he thought for a moment that I might betray him, I’d disappear before you knew I was gone.”

Claudia cried, “I don’t understand. If it is obvious to you that Sejanus intends to seize the throne, why would it not be equally obvious to the emperor?”

“Tiberius has no cause to believe Sejanus would betray him; quite the opposite in fact. Sejanus saved the emperor’s life earlier this year during a cave collapse at Tiberius’ Sperlonga retreat. Sejanus is Tiberius most trusted confidant. All the imperial mail and all appointments with the emperor go through an administration system that is loyal to Sejanus. Tiberius is quite happy to let Sejanus run the day to day affairs of the empire.”

Claudia sniffled, “So, obviously no one, least of all the emperor, would take your word over Sejanus’.” Then almost immediately, she sat up straight, “What about Agrippina ... or Drusus?”

“Neither of them knows me. There is no believable pretense for why I would ever want to request an audience with either of them. And to hint at something obtuse like an important matter of state would raise questions among their staff and entourage. Sejanus has spies everywhere. I’d never get within a hundred miles of the family before Sejanus got to me.”

Claudia offered hastily, “But I could gain access to her without needing an upfront explanation. Then, I could ask to speak with her alone.”

“I had considered that possibility but I would never put you in harm’s way.”

“It’s Sejanus who has created the threat,” Claudia said bitterly. “He has given us no choice. I want to do it. We have to do it!”

“As I said, I considered that but there is another reason why meeting Agrippina is not a wise move. Firstly, Agrippina would find out, if she doesn’t already know, that I owe a great deal of my position and success to Sejanus. She would be suspicious of my motives.”

Claudia replied, “But she would have the most to gain if there was any way to prove Sejanus’ intentions.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Pilate said, “But despite owing her quality of life to the emperor and enjoying his protection, she blames Tiberius for her husband’s death and blatantly attacks the emperor’s character at every turn. She has no tact or judgment at all, and I’m unwilling to entrust our lives to her.”

“Then what about someone close to her who has tact and can keep a secret? Powerful people learn to keep secrets,” Claudia offered.

“To what purpose, dear?” Pilate replied. “They certainly wouldn’t tell Tiberius anything. Anyone in Agrippina’s circle of influence would be supporting Agrippina’s plan to put one of her three sons on the throne. They’d use the knowledge for their own ends; certainly not in any way to protect the emperor. All that we might accomplish is to get rid of Sejanus, making Agrippina that much more powerful, and I would lose my only notable benefactor in Rome. Agrippina and her friends might be appreciative of my efforts but then again, she more likely would not.”

“No honor among conspirators?” Claudia opined.

Pilate gave a half wink and continued, “Recently, in a court case I presided over, I had to remind myself that once a traitor, always a traitor.” Claudia tilted her head slightly and raised an eyebrow. Pilate continued, “Everyone in Agrippina’s circle is enmeshed in dangerous politics. Again, to them my motivations would initially be suspect but let’s say they eventually believed my report about Sejanus’ intentions. Ultimately, because of my long-standing relationship with Sejanus, I might be viewed as having been a traitor to him. If I betrayed a master once then why not betray a second time? It may seem like perverse logic but I believe the validity of that argument.” Claudia looked at Pilate forlornly, seeming to want to say something but nothing came out. Pilate continued, “I think we’re on our own, sweetheart.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to swim down the crocodile-infested river and try not to get eaten.”

“Meaning?”

“I have some ideas to rustle up some discord in Judea while still appearing to be acting in the best interests of the empire. I—”

Just then, one of Claudia’s slave attendants made her presence known at the doorway. She lowered her eyes and curtsied slightly, “Mistress; Yehosef Bar Qayyafa has arrived.”

Claudia dismissed the slave with a perfunctory nod and walked over to a decorative ironwork motif of scrolls and leaves attached to one wall of the atrium. Its intricate pattern obscured a spying porthole through which a person could view the adjoining receiving room.

“So this is your high priest,” Claudia said.

Pilate peered over his wife’s shoulder. “Mmm. He is known among the Romans as Joseph Caiaphas. He’s here to see whether he keeps his job as high priest. Pilate gently took each of Claudia’s shoulders in his iron paws and gazed into her eyes, “Are you okay?”

“Mmm. It’ll take some time to absorb everything you just told me and adjust to these ... new circumstances, but I’ll be fine.”

Pilate continued to search Claudia's eyes for the truth. "I'll take that as a yes," Pilate replied. "We can continue our other discussion later, if you wish," and with that Pilate released Claudia and peeked through the spy portal himself.

