

A Light in the Dark

Chapter 15

Lucia could feel the calmness spreading within her. She liked it when they gathered for worship at home with the eldest. It was one of the few occasions when mother wasn't tense and worried. They gathered at the end of every week and shared a meal together. The eldest preached the word of God, and Lucia enjoyed sitting there, feeling the warm and loving energy that pervaded the room. They sang hymns. Lucia thought that mother sang most beautifully of all. Mother was beaming with happiness, and sometimes she closed her eyes and enjoyed being part of the song and the notes.

It wasn't so much the word of God in the sermon that made Lucia so comfortable at these gatherings; it was the effect of the worship service on the people that made her happy. Everyone radiated a strength that Lucia did not see otherwise. When Mother met grandmother Alessia, she was afraid and shy. Here she was suddenly strong and unconquerable. And that was how God loved to see the people -- happy and unafraid -- Lucia knew that. He wanted His children not to fear, but to feel joy and happiness instead.

That was what Lucia talked about with the girls in the harbor area. God's will for their lives was that they should never doubt themselves and the powers dormant within them. God wanted them to realize that everyone was of equal worth. Most of them listened to her and she could see that she instilled hope in their hearts, but some laughed scornfully or got angry. They wondered how she, who was so well off, had the nerve to talk with them about happiness. Didn't she have eyes to see with? "There's no justice in this world, and your god doesn't exist!" they would shout at her. Sometimes she was hurt. She wanted them to be her friends and she only wished them well, but she understood them. She understood why they felt as they did, and could not blame them. She wished that God could perform a miracle that would grant even the greatest doubter hope. Hope that would strengthen and guide those who needed it.

The congregation was not large. This did not mean that there were few adherents of the Christian faith in Syracuse, but there was still fear of the persecutions that had gone on for centuries, and some maintained that the new emperor, Diocletianus, was also hostile to Christians. Therefore precautionary measures and secrecy about their meetings continued. They gathered in small groups in various homes in the Jewish quarters. Sometimes they dared to have larger gatherings, and it was always just as exciting to meet like-minded people that you didn't see very often. Lucia was happy that so many carried the belief in Jesus' message of love in their hearts, and at these meetings she was filled with new hope. It was as if all doubt was blown away and she was convinced that the world could be transformed.

Lucia looked around the room. Eber was standing before them. After Tobuk and her father, Eber was the wisest and most kindhearted man Lucia knew. Eber held his arms outstretched in a gesture of blessing and spoke about his dreams and hopes for the future. His gentle eyes radiated warmth and his white hair shone in the glow from the oil lamps. His white beard swayed rhythmically as he spoke. He believed that the persecutions of the Christians would soon be over, and then they would no longer need to conceal their faith. But not everyone was as hopeful as Eber, and some muttered that this was only the calm before the storm.

Eber's wife, Emilia, looked lovingly at her husband. Not for a moment did she take her gaze from him. Every time you met her she would break into a broad smile and then take hold of you with her small, round arms and pull you into an embrace. She always laughed at Eber's jokes, even though Lucia was certain that Emilia had heard them many

times before. When she laughed her whole round body bobbed up and down and her face turned glowing red. Eber always called her “my little meadow flower.” Then she laughed even more and nudged him in embarrassment. They had three sons together -- all about Lucia's age. All three were extremely quiet and almost a little shy, which Lucia thought was strange as neither Eber nor Emilia were that way at all. But she saw them only during the worship services and maybe they were different the other days of the week.

Eutychia was cautious and did not often socialize with the others in the congregation; she was afraid of what Alessia would say. Eber sometimes visited their home, but not often and always under the cover of darkness. It was only when Mother had been the most ill and close to dying that the congregation gathered to pray for her. Tobuk had told this to Lucia. Late in the evenings they had gathered around Eutychia's bed -- Father had also been there -- and then they prayed for Eutychia's life.

