

NICAEA TRILOGY

Three Novellas

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THE MISSION

CHAPTER ONE

A centurion in the Roman Legion mopped his brow under the burning sun, as he led a cadre of imperial soldiers into the shadowy bowels of the Caesarea Maritima prison near the Mediterranean Sea. Julius hated this part of his job. The stonewalls smothered him like a crypt, closing in on his mind. “Jailer—where are you?”

A mulish man emerged from the darkness carrying a torch to light his way from the hole where he guarded the forsaken. He approached the brawny centurion and said, “Where’s the list?”

Julius gave him a folded papyrus with seven names on it. “Be sure to chain their hands and feet. And hurry up—I’m running late.”

The jailer’s lifeless eyes scanned the list. He sighed as he turned and walked off with the soldiers to round up the inmates. Julius waited under a shaft of light, wondering how long it would take this time. He couldn’t miss the ship. He paced for a few minutes before he saw his soldiers returning, pushing the prisoners to make them move faster.

Julius counted seven men all clad in grubby, ragged tunics.

The jailer handed over the papyrus. “They’re all here.”

“You’d better be right.” He checked the list again and nodded. “Guards, take them out.”

The soldiers escorted the prisoners out of the murky pit into the morning air. The captives shuffled along, dragging clumsy leg irons, and shielding their eyes from the cerulean sky. Julius snapped his leather whip to get their attention. “Line up!”

A noisy crowd of the naturally curious, with nothing else to do that hour, gathered to see the show. Julius knew they were hoping that, by chance, at least one of the criminals might be brave or mad enough to run for it, to add a little excitement to an otherwise dull existence.

Julius spotted a short inmate, at the end of the line of prisoners, surveying the rabble of onlookers. The inmate apparently didn’t recognize any of them until he spotted a familiar face in the crowd and shouted out, “Is that you, Lucas?”

Without hesitating, the man identified as Lucas cried out, “Paul!” He snatched up his brown satchel and rushed toward his friend. But that was a mistake, for he got no farther than the long, powerful arm of a burly guard.

Julius heard a thud as Lucas hit the ground and lay sprawled out on his back.

The short prisoner, Paul, winced at the injustice. “Why did you do that? He’s my friend.”

The boorish guard laughed and put his foot on Lucas’ chest.

“I don’t have time for this nonsense,” Julius said. Yet, sensing something curious about the man on the ground, he ordered, “Let him up.”

Lucas got onto his feet and brushed himself off. “I’m a doctor, and Paul is my patient.”

Julius scratched his chin. “That’s hard to believe—only the emperor has a personal doctor.”

He studied Lucas, a tall and lean fellow, wearing a plain tunic and sandals—clothing of the common man. Lucas smiled as he reached into his bag and pulled out two small odd-shaped leather pouches.

Julius stared at them. “What are those?”

“They contain special herbs I use in treating Paul and other patients.”

“Potions, you mean. Are you some kind of magician?”

Lucas shook his head.

Julius was unsure what to make of it. He looked at Lucas again. “We’re wasting time here,” he said, eager to get back to the task at hand—putting his prisoners aboard a ship bound for Rome. He tugged at his sleeve, muttering to himself, and gave up, “Oh, go on, then. You’re free to leave—just stay out of my way.”

“I want to come with Paul,” Lucas said. “He needs me on this trip.”

Julius spat in the dirt and grumbled, “Go buy a ticket and meet us at the ship,” and then he walked away without another word.



The ship was due to sail at noon that day. Lucas found the owner’s agent and got in line with other passengers, holding a silver coin to pay for his passage. He glanced around the bustling dock in search of Paul but didn’t see him anywhere. *Was he already on board?*

“Do you want a ticket or not?” asked the bored-looking agent, swatting at a fly.

Next in line, Lucas turned to face the man. “Yes, here’s my fare.” He handed the agent the coin and received a scrap of papyrus in return. He picked up his bulging travel bag and tent, and lugged them over to a huge freighter moored at the dock with thick ropes. The Roman ship was one of many that carried cargo and people in the Mediterranean.

He made his way past stevedores who were hauling bags of grain and pulling wagons of food being loaded, and found himself in another line of passengers eager to board. He looked up and spotted Julius and his guards on the gangplank, and then watched them disappear through an open starboard hatch on the main deck. Lucas waited his turn and, once on the ship, he dashed through a throng

of sailors and travelers over to the hatch—only to find it blocked by a brawny soldier.

Tired and out of breath, Lucas asked, “Where are the prisoners?”

The guard waved his big hand as if to shoo away a bad smell.