Claudia turned away with a sigh and then said, "Aside from the obvious religious duties, what's so important about this Caiaphas, his role I mean?"

"The day-to-day administration of the Judean nation is managed largely by the aristocracy of Jerusalem, with the high priest at its head of government. In return for upholding imperial interests, the Sanhedrin expects Rome to safeguard the Judean aristocracy's positions and lifestyle."

Pilate continued, as he lightly rubbed Claudia's shoulders while they both continued to observe Caiaphas, "Every Roman governor of Judea has recognized the supreme political importance of the Judean high priesthood, and has kept a tight rein on it, deposing and appointing high priests as appropriate. Caiaphas had a successful working relationship with Valerius Gratus for the last eight years."

"Your predecessor?"

Pilate hummed acknowledgement and then said, "Gratus told me that he appointed Caiaphas for his tactful behavior in Rome when Caiaphas amicably settled the Judean embassy's appeal to the emperor for a reduction in the tribute of Judea."

"Well, he's certainly dressed to impress." Claudia scanned the short, tubular man who sported a well trimmed, half oval shaped, bleached white beard and moustache that fully covered more than half of his sandpaper-textured and -colored face. The toes of his sandaled feet peeked out from under his three layers of garments, which together covered every part of his body and appeared heavy and stifling, wholly inappropriate for the country's hot, dry climate. His raiment was a spectacle to behold, nothing short of an imperial family's attire for the attendance of an emperor's event.

Caiaphas was pacing slowly, apparently exploring various fixtures and decorations but not giving study to any of it.

"He has weasel eyes," Claudia continued. "They dart around a lot. Be careful, dear. I'll bet he's done in more than a few opponents who underestimated him because of his tubby appearance."

"That would describe half the Roman senators," Pilate added.

"He's nervous."

"Good. It means he knows who's in charge."

Claudia stepped away from the viewing porthole and assisted Pilate in preparations for his meeting with Caiaphas. She fiddled with Pilate's accoutrements, more to distract him from her questions than to make him presentable. "How does Caiaphas fit in with your plans for governing the province?"

"He is perhaps the most important strategic alliance I need here in order to keep the peace."

"I thought your armies guaranteed the peace?"

"The Empire was gained by force. Consensus secures it," Pilate replied authoritatively.

"Mind your tone, dear."

Pilate shot a disapproving look at Claudia which, fortunately for him, she did not see. He continued, "He is currently the high priest, rightfully called the *nasi*, or president, of the Sanhedrin. Gratus selected Caiaphas from the aristocracy of the Sadducees."

Pilate half-turned towards Claudia, "And before you ask, the Sadducees are the leadership in the temple in Jerusalem and they claim to be descendants of a high priest named Zadok, who supposedly anointed Solomon as king. Gratus wrote in his notes to me that they are wealthy and

powerful, but not unified. They don't believe in an afterlife so they are quite eager to preserve their earthly position at all costs."

"A practical viewpoint. Maybe we should invite a couple of them and—"

"But they're extremely quarrelsome and quite boorish in social interactions."

Claudia, now finished with her nitpicking, said, "Noted. No Sadducees for private parties. So they're a religious group?"

"A Sadducee is about as religious as a *tiro* on pay day with a Syrian harlot."

"Oh, Pontius!" Claudia punched his shoulder.

Pilate smirked, "Caiaphas gained the position by bribery and by marriage to the daughter of Annas, once himself the high priest. Annas is apparently quite a piece of work. He was originally appointed high priest by the legate Quirinius just after Archelaus, the ethnarch of Judaea, was deposed, and Judea was placed under direct Roman rule. Annas served in the office for ten years until Gratus dismissed him about ten years ago—"

"I thought you said Gratus appointed—"

"I wish you'd stop interrupting me like that."

"I'm sorry, Pontius. I didn't mean to."

Pilate ignored the apology. "Gratus says that Annas is still the real power, despite Caiaphas' legal status under Roman authority."

"That's a bit of a contradiction, isn't it? I mean, how can—"

Pilate interjected, despite his reproach a moment earlier, "The high priesthood is held for life according to the people's Mosaic Law so they continue to covertly regard Annas as their legal high priest." He then stopped and reflected on that point. "Never underestimate the influence of religion. Blind faith is more powerful than fear."

"You understand these things, darling. I'm sure you're right."