Next to Lucia sat Lucinda, who had nursed Lucia when her mother was so sick. Lucinda was twice as big as her husband, and of their eight children only four were still alive. Lucinda loved Lucia as much as her own children. She thought that Lucia was a little bit hers, because she had fed her at her breast. Now and then Lucinda sneaked a glance at Lucia, smiled at her and patted her on the cheek.

The congregation put the greatest emphasis on working among the poor and needy the way Jesus had done. “Faith should warm and embrace, it should give hope and guidance, and above all it should be seen in our actions!” Eber would preach. He made it a point that everyone in the congregation should be attentive to where they could work and serve every day. “See the people you meet as a brother or sister. See whether there is something you can do for them, before you go past. When you go to rest in the evening, you should be able to look back on your day and know in your hearts that you have served in the best way. You should be a link between divine love and suffering here on earth.”

Lucia listened with great attentiveness to Eber's words. Certain things made a stronger impression than others. “We all have our mission to fulfill. Some have more difficult paths to walk, but it is thanks to their courage that history is transformed.” These words moved her deeply, and she thought about what she could do to create changes that would last.

The worship service always ended by everyone giving up what could be spared - items of clothing, food and money. Then they went over the tasks of the week. Lucia promised that as usual she would wander with Tobuk. Mother was never with them -- she was too weak -- but she and Nomi baked bread that was passed out a few times a week. Everyone contributed what they could, grown-ups as well as little ones.

“Wait here,” said Tobuk to Lucia. They were standing in the midst of the throng of people in the large harbor. Some trading vessels from far away were being unloaded and the pier was buzzing with life and movement. Lucia held firmly onto Tobuk's hand; people crowded and jostled.

“I won't be gone long,” he said, leading her a little to the side of the crowd. “Stay here. Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back.”

She looked after him as he made his way through the sea of people. People moved aside. Tobuk was tall and strong; he inspired respect and deference. But in his friendly eyes you could see that he would never hurt a fly.

Tobuk disappeared into one of the many wine bars and Lucia looked around. Here people gathered from near and far. Lucia thought it was fascinating to see how different people could look. On a few occasions she had seen golden hair, which glistened like gold in the sun. The two tall men with sun-colored hair had spoken a language Lucia had never heard before. She looked toward the ships moored in the harbor. There were people running along the gangways, loading and unloading goods. Children were playing tag between the legs of all

the grown-ups who were jostling, and a few expensively dressed travelers were on their way into one of the taverns. Lucia wondered where Tobuk had gone. She thought she'd been waiting a fairly long time.

Sometimes they made visits to the wine bars. That was where the men gathered and drank, gambled and amused themselves. Tobuk tried to make them see reason and get them to understand that they had families to take care of. Sometimes he succeeded, but just as often he came out of the bar alone, and he and Lucia had to go away. Tobuk spoke often with her about how wine could transform the most sensible person. Lucia already knew this; she had seen fathers of girls she knew stagger around between the buildings. She had seen Helena's father on several occasions. Lucia didn't like that; the drunks frightened her as they staggered around with blank, vacant eyes. But right now she had no other choice than to stand here and wait for Tobuk, as she had promised.

A man stumbled and fell flat in front of her feet. Lucia jumped to the side. She looked toward the alley by the side of the bar. It looked more peaceful there. If she went up the alley a little ways she could still see when Tobuk came back. Tensely she stood there, hoping that Tobuk would soon come. It reeked of urine and garbage, and she held her hand discreetly under her nose to ward off the worst of the stench.

Then she heard a muffled scream -- as if someone was trying to scream but was hindered by a hand over their mouth. The sound came from the house next to where she was standing. Lucia took a step closer and listened intensively.

"You be quiet!" someone hissed. "You be quiet, you little animal. If you bite me again I'll knock out your teeth!" The man was angry, but there was also something else in his voice, a bestiality that aroused feelings of discomfort in her. Lucia heard sobbing. She got on tiptoe to be able to see in through a window opening. On a mattress a man was lying on top of a girl. The man was struggling to hold down the desperate girl, who was struggling beneath him. Again and again he struck her on the face and at last she lay quietly. The man rummaged with his clothes, moaning and snorting like an animal. Lucia heard how he was mumbling, "Now you'll get it. That'll teach you to behave yourself, you little bitch." Then he forced himself into her and after a few hard and rapid thrusts he moaned with pleasure and fell to one side.

Then Lucia saw who it was lying naked on the floor. Helena! Lucia gasped and wanted to scream, but no sound came out. Helena was lying spread-eagle on the floor, and a trickle of blood ran from her nose. Her cheeks were swollen from the blows and her eyes wide open. Lucia could see the terror in her face. The man got up on unsteady legs and adjusted his clothes. "Here." He jingled a fistful of coins, which he then threw at her. "You really shouldn't get anything, you little vixen." The man kicked at Helena, who curled up into a little ball.

Lucia quickly took a step back from the window, gasping for breath. Helena was lying on the floor in there, and Lucia didn't know what she should do. But she had to help her! She stood with her arms drawn up and her hands clenched hard, taking short, rapid breaths, trying to collect her thoughts. She knew about the whorehouses that were in the city. She had heard about orgies and assaults; about how poor, young girls were exploited because they so desperately needed money for food. Helena had told Lucia about how girls her own age earned money by selling themselves. Lucia had said that she would help Helena so that she would never need to become so soiled and exploited. Now it was too late. Someone had bought her body. Lucia felt so desperately powerless, and she felt guilty that she hadn't done anything. She ought to have done something. The tears welled in her eyes and she steeled herself to throw herself into the house.

“What's going on, Lucia?” a voice suddenly asked, and someone touched her shoulder. She shrieked and jumped to the side. Lucia was so involved in her own thoughts that she hadn't heard Tobuk arrive. “What's the matter, child?”

Lucia felt how tears filled her eyes. Through her tears she saw the man come out through the entryway. He took a quick glance at them and then continued nonchalantly up the street.

Lucia released herself from Tobuk's grasp and ran into the house the man had just left. She called Helena's name. Helena stood in the middle of the room, tying her tunic around her. Before she turned around she quickly raked up the coins that were spread across the floor.

“Helena!” Lucia embraced her, but Helena stood rigidly in her embrace.

“What are you doing here?” she snapped, and Lucia looked at her with surprise. Helena's gaze was cold and hard.

“I'm your friend. I want to help you,” said Lucia.

“Help me? How could you help me? You have no idea what it's like to be poor, Lucia. You live in your fine little world and you've never needed to fight for anything. How could you know what we have to put up with to survive?”

Helena's words were like whiplashes and Lucia looked at her mutely. Helena was right. Lucia had no idea what it was like to be poor. Now she stood speechless before the accusing Helena and found no comforting words to give her. Lucia heard Tobuk come into the room. Helena wriggled out of her grasp, squeezed past Tobuk and ran out onto the street. Lucia called after her, but she was gone.

“What is it that's happened?” asked Tobuk.

Lucia did not reply. Helena's words were burning inside her.

“What is it that's happened?” Tobuk asked again. Lucia shook her head. “What is it you've seen?” he continued quietly.

“I saw a man force himself on Helena,” whispered Lucia. “I saw that he hit her and called her things and... and Helena cried. She cried and was afraid.” Lucia sniffed and tried to calm her breathing. “I didn't do anything,” she said, looking up at him.

“Lucia, my child,” he said soothingly. “Sometimes we can't keep up and sometimes we don't measure up, but we do as good as we can in this world,” he said with a deep sigh.

“But Tobuk. What kind of world is this? How can this sort of thing happen? Everything is only dark, hard and horrible.” Lucia was dejected. “It doesn't matter what we do or say. We won't be able to change anything!”

“You do that every day, Lucia. Every day you try to gladden and help people you meet.” Tobuk took her hand and they went out onto the street. “I know that sometimes it's tempting to give up. But you must never do that.” They walked up the hill, away from the harbor. “We must never give up, for then we let the darkness win. We must be the hands that God doesn't have.”

Lucia nodded. She knew that Tobuk was right. But she still saw Helena's weeping face before her, and Helena's words ached in her heart. There must be something more Lucia could do! She thought about everything that Helena and Tobuk had told her, about the young girls without a chance or the right to a life of their own. Some people lived in abundance and freedom, while others starved and were degraded. Would it always be that way here, regardless of how much they fought to change it?

She wished that she could carry women and children away on an enormous ship. In the same way Noah did with his ark, she wanted to rescue the vulnerable from destruction. On that ship she would gather all the poor and vulnerable in Syracuse -- and all the others who also wanted to live as equals in a world full of love. No one would need to be afraid on

her ship. Helena would stand in the prow with outstretched arms and laugh at the head wind as the ship rushed along over the foaming sea. In her thoughts Lucia saw how Sofia ran with shining eyes toward an elderly woman who received her with open arms. Lucia felt how the warmth spread inside her. This was the way she wanted to remember Sofia, not the horrible images of her dismembered body on a garbage heap. Lucia did not know whether the happy images were real or imaginary, but you choose your images, she thought; in order to endure she often exchanged dark images of pain and suffering for images filled with hope and joy. Lucia's ship sailed toward a world where everyone would be safe. Everyone would care for their neighbor, as the teachings of Jesus preached. Surely it must be possible to create such a world? The only thing required was that every person started to live lovingly. Was that so difficult? Why? Lucia sighed audibly.

“There will always be lost souls in this world,” said Tobuk. “Lost souls make misguided choices, because they don't know better.”

“But shouldn't they realize that when a girl cries and suffers they're doing something that's wrong?” Lucia said indignantly.

“You'd think so. But there is also a perception in our society that women don't have the same value as men. They simply don't understand that what they're doing is wrong. They think it's their right.”

“I'm equally worthy and I don't intend to ever let myself be ruled or oppressed by a man. And I will never do anything that goes against my innermost conviction. Never!” She looked at him with a resolute, determined expression.

“Good! That's how it should be.”

Lucia and Tobuk looked for Helena. They went to her home, but no one in the family was there. They continued to wander along the narrow alleys to see whether they could find her, but at last were forced to give up.

When Lucia came home she was still very agitated. Eutychia was sitting in the kitchen with Nomi when Lucia entered with determined steps.

“Mother, I want our home to be open to poor and helpless women. I want us to help them so they don't need to sell their bodies to get money for food! I want us to help the widows and orphans. I want us to help the sick and the blind -- we must help them, because that is what God wants us to do!”

Eutychia looked at her daughter with fascination. She often wondered where she got her energy from. How could so much strength be housed in a young, slender girl, only fourteen years old! Now something had happened during the customary rounds together with Tobuk; Lucia had seen something she hadn't witnessed before. It had clearly affected her so strongly that she had arrived at these decisions, and Eutychia knew that Lucia would get her way. Eutychia looked questioningly at Tobuk.

“When she was waiting for me outside Filio's wine bar she was witness to a rape of one of the girls she knows,” said Tobuk.

Eutychia gasped for breath. She went up to Lucia to take her in her arms, but Lucia took a step back and looked her mother in the eyes with great seriousness.

“God has shown me that I'm needed. He has shown me how I can serve him in the best way.” Then she looked at Nomi and Tobuk. “There is so much more we can do.”

That evening, when Lucia shut her eyes, she could hear voices weeping over what had afflicted them. She could see Helena's face, and many of the other young girls she had met as she wandered with Tobuk around the poor quarters of the city. She heard their suffering and felt the pain in their souls and hearts. Lucia squeezed her eyes shut and covered her ears. She wanted to close out all the dark images and painful sounds. She struggled to drive away her despair. Sometimes she felt so much anger that she couldn't do more. It didn't matter that Tobuk said she was doing far more than others in her position and age were doing,

and that when she was older she would be able to do even more. Helping those who were in difficulty was completely obvious to Lucia. If she could decide, she would sell everything she had of value and give away the money, and she would open her home to everyone who needed protection. Her grandmother would never go along with it, that she knew, but Lucia would find a way. When the time was ripe she would understand what she should do. Tobuk was right; she was still young. But the power she felt within her could move mountains, and one day she would do that. She would never betray her inner voice, the one that guided her toward the goal that was predestined. Never!

Slowly the darkness eased up, the light made its way in and warmth again filled her heart. Lucia fell asleep and in her dreams she soared ahead on a large ship surrounded by her friends.

Chapter 16

For several days Lucia looked for Helena with Tobuk at her side. Helena's mother, Rebecca, said she was working, but doing what she could not say. "She comes home with money and I'm grateful for that," said Rebecca, and Lucia was appalled that a mother was not more worried about how her daughter was acquiring her money.

Tobuk and Lucia continued to wander up and down the street. They inquired after Helena at the whorehouses. Most refused to even speak with them, but Lucia did not give up. She had heard about how bad off the slave girls were who were forced to work there. They contracted incurable diseases that led to death, and no one took care of them. No one cared about a slave, much less a slave girl. With determined steps Lucia approached one of the larger brothels in the harbor. It was the only one they had not yet visited. Tobuk walked behind her and studied her upright posture. He wondered how Lucia would react to the environment if they were let in. During the years she had wandered with him in the city she had seen and experienced much, but she had never set foot in a brothel. It was another world - like stepping straight into hell. He wanted to forewarn her, but her steps were rapid and she was soon there. Tobuk thought that God no doubt knew what He was doing.

Many of the houses in the harbor were decrepit and had been built without any great care. The builders didn't worry much about the poor people who would be living there. But the brothel was braced with reinforcing beams, because in that building you would find not only poor people and slaves but also visiting rich men. Tobuk caught up with Lucia just as she was knocking on the door. The woman who opened was draped in a thin tunic and her large breasts could be glimpsed under the diaphanous cloth that barely covered her body. She was heavily made-up with kohl around her eyes and her rough hair was carelessly put up. She looked skeptically at Tobuk and Lucia.

"I'm looking for a friend I think might be here. I wonder if I could come in and look around?" asked Lucia.

The woman stared at Lucia, astonished and slightly amused.

"Sorry. Come back tomorrow when we have open house for new customers -- it's usually very pleasant," she said, laughing crudely.

Tobuk felt called upon to intervene.

"We have no intention of interfering in your business. Lucia here," said Tobuk, nodding at Lucia, "only wants to say goodbye to her friend before she departs on a long journey. We think her friend works here. We won't stay long, and we won't disturb your affairs, only look around and then move on."

The woman studied them suspiciously for a long time, and they feared the door would be slammed in their faces. But then the woman called to someone named Nimrod. A tall black man, with darker skin than Tobuk, appeared in the doorway. His bare torso

glistened and he was dressed only in a loincloth. Large gold rings adorned his arms and neck. Nimrod's gaze was foggy and his pupils large as coins.

“Keep an eye on these two. They're looking for a friend and won't stay long,” said the madam, riveting her eyes on them before she disappeared. Nimrod looked absently at Lucia and Tobuk and then made a sign to them to follow along. There was an acrid, pungent odor in the brothel, which blended with the city's customary stench of grime and garbage. Everything was in darkness, and a sweet haze dispersed from one of the rooms. Lucia peered into the dark rooms: naked and half-naked people were copulating openly, sometimes in pairs, sometimes more. Sounds from them echoed between the walls. Lucia felt bewildered. A half-naked man came toward her. His round body was shiny with sweat and his gaze just as foggy as Nimrod's.

“You're new here, huh?” he slurred, reaching out for her. Lucia quickly took a step back and Tobuk stepped between.

“Sorry, sorry. I didn't know she was yours,” the man excused himself, veering into one of the rooms. He staggered up to the bodies on the rugs and glided down among them.

Nimrod led them around in the house, but nowhere could they see Helena. At last they gave up. Once out on the street, Lucia took several deep breaths to clear out her lungs.

“Are you okay?” Tobuk asked.

Lucia shook her head. She felt hopeless.