Lucas refused to go away. “I must talk to Julius, the centurion.”

The soldier growled and pulled his sword out of its sheath. “Move along!”

Giving up, for the time being, Lucas walked away and found an empty spot on deck to set up his goatskin tent for sleeping among the other passengers. It was now the last week of August, as the ship got under way to leave the port of Caesarea.

The vessel sailed north in the coastal waters before heading for the open sea. The next day it passed the rock island city of Tyre and went north to Sidon—the ancient city where Jesus had come many years earlier with his disciples and healed a possessed woman.

From there, the freighter sailed northwest toward Cyprus and eventually hugged the lee side of the island’s peaceful waters. While other passengers sat relaxing in the warm afternoon sunshine, Lucas passed the time writing in his journal about the voyage, noting that he had wanted to examine Paul but couldn’t. It was then he looked up and saw Julius a few feet away.

“Bring the prisoners topside for some fresh air,” the centurion told a guard, who turned and disappeared down the hatch.

The seven captives, bound with iron chains to prevent any trouble, soon emerged one by one from the ship’s dark hold. At the end of the line was Paul, who followed the others to the stern and told to sit down in a circle. While two guards kept close watch, another handed out scraps of stale bread and then passed around a jug of sour wine.

Lucas watched from a distance and then, after a few minutes, went over to see Julius. The centurion, talking with the ship’s captain, glanced over his shoulder and saw Lucas coming in hurry. He glared at the doctor. “What do *you* want?”

“I need to examine Paul.”

“Can’t you see I’m busy?”

Showing no particular interest in the matter, the captain turned and walked off.

Lucas faced Julius and said, “I’m his doctor and demand to—”

“You *demand* nothing—*understand?*”

“Only five minutes, that’s all.”

“No!—Now get out of my sight.”

Lucas looked at Paul and shrugged his shoulders at the centurion’s quick dismissal. He would not give up but thought it wise to try again another time.

As the days passed, Lucas spent mornings on deck jotting notes in his journal about the voyage to Rome.

We were able to leave the waters off Cyprus and sail to the region of Cilicia. With the aid of a nice breeze and a favorable current, the captain steadily worked his way past Pamphylia in the Gulf of Adalia. Staying within sight of land, our ship went around the shore line and hills of Lycia. It was late September by then and clouds covered the mountaintops. We then put in at the harbor at Myra, due north of Alexandria. The captain maneuvered his vessel around Egyptian grain ships and naval slave galleys, and found an empty berth.



After the sailors lowered the gangplank, Julius went ashore to find the agent of a vessel continuing to Rome. Lucas followed the centurion at a safe distance and saw him booking passage for himself, his guards, and prisoners on another sturdy cargo ship. Afterward, Lucas bought a ticket for himself.

Behind schedule, the ship left Myra and sailed close along the coast. Julius was the only military officer on board and, according to Roman practice, his word was final on the voyage. Also sailing that

day were several Italian merchants, African slaves, Roman army veterans, and women and children.

The ship floated past Patara, a flourishing coastal town, when Lucas heard the captain bark at the helmsman: “Steer more west toward Rhodes. We must make up for lost time and reach Cnidus before the winds are too strong.”

Cnidus was the last port of call for vessels sailing across the Aegean Sea, between the southern Balkan and Anatolian peninsulas, to the mainland of Athens or Corinth. It was October now, and most sea captains kept their ships sheltered in the harbor, fearing a violent storm would hurtle them to the bottom of the ocean.

The vessel sliced through the water with ease, gaining speed as it moved. But after the main meal and by the seventh hour, the northern winds were blowing much harder in the Aegean.

The helmsman struggled to keep on course.

“Hold her steady,” the captain ordered.

“Trying to, sir, but she’s not responding. We’re sliding south!”

“We’ll make a run for Crete’s southern shore and might get some protection there.”

Day after day, the ship blew off course and then passed Cape Salmone on the eastern tip of Crete.

The captain told the helmsman to steer into Fair Havens, a bay near the town of Lasea. Lucas saw some passengers bent over the railing, including Julius, sick from the rocking ship. He went over to the groaning centurion. “I hate sailing,” Julius complained, his face chalky white.

“You’ll feel better soon.”

“How come *you* aren’t sea sick?”

“There’s no cure for it, but I’ve learned a secret that can help.”

“Oh you have . . . what is it?”

“If I tell you, will you give me permission to examine Paul?”

Julius hung his head over the rail and threw up again. He wiped his mouth and said, “All right—now, what’s your secret?”

“You’re sick because your body and brain aren’t working together.”