"The position of Judea's high priest is extremely important to Rome. As the chief religious authority, he is responsible for the temple treasury, the temple police and other personnel as well as for performing religious services and serving as president of the Sanhedrin. And, of course, it is the official liaison between my authority and the population at large."

Pilate pulled his toga tightly around his body and admired the reflection in his highly polished bronze plate mirror. The life of a Judean governor was physically and mentally demanding, requiring a regular fitness program to keep up. At age thirty-two, his hard muscular, bear-shaped body filled his tunic, which amplified his barrel chest and multi-scarred biceps. Piercing black eyes betrayed his proclivity to violence and sport, which he regularly intermixed as consequences of the sentences he doled out in his court proceedings. A long thin scar, made from a Illyrian blade during the Pannonian uprising, started on the lower left side of his neck and traveled up to his ear, a constant reminder of his not taking his Roman military training seriously when he first joined up. He still remembered his instructor's wisdom, which he continuously passes along to his own troops, "Train hard, fight easy; train easy, fight hard, probably die."

Coal-hued hair flourished on his head, which he kept to almost stubble length because of the sweltering heat of Judea but also because training habits die hard; it prevented an enemy from grabbing it should he lose his helmet in the heat of battle.

Pilate released his toga, which returned to its flowing state, "I guess I've kept him squirming long enough; time to meet his Excellency," Pilate said derisively.

"Quirinus be with you, dear."

Acknowledging the blessing with a perfunctory nod, Pilate marched smartly out of the room and down a short hall to the receiving room.

Claudia overheard the usual exchange of pleasantries in the distance and then idled back to her peephole.

Pilate gestured towards a *bisellium* made of citrus wood cut from the roots of the cedars of Lebanon, the most precious and coveted wood in the world, but still more accessible to a wealthy Caesarean, even more so than Rome's elite. The two-place couch was lavishly inlaid with tortoise shell, horn and ivory, and was considered a seat of honour for visiting dignitaries.

Pilate caught Caiaphas' fleeting look of pleasant surprise as he gathered his long raiment, tucked it under his buttocks and sat primly upright on the backless seat, the palms of his hands resting on his knees.

Pilate sat across from Caiaphas on his highly prized *solium*, crafted decoratively from a deciduous Syrian terebinth tree, and resembling a small throne.

Their conversation was at first casual but quickly fell to the business of state.

"Tell me more of your Sanhedrin," Pilate said. "The council seems to be quite influential in your culture."

"The Sanhedrin is indeed very important," Caiaphas replied without moving his body or hands. "Among our people it is roughly equivalent in status to your supreme court. It is also the legislative body of the people—subject to Roman authority, of course." Caiaphas gave a superficial nod. "It comprises a president, a vice-president and sixty-nine members. The odd number prevents the possibility of a tie in council decisions. Currently, I hold the position of the Sanhedrin's president—by Rome's blessing," he said obsequiously. Caiaphas looked for a sign in Pilate's face that Caiaphas was still, in fact, president. Pilate maintained the same stone face he had become famous for while playing *tali* in the Pannonian camps.

Caiaphas shifted uneasily and made an unnecessary adjustment to his garments as he continued, "Our court is called Beth-Din, meaning House of Judgment. We believe only God may sit in judgment without council so we permit no less than three judges to preside over a case. The Sanhedrin meets in a building called the Hall of Hewn Stones."

"An odd name for a hall?"

"All the other buildings within the temple complex are used for ritual purposes, which have to be constructed of stones unhewn by any iron implements. The Sanhedrin's building is named after its construction method, simply to remind temple occupants that the Hall is not a place of worship. The Sanhedrin is the final authority to all questions regarding our law. We, of course, recognize the final authority of Rome in all judicial matters, but it may be useful for you to know that the Sanhedrin is the only authority our people recognize that can try our king or extend the boundaries of Jerusalem or the temple."

The conversation went on for another hour and a half while Claudia covertly observed.

One particularly animated topic was the minting of new coins that fairly represented Pilate's desired policy of equal rights for Judeans, Romans and pagans.

Since there was no Syrian governor present in Syria to create the coins, Pilate was obliged to do it himself. However, it was no small undertaking to find symbols that would not offend the Judeans or the Romans. They finally settled on a staff of an Italian seer on one side; on the other side a quantity of grapes, the usual image on many Judean coins.

At the meeting's conclusion, Caiaphas and Pilate bowed towards each other, both wearing a restrained smile.

Claudia smiled too. They have worked out a mutually beneficial arrangement, she thought. We may well yet retire in a manner to which I could become accustomed.