“Do you know that I promised to help her?” she said to Tobuk. “I said to her that she shouldn't have to sell her body and that I would be there for her.” She looked dejectedly at Tobuk. “Helena was angry at me when I tried to talk with her after... well, you know?”

Tobuk nodded.

“She said that I had no idea what it's like to be poor, that I'd never needed to fight for anything, so how could I know what they had to put up with in order to survive?” Lucia looked at Tobuk. “She's right. What do I know about her life, and who am I to think that I can help her or change anything?” Lucia sighed and lowered her gaze. Tobuk squeezed her hand and led her away toward a small café in the quieter part of the harbor.

“We'll sit here and rest a while,” he said. “We need to get something to drink.”

A young woman served them and Lucia realized that she was extremely thirsty. For hours they had walked around in the heat without a thought of resting or drinking. Now she was nauseous from disappointment and thirst.

“You have no guilt in what happened to Helena,” said Tobuk, looking at her. “This is how the world looks right now, and you can't change it on your own.”

“But I betrayed my friend.”

“How could you know, Lucia? We're here with our outstretched hands and we do our very best. But we can't always know what's going to happen. Sometimes we don't measure up. It's impossible to help everyone.”

“But everyone can help someone,” Lucia replied.

“Of course they can. But not everyone realizes that. The world doesn't look like that, and sometimes I wonder if it's ever going to change,” Tobuk sighed.

They sat silently a while and looked out over the harbor. The sea glistened in the spring sun. The ships moored at the pier looked enormous, and around the high masts gulls circled with their inexhaustible screeching. A constant murmur of human voices and laughter was heard.

“I've never told you about the day I was taken prisoner and became a slave,” said Tobuk suddenly. “It was in the middle of the day and without advance warning,” he

continued, trying to capture Lucia's sorrowful gaze. "All this happened during the time of Emperor Decius. The Christians frightened him. He was afraid that we would bring about chaos with our faith in a single God -- a creator and the Lord of all. Perhaps he was afraid that the Romans would no longer obey him if they got the idea that there was one god who stands above the emperor and who challenges the rich to give to the poor and insists that all have the same worth, I don't know. His solution was to kill as many Christians as possible. In that way he got rid of many of us, at the same time as he instilled fear in everyone who felt drawn to the new teaching. I don't know why we children were spared that day. Perhaps they saw us as harmless and moldable? They must have also seen that we had value on the slave market. Yes, that was probably it." Tobuk fell silent for a moment. "They killed my mother and father before my eyes. They took me and my siblings and led us to the harbor where large ships were waiting to carry slaves to other parts of the Roman empire. That was the last time I saw my brothers and sisters. We ended up on different ships, and I don't know what became of them or whether they're alive."

Lucia saw the sorrow in Tobuk's eyes and could feel the pain in his heart. The wounds that never healed inside him. Carefully she placed her hand on his and squeezed it. He smiled gently at her.

"Thanks."

"What happened next?" she asked.

"They crowded us together inside the large ship. Everyone was scared and many were screaming and weeping. A little girl, perhaps only five years old, was hanging on tight to me. I'll never forget her face and her big, terrified eyes. I did my best to console her and say that everything would be fine -- although I knew that was a lie."

"What happened to the girl?"

"I don't know. When we finally arrived at Syracuse everyone was scattered. I held her hand a while, but then I lost my hold. They placed us in the harbor in small groups. It was there I met Nomi for the first time.

"We were standing like cattle and they stared and poked at us. I remember that two men came up and groped Nomi, and I placed myself in front to shield her. One of the men struck me with the whip he had in his hand. I remember that it stung, but the pain was nothing compared to what I felt in my heart." Tobuk's eyes filled with tears. "Nomi and I prayed together. We prayed that we would be able to stay together and that we would end up with kind people."

"Weren't you angry at God?"

"No. I knew that what had happened was not the work of God. It was people who acted based on fear and ignorance. For Nomi and me, faith was our strength and our consolation."

"So you came to grandmother's estate?"

"Yes. Your grandmother bought us. Your grandfather was just as good-hearted as your father, so in that respect God was with us. And later we were a wedding present to your mother and father, and then we were extremely grateful." Tobuk was silent a long while before he took a deep breath and then smiled warmly at Lucia. "Now it's probably best that we move on home," he said, getting up.

Lucia did not protest. Her thoughts were constantly searching for something good, something that would restore both of their spirits.

"I still think there must be something more we can do, besides doling out alms," said Lucia as they made their way among the people in the harbor. "We should make it possible for those who are in difficulty to learn a trade. Like sewing or something." She looked up at Tobuk. He nodded thoughtfully.

“That's not a bad idea. I know where help is needed,” he said quietly. “Maybe it doesn't need to be all that difficult... that's not a bad idea at all,” he said again, breaking into a smile.

They made their way through the sea of people, Lucia holding hard to Tobuk so as not to lose him. A ship had just arrived and the passengers were streaming down the gangway. Spring was in the air and the sun was beaming from a clear-blue sky. Lucia suddenly felt exhilarated and she squeezed Tobuk's arm hard. She'd had an idea, as if by inspiration, and Tobuk had liked it. She felt that it was the beginning of something big -- an opportunity to bring about considerably greater changes than before. They would be able to prevent young women from meeting the same fate as Sofia, Helena and hundreds of other poor women.

Deeply absorbed in plans on how she could realize her vision, Lucia did not notice that Eber was approaching them on foot. Only when she heard Eber's happy greeting and Tobuk's rumbling laughter did she look up. A young man stood at Eber's side, and at the same moment she met his gaze she felt that something changed inside her. It was as if a fire flamed up and the heat burning in her breast caused her to pant. The man looked at her without turning his gaze away. A warm smile played on his lips and his dark eyes sparked with energy. His hair was covered by a headdress, but she glimpsed a few dark locks at his temples. Lucia could think of nothing to say. Who was this man? Where did he come from? She had never met him before, and yet he felt so familiar.

“This is Immanuel,” said Eber as he took hold of Immanuel's shoulders and proudly hugged him. Tobuk extended his hand and greeted him, and Lucia did the same. The touch caused her heart to beat faster, and suddenly she felt embarrassed and lowered her gaze.

“Immanuel is the son of a distant relative of mine in Caesarea. He arrived with the ship just now, and it's very nice that I could introduce him to my best friends, the first thing I did.”

Lucia glanced furtively at Immanuel, who was still looking at her with an intense gaze.

“Immanuel is going to live with us for a while. He is studying to be a priest and his family thought it might be instructive for him to follow our congregational work,” Eber continued.

“You won't find a better teacher than Eber,” Tobuk said with emphasis.

Then they accompanied them through the city. They left the great harbor behind them and went toward the small harbor where Eber's home was, only a short distance from Lucia's. After Tobuk had inquired about Immanuel's journey and his life in Palestine, he started talking with Eber about Lucia's proposal to teach the most vulnerable women and girls a trade. Immanuel listened with just as much interest as Eber. Now and then Immanuel looked at her and smiled, and she made an effort to smile back.

She was studying him in secret, as he walked a little ahead of her, listening to Tobuk. Immanuel was by no means as tall as Tobuk, but his posture was erect and proud and he moved lithely. She guessed that he was a few years older than her. In his gaze she had seen both playfulness and wisdom, and she longed to get to know him. He seemed to be positive about her proposal, and Eber also appeared enthusiastic. Lucia felt proud as she walked together with the three men. She stretched, suddenly feeling very grown-up. The walk home was suddenly far too short. Soon they were standing outside Lucia's home, saying goodbye. Once again she got to touch his hand and meet his gaze. It was decided that they would meet again the very next day to make plans. Tobuk and Lucia watched Eber and Immanuel as they continued along the street.

“I think you made an impression on Immanuel,” said Tobuk, looking at her. Lucia did not reply, nor did she meet his gaze. She was afraid that her eyes and glowing cheeks would reveal her. But Tobuk didn't need to look into Lucia's eyes to understand what had happened. “What do you know, I think he made a strong impression on you too,” he said, laughing.