

Chapter 1 The Silversmith's Family

"We haven't put on a play for a long time," Chloe remarked to her older sister, Drusilla, as the two of them sat together, weaving linen for new tunics. The afternoon sun was slowly sinking over Ephesus that late-winter day as they waited for their father, Nicanor, and their brother Stephanas to arrive home from the silver shop.

"No, we haven't," Drusilla agreed. "I suppose we've been busy with other projects; we are sixteen and seventeen now. We still write stories and poems though."

Both sisters were tall, nearly the same height, but Chloe had wavy brown hair while Drusilla had black curls. They had been close since earliest childhood and had been educated at home by their mother, Apphia, who had taught them to read, write, spin, weave, and act as respectable young ladies ought. A lover of music with a beautiful voice and admirable skill on the lyre, she had also taught them to sing and play.* The family's domestic servant, Phebe, had helped train the girls in certain practical skills as well.

Their hometown of Ephesus, capital of the Roman province of Asia, boasted a population of several hundred thousand people. The city's most renowned landmark was the magnificent marble Temple of Diana, a wonder of the ancient world, which attracted worshipers and tourists from all over the Roman Empire.** In addition, the city's massive outdoor theater, located on the western side of Mount Pion, could seat up to twenty-five thousand spectators. Occasional comedies the girls had attended there with Mother, Father, and their younger brothers had inspired them to write skits of their own and perform them with friends for the parents' enjoyment. But the amateur theater troupe, led by Drusilla with Chloe as her chief consultant, had been largely latent for the past two to three years.

"Do you remember that play we wrote together four years ago about Diana falling in love with one of the other gods?" Chloe asked.

While Chloe took pleasure in writing about almost anything, her passion was romance. Many an hour she had spent penning stories and poems about pretty young women who fell in love with handsome young men. She had imagined exciting meetings, thrilling courtships, and extravagant weddings for dozens of fictional couples, and it must be confessed that her conceptions and descriptions of love and marriage (guided heavily by girlish emotion) had more of romance than reality in them.

Drusilla's preferred pastime was also writing, but her particular interest was mythology; she loved drafting poems and stories about the gods and goddesses that she, her family, and her city worshiped. Diana was a major character in many of Drusilla's plots, and for the aforementioned play, the girls had combined efforts to present what they'd considered a captivating love story.

"Yes, I remember it." Drusilla blushed. "Mother and Father didn't approve of that play, and I don't blame them now. The performance they saw was the last of that sort. Since then I've been more careful what I write, mainly retelling stories I've been taught about the gods rather than making up tales contrary to tradition."

Devout worshipers of the Greek and Roman gods, the family feared that evil would come upon them if they in any way displeased those gods—gods served by most residents of Ephesus but not by the substantial Jewish population. The Jews knew from the Scriptures that "the LORD is the true God, he is the living God, and an everlasting king." As for all other alleged deities, the LORD's prophet Jeremiah had proclaimed, "The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth, even they shall perish from the earth, and from under these

heavens." [Jer. 10:10-11]

Chloe and Drusilla's Greek family, however, had little to do with the Jews, their Scriptures, or their God. Father's trade as a silversmith especially flourished due to his expertly crafted statuettes of Diana and his realistic models of her temple, the sales of which brought a comfortable living to him and his family. Neither very rich nor very poor, they were part of a class known as the respectable populace. The household of eight—including two parents, two daughters, two sons, and two servants—lived on a scenic property with an exquisite garden away from the center of town.

"You know," said Chloe, "it's a little strange to consider that something Father makes out of silver could actually have the power to hear prayers and help people. I sometimes think it's rather hard to believe," she admitted.

"Chloe, don't talk that way!" Drusilla chided her in alarm. "It isn't respectful."

The girls' conversation was interrupted as seven-year-old Epaphras ran into the room, gladly announcing, "Father and Stephanas are home!"

The baby of the family and a delight to them all, Epaphras had straight black hair, a contagious smile, a love for singing, and an often-heard voice that rarely lacked a question to ask or an opinion to share. He had recently begun attending a local school. The house was surely quieter after he left each day, and Chloe wondered whether he asked as many questions at school as he did at home—and if so, how the teacher responded to his ready tongue!

Happy to hear their little brother's proclamation, Drusilla and Chloe left off weaving and went to greet their father and Stephanas. Fourteen-year-old Stephanas, who also had straight black hair, was training with their father to become a silversmith, having served as his apprentice for a little more than a year. A shy, serious lad of few words who did not

enjoy being on stage as did his sisters, he had nonetheless been a key member of the children's theater troupe, invaluable in preparing props and large masks patterned after the ones that professional actors used.

Even as a young boy, Stephanas had demonstrated an aptitude in various art forms: drawing, painting, and sculpting. Although he had attended school and studied diligently there for several years before becoming a full-time apprentice, some academic subjects had not come easily to him. He far preferred and excelled at using his hands to create. Along with images of Diana and her temple, he also helped Father make dishes, cutlery, and mirrors for the shop.

Phebe, the gentle, dutiful cook, had supper ready; and after a prayer to their gods, the family began to eat. Phebe and her husband, Urbane, the mild, faithful gardener, were both in their early sixties. Though they had been freed from slavery a few years before, they continued to serve in their longtime master and mistress's household, and Urbane still helped at the silver shop on occasion.*** Knowing that it was sometimes difficult for freed slaves to find employment and to make a good living, the couple had stayed where they would be assured steady work, wages, and lodging. They lived in a small apartment built off the south side of the house.

"Did you have many customers at the silver shop today, Father?" Chloe inquired.

"No," Father replied with a frown, "business has been slow lately. Only five people came into the shop after midday break, and just two purchased anything.**** This morning wasn't much better; in fact, sales today reached the lowest point in an already-low month."

Father sighed, then added, "My business isn't the only one seeing a downturn. When we closed at noon and Stephanas went to pick Epaphras up from school, I stopped by Demetrius's shop to chat for a minute. Because he's the leader

of the silversmiths' guild, I thought he might have some insight as to what's going on and what can be done about it. He said that sales have recently dropped off for him too and that several other smiths he's spoken with are seeing a similar trend."

"Why is that?" asked Mother.

"He told me that a visiting Jewish teacher named Paul has been debating in the school of Tyrannus for at least a year now and is gaining increasingly more of a following among both Jews and Greeks. You know how the Jews pray only to their own God and deny the gods worshiped by the rest of the world? So those converting to Paul's religion don't want to buy our shrines anymore.

"Paul is apparently a leader in a new sect called the Christians and travels around, trying to proselytize folks. Some of the other Jews don't get along with him too well; I hear that he spoke in their synagogue for three months, and such conflict resulted that he separated his followers and started teaching in the school of Tyrannus instead. Well, after eating lunch with you here, I went to the school to hear him for myself." [Acts 19:8-10]

His family members listened attentively as he continued, summarizing Paul's preaching as a matter of interest yet not as a message he truly believed. "I've heard quite a few stories about various gods and goddesses but nothing quite like what I heard this afternoon. Paul mostly talked about a man named Jesus, who he claimed was the Son of the Jews' God. He said that Jesus was born in Judea about sixty years ago, that He taught and performed miracles as an adult, gaining a large group of disciples, and that He then was crucified, having sparked the envy of the Jewish leaders."

"What does *envy* mean?" asked Epaphras.

"*Envy* means 'jealousy,' " Mother replied. "Apparently, the Jewish leaders were upset because many people were

paying attention to Him instead of them."

Chloe and the rest were intrigued by Father's news, and Drusilla in particular was always eager to hear another myth that she might be able to retell. She and her family had yet to learn that this account of Jesus was not a myth at all; it was the truth, which would dramatically impact each of their lives.

"Now, you'll never guess the next part," Father continued. "Paul said that three days after Jesus was put to death, He came back to life! I left then because I didn't want to listen to that kind of talk too long, and it was nearly time to go back to work anyway. But that story really was unlike anything else I've heard," he finished thoughtfully.

"You aren't thinking of converting to Judaism or this new Christian sect, are you?" Mother said with a smile, wanting to be reassured.

"Oh, no!" Father laughed. "Don't worry; I'm not about to throw away a successful career, a comfortable lifestyle, or my faith in the gods that my fathers have served for generations. And I'm sure business will soon be booming again once this Paul fellow leaves town and people return to their normal routine."

* The Greek *lyre* was a small musical instrument that looked similar to a harp and was played with a pick.

** Though the Greeks called this false goddess Artemis, for my story I chose to use the Roman name Diana because that is how the King James Bible refers to her. (Acts 19:24) And while *Asia* today denotes the world's largest continent, the Roman province by that name was a region in what is now western Turkey.

*** This inclusion of slavery is in no way meant to condone the practice but rather to reference a widespread element of Greek and Roman culture. Most slaves under the Roman Empire were prisoners of war, debtors, or children born to other slaves, though some were captured by slavers and sold. Many who demonstrated diligence and loyalty were eventually freed like Urbane and Phebe, and some freedmen became prominent.

Scripture commands capital punishment for those who capture other human beings, forbids God's people to enslave their brethren, affirms the equality and unity of free and bond before the Lord, and requires masters to treat their servants well. Paul exhorted Philemon to receive his returning slave, Onesimus, "not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved." (Exodus 21:16; Leviticus 25:39-43; Galatians 3:26-29; Colossians 4:1; Philemon 1:16)

He encouraged Christian servants to obtain their freedom if they had lawful opportunity to do so. Otherwise, they were to faithfully serve their masters, doing their work as to the Lord. (I Corinthians 7:21; Colossians 3:22-25)

**** The workday in the Roman Empire began at dawn and ended at dusk, but laborers took about two hours off in the heat of the day to eat and rest.