

Chapter 61

The King of the Jews

“Here you go, your majesty,” Ulixes mocked as he roughly tied the wooden sign around Jesus’ neck. “This should make it official. Pilate even ordered it written in three languages so everyone will know that you are indeed the King of the Jews!”

“He’s got his crown and his title,” Velius jeered. “Now he needs to get up on his throne so people can bow before him!”

Jesus could barely stand, but quietly endured the continued taunting as the soldiers prepared him and the two thieves for crucifixion. Each of them was made to wear a *titulus* or sign around their neck, indicating the crime they had committed. The criminals would be marched through the streets by the longest route possible, so everyone along the way could read about their crimes. The signs would then be attached to their crosses to warn others what surely awaited them if they committed the same crime.

“*Mon Dieu!*” Liz exclaimed as she and the other animals moved to where Jesus was being held. The death march was ready to begin. “The crown of thorns! This was foreshadowed in the Garden when man fell, and later when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac.”

“How so, Liz?” Kate asked tearfully.

Nigel’s eyes widened with Liz’ revelation. “Indeed you are right, my dear. Thorns represent the fall of man when God told Adam the ground would be cursed with thorns and thistles because of his sin. And when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, a substitute ram was caught in the thicket of thorns by its head!”

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“Aye, Jesus were foreshadowed all along,” Max observed. “His blood be on every page of the scr-r-riptides.”

“*Oui*, and the wooden sign around Jesus’ neck also is full of meaning,” Liz added, trying to find confirmation of the plans of God throughout the horror of this moment. “Pilate ordered Jesus’ sign to be written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew. These nations are responsible for giving the world three vital things for people to live together. Greece gave the world beauty of form and thought, Rome gave the world law and good government and Israel gave the world worship of the one true God.”

“Jesus be all o’ these things, and more,” Al sniffed and said. “So in their own language, Jesus be called the King o’ the Jews?”

The Jewish leaders were arguing with Pilate about the sign around Jesus’ neck. Pilate had had enough. He threw up both of his hands in front of them and forcefully gestured, “What I have written, I have written!” He then stomped off and left the soldiers to their work. He was ready to end all involvement with this debacle of justice. The Jewish leaders looked at one another and folded their arms in disapproval. But they had pushed Pilate as far as they could.

Armandus was in charge of four soldiers who were preparing the three men to be led to the crucifixion site. Two of the legionnaires were Armandus’ men, Ulixes and Velius, and they were assigned to Jesus. The other two were from Pilate’s regiment from Caesarea, and were assigned to the two thieves. They readied the two thieves with their signs and placed the crossbeams over their shoulders. Ulixes and Velius lifted Jesus’ crossbeam and harshly placed it across the nape of Jesus’ neck, trying to balance it along his torn shoulders.

Max growled. “Wha’ be they doin’ ta him now?”

Nigel frowned and cleared his throat. “It is customary for each criminal to bear his own cross as a testimony of his guilt, so they are placing the *patibulum* or crossbeam on their shoulders. They will have to carry it to the place of crucifixion where the *stipes* or vertical beam awaits them. It’s terribly heavy, weighing seventy pounds or more.”

Al’s lip trembled. “What exactly happens then?”

Liz took in a quick breath and tears quickened in her eyes, but she knew that they should be prepared for what was to come. “Crucifixion was invented by the Persians who desired their victims to be ‘lifted up’ off the ground, so as not to defile the earth belonging to their god Ormuzd. The Carthaginians picked it up from the Persians, and then the Romans picked up the practice.” Liz shook her head. “But because it is the most cruel and horrific means of death ever invented, it is illegal to inflict it on a Roman citizen. It is meant only for rebels, runaway slaves, and the lowliest of criminals.”

“And to think that Rome is known for its justice,” Nigel said, shaking his head. “Jesus was found not guilty by Pilate and Herod in their Roman courts. On his desk every Roman official has a figure of Janus, the two-faced god, to remind them to look forward and backward, at both sides of the question. In Roman courts, the innocent and the guilty always get justice—not mercy, but at least justice. But this . . . this is a mockery of justice to send an innocent man to such a horrific death.”

“So the Jews and the Gentiles both turned their faces on the very things they are known for: God and the law. That’s about as two-faced as it gets,” Al noted. “Both be guilty o’ doin’ this to Jesus.”

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“*Oui*, Albert, they are the ones at this point in time who are about to kill Messiah,” Liz affirmed.

“But the reality is that every single man, woman, and child since Adam and across time is responsible, for Jesus is willingly doing this to die for the sins of every single soul.”

“*The wicked band together against the righteous and condemn the innocent to death,*” Nigel said, quoting yet another prophecy of Messiah from Psalm 94. “In the Maker’s court, one day every person will have to give an account of what they did here on earth. Judas, Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas will be judged for what they did to Jesus, but so will every other soul due to sin. Sadly, all are guilty of the charges and owe a debt that must be paid by a dreadful eternity apart from the Maker.”

Al gulped. “Ye mean . . . in hell?”

“*Oui*, the Maker loves the world but his justice demands that sin be paid for. But for those who believe in Jesus, he’ll take their place in the Maker’s court. Jesus will look at them, smile and say, ‘Not guilty. I’ve paid their debt in full,’” Liz added, the full understanding of Jesus’ mission becoming clearer with each passing moment. “This is how every soul can gain eternal life with the Maker in heaven!”

“For God so loved the world, he gave his only son so whoever believes in him won’t perish but’ll have eternal life,” Al recounted. “Is this what Jesus meant then?”

“Aye, Big Al. That’s exactly wha’ Jesus meant. No one be killin’ Jesus even though it looks that way,” Max observed. “He’s the one who planned this ta happen ta save the world then.”

“No one has ta be separated from the Maker when they die. He’s givin’ them a way out—a way ta be with him in heaven forever!” Kate said. The hope of the moment was overshadowed by what would have to happen to make this possible. “So wha’ will happen ta our Jesus now?”

“Right. I’ll try to explain this the best way I can, but I’m afraid there is simply no way to put it mildly,” Nigel began. “Once they arrive at the place of The Skull where the crucifixion will be held, they will remove the victims’ clothes to humiliate them. They will take the crossbeam and attach it to the vertical beam to form a ‘T,’ and make each man lie on his cross. While two soldiers hold him down,” Nigel said, a lump in his throat, “two soldiers will drive five-inch long nails through his palms close to the wrist. They do this in order to cause intense pain at the median nerve of the arm and forearm, and to support the weight of the victim while on the cross. Next they will place his feet flat on the *stipes*, bending his knees, and drive a nail through each foot. As the soldiers then tilt the cross up and guide it into a hole, the jarring motion and the hammering of support wedges of the cross in the hole cause shocking, horrific pain.”

Max shook his head, trying to grasp that this would be happening to Jesus. “How long will they have ta hang there?”

“I pray mercifully not long,” Nigel replied. “Sometimes victims stay on their crosses for days on end.”

“Days?! How can that be?” Al asked in anguish.

“The cause of death is not the nails. Some victims are simply tied with ropes to the cross without nails, which might sound more merciful but their suffering is prolonged,” Nigel explained.

“Death from crucifixion usually comes from exposure to the elements of heat and cold, dehydration from lack of water, starvation or suffocation. You see, victims have to continually move to momentarily relieve the pain in their wrists, arms, shoulders, chest and legs. After a while they become so tired they can’t lift themselves up to catch their breath or even have the

lung power to exhale. For nailed victims, they experience blood loss, shock and even heart failure. But victims have been known to last for days on the cross, depending on how badly they were scourged prior to crucifixion. It's simply incomprehensible that man could have invented something so 'excruciating'—hence where that word comes from.”

“Because Jesus suffered such a brutal scourging, he will not be physically able to last as long as others might,” Liz added in a broken voice. “We also have the hope that the Sabbath and the Passover begin at sundown today, and by Jewish law, victims must not be left on the cross.”

“So it will be a matter of hours, not days then,” Max surmised. “These will be the longest hours the world has ever seen.”

Armandus stood clenching his jaw as the four legionnaires formed a square around Jesus and the two thieves. They would walk them along the crowded, narrow streets of Jerusalem, out the gates of the city to Golgotha. For some reason Armandus suddenly remembered the Via Sacra in Rome—the Sacred Way—and how it represented triumph as the men meandered through the streets of Rome before the crowds. *This walk will be the opposite for Jesus. This road is the Via Dolorosa—the way of suffering and sorrow*, he thought to himself, gripped with anguish. *There will never be anything sacred about this way.*

“We're ready, Sir,” Velius said as the soldiers got into position around the victims.

“Very well,” Armandus said as he began walking forward. He suddenly heard a groan and the sound of a man hitting the stone pavement. He turned and saw it was Jesus lying there, clearly unable to carry the weight of the crossbeam. His back and muscles were too damaged to support the beam, and his strength was drained from the loss of so much blood.

“Get up!” Ulixes said, kicking Jesus. “That's no way for a king to act!”

