

# The shadows of Gerasa

His lungs burning, Jonah finally slowed his pace through the twisted alleyways of old Gerasa, where hot air lingered between ochre walls. He stopped abruptly, breathless, irritated by his sandals that had hampered his flight. Looking quickly over his shoulder, he angrily dropped to one knee to remove them one by one. At last he stood up, now holding them in each hand. He gulped the scorching air that scraped his throat. His coarse linen chiton, far too large for his frail body, clung to his skin, soaked with the sweat of terror. He had run as if the gods themselves were chasing him. His heart still pounded in his chest, but the blessed coolness of the shaded pavements offered him a brief respite in his desperate flight.

For Jonah, every venture into the burning streets of Gerasa was like casting dice: one never knew if the stars would be unfavorable. The risk was encountering that gang of idle rogues who,

like a pack of hungry jackals, would not hesitate to pounce on him whenever he crossed their path.

That late morning, his grandmother had urgently needed him – her fever had kept her bedridden, and they had used up their last pouch of medicinal herbs. "Make haste and be careful, Jonah," she had warned him from her bed, her voice hoarse, as she held out a silver denarius clutched in her fever-trembling hand.

The dice were then cast. Either these vultures would be at work with their fathers, or they would be roaming the streets, burning off their energy before joining their fathers' workshops. Jonah knew their habits as a merchant knows his coins. Lunchtime was approaching, the safest moment of the day, when they would be seated at their parents' food stalls. Everything should have gone as planned. He should have been safe. But that day, the stars had been unfavorable.

He had left their lodging through the common courtyard, then walked down the alley toward the potters' quarter. As he walked, his right hand patted his chest to feel the denarius he had carefully placed in the inner pocket of his tunic. This small fortune would have allowed him to buy those fashionable colored glass marbles that Phoenician merchants were selling near the temple – he would have had enough for the entire season. But his grandmother was suffering, and he alone could bring back the herbs that would ease her fever. As he emerged into the potters' street, something troubled him. Usually, this place buzzed with activity: the wheels creaked their familiar melody while apprentices kneaded clay in rhythm. The Greek master potters, whose elegant amphorae were exported throughout the Decapolis, to Judea, and as far as Syria, directed their teams with voices that carried above the crackling of the burning kilns. The tinkling of tools against fired clay mingled with the hissing of water on hot pieces taking shape. But today, an unusual silence reigned before their closed workshops. This absence of famil-

iar sounds in a normally bustling street seemed to his mind a bad omen.

At the turn of a passage lined with rough stone walls, Jonah's blood froze in terror. He had stumbled upon them: about ten boys, who would have looked older than him had they been placed side by side, occupying the entire street. Split into two camps challenging each other from opposite ends of the street, they were hurling stones at one another, roaring with laughter at each impact that made one of them howl in pain. Their torn tunics and scraped knees bore witness to the ravages of their sadistic games, while fresh bruises marked their bare arms. One of them fell brutally to the ground with a cry of pain when he was violently struck in the left eyebrow, which was already bleeding. "Hey Stephanos, even an armless cripple would aim better than you!" bellowed one of the leaders, mockingly pointing at his victim's bloodied brow. "Your mother must have made you with a leper from Gadara!" The others guffawed, holding their bellies and pointing at him in turn, while Stephanos, his face smeared with blood and con-

torted with rage, his left hand on his brow, was already groping blindly for a larger stone to exact his revenge.

At the sight of this spectacle, Jonah had swallowed hard, his throat tight with dread. Making himself smaller than a mouse, he had begun to edge along the wall in hopes of escaping their notice, his sandals barely grazing the paving stones. Each step brought him closer to the other side of the passage, while the boys' laughter continued to echo. Completely exposed, he held his breath, sliding along the still-cool ochre stone, camouflaged in its shadow. For a moment, he thought he had succeeded in passing when suddenly "The orphan! He's there!" Another shrill cry tore through the air. "Get him!"

He had launched himself like a stone thrown at full force, his pursuers on his heels. The silver denarius bounced against his chest in rhythm with his frantic run, each beat reminding him of the cost of his mission. As he raced down a sloping alley of the old village, a group of artisans had sud-

denly appeared around a bend, their linen aprons marked with clay-colored stains. The men in front were carrying amphorae of ceremonial wine, while behind them the women reverently supported freshly woven garlands of ivy and vine, their measured movements testifying to the importance of their burden.

