

**Excerpt from *Blood of a Stone*
by Jeanne Lyet Gassman**

Farmers, merchants, townspeople, and peasants crushed together on the narrow road into the city, pushing toward the marketplace. Shepherds whistled at their herds of goats, struggling to keep them away from the booths stacked with winter figs. Herod's auxiliary troops circled through the mob on horseback and foot, their shouts lost in the uproar.

"Move, move! In the name of Caesar and the King, get out of the way!"

The people dropped back to clear a path for more soldiers who marched in tight formation. Their conical helmets bounced up and down in waves as they jogged along the road. One of the horsemen accompanying them broke rank and rode into a group of spectators that had pressed closer for a better look. He swung his sword and warned them to keep back. There were a few muttered epithets, but no one spoke too loudly. A space opened around the soldier, and the crowd could see why they had been forced off the path. The troops dragged behind them a captured slave: a dark-skinned man with the letter F, for fugitivus, seared into his forehead. His hands and feet were bound, and if it were not for the rope that jerked him upright and pulled him along, he would have fallen face down to the ground.

Demetrios brushed his fingers across his own shoulder, feeling the raised, damaged flesh beneath his cloak. If he had not killed Marcus and escaped, his fate could have easily been the same as this poor runaway's.

Someone pitched a stone at the auxiliaries, striking the horse. The animal reared up, and a farmer in front of the soldiers lost control of his cart. The entire procession halted as his crates of doves toppled to the ground.

The terrified birds flung themselves against the wooden slats; clouds of feathers spiraled into the air. The farmer tugged at his donkey's rope, but the creature dug in its heels and refused to move, its hysterical brays adding to the general confusion.

The slave, sensing he had a receptive audience, raised his head. The wound on his brow had festered. His skin glowed with fever and madness. He blinked, scanning the blur of faces in front of him, seeking one he knew would understand. Then he paused and focused his gaze on Demetrios, a faint smile playing around his mouth.

Demetrios shrank back behind a cluster of men.

Of all the Jews, the soldiers, and the travelers in this place, how did he know? How does one slave recognize the other? Although the sun was warm upon Demetrios's back, he shivered.

A man behind Demetrios said, "I heard they found him in the caves near the hot springs. He belonged to Herod's house. Not a good place to hide." The woman with him asked, "Where are they taking him?"

"With a group of other slaves to the mines. He'll never see daylight again."

Holding fast to the reins of his skittish horse, the furious soldier confronted the crowd. "Who threw that stone?"

When no one answered, he hooked one of the crates with his sword and smashed it to the ground. Several doves flew out, sweeping low over everyone's heads. "Clear this trash from the road."

Some of the men behind Demetrios laughed and jumped to catch the floundering birds; others complained loudly about the delay. A couple of the women near him finally stepped forward to help the beleaguered man drag his remaining crates to the side. The soldiers began to move again, their captive stumbling behind them.

The slave cried out, "Please! Help me!" before he disappeared into the wall of armored bodies.

"Demetrios of Tiberias? Is that you?"

Over the bobbing heads, Demetrios strained to see who was calling him. He cut across the road and scooted around the people still pursuing errant doves.

“Demetrios of Tiberias!” the voice called out to him with authority.

Demetrios wheeled around. They knew. The soldiers were coming for him. He was caught, trapped like a beetle in the clinches of a scorpion’s pinchers. Someone had revealed his secret, knew that he, too, was an escaped slave. Marcus’s slave. Marcus’s murderer.

“Demetrios! Demetrios!”

Demetrios tried to escape through the crowd, but the throng closed about him. He had to get away. Escape. Again. As he ducked and darted through the multitude, Demetrios realized he would be running for the rest of his life. He would forever be a slave.

“Demetrios!”

He pushed against the backs of a group of men. “Let me through.” But the crowd would not part for him.

A hand clutched his arm. He froze. Doomed. He was doomed. And he would be sentenced to die in the mines like his fellow slave. The hand that had seized him spun him around now to face his fate.