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Armandus walked back and shoved the cruel soldier in the chest, snapping, “You fool, the man was scourged so brutally that he can’t carry this much weight!” He looked around and saw a man who stood next to where Jesus was in the street. He placed the end of his spear on the man’s shoulder. “You, carry this man’s cross.”

The man’s face filled with fear and his two sons gripped him by the shoulders. He turned to them, handing them his knapsack and whispered, “Alexander and Rufus, follow along so I won’t lose you. I must do as the centurion commands.” The young men nodded as their father stepped forward. “Sir, I am Simon, from Cyrene. I will do as you say.”

Armandus nodded and barked at his men. “Take the cross off of Jesus and put it on this man.”

After the soldiers untied the crossbeam from Jesus’ shoulders, Armandus slowly helped Jesus to his feet, breathing a quiet whisper, “I’ve got you.”

Jesus shut his eyes and nodded. A large crowd trailed behind, including many grief-stricken women who began wailing.

As the soldiers seized Simon to put the cross on him, Jesus turned to the women. He raised his gaze and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, don’t weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are coming when they will say, ‘Fortunate indeed are the women who are childless, the wombs that have not borne a child and the breasts that have never nursed.’ People will beg the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and plead with the hills, ‘Bury us.’ For if these things are done when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

Armandus looked at Jesus in awe. *Even now, he’s preaching to the people, more concerned about them and their futures than his own.*

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“He’s prophesying,” Liz noted. “Jesus is the green tree, and he is saying if such horrible things happen while he is here, how terrible it will be when he is not here and God’s wrath falls upon them for rejecting Messiah.”

Suddenly a murmuring developed as Mary was escorted by several women to the front of the crowd. Her face was full of anguish and tears streamed down her cheeks as she looked on her first born son. She reached out a cloth to wipe his face, looking first to Armandus for approval. Armandus swallowed hard, thinking how it would be if this were his mother and he were in Jesus’ place. He nodded respectfully and stepped back to watch a tender scene.

No words were spoken, but the loving touch of a mother to her son left the crowd speechless. Mary gently dabbed the cloth on Jesus face, struggling to wipe his eyes without causing him further pain, since they were so badly swollen and bruised. Tears fell down her face as she looked at the crown of thorns, shaking her head.

Anger welled up inside of Armandus. He reached over and removed the crown of thorns, tossing it in the street. Mary gently dabbed at the blood on Jesus’ brow, choking on her tears.

“The man is ready, Sir,” Velius said when Simon was prepared with the crossbeam tied to his shoulders.

Armandus took Mary by the arm and she suddenly whispered in Jesus’ ear. “Your Father’s hands, Jesus, you are in your Father’s hands.” She fell back into the arms of the other weeping women as Jesus was pushed away from her touch.

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Armandus resumed his position at the front of the procession, and tried to shake off the emotion of that moment. They walked on to Golgotha, known as the place of The Skull for its craggy cliffside appearance resembling a skull.

The animals followed along, weeping as much for Mary as for Jesus.



Once they reached Golgotha, things happened quickly. The soldiers offered the victims wine drugged with myrrh. The two thieves eagerly drank the elixir, taking any chance they could to alleviate their pain. But Jesus quietly refused it. He was going to face the salvation of mankind with his senses fully intact. Armandus looked at Jesus in continuing awe as he removed the sign from around Jesus' neck. It was covered with blood, staining the wood with a reddish-brown hue. He handed it to Ulixes who would affix it to the top of Jesus' cross.

As they removed the crossbeam from Simon's shoulders, he bent forward, resting his hands on his knees and catching his breath. Even for a strong, healthy man the burden of carrying the cross was intense. He heard the clank of the Roman hammer nailing the crossbeam to the stipes and raised his gaze. Simon locked eyes with Jesus, feeling a sense of sadness and an indescribable feeling that he had just participated in something significant. In Jesus' eyes he saw gratitude mixed with love for him. Simon lingered a moment longer, until the two brusque legionnaires grabbed Jesus. He turned and walked back to find his sons. He didn't want to be alone as the events unfolded.

Ulixes and Velius pulled off Jesus' clothes and threw them on the ground, leaving him dressed only in a loin cloth. His robe was covered in blood. The soldiers roughly handled him and forced him to lie back on the prepared cross. Armandus watched as Pilate's two soldiers lay across

Jesus' body, bracing for him to resist the process. Amazingly, Jesus stretched his arms wide, shutting his eyes as he submitted to his inevitable fate.

Velius and Ulixes each took one of Jesus' wrists and stretched his arms so tightly on the crossbeam that Jesus' shoulders pulled out of joint. They took the huge nails and as they raised their hammers high in the air, Armandus shut his eyes tightly with the first clank of the hammer onto iron. Jesus groaned as the nails entered his wrists, tears of agony streaming down his face. Ulixes' eyes flashed red with delight and a wicked smile grew on his face.

Armandus had to turn his back and act like he was disinterested in order to make it through this nightmare. He walked over to the two thieves who knelt on the ground, arms bound to their crossbeams, and waiting their turn for the same fate. He listened as the other nails were driven into Jesus' feet, followed by the groans of this innocent, loving man who didn't fight his executioners.

"One, two, heave," he heard Velius instruct as they lifted Jesus' cross up high into the air. He heard the sickening thud of the cross landing in the hole, and Jesus cry out in pain. But what Armandus heard next made him turn around and face Jesus in disbelief.

"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing," Jesus said softly.

How can he possibly say this? Armandus wondered. And who is he speaking to?

As the soldiers left Jesus to move on to repeat the horrific procedure to the two thieves—one on his right and one on his left—Armandus gazed at Jesus hanging there and read the wooden sign above his head, written in three languages: JESUS OF NAZARETH: KING OF THE JEWS.

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Why would the Jews kill their king? What possible threat did he pose to them? Armandus wondered. Suddenly he made a startling connection of events in his mind. *Herod the Great also wanted to kill the King of the Jews. Why? Who is he?!*

It was 9:00 a.m. His mind was swirling with questions and Armandus already felt a sickening heat enveloping him which he knew was unnatural for springtime. He shuddered and wiped his brow with the back of his arm, hoping this day would pass quickly. Nothing about this day felt natural. He gazed at Jesus suffering on the cross. *Who really is this Jesus of Nazareth?*

Chapter 62

Who is this King?

It didn't matter that this was a foregone conclusion. It didn't matter that they knew hundreds of years ago from prophecy that Messiah would die via crucifixion. Now that they knew Jesus personally, nothing that they *knew* mattered. All that mattered at this moment was how they *felt*. They lived life with Jesus since the moment of his birth. They watched him grow as a young, happy, caring boy. They saw him begin his ministry and touch countless lives with his healing touch and his words of grace and guidance. Jesus was a beacon of light and love in a dark world, bringing hope to the hopeless and love to the unlovable. He was Emmanuel, God with us. He was the way, the truth, and the life. But now they saw that life dying before their eyes. And they were heartbroken.

Liz and Kate hugged each other as they sobbed. Max, Al and Nigel stood by as silent sentinels, resigned to the fact that what was happening was Master-planned and well beyond their control. They slowly watched the crowd gather around Jesus' cross: His mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary, the wife of Clopas. The love that these women had for Jesus kept them clinging to him even at the cross. They were unashamed to stand below the cross of this man rejected by the world. Suddenly and surprisingly, John appeared. One lone disciple finally showed up.

As John looked at Jesus, crucified between two thieves, a wave of understanding and shame washed over him. He and his brother James had brazenly asked to be placed at the right and the left side of Jesus, but Jesus had told them they didn't truly know what they were asking. *Of*

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course we can handle it! the Sons of Thunder had arrogantly answered him. John closed his eyes and shook his head with regret. *How could I have been so foolish?*

Surrounding these few who stood at the foot of the cross out of love for Jesus were those who surrounded the cross out of hatred and avarice. The laughter of the soldiers was like a dull knife stabbed in the back. It was out of place, unexpected and irreverent. They gambled for Jesus' clothes by throwing dice, dividing his clothes among the four of them. They also took his bloody robe, but it was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom.

“Rather than tearing it apart, let's throw dice for it,” Ulixes suggested with a callous grin.

Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet...They divided my garments among themselves and threw dice for my clothing, Nigel softly said, remembering the prophecies from Psalm 22. “Astounding. David wrote these prophetic words before crucifixion had even been invented.”

The crowd watched and the Jewish leaders scoffed. “He saved others,” Zeeb started to taunt, “let him save himself if he is really God's Messiah, the Chosen One.”

The soldiers mocked him, too, by offering him a drink of sour wine. They called out to him, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”

The people passing by shouted abuse, shaking their heads in mockery by following the cue of their leaders. “Look at you now!” they yelled at Jesus. “You said you were going to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days. Well then, if you are the Son of God, save yourself and come down from the cross!”

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Over the course of the next three hours, the leading priests, the teachers of religious law, and the elders took turns mocking Jesus. “He saved others,” they scoffed, “but he can’t save himself! So he is the King of Israel, is he? Let him come down from the cross right now, and we will believe in him! He trusted God, so let God rescue him now if he wants him! For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

“But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. ‘He trusts in the LORD,’ they say, ‘let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him,’” Liz echoed from Psalm 22. She had dreaded seeing this Psalm fulfilled before their eyes.

“The fact that Jesus isn’t comin’ down pr-r-roves he’s Messiah,” Max said in a broken voice.

“He couldn’t save the world if he left the cr-r-ross.”

“Aye, Jesus is showin’ that there be no limit ta the love of the Maker,” Kate added, wiping her eyes. “There be nothin’ that his love wouldn’t do for the people he created, even dyin’ for ‘em.”

The criminals who were crucified with Jesus even ridiculed him. One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!”

Something suddenly changed in the other criminal. “Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” He winced as sudden pain shot through his arms. “Jesus. . . re. . .remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”

Jesus gasped for breath and slowly turned his gaze toward the criminal. “I assure you . . . today you will be with me in paradise.”

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Jesus writhed in pain and rose up on his feet to seek temporary relief from the agony in his wrists. The pain then attacked his feet and he lowered himself back down, shaking with seering pain beyond comprehension. His gaze drifted to the crowd below. He saw his mother standing there beside John. The long ago prophesied sword was piercing her heart as men pierced her son.

Jesus licked his dry, cracked lips and struggled to form his words. “Dear w-w-woman . . . here is your son.” He looked at John. “Here . . . is your mother.”

John wrapped his arm around Mary, understanding Jesus’ directive that he was to now look after the mother of Messiah.

He’s prayed for his murderers, promised Paradise and now provided for his mother, Armandas thought to himself. Who does that while struggling to hang on to life? Who is he?

“Wha’s that comin’?” Max asked, his head up at attention.

“Where, old boy?” Nigel asked, looking in the direction where Max stared.

“That dark thing,” Max answered.

The animals watched a strange phenomenon creeping along the horizon. It looked like a black curtain being pulled across the sky. It soon blocked out the noonday sun that was high overhead.

“Could it be an eclipse?” Nigel wondered.

“*Non, c’est impossible,*” Liz answered. “The moon is in its full phase. This has to be supernatural.”

Armandus looked at the ominous sky that brought with it a chill in the air. The sky was dark but these were not clouds. His eyes roamed the heavens but it looked like they were completely cut off from the earth.

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The shroud of darkness lasted three hours. During that time, the animals watched as Jesus uttered not a word, but wore a look of unimaginable grief. His eyes gazed into the distance with widened shock and disbelief. His mouth would occasionally open as if viewing a horrible scene, and he would shake his head sadly. He sobbed and sobbed and sobbed which robbed him of precious breath.

“I think he’s seeing every sin of man played out across all of time,” Nigel said with a heavy heart.

“*Oui*, this is why the darkness covered the earth. Heaven could not watch as Jesus took on the sin of the world,” Liz wept. “As he became Sin itself.”

Nigel nodded. “Jesus now understands humanity like he never has before. He has never known what sin feels like, or what being separated from the Maker feels like.”

“Nobody can really understand what ye go through unless they’ve been through it themselves,” Al remarked. “Because Jesus felt every single sin o’ every single person, he truly be the only one who can now understand ‘em. He’s been there. Sure, and he’s done that.”

“Aye, an’ he’s *paid* for it on top of it all. For the first thr-r-ree hours, Jesus were sufferin’ at the hands of man,” Max said. “For the last thr-r-ree hours, he were sufferin’ *for* man.”

Suddenly the dark skies began to swirl into storm clouds. A single drop of water fell from the sky and landed on Jesus’ face.

“I think the Maker be cryin’,” Al said with a trembling lip as he, too, began to cry.

Jesus’ eyes widened and he frantically searched the heavens. With a loud voice, he screamed, “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*”

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Liz shook her head, weeping. “He’s quoting the first verse of Psalm 22: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”

A rumble of thunder raced across the sky, and a rush of wind began to blow.

Some of the bystanders looked at one another trying to understand what Jesus was saying. They misunderstood and thought he was calling for the prophet Elijah. But the rest of them said, “Wait! Let’s see whether Elijah comes to save him.”

Jesus lowered his gaze and shut his eyes. He licked his lips and with a broken voice, said, “I am thirsty.”

Armandus grabbed a hyssop branch and a sponge and plunged it into a jar of sour wine that was sitting there for the soldiers to drink. He reached and held it up to Jesus’ lips, striving to ease his suffering.

After Jesus tasted it, he looked at Armandus with those piercing green eyes. In that moment, Armandus knew. He finally knew who Jesus was.

A series of flashbacks played across his mind. *I like his eyes!* the toddler Armandus said about the baby friend who visited his family’s home in Jerusalem. That baby was Jesus! And that day as a teenager when he bought the oil lamp in Jerusalem—the young Jewish boy with the worn clothes and the captivating green eyes who smiled at him in the street, causing him to have a distant feeling of familiarity. It was Jesus! That day Jesus healed his servant in Capernaum, there was something in those eyes that haunted Armandus, something familiar. Now he knew who Jesus was all along. He was the child his father and mother knew—this is the one child his father had allowed to escape the night of the slaughter of the innocents. Jesus was the child his father had saved!

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Jesus pulled himself up one last time. With a loud voice he exclaimed, “*Tetelesai!*”

Nigel let out a mournful groan as he interpreted Jesus’ word: “Paid in full!”

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,” Jesus softly said. His chin dropped to his chest, and he was gone.

Mary threw her head back and let lose a sorrowful cry. The words she had taught Jesus to pray before he went to sleep every night, he now said as he went to be with his Father.

Immediately an earthquake shook the ground and everyone cried out in fear, dropping to their knees. A giant crack ran under Armandus’ feet and he clutched the earth with both hands. His emotions raged as violently as the stormy sky that was suddenly illuminated with widespread lightning and deafening thunder. The heavens broke open with a deluge of stinging rain. As the crowds screamed and began running away, Armandus slowly got to his feet.

The centurion gazed on this Jesus who had been in his life all along, and who did things that no mere human could ever do. The rain began washing the blood from Jesus’ body, and it pooled into the muddy ground below. Yes, Armandus now knew exactly who Jesus was.

“Surely he was the Son of God!”

Chapter 63

Worthy is the Lamb

“What is that sound?” one of the priests shouted. He stopped in the middle of preparing the sacrificial lamb at the designated three o’clock hour for Passover to listen.

“It sounds like something tearing,” another priest nervously answered. “The sound is coming from the Most Holy Place!”

The priests ran toward the direction of the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place in all of Israel. It was here that the presence of God resided, and where the Ark of the Covenant holding the Ten Commandments once was kept. After the Babylonian invasion and destruction of Jerusalem the Ark was never seen again, but the sacred Foundation Stone, or the rock where Abraham offered up Isaac remained. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and only on one day per year: the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur, the day that all sin was obliterated.

Hanging in front of the Most Holy Place was a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with woven cherubim throughout. It was hung with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases. The curtain separated the Holy Place where priests could gather from the Most Holy Place, where God was. A series of separation points in the Temple separated the Jews from the Priests, and the Gentiles from the Jews. If you were a common person, Jew or Gentile, personal access to the presence of the one true God was denied. But all of that was about to change.

A group of priests ran to the Most Holy Place from all over the Temple but fell back in fear as they saw the unthinkable occurring before their eyes. The sixty-foot long curtain was being torn

from the top to the bottom, by unseen hands. The sound of the thick fabric tearing drove fear into the hearts of these priests, for they knew they would be exposed to the presence of God. The ground shook from a violent earthquake under their feet and they scattered in all directions, spreading the word of the veil of the Temple being torn in two. They would later learn that this happened at the precise moment that Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross.



“Sir, orders from Pilate,” a legionnaire said, handing Armandus a small roll.

Armandus snatched the scroll from the soldier and unrolled it, reading Pilate’s instructions as the rain pelted the paper. He nodded and excused the messenger. Pointing at Pilate’s men in charge of the two thieves, he said, “Listen up, men. On request of the Jewish leaders, Pilate has ordered that the legs of these men be broken to hasten their death in accordance with their law. These bodies need to be removed before sundown. Make it so.” He looked at Jesus’ lifeless form, and at the two thieves who struggled to hang on to life. It would ultimately be merciful as death would come quickly to them. But for Jesus, it was unnecessary.

As Pilate’s men immediately took to the task, Ulixes spoke in a low tone to Velius. “How do we know the king is *really* dead?”

Velius grinned at Ulixes as the callous legionnaire grabbed Armandus’ spear that was leaning on a post. Ulixes hurriedly went up to Jesus, his eyes flashed red and he shouted almost in victory, “HA!” as he thrust the spear into Jesus’ side. Immediately water mixed with blood flowed out. He tossed Armandus’ spear on the ground and looked up at Jesus with eerie satisfaction.

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Armandus stomped over and grabbed Ulixes' shoulder armor, spinning him around. "That's a sure sign of death! Now go ready the ropes!"

"Yes, Sir! The king is truly dead, Sir!" Ulixes said with a laugh as he and Velius got the hammers, ropes and lifted the ladder up behind Jesus' cross.

Armandus clenched his jaw as he watched Mary fall to her knees with arms raised, eyes pleading as she cried, "Please, with care, with care!" He instinctively took a step toward her to offer aid, but others rushed to her side, supporting her there on the filthy ground. Armandus remained where he was, but anger consumed him as he turned his gaze upward to see the work of his soldiers.

Ulixes and Velius stood on ladders leaning against the gnarled cross as they carried out with callous precision the task they had performed countless times before. One legionnaire hammered the iron spikes back through blood-drenched wood while the other slipped a rope under the dead body to catch it as it fell forward, slowly lowering it to the ground. The soldiers carried on, laughing about their winnings from casting lots for this dead man's cloak.

"Maybe they'll treat me like a king when I stroll through the city tonight wearing that robe!"

"Hail, great Ulixes!" Velius replied with a sarcastic bow as they reached the ground.

The cold-hearted soldiers ignored the group of Jews that were gathered around Jesus' body, weeping and clinging to one another. His mother refused to be comforted. She held tightly to her son, her head thrown back as she wailed in sorrow, rocking his lifeless form back and forth.

Ulixes picked up the spear belonging to Armandus and together the soldiers walked over and stood face to face with their commander. Ulixes wore a look of inappropriate humor and silent indignation as he handed the bloody spear to the Centurion.

“Our work is finished here, Sir. Are we relieved?” Velius asked.

Armandus grabbed his spear so tightly his knuckles turned white as his eyes bored into the face of Ulixes. How he wanted to thrust the cold blade into this one who had tortured and mocked Jesus. Yes, these were typical brutal Roman soldiers who carried out their assignments with undeniable precision and impeccable obedience. But this one—Ulixes—there was something evil about him. He had pushed the limits of Roman brutality today, enjoying every minute of it in a way that could be described as nothing short of inhuman. All Armandus could muster was a nod of agreement as he struggled to maintain self-control. He couldn’t allow himself to stoop to the level of mindless brutality like this soldier, despite the rage of emotion he felt.

With that the soldiers picked up their personal effects from their crucifixion post and prepared to depart. Suddenly, something caught Ulixes’ eye. He grinned wickedly and walked over to the cross. He looked back at Velius. “We forgot something.”

Ulixes climbed back up the ladder with an iron bar and released the wooden sign that had been nailed in place above the head of the dead man. He jumped from the ladder and landed on the ground with a thud, splashing mud onto the mourning family. He smiled as he read the sign and carried it over to Armandus.

“The criminal’s sign, Sir,” he said with false sincerity. “An untimely death but a fitting end to his reign. We have protected our Emperor from the threat of this one today. Hail Caesar!” The

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depraved soldier saluted his commander and waited for a reply as rain splashed off his outstretched arm.

It was all Armandus could do to return the expected salute to the wicked soldier. Not to do so would signify treason against their sovereign Roman Emperor. He quickly saluted and the wicked grin grew on the face of his subordinate soldier. Armandus leaned in and got eye to eye with Ulixes, allowing the tip of the spear to rest on the man's chest. "Never usurp my authority again, or it will be you facing an untimely death."

Ulixes gritted his teeth. "Yes...Sir." The soldier tossed the wooden sign into the mud.

"Get out of my sight," Armandus scowled as Ulixes turned away.

Velius picked up the dead man's robe and draped it around Ulixes' shoulders. Ulixes and Velius left the scene and walked back down the steep hill. Their laughter and mocking resumed once they were out of earshot of Armandus. Other soldiers joined in the fun of hailing the "royal Ulixes" in his new robe as he gallantly walked back into Jerusalem.

Armandus returned his attention to the grieving mother. Suddenly two well-dressed men approached her, with servants in tow. They knelt down to place their arms around the mother.

Pharisees?

What should they care? Armandus questioned himself. *They are the ones who condemned this man. How dare they pay respects to his mother!*

But as Armandus watched, he noticed that these men cared not that their expensive, prestigious robes were quickly drenched with the blood and mud that ran through the ground in a torrent.

Their grief was genuine. One of the men suddenly looked up at Armandus with pain in his eyes.

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The Centurion and the Pharisee shared a moment of strange bewilderment. The man stood and walked over to the Centurion.

“I am Joseph of Arimathea,” he explained with a hand over his heart. “Pilate has given Nicodemus and me permission to remove the body.”

Armandus felt something he couldn't quite identify. Relief? Gratitude? Finally, here was a show of respect for this dead man that he was incapable of giving himself. Shame. He felt shame.

“Of course,” Armandus uttered after clearing his throat and dropping his gaze to the ground.

Joseph stood there, waiting, not daring to touch the Roman. Armandus lifted his head and gazed deeply into the eyes of this Jew. The man did not speak immediately, but peered into the soldier's soul, somehow understanding the depth of regret buried there.

“Know this,” Joseph finally said. “You are not responsible for this man's death.”

Confusion swept over Armandus. His mind silently screamed, and all he wanted was to escape this scene. He clenched his jaw, brusquely straightened up and nodded to the strange man. “Be swift with the body.”

The Roman Centurion looked once more upon the grieving mother. As the servants gently took her son from her arms, she locked eyes with Armandus and in them he saw the pain that only a mother having lost a child could express. Her eyes. Jesus had her eyes. And in that powerful moment before his death, those eyes looked directly at Armandus with such compassion that the soldier finally realized who he was.

Armandus shook his head and turned away. He could not accept what was happening. He was responsible! How could this Jew say such an outrageous thing? It was his sole responsibility to

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carry out this despicable deed. *Enough!* his mind silently screamed as he quickly walked away from the horror of this dark day in Jerusalem.

From a distance, the animal friends stood in silent grief as they watched the humans carry Jesus away from the now three empty crosses. The rain continued to lash down upon the earth, as if nature itself were furious with what had happened here. Already nervous from the earlier earthquake and now this torrential downpour, the humans quickly parted the place of The Skull and made their way home. The small creatures walked to the scene, barely able to speak as they gathered around the muddy pool of blood at the foot of the cross.

“No amount of prophecy could have prepared me,” Liz said softly, her voice breaking with each word, “for the reality of this day.”

“Aye,” Max echoed as he put a paw gently on Kate’s back. He softly nuzzled his mate who shook with silent sobs.

“Indeed,” Nigel added, wiping his eyes unashamedly.

Al’s lip quivered as he sobbed uncontrollably. “I jest don’t understand. Why? Why him? Why?”

Nigel walked over to the sign lying in the mud, rain splattering off the wood and covering his white fur with remnants of blood. “Because of this.”

The animals gathered around Nigel and the sign. Liz closed her eyes and nodded in understanding. Max’s brow wrinkled with anger. Kate shook her head in grief. Al cocked his head to one side. “Mousie, what does INRI mean?”

Nigel adjusted his spectacles and cleared his throat.

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“INRI represents the Latin inscription IESVS•NAZARENVS•REX•IVDÆORVM,” Nigel responded, placing his paws respectfully on the crude wood. He looked up at Al and the others and took a deep breath before continuing. The mouse could hardly bear to speak another word. He slowly looked into the grieving faces of these who had walked with Messiah from the joyous moment of his birth and now stood in the sorrowful moment of his death.

Suddenly Liz stepped forward and placed her dainty paw on the sign, her tears falling onto the wood. “*Mon Cher Dieu!*” she exclaimed, looking up at the cross. She turned her gaze to Nigel. “This is more than just a wooden sign. It is an answer.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow you, dear girl,” Nigel replied as he examined the sign.

“It is the clear answer to the question the Magi asked when they first arrived in Jerusalem,” Liz explained with great emotion in her voice.

“Aye, the question about Messiah that led ta that dark day in Bethlehem,” Max added with a frown, remembering King Herod’s response.

Kate smiled sadly as she thought about the happy days before that horrible night. She recited the Magi’s question: “Where is he, the newborn King of the Jews?”

The friends stood there for a moment as they remembered the events that followed that night so long ago.

“So ye’re sayin’ the Wise lads asked the question way back then and the Roman lads answered it today by writin’ on this sign?” Al finally asked, not realizing the profound meaning of his question.

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Nigel tightly closed his eyes and nodded his head in agreement. He opened his eyes, cleared his throat and reverently translated the Latin inscription on the sign:

“Here is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”

“Twenty-eight,” Liz said. “I count twenty-eight prophecies that were fulfilled while Jesus was on the cross, with these two after his death: *Not one of his bones will be broken* and *They will look on the one they pierced.*”

“The sword of Antonius will find Messiah yet,” Nigel recalled Lucifer’s words. “This is what Lucifer meant, that Armandus would oversee the execution of the one child his father let go. Armandus’ own spear found Messiah, piercing his side.”

“Aye, but little did Lucifer know that his evil threat would actually fulfill the prophecies Liz just told us about,” Kate said in anger. “That devil were used ta make the prophecies aboot Jesus come true!”

“I love ta watch the Maker turn everythin’ that the devil does back on his slimy head,” Max huffed.

“Jesus were already dead so they didn’t break his legs,” Al said sadly. “So how do ye think Jesus died?”

“From what I can surmise, with the water and blood that came from Jesus’ side,” Nigel said gently, “it appears that his heart ruptured.”

Tears fell down Liz’s cheeks. “Jesus literally died of a broken heart as he paid for the sins of the world.”

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“As the Maker took a rib from Adam’s side to make his bride of Eve while he slept, could it be that He took from Jesus’ side his heart to make Jesus’ bride?” Clarie said, suddenly appearing as a lamb standing beside them. Her loving eyes and gentle voice brought welcome relief.

“Oh, Clarie!” Kate exclaimed, giving the lamb a warm embrace. “I think the Maker knew we needed ta see ye.”

“*Oui, mon amie*, how glad we are to see you,” Liz echoed, kissing the lamb on both cheeks.

“What do you mean? Jesus’ bride?”

“All of those who will follow Jesus after his resurrection will become known as ‘the church,’ which he will lovingly refer to as his ‘bride,’” Clarie explained. “He already loves her enough to have died for her, giving his heart freely for her. Someday he’ll come back for her and bring her to heaven for all of eternity.”

The animals were stunned by the wonder and beauty of this revelation. It was mysterious and hard to understand.

Clarie saw that they were trying to comprehend the meaning of this. “You will understand with time,” she smiled.

“Wha’ will happen ta Jesus’ body now?” Kate asked quietly.

“Well, they don’t have much time, but Joseph and Nicodemus will carefully clean Jesus’ body, anoint it with oil and then wrap it in a single linen cloth,” Clarie explained. “Usually they use a large amount of myrrh and spices and wrap the body from head to toe in strips of linen soaked in a mixture of spiced resin, but there won’t be time to prepare Jesus’ body completely before they have to roll the stone in front of the tomb.”

“Why won’t they have time then?” Al asked.

“Sunset is fast approaching, and with it, the Sabbath. They also must obey the Jewish law that the body of someone executed must be buried on the same day,” Liz jumped in to explain. “So Joseph and Nicodemus are hurriedly trying to keep two of the Maker’s commandments before the sun goes down.”

“That’s exactly right, Liz,” Clarie affirmed. She looked over at Nigel who was looking at Jesus’ sign, touching it softly.

“Wor-thy is the Lamb, that was slain,” Nigel sang softly. He looked up with grieving eyes, not understanding how or why he would or could sing at a time like this. “Where did that come from?”

Clarie walked over and softly kissed the little mouse on his head. “It came from your heart, dear Nigel.” She looked over at Max. “Max, would you please pick up Jesus’ sign and carry it with us?”

“Aye, lass, but why do we need it?” Max asked.

Clarie started walking in the direction of where they had carried Jesus’ body. “You’ll know why soon.”

Max reverently picked up the sign that was lying in the mud and covered with blood. He closed his eyes and fought back the tears as he fell in line behind Clarie and the others. As the animals walked on to the Garden tomb where Joseph and Nicodemus were hurriedly preparing Jesus’ body, the rain suddenly stopped and the sky began to clear. The sun appeared just long enough to give their eyes and hearts a welcome relief of hope with the light after the darkness of this horrific day.

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As they reached the tomb carved into the hillside, they saw the men roll the massive stone in front of the door. Joseph, Nicodemus and their servants walked away and the animals saw two of the women who had been hiding in the garden also scurry home. The women had followed to see where Jesus would be laid. But now the sun was setting and the Sabbath had begun. Everyone needed to get home.

The animals gathered around the tomb, knowing Jesus' body was on the other side of that huge, cold, round stone. All was quiet. Not even the birds were singing. All of nature itself was grieving.

Liz walked up and placed her dainty paw on the stone, weeping. "We can no longer get to our Jesus."

"Aye, the separation be too great," Kate added, joining Liz and placing her paw on the stone.

Max, Al, and Nigel joined them next to the stone, just wanting to be close to Jesus, even though they knew they couldn't get to him. The five friends held a silent vigil of grief.

Clarie stood behind them, so proud of how they had walked with Jesus every step of the way, never faltering in their mission. Perhaps their greatest challenge was when they were called to simply stand by and allow the events of Jesus' death to unfold. Oh, if they only could see all that was coming! But Clarie would have to wait right along with them. Still, she could offer them some hope to lift their spirits.

"Liz, you are usually right 100% of the time, but in this case, you couldn't be more wrong,"

Clarie said.

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Liz turned to her lamb friend and wrinkled her brow. “I am sorry, but I do not understand, *mon amie*.”

“Jesus has provided a way of access to himself and to his Father that has never been available to all of creation since the fall in the Garden,” Clarie explained. “Today at the moment of Jesus’ death, the veil in the Temple was rent in two, from top to bottom. There is no longer any barrier to get to the Maker, all because of what Jesus did.”

“You mean the veil to the Most Holy Place? It was torn? But how?” Liz said excitedly. “It is made of knitted wool. It simply is not possible to tear it! The weight and strength of it cannot be torn by human hands!”

Clarie pursed her lips and gave Liz a look of ‘*Come now, you should know better than to say something is impossible.*’ “Exactly.”

Liz smiled shyly and nodded. “*Oui*, but with the Maker, nothing is impossible!”

Max gently placed Jesus’ sign on the ground. “Aye, so ye’re tellin’ us that the dividin’ curtain that kept the people away fr-r-rom the Maker were r-r-ripped apart by the Maker’s hand himself?”

“He must want everyone to be able to get to him now,” Al said, drawing appreciative looks of understanding from the others.

“Jesus said he were the way ta the Father!” Kate enthused. “He’s paid the price for all ta reach him.”

“Utterly sublime!” Nigel added. “Just as Jesus’ body was torn for men, now the Maker has torn the dividing veil. No longer must anyone go through priests, good deeds or sacrifice to reach

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him. Through Jesus' sacrifice, direct access to the Maker is forevermore granted. He was the final sacrifice the Maker will ever require. Worthy is the Lamb indeed."

Clarie beamed at seeing the understanding of the animals. Suddenly they heard the voices of soldiers approaching. "Hurry, hide!"

Max picked up the sign and ran behind the bushes with the others. They saw the glow of the torches first, and then the familiar brusque voices of soldiers approaching the tomb.

"Those Jewish leaders are the most paranoid bunch I've ever seen," Velius joked. "I can't believe they actually asked Pilate to post us here to guard a dead body!"

"Yeah, as if he's going to get up and escape!" Ulixes laughed. "I thrust the spear into him myself. Jesus was *dead* when we took him off the cross."

"It's not that they think this Jesus is going to rise from the dead, even though he claimed it. They're afraid his disciples will come and try to steal the body and *say* that Jesus rose from the dead," one of the Temple guards instructed them. "The Jewish leaders knew you two men were on the crucifixion detail and might I add, it didn't escape them that you *enjoyed* it. They know they can trust your opinion that Jesus is in fact dead."

"Yeah, well, it's only a couple of days. The pay is good, and it's from the Temple treasury at that," Velius said as he pulled out the cord to tie across the stone that was rolled in front of the tomb.

"Our commander was glad to get rid of us for a while, too," Ulixes said as he helped to secure the cord. He took out a glob of wax and mashed it on top of the cord. He brought his torch close

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enough to slightly melt the wax while he pressed the Imperial Seal of Rome into the glob, leaving an impression in the wax. He then stood back and grinned at the tomb.

“Jesus’ fate is sealed,” Ulixes said with a wicked laugh. “The king is dead.”

PART FIVE

ENCORE: LONG LIVE THE KING

Kings will stand speechless in his presence.

-Isaiah 52:14



Chapter 64

I Know that My Redeemer Liveth

“Here we are again, in another garden, no?” Liz posed. “The most important encounters between man and the Maker have taken place in gardens. I wonder if this is why I am so drawn to them.”

Liz and the animals had remained near the Garden tomb, not wanting to leave. They stayed hidden from the soldiers guarding the tomb, and comforted each other as best they could. Faint pink ribbons of light began to streak across the dark sky.

“Aye, lass. Methinks we’re goin’ ta see the best garden meetin’ yet,” Max said cheerfully. “R-r-remember, all of ye, that Jesus said he would r-r-rise on the third day!”

“I wish it would hurry up and get here,” Al said with his head resting on his front paws. “I can’t stand to be so sad for so long.”

Clarie breathed in deeply as a gentle breeze blew through the garden. She smiled and gazed at the tiny rays of light appearing in the sky. She gazed around at the animals. “Al, you won’t have to wait any longer. It’s time.”

Kate’s sad eyes widened. “How can it be the third day already?”

“*Oui!* The Jews count any part of a day as a ‘day’ so Friday, Saturday, and now today is Sunday,” Liz enthused. “*C’est magnifique! Le troisième jour est arrivé!*”

“Aye, and the third day be here!” Al cheered.

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“Splendid! Oh, how I’ve longed for this day!” Nigel exclaimed with a fist of victory raised in the air.

Clarie walked over to Nigel and leaned her head in close to his. “Nigel, since seals are your specialty, would you do the honors?”

Nigel’s eyes widened and he placed a paw on his chest. “I say, you want *me* to break the seal on Jesus’ tomb?”

“No mouse deserves it more, Mousie,” Max said, giving Nigel a nudge.

“*Oui*, what a wonderful honor, *mon ami!*” Liz encouraged.

“Jesus wouldn’t have it any other way!” Kate added.

Al braced himself for impact and shut his eyes tightly. Max looked at him and frowned. “Wha’s wr-r-rong with ye, lad?”

“Goin’ into the IAMISPHERE be one thing,” Al gulped and said. “Wakin’ I AM be a whole ‘nother thing.”

Clarie laughed softly. “Actually, Al is not far off. Once the seal is broken, we all need to brace ourselves.”

Nigel wiped back his fur and whiskers, making sure he looked his best. He straightened his spectacles and bowed humbly with his foot forward and a paw draped across his chest. “It will be my highest honor.” With that he scurried over to the tomb, careful to avoid being seen by the soldiers.

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The animals watched as Nigel jumped from rock to rock and up to the cord that was tied around the stone. They held their breath as the little mouse carefully walked across the cord to reach the seal, slipping once. He looked over at the group who all gave him encouraging nods and smiles.

Nigel closed his eyes. He let go a deep breath and sang-whispered, “I know that my Redeemer liveth.” He wrinkled his brow, curious as to why he once again was singing, but began to nibble the Roman seal. As soon as he broke through the wax, the earth began to rumble and the cord split. Nigel grabbed one end of the cord and swung to the ground. As soon as his paws hit the dirt, a violent earthquake erupted and light filled the garden. Rocks tumbled all about the soldiers who covered their heads with their hands.

The animals looked up to see an angel descending from heaven. He landed right in front of the stone, and his appearance was like lightning! His robe was as white as snow. He stretched out his strong arms over the stone and easily rolled it aside. The angel then jumped up and sat on top of the stone. He looked over at Nigel and smiled at him with a wink.

The guards screamed in fear from what they had seen then proceeded to faint.

“Those bully lads scr-r-ream like lassies,” Max said with a grin as he trotted over to the tomb, followed by the others.

Nigel looked up at the angel and then in the tomb. “May I?”

“Of course! Come and see!” the angel said excitedly, his hand extended in welcome toward the open tomb. “All of you, come and see that He is risen!”

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Nigel was the first to peek inside the tomb, and he was soon joined by the others who stood with him gazing in. There on the slab where Jesus' body was laid they saw nothing but his bodyless grave clothes lying there, undisturbed. His head covering was still in the shape of having been wound around his head, but was flat. The long linen shroud also was still in the shape of his body, but also was flat.

"He's r-r-risen jest like he said!" Max exclaimed, pushing on it and running to the slab.

"*Oui*, his shroud is here but it is still lying in place as if he simply passed through it!" Liz exulted, tears of joy now filling her eyes. "He is risen!"

"Brilliant! And unlike Lazarus who had to be unbound from his grave clothes, Jesus has sent the clear message that nothing can bind him," Nigel added. "Not a stone, not grave clothes, not death itself!"

"Praise the Maker, our Jesus be alive!" Kate said, hugging Al.

"Aye! He ain't called I WERE, but I AM," Al cheered. "But where be Jesus now?"

"You'll see him soon," Clarie said. "It's going to get very busy here in the Garden."

Suddenly another angel appeared in dazzling clothes, sitting on Jesus' tomb. "Greetings!"

The animals bowed respectfully before the powerful angel. "That's our cue. Time to go," Clarie said. The group went back outside and resumed their hiding position. "You're going to love this."

"How will we roll away the stone?" they heard a woman's voice say from around the corner.

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Soon the animals saw Mary Magdalene, Salome, Joanna and other women they had seen at the foot of Jesus' cross, except for his mother, Mary. Their faces wore expressions of intense grief, and in their hands they carried jars full of spices.

“They've come to complete the process of anointing Jesus' body,” Clarie whispered.

“They be in for a gr-r-rand surpr-r-rise then,” Max answered back in a hoarse whisper.

As the women walked up to the tomb, they saw the soldiers lying there unconscious and the stone rolled away. Mary Magdalene stopped in her tracks and put her arm out in front of the women in alarm. “What has happened?”

Together the women slowly, carefully inched their way toward the tomb. They held on to each other and gradually came to the entrance. The women peered inside and saw Jesus' grave clothes lying there.

“He's gone!” Mary Magdalene said as she immediately took off running.

The other women were too much in shock to react when suddenly they saw the two angels radiating light inside the empty tomb. Their presence was blinding and struck fear into their hearts. The women immediately bowed with their faces to the ground.

One of the angels asked, “Why are you looking among the dead for someone who is alive? He isn't here! He is risen from the dead!”

“Remember what he told you back in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and that he would rise again on the third day,” the other angel echoed with a brilliant smile.

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The women suddenly remembered Jesus' words, but were so full of fear and confusion that they quickly left the tomb. They glanced over and saw the soldiers beginning to rouse, and their hearts began pounding in their chests. "Hurry, we have to get away from here," Salome urged. "And we must tell no one!"

As the women ran off, Ulixes, Velius and the Temple Guard sat up, trembling from head to toe. They looked at one another in fear. "We must report this to the Jewish leaders," the Temple Guard said in a broken voice. Together they picked up their spears and ran away.

"Cowards!" Max called after them.

As the women rounded the bend, there in front of them stood Jesus. He wore a pure white robe and his face radiated robust health and power.

"Good morning!" Jesus smiled and said.

The women gasped in awe and joy, fell at his feet and worshiped him, crying, "Master! You're alive! We don't understand!"

Jesus gently placed his hand on their heads. "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there."

Then suddenly, Jesus was gone.

The women laughed with joy and hugged one another tightly. "We've got to tell the eleven! If we spread out, we can find them." The women got to their feet, tingling from head to toe with the miracle of seeing their risen Lord. Their fear vanished and they ran as fast as they could to find the disciples.



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Peter and John jumped when they heard the knock on the door. Fear coursed through them afresh as they wondered if the Jewish authorities had found them. John looked to the room where Jesus' mother, Mary, slept, exhausted from the grief of losing her son. *What will she do if we are taken?* John worried to himself. They paused a moment and waited. The knocking resumed and this time they heard a hushed voice. "It's me, Mary."

Peter let go a heavy breath of relief and shut his eyes tightly. John got up and cracked open the door to make sure she was alone. When he saw it was she, he opened the door and quickly ushered her inside. She put her hand to her mouth as tears filled her eyes.

"Something has happened," she began. "We went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices, but when we got there. . ." she stopped and shook her head sadly.

"Yes? What, Mary?" Peter asked insistently. "What happened?"

"The guards were lying there unconscious, the stone was rolled away, and Jesus . . . he was gone," Mary finally spilled out. "Someone has taken him!"

Peter and John looked at one another in alarm, and mindlessly left Mary sitting there as they ran out the door. They were heading for the tomb to see for themselves.

After the men left, Mary Magdalene stood up and slowly closed the door behind her. She didn't know what else to do, so she decided to go back to the tomb. She had to find out where Jesus was.

Mary emerged from the other room, her hand on her chest. She smiled and closed her eyes, tears of joy streaming down her face. Overhearing Mary's report, she tapped her hand on her heart.

"My Jesus, you are alive!"



“It’s John!” Liz exclaimed as the disciple reached the tomb, stopping outside and falling to his knees as he peered inside the empty tomb. The animals had moved closer to the tomb where they could hear and see everything, but they still remained hidden behind a shrub.

“Aye, an’ Peter,” Max added as Peter ran and put his hand up on the stone, out of breath from running. He looked inside and stepped around John, boldly entering the empty tomb.

The angels veiled themselves so Peter and John couldn’t see them.

Peter walked over and looked at the undisturbed grave clothes. He furrowed his brow and ran his fingers through his hair, struggling to understand what had happened.

John slowly joined Peter in the tomb, and as he stood there, Jesus’ words suddenly rushed back into his mind. *“Listen, we’re going up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die and hand him over to the Romans. They will mock him, spit on him, flog him with a whip, and kill him, but after three days he will rise again.”*

Everything suddenly fell into place. John grabbed Peter by the arm and exclaimed, “He’s alive!”

Peter looked at John with confusion. He still didn’t understand and was blinded with grief. The animals saw Peter and John exit the tomb and hurriedly walk away.

“John gets it, but Peter still doesn’t see,” Nigel said.

“*Oui*, Peter is not only blind with the grief of Jesus’ death, but with the grief from betraying his Lord,” Liz agreed. “This heavy burden has Peter’s heart so captive with pain that even at this moment of victorious evidence, he just can’t see it.”

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After a moment they saw a glow of light once more coming from the tomb. And they heard the soft weeping of Mary Magdalene. She walked back to the tomb, stooped and looked in. She saw the two white-robed angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying.

“Dear woman, why are you crying?” the angels asked her.

“Because they have taken away my Lord,” she replied, “and I don’t know where they have put him.”

Mary turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn’t recognize him. The animals gasped with joy at seeing Jesus for the first time.

“Dear woman, why are you crying?” Jesus asked her. “Who are you looking for?”

“The lass be blind with tears,” Kate observed, her chin quivering at seeing Mary’s pain. “An’ deaf with grief. She doesn’t even recognize his voice.”

Mary placed her hands on her eyes, shaking her head before answering this man who she thought was the gardener. “Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him.”

“Mary,” Jesus said softly, smiling with his arms spread out.

Mary’s head immediately snapped to attention as she recognized Jesus’ voice. “Rabboni!” she exclaimed as she fell at his feet, holding onto him, weeping now with joy and relief.

Jesus gently reached down and touched her. “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet gone back up to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am returning to him who is my Father and their Father, my God and their God.”

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He helped her to her feet and their eyes locked. Jesus was filled with compassion for her and knew she was trying to grasp what was happening. “Go, now.”

Mary smiled and without another word ran off to tell the others, this time, that Jesus was not in the tomb because he was alive. In a flash, Jesus was gone.

“We didn’t get to see him!” Al said sadly, stepping out from the bush and running into the tomb to see if he was in there. “The angels be gone, too!”

The others followed Al into the tomb. They were full of joy but also shared Al’s sadness that they didn’t get to talk to Jesus. Clarie smiled and nodded as she looked at her friends. It was time.

“Now that you’ve seen that Jesus is risen, it’s time for you to remember,” Clarie said.

“Remember what, *mon amie*?” Liz asked.

Clarie smiled. “Not what, but *when*. Max, will you go get Jesus’ sign?”

Max looked at her with a furrowed brow. “Aye, wha’ever ye say, lass.”

As Max ran outside, she lowered her head to Nigel. “Nigel, would you please take the reed from behind my ear that you took from the Jordan River the day Jesus was baptized.”

“Certainly, my dear,” Nigel said, gently pulling the reed and holding it fondly in his hands.

Max came back inside the tomb and placed the sign gently on the stone floor. “Here ye go, lass.”

“Thank you, Max,” Clarie said. She looked around at the curious animals who wondered what she was doing. She pointed to the sign, “This is no ordinary sign.” She nodded to Nigel, “And

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that is no ordinary reed. You were sent here in time to retrieve them for a grand mission. There's a reason you've been singing when you didn't understand why, Nigel."

Nigel wrinkled his brow and rubbed his chin, trying to remember. "I'm afraid I'm at a loss, my dear."

Suddenly they heard Gillamon's voice echo off the walls of the empty tomb:

"Deep in your subconscious will be these things to watch. They will give you a fresh passion that you will need when you return to 1741. As you go back in time to Jesus, watch him, the Maestro, again. Watch as he carefully chooses his twelve instruments, tuning them to perfection in order to bring a full symphony of purpose into being. Once more feel the crescendo of his life symphony to its climactic end of the Passion. Feel the thrill of Messiah's mighty encore, which has left believing audiences applauding ever since that day. You see, in order to truly make beautiful music, one must know the Subject well, and feel it deep in the soul."

"And the *Subject* is Messiah!" Nigel replayed his response, now fully remembering, a jolt of excitement running through him.

"*Bien sûr!*" Liz exclaimed. "Handel! Jennens! The libretto for *Messiah!* We've been sent back to revisit our time with Jesus in order for Nigel to freshly experience his life. Nigel, you are to inspire Handel's music with your violin."

"Aye, we were also sent ta get things Mousie needs for his new violin!" Max exclaimed.

Nigel held up the reed in his hand, "My bow." He walked over and tenderly touched Jesus' blood stained sign. "The wood for my violin."

"Ye still need the hair from a grey stallion's tail then," Kate added.

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“Achilles!” Liz exclaimed. “We must find Achilles!”

Clarie smiled and nodded. “Exactly, Liz. He’s with Armandus at a place you should well remember.”

“The home of Antonias?” Liz asked hopefully.

“Indeed,” Clarie affirmed. “In the garden. Where another encounter with Jesus is soon to take place. Shall we?”

“Aye, there be no time like the present!” Al said, trotting away from the empty tomb. He knew exactly where they needed to go.

Chapter 65

Tell Your Father

“Shhhh, hurry!” Clarie urged as the animals made their way into the garden courtyard. “Find a hiding spot. He’s coming!”

The animals each found a place to hide. Al lifted his head, startled at what he saw. “What’s wrong with him?”

Liz quickly drew in her breath and put a paw to her mouth. “Oh, no! Achilles has been wounded.”

The magnificent grey stallion lay on his side, breathing heavily. His body shuddered and he struggled to lift up his front leg. Achilles was in pain.

Armandus walked into the courtyard with a poultice and knelt down by his beloved horse. “Here you go, my friend. Let’s see if this brings you any comfort.”

“His leg,” Liz observed sadly. “It is swollen from an injury. *C’est tragique!* Armandus may have to put Achilles down.”

Armandus winced as Achilles grunted from the pain. He sat down next to his horse on the richly tiled terrace floor of his parents’ grand home in Jerusalem. He looked around at once was a happy place for him. When his parents moved back to Rome, they agreed to allow Armandus to keep the property for his use, knowing he would be stationed in this region for an indefinite period of time. It was eerily quiet as he looked around the neglected garden that had been his mother’s pride and joy. It was her place of solace. Armandus laughed sadly. “If the Jewish leaders knew that this idol was within the walls of Jerusalem, they would be banging down the

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doors, demanding its removal,” he said to Achilles. “But I won’t let them in. I won’t let anyone in. No one is going to take you from me.”

When Pilate had released Armandus back to Herod Antipas, he sent word that Armandus had performed extraordinarily well in “that Jesus matter.” As a reward, Herod gave Armandus two days leave. When Armandas gratefully returned to the Antonia Fortress he was horrified to see that Achilles had suffered this leg injury when the earthquake hit on Friday. All of the horses rose up in alarm that day, and Achilles’ leg fell into a crack, leaving him wounded. Armandus immediately brought the lame horse here, where he could privately care for him. But it appeared there was nothing he could do.

Tears filled Armandus’ eyes as he pulled back the poultice. It was hopeless. His horse was wounded beyond hope. He shook his head. Too much grief. Too much death. Too much loss. “I don’t think I can take losing you, too.”

Suddenly he heard someone banging at his door and he immediately wiped his eyes and got to his feet, running to the door. As he opened the window latch, there stood his two legionnaires, Velius and Ulixes. Their eyes were wild with fear.

“Sir!” Velius exclaimed as Armandus opened the door. “We’ve just come from guard duty and have some disturbing news to report.”

“What has happened?” Armandus said with his hands on his hips.

“Pilate appointed us to guard the tomb of that Jesus of Nazareth, along with one of their Temple guards,” Ulixes explained. “This morning at the tomb,” he stopped and looked at Velius.

“Well, get on with it!” Armandus shouted.

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“Sir, an earthquake happened, and we saw a man who looked as bright as lightning suddenly appear,” Velius continued.

“He rolled away the stone in front of the tomb, and sat on it,” Ulixes jumped in. “Sir, the body just vanished. Jesus is gone.”

“Did someone take the body?” Armandus asked, wide-eyed at this incredible report.

The two soldiers looked at one another. “No, his grave clothes were there neatly in place, like he just disappeared out of them,” Velius explained. “And that bright man that rolled away the stone—he wasn’t human. He looked like a god. And he had the strength of a god.”

“But the Jewish leaders want us to tell everyone that someone took the body,” Ulixes added.

“The Temple Guard had us report to them first. They gave us a huge sum of money and told us to report that we had fallen asleep and that Jesus’ disciples came and stole the body.”

“They vowed to protect us should this word get back to Pilate,” Velius further explained.

“But that story doesn’t even make sense,” Armandus frowned and said. “If you were asleep, how would you know that Jesus’ disciples had stolen the body? And for a Roman soldier to fall asleep is punishable by death!”

“Sir, we know,” Ulixes pleaded. “We know what happened, but we took the money and agreed to spread the story as the Jewish leaders instructed us. We didn’t know what else to do.”

“Go back to the Antonia Fortress and wait for me there,” Armandus instructed. “And speak of this to no one.”

“Yes, Sir!” the two soldiers exclaimed, saluting their commanding officer before turning to leave.

Armandus shut the door and rubbed his face with his hands. His mind was reeling with this news. Jesus had claimed that he would rise from the dead. Could it be true? The Centurion shook his head. Rising from the dead was impossible. There must be some other explanation. As he walked back to where Achilles lay, he stopped and stared at Libertas. She represented liberty, freedom. Armandus looked at her longingly, wishing he could be free. He felt imprisoned to guilt, pain, sorrow and impossible burdens placed before him. If only this goddess were real. But now Armandus doubted all of Rome's gods and theology after Jesus. He had come to feel that there was only one true God. But he had killed God's son. Surely the pit of Hades is all that awaited him now.

Achilles snorted in pain, and Armandus ran over to him. The horse was sweating and clearly in agony. It was time to get back to his men and his duty, but Achilles couldn't return with him. He knew what he must do. Armandus pulled his sword from its sheath as his eyes filled with tears at the horrible task before him. He fell over his horse to embrace him one last time, weeping and softly whispering, "I'm sorry, my friend. I'm so sorry."

"Why are you crying?" a voice from behind him asked.

Armandus quickly turned around with his sword raised, startled at the presence of someone who had invaded his home. There stood Jesus. Armandus' eyes filled with fear, and his throat tightened to where he couldn't say a word.

Jesus simply smiled. "Put away your sword." He proceeded to kneel down next to Achilles and placed his hand on the horse's leg.

Armandus watched in disbelief as he saw Jesus' pierced hands now tenderly touching Achilles. How was this possible?!

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Suddenly Achilles whinnied and rose up to stand tall on his feet, strong and completely healed. He stomped his foot and vigorously nodded his head, as if to say, “Thank you!”

Armandus dropped to his knees and bowed low before Jesus, swimming in a swirl of emotions. “Thank you, my Lord! Thank you for healing Achilles! Oh, please forgive me! Forgive me for all I’ve done.”

“I already have, remember?” Jesus put his hands on Armandus’ shoulders. Armandus turned his gaze to look upon this man who was indeed the resurrected Son of God. Jesus gripped him by the hand and helped him to his feet. Armandus immediately embraced Jesus, overcome with gratitude. For the first time, he was experiencing the grace and forgiveness of the one true God, and it was unlike anything he had ever known before. “I’ve got you,” Jesus smiled and said.

Armandus wept for joy and leaned back. “Yes, you do, my King. Please, tell me how I can be one of your disciples.”

“When you return to Capernaum, find Peter,” Jesus replied. “He’ll show you how.”

“I will, but where are you going? You’re alive now! Won’t you stay here and establish your kingdom?” Armandus asked. “No one can doubt that you are the Son of God any longer! You have the power to come back from the dead.”

“My kingdom is not an earthly kingdom, but will be comprised of men just like you,” Jesus said.

“I will be here for a short while after I meet with my disciples and others, including some now on the road to Emmaus. Then I will return to my Father in heaven.”

“I don’t understand,” Armandus said.

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“You will, with time,” Jesus replied. He looked around the courtyard and smiled. “Our parents were friends. You and I met here as children.”

“Yes, I know,” Armandus replied sadly. “I finally understood who you were the day you died.”

“Armandus, tell your father. Tell him about me and all that has happened. He has grieved these many years over what he did to the children of Bethlehem that horrible night so long ago,” Jesus urged. “Tell him that the child he saved has now saved the world.”

Armandus looked down and nodded. “I will, my Lord. I will tell him.”

When he looked up, Jesus was gone. Armandus looked around the courtyard and raised his hands toward the heavens. “Thank you, my King!” He ran over and embraced Achilles. “Oh Achilles, you are well! I don’t have to lose you. I will ride you out of here!” Jesus had given Armandus everything: forgiveness, healing, hope, a future, and a message. Armandus would not let Jesus down.

“Stay here, Achilles. Let me get my things and together we’ll ride to the Fortress,” Armandus said jubilantly.

As soon as Armandus was gone, Nigel quickly jumped down to land on the horse’s back and ran along his head to stand on his nose. “Good day, Achilles. I have long admired what a fine stallion you are. My name is Nigel P. Monaco, and I am on mission for the Maker. Might I ask to remove one of the hairs from your tail? It’s terribly important.”

“*Buon giorno*, Nigel,” Achilles answered in a thick Italian accent, trying to look at the mouse without crossing his eyes. “It would be my honor to serve the Maker, especially after all he has done for me, eh? Take as many as you need.”

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“Simply *splendid* of you, old boy!” Nigel cheered. “But one is sufficient. My friend will insist with this endeavor.” Nigel pointed to Al who jumped up on a rock wall next to where Achilles stood.

Al waved and gave a goofy grin. He reached up and grabbed one of Achilles’ tail hairs and yanked hard. At that moment, Achilles’ natural reflex made him kick his hind leg, sending Al flying across the courtyard. Al landed right on the Libertas statue and slid down to where he was face to face with the carved image of Liz who had posed as the cat for the base. “Why hello, me love,” Al said before his eyes rolled in his head and he passed out.

Achilles and Nigel gritted their teeth as they watched Al sail across the courtyard. “*Mi dispiace!* I hope *il gatto* is alright.”

“He’ll be fine, I assure you,” Nigel said. They heard Armandus’ footsteps coming down the tiled corridor. “I must be going. Thank you again!”

“*Prego*, Nigel,” Achilles replied with a grin.

Armandus lifted the saddle up onto Achilles. “I never thought I’d ever be able to put this on you again.” He secured the saddle and walked Achilles out of the courtyard, smiling and shaking his head in wonder and awe. Armandus climbed up in the saddle once they were outside. “Long live the King! *Magna est veritas et praevalabit*,” Armandus exclaimed as he squeezed Achilles to gallop off.

Immediately Liz and the others ran over to check on Al. “Speak to me, *cher* Albert.”

Al’s eyes fluttered open and he rubbed his head with his paw, now sitting up. “I jest had the craziest dream. I were flyin’ like Mousie on a pigeon. But then, Liz, ye turned ta stone and I fell like a rock.” He held up Achilles’ horse hair and said, “Where’d I get this?”

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Liz breathed a sigh of relief and hugged Al as Nigel reached over to get the hair. “I’ll take that off your hands, old boy.”

“Wha’ did the lad say when he were r-r-ridin’ off then?” Max asked.

“Great is the truth and it will prevail,” Nigel translated.

“Oh, this were wonderful ta see! Jesus healed Achilles an’ gave hope ta Armandus,” Kate said happily.

“Aye, an’ that lad will give hope ta his father,” Max added. “There’s nothin’ as powerful as gr-r-race ta give ta those who feel they be unforgivable.”

“Well, your mission here is accomplished,” Clarie said. “You’ve got everything you need for Nigel’s violin.”

“*Oui*, and I cannot begin to imagine the music that will come from those items!” Liz cheered.

“Aye, the r-r-reed from the Jordan, the wood from Jesus’ sign, and horse hair from the R-r-roman’s horse,” Max affirmed.

“Not hair from just any horse, mind you,” Nigel said with a jolly twinkle in his eye. “But the horse of one healed by the power of the resurrected Messiah!”

“Oh, Nigel, I be so excited for ye!” Kate said, hugging the little mouse. “I can’t wait ta hear wha’ comes from yer fiddle.”

“Me as well, dear Kate,” Nigel replied, studying the sign. “I say, though, when we bring these items back to Shandelli to make my violin, I don’t see how we can reveal the entire sign. Plus he doesn’t need this much wood.”

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“But of course, you are right, *mon ami*,” Liz agreed. “Perhaps you should take just a portion of the sign.”

They studied the sign for a moment. “Right. The acronym INRI represents the Latin inscription IESVS·NAZARENVS·REX·IVDÆORVM (Jesus Nazarene, King of the Jews). Since the REX stands for KING, I’m terribly drawn to using the ‘R.’”

“I think that is perfect, *mon ami*,” Liz said with her dainty paw on his back. “And did you notice how beautiful the color of the wood is where Jesus’ blood has stained it there?”

“Stand back then,” Max said as he picked up a sharp rock. He lifted the rock high and plunged it into the sign, breaking it apart at the ‘R’. It was a clean break. He made another plunge, separating the ‘R’ from the ‘I’.

“Good show, old boy!” Nigel exulted, picking up the segment of wood. “It’s perfect!”

“Very well, it’s time for you to return to 1741,” Clarie said. She pointed to the remains of Jesus sign.

Suddenly the dried blood on the sign began to liquefy and formed a circle. Soon it rippled into the Seven Seal. It was time to break the seal and enter the IAMISPHERE.

Kate’s smile faded. “That means we have ta tell ye good-bye.” The westie went over and embraced her lamb friend.

“Goodbye, sweet friend,” Clarie said tearfully. “I’m so proud of you all.”

Liz also embraced Claire. “*Merci beaucoup*, Clarie, for everything. We hope to see you soon.”

“Don’t worry,” Clarie replied playfully. “I’ll see you again soon. You never know where I might turn up.” She winked and gestured to the sign. “Nigel, if you please.”

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“Certainly, my dear. Fairwell,” Nigel bowed and said, kissing her extended foot. “Is everyone ready?” He looked around the courtyard one last time and said, “Hallelujah!” before nibbling the seal.

In a flash the sign exploded and they disappeared into the IAMISPHERE.