“Huh?”

“Next time you’re dizzy, keep your eyes open and stare at something, just one small spot, on the ship.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Believe me, it works.”

Just then the captain came over to them. “Get ready to sail. We’re not going to winter here. There’s no shelter from the winds and no place for the crew and passengers to stay.” He looked at Julius and winced. “You look awful, centurion.”

Julius ignored the remark and shouted to one of his guards. “Bring Paul up from down below so the doctor can examine him!”

The apostle soon appeared on deck, hobbling toward Lucas, who asked, “What happened to you?”

“I fell down the steps in the hold . . . my right leg hurts a little.”

“Let’s take a look at it—come with me.”

Leaving the captain and centurion, Lucas guided Paul to a spot near the stern. “My tent is right here,” he said, helping the apostle sit down and prop his leg on a crate. Lucas opened his medical bag and went to work. After a few minutes, he said, “Nothing’s broken—there’s just an ugly bruise that will go away.” He examined Paul all over and found him in good condition. “You’re in better shape than I expected.”

Paul was looking at Julius.

Lucas leaned forward. “What’s wrong?”

“How far have we come?”

“We’re in Fair Havens, but the captain wants to leave.”

Paul frowned at this idea. “Time is running out for us to reach Italy this season.” By early November, ships like this one cannot sail because cloudy weather will prevent navigating by the sun and stars.

“We have lost too much time and will lose even more if we keep going.”

“What can we do about it?” Lucas asked. “The captain has made up his mind.”

“We’ve got to convince Julius, so that he will order the captain to winter here.”

Paul got up and went to speak with the centurion, and Lucas tagged along.

Julius saw them coming and was unsure what they were up to.

Paul wasted no time in telling him. “We’re headed for disaster.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If the captain leaves now, he will lose his ship and cargo, and we will all drown!”

Lucas nodded. “He’s right.”

Julius peered down at Paul. “I say we follow the captain’s advice. He knows these waters far better than you or I, and will take us to Rome.”

“I believe he’s wrong.”

This made no difference to Julius. “Guards, take the prisoner down to the hold.”

Moments later, a gentle south wind began to blow and it seemed leaving Fair Havens was the right decision after all. “We should have no trouble crossing the gulf,” the captain told Julius. He ordered his men to weigh anchor and the helmsman to steer along Crete’s shoreline.

The vessel rounded the island’s southern coast and entered the clear waters of the Gulf of Messara. Lucas and others could see its sandy beach in the distance, as the winds picked up, blowing down from Mount Ida in the north.

Lucas didn’t seem to worry about his safety, though. He was familiar with the ship’s rugged design. It was built up from a keel with a shell of cedar planks fastened together. Each joint between the planks was fixed in place to make it secure. The builders smeared pitch outside the hull to preserve the wood and covered this with a layer of fabric to the waterline, adding a thin sheet of lead for greater strength.

The ship continued to struggle against the powerful winds when at last the helmsman shouted “Euraquilo!” A violent gale had caught the vessel, and it could not head into the wind. It was as if an angry sea monster had slapped the ship. The vessel rolled out of control in the whirling, drenching rainstorm. Cascades of icy water splashed across the deck, soaking everyone to the skin.

The main mast shuddered and the captain looked up. “Run for cover!” The mast cracked and its burden of cables came crashing down—trapping two men and a woman. As Lucas tried to pull them out, a huge wave of cold water knocked him down. He crawled on his hands and knees over to the victims, and pushed away the wreckage to free them. He helped each one to get below deck. Then he came back up as sailors hoisted a lifeboat high enough to dump out seawater and then tie it down.

“Pass long ropes under the hull,” the captain told them, “so we don’t run aground on the sandbars and breakup in the waves.” He then went to the port side. “Raise the anchor—just let her be driven along!” he ordered, as fierce winds and rolling waves mauled the ship and blew it due west to a small island.

“We must lighten the load,” he told the crew. “Pump out the bilge. And take off all leg irons so the prisoners can help throw cargo overboard—even the animals.”

By the third day they were tossing the ship’s tackle into the sea. The only thing of value they did not get rid of was the Egyptian grain. It would fetch a high price in Rome that coming winter when wheat would be in short supply.

For 12 horrible days and nights the hurricane raged, and there was neither sunlight nor any starlight shining through the clouds to help the captain navigate. Many onboard lost hope. Paul prayed to God for strength to endure. One night he went topside with Lucas and climbed a few rungs of a rope ladder to speak to the crew.

The sailors stared at him, not sure what he was doing. “Listen to me—you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete.”