Jonah skidded violently, his sandals sliding on the smooth paving stones as he desperately tried to stop. Off-balance, he stumbled forward, nearly colliding with one of the bearers. One of his sandals, now uncontrollable, caught in the hem of his tunic as he crouched and squeezed between two men. In his attempt to free himself, his shoulder struck an amphora that tipped and shattered on the ground with a splash muffled by its liquid contents. The precious purple juice spread in a treacherous puddle that his pursuers, running at full tilt, had no time to notice. Two of them slipped and sprawled full length in a tangle of limbs and curses, dragging down with them two more amphorae and a carefully bound bundle of cypress branches.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Jonah had rushed toward the Roman quarter. His chest felt ready to burst, but looking back, he saw a worker who had grabbed the two fallen boys by their ears and was scolding them severely. Greek curses flew through the air. As he resumed his flight, a fleeting smile had lit up his face. In the distance, he could hear the endless commotion, a woman's furious voice rose above the others "You'll pay to the last sesterce!" He knew they would make him pay dearly if they caught him, but for now, he had gained a precious lead.

This frantic chase had led him to the Roman quarter. There, he finally stopped to remove his sandals that were hindering his flight. He had developed a simple yet formidably effective technique. He only needed to remove his sandals to allow the soles of his damp feet to better grip the smooth paving stones worn by time and years of passage. Moreover, with a sandal in each hand, the counterweight created by the alternating motion of his arms at full run played to his advantage, and he had noticed he ran faster.

Yet this running prowess brought him no pride. In his darkest reveries, he saw himself invested with a malevolent power. Lightning bolts shot from his eyes, striking his tormentors with a violence that frightened even himself. His hand stretched out before him, guided by a dark force he did not understand, and slowly closed on empty air. His adversaries, seized by the throat by this invisible force, clutched at their necks, choking. They would then fall to their knees, their eyes pleading as life slowly left them. Part of him was horrified by these thoughts, but another part, deeper, darker, found in them an unwholesome delight.

An aroma of garum and smoked fish drifting in the air brought him back to reality. This familiar scent reminded him of the times when his grandmother would bring him to eat here, at the corner thermopolium. Old Marcus, the innkeeper, would always keep a place for them at the counter and serve them his famous smoked fish stew with herbs. Usually, such a smell would have made his

taste buds tingle, but today, his stomach was knotting and nausea rose in his throat. He knew he was being hunted like prey, he was far from being out of danger, and he dared not imagine what these maniacs had in store for him. He swallowed hard. His stomach tightened further.

Why did they always have to pick on him like this? How could anyone be so wicked? Jonah had had enough, he could not, would not continue like this. Yet no solution had presented itself to him. If only he could be big and strong like the gladiators he saw training near the hippodrome, their muscles gleaming with sweat in the sun. With such strength, he could finally make them swallow their mocking laughter and grab them by the throat. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

He was torn from his thoughts when a rallying cry made his heart sink: "I found him, over here!" called one of his pursuers to rally his gang, "Quick, he's ahead!" This sinister enthusiasm for this merciless pursuit chilled his blood. He gripped the sandals tighter in his sweaty hands and started

running again as his pursuers' shouts swelled behind him. In his feverish mind, he cursed the scoundrel who had restarted his chase. If only he could paralyze him on the spot and cut out his tongue... But no, here he was, reduced to fleeing like a kid goat hunted by jackals.

Suddenly, his face brightened – an idea had just sprouted as he ran at full speed. It was market day today, he had no doubt. In the hustle and bustle of the stalls along the *Cardo Maximus*, he could finally lose them. He now knew which direction to run to execute his plan.

He hastily left the Roman quarter with its elegant patrician houses and emerged before the massive facade of the baths, a building so imposing that its shadow covered the street across. He darted left so abruptly that he had to plant one foot against the wall in front of him to catapult himself onto the path. The smell of burning wood and perfumed oils lingered in the air as he raced along the wall. A group of sweating slaves was about to enter with their bundles of firewood des-

tined for the underground furnaces – when Jonah, trying to avoid them, bumped one with his shoulder who staggered under the impact, spilling his load onto the pavement. Shouts of anger rose behind him as he sprinted toward the corner of the building. If he could round it, he would reach the first bridge spanning the river that crossed the city.

Reaching the corner of the baths, his blood pulsed harder in his veins – a cart stood just a few cubits from the bridge. Gripping his sandals in each hand to balance his run, he accelerated and barely squeezed in front of the ox which, unperturbed, watched him pass with a placid eye while its jaw chewed in a disjointed manner.

He had only to cross the last street connecting the bridge to the *Cardo Maximus*. Like a fish slipping through the net, he darted into the channel, already tasting relief, knowing he would soon drown himself in the crowd. But immediately, his instinct stung him sharply. The shops, usually overflowing with life on the ground floor of the *insulae* that raised their four stories of stone and

wood skyward, seemed far less alive. The silence struck him like a punch. Not a merchant's cry, not a coin's tinkle. Even the carts that usually clogged the road could move freely. A trickle of cold sweat ran down his back. None of this boded well. Lungs out of breath and legs aching, He had to summon strength he didn't know he had to accelerate to accelerate to the end of the street.

But he stopped dead in his tracks as he emerged onto the monumental *Cardo Maximus* and was horrified by what he saw. The majestic limestone columns, whose intervals usually teemed with citizens, now stood in an unsettling void, like the pillars of a deserted temple. He bent double, hands on his knees, gulping air in great mouthfuls. Once he caught his breath, he straightened up and set off at a hurried pace down the paved avenue toward the north theater while looking back to make sure they weren't on his heels.

On normal market days, the grand avenue swarmed with life: buyers jostled in front of the stalls, merchants loudly praised their wares, and

porters zigzagged between citizens with their loads. The shops sheltered under the colonnades overflowed with customers, while carts loaded with goods struggled to make their way through the crowd. But today, the unusual near-silence that reigned over Gerasa's main artery was causing his plan to fail.

As he walked, voices caught his attention. Two women, Roman matrons, were conversing there at the edge of the avenue, their social rank evident from their slaves bending under the weight of purchases and the finely chiseled gold adorning their ears and necks. Their fine linen stolas bordered with purple bands swayed gracefully, while their hair was expertly braided in the latest Roman fashion. As he passed within a few cubits of them, Jonah slowed his pace to catch fragments of their conversation: "...we couldn't go. We thought we could leave but he had forgotten that today was the opening of the Dionysia. I hope the merchants will resume tomorrow because we absolutely need..."

Jonah couldn't believe his ears – just his luck. His forehead was dripping as he quickened his pace. How could he have forgotten? The next five days were of course dedicated to the Dionysia. In the afternoon, devotees would parade in ceremonial dress following the procession. The statue of Dionysus, god of wine and ecstasy, would reign above all on his resplendent chariot decorated for the occasion.

Jonah was sweating profusely. Large drops of sweat had now managed to breach the barrier of his soaked eyebrows to penetrate his eyes. With a quick gesture, he wiped his forehead with his bare forearm, feeling his sandal strike his shoulder. The Cardo Maximus had been an excellent idea as long as the crowd answered the call; without it, the avenue was merely a stone backbone whose three passages became the only escape routes. Turning back now was out of the question – he would inevitably face them. The middle bridge was the only immediate way out. His tormented mind was reflected in his erratic gait – sometimes long nervous strides, sometimes rushed bursts of running. The

paved avenue seemed to melt under the heavy heat of the sun. His vision blurred. The columns lining the street began to undulate like mirages in the desert. The prospect of the bridge revived him. Going that way, his pursuers would lose his trail, never imagining he had circumvented them thus. Those jackals would then abandon their hunt. Resolute, his pace steadied, drawing energy from this saving idea while moderating his speed to preserve his strength.

The shock of the absent crowd had at first imprinted in his mind the vision of a deserted avenue. But looking more closely as he ran, he realized this wasn't the case. Despite the Dionysia preparations that mobilized the Greek community, life continued its course. Jewish and Nabataean merchants offered their wares under the colonnades, while a few Roman matrons, followed by their slaves laden with baskets, stopped before the stalls to make their purchases and exchange the day's news. A group of Syrian caravan drivers, recognizable by their long dusty tunics and embroi-

dered shawls covering their heads, were arguing with a Greek merchant in front of his shop.

Absorbed in his thoughts, Jonah had unconsciously slowed his pace. The Cardo Maximus... A strong scent of cumin that had marked his childhood had found its way to his nostrils. How many times had he walked this avenue at his father's side? Memories assailed him: his father, a respected trader, would take him to visit his clients who were spice merchants with shops filled with exotic fragrances. Precious spices freshly delivered were piled in earthenware jars: golden saffron from Persia, black pepper from India, cinnamon from distant lands. This prosperity had allowed his family to leave their modest life in Gergesa, a small fishing village on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, to settle in the opulent Gerasa. "Even if today we know abundance," his father would often repeat while affectionately brushing the hair from his forehead, "never forget where you come from, never forget Gergesa."

How could he have forgotten, Jonah thought. Even though he was only seven when they left Gergesa, each memory remained engraved in his mind like an inscription carved in stone. He could still see those moments when, perched on the verdant hills overlooking the village, he would intoxicate himself with the pure air carried by the lake breezes. He remembered his wild chases through the scrubland, pursuing the neighbor's young goats. The fishing mornings remained his most precious memories. His father would take him to the shore before the sun even set the waters ablaze, to buy still-wriggling fish from the fishermen. While the men talked, he would amuse himself by teasing with a small twig the crabs stranded on the sand that the dawn nets had brought in unwittingly.

No, he would never forget the simplicity of life in Gergesa. How could Gerasa ever replace it? The city might adorn itself with buildings more exuberant than the next – its two spectacular colonnaded avenues that intersected, its colossal temples dominating the valley, its theater and hippo-

drome where thousands of city dwellers thirsty for entertainment packed in each day – all this pomp contrasted with the peace and natural beauty of Gergesa.

Since his parents' disappearance, he had become the scapegoat of his neighbors who persecuted him for one apparent reason: he had no father. As he ran, sadness and hatred fought for his heart, when suddenly he froze, petrified by what he saw. His eyes widened in shock. In the distance, at the junction leading on one side to the monumental entrance of the Temple of Artemis and on the other to the second bridge, a boy was posted there, motionless as a statue, legs spread and torso bent forward, pointing at Jonah. His silhouette, seen through the heat waves rising from the ground, oscillated like the temple torches at dusk. Two of his cronies were already joining him.

They must have had the same idea as him, to outflank him. Anger rose within him, burning, suffocating, followed by a frustration that had been devouring his belly for weeks. They sprang in his

direction. Without thinking, Jonah bolted back the way he had come. The first bridge. No choice.

The intersection was in sight. He turned without slowing and plunged down the street lined with insulae once more. The bridge was almost within reach. When suddenly, terror seized his gut as he stopped dead in his tracks. How was this possible? These jackals! They must have split into different groups to improve their chances of finding him. Their silhouettes now stood out against the light stone of the bridge, some crouched like beasts ready to pounce, others carelessly leaning against the stone railing. His mind, like a panicked bird in a cage, desperately sought an escape. Turning around, he saw the other pack arriving, slowing their pace for a more menacing approach. This time, he was trapped. The two packs advanced step by step, their malicious laughter echoing against the stone walls that hemmed in the street. Jonah stood rooted there, his sandals hanging uselessly in his clammy hands, like broken wings. The storm about to break promised no mercy.

Time seemed to freeze when he recognized a familiar presence, the one that visited him in his darkest nights. With an icy breath, it whispered in his ear: "Give yourself to the shadows." He pretended not to have heard it. Then a strange peace came over him. The world around him seemed to dissolve like a puddle of water evaporating under the desert sun. The shops, some passersby, even the shouts of his pursuers – everything became blurred, distant, unreal. His body was now but an empty shell while his mind rose above the scene, sliding into a growing darkness.

He was transported into a vision where he saw himself transformed. Taller, grown, his features refined by the years. His clothes, as deep black as a moonless stormy night, rippled around him like living shadows. Between his hands, a simple staff like that of a shepherd. When he raised it toward Gerasa's burning sky, his tormentors froze instantly, their faces decomposing under the effect of a primitive terror.

Suddenly, their tunics began to tear themselves apart, as if shredded by invisible claws. One after another, they fell to their knees on the pavement, writhing in pain, their screams of agony resonating in the motionless air. Some rolled in the dust, hands clenched on their heads, as if seized by the evil spirits the elders spoke of. Others, their eyes rolled back, begged the invisible force that tormented them.

"You thought you could escape us, orphan boy," the leader said with satisfaction, bringing him brutally back to reality. They now formed a circle around him, packed as tightly as the columns of a temple. In an uncontrolled gesture of panic, Jonah gathered his sandals in one hand while the other sought the coin on his chest for reassurance.

A younger boy noticed his movement. "Look, he's hiding something!" he cried, pointing at the tunic. Their eyes lit up with greedy gleams as they tightened their circle. Jonah realized his mistake, but it was too late. Their simple desire to beat him

had just transformed into something more dangerous. The leader shoved him violently with both hands. Jonah stumbled backward, bounced against another who pushed him in turn. They jostled him savagely until his legs gave way and he collapsed onto the worn pavement. Everything then happened as swiftly as a storm that strikes without warning.

Merciless blows began to rain down upon him. Jonah had curled up, protecting his head with his arms. Then he quickly drew his knees up to his elbows in a fetal position to protect his meager treasure and his abdomen from the blows. "Pry his arms apart!" ordered one of them. But Jonah, like an oyster resisting a crab's attack, tensed his muscles with all his might. The more they tried to unfold him, the more tightly he closed in on himself. The blows doubled in violence at this unexpected resistance. Their feet crashing against his ribs drew groans of pain from him. One of them had picked up one of the abandoned sandals nearby and was viciously working on his head, seeking with malicious joy to make him lower his guard. A

more violent blow to his solar plexus cut off his breath completely. Like a fish stranded on the shore, his mouth opened and closed mechanically, his body stubbornly refusing the air he desperately tried to swallow. When at last his lungs came back to life, his body was nothing but a burning wound.

Like an echo of Zeus's thunder itself, a deep voice tore through the burning air: "Stop at once!" Calm fell instantly. Jonah, who in the fog of pain perceived none of it, thought it was the end. The condemned, they said, heard this same silence just before death carried them away.

The boys froze as if struck by lightning. Two workshops away stood a figure who seemed to have stepped out of the legends of the Titans. The colossus emerged from the shadows of his forge, his massive silhouette cut out against the red glow of the furnaces behind him. His shoulders, like polished rocks, gleamed with sweat and bore the black marks of daily battles with fire and metal. His brown leather apron, thick as an ox's hide, was studded with burns and scars left by years of

molten metal. In his hand, he held an iron rod whose tip glowed as threateningly red as a Cyclops' eye.

The young rogues exchanged silent glances, betraying their growing unease. Without a word, the man of marble stepped forward with surprising agility. The boldest were the first to take to their heels, followed in disarray by the rest of the gang.

The giant carefully set his iron rod on the street's pavement and knelt beside Jonah. His voice, though deep, became surprisingly gentle: "It's over now, little one. You're safe."

But Jonah remained huddled, his arms protecting his head like a shield, his body shaking with tremors. With measured movements one wouldn't have expected from hands used to taming metal, the blacksmith helped him to his feet. The child immediately curled up into a sitting position, his arms, battered by the blows, seeming to have welded themselves around his head like metal on

an anvil. Head buried between his arms and knees, he rocked back and forth, repeating in an endless, barely audible whisper: "Never again... Never again..."

The giant placed his callused palms on Jonah's frail shoulders and reassured him: "Don't worry, I'll take care of you. I'll carry you right here into my forge and give you something to drink. Come now."

He spoke with the benevolent wisdom of a father, the kind that comes only after guiding one's own children through life's perilous paths. With a sure gesture, the blacksmith lifted the boy as if he weighed no more than a newborn and carried him to his forge. With one hand, he pulled out a wooden tripod worn by time and set down the child, who had allowed himself to be seated.

"Bring me a bowl of water for the boy," he commanded to one of the smiths, indicating him with a nod of his chin. The man obeyed and headed to the back of the workshop. Behind the brick

wall that served as a partition, the air was cooler. He filled an earthenware bowl with water drawn from a jar broader than it was tall. He brought it to the master blacksmith, offering it with both hands in a sign of respect, then returned to his workbench.

Kneeling before Jonah, he offered the bowl of cool water, which met with no response. He observed the huddled child for a moment, one hand clutched to his bruised ribs, the other gripping his scraped knee. With a slow gesture, Jonah moved his hand from his knee to his chest to feel for the denarius, as if to ensure his mission was not yet over. He stared at the ground with intense focus, his eyes narrowing, betraying the inner battle that must have been taking place. The master blacksmith was filled with compassion at the sight of the angry bruises that covered every visible part of that miniature body.

“My name is Darius,” he said, his deep voice softened like metal after tempering. “The forge is my domain today, but life forged me first.” He

paused, letting his words sink into the silence. “I was a boy like you once,” he continued in a lighter voice. “And believe it or not, I too knew the fists of those bigger than me.” A melancholic smile lit up his face, streaked with sweat and ash. “But just as the hardest iron softens in the forge, time soothes wounds and teaches forgiveness. One day, you'll understand.”

Jonah suddenly lifted his head, his eyes burning with a sudden flame. The blacksmith noticed their reddened and swollen edges, testament to how much he must have wept in despair under the blows. “Forgive? Never in my life!” he spat vehemently, his nose still running, “Forgiveness is for the weak!”

He leaped to his feet as if stung by a scorpion and darted toward the exit. But his injuries were quick to remind him of their presence, rekindling through their pain the bitter memory of his humiliation.