

# **Petra: City in Stone Study Guide**

**Petra: City in Stone by T. L. Higley**

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# Plot Summary

Told from multiple perspectives, *Petra: City of Stone* is the story of a mother's struggle to save her young son from the clutches of an evil queen amidst the war waged between good and evil, Heaven and Hell.

Set in Petra in the year AD 106, the novel opens with Julian rushing to the amphitheatre to save the lives of his friends and his fiancé. This group of individuals has been discovered to be Christians, and the Roman government has ordered their deaths in the arena, mauled to death by lions. Julian, whose father is a powerful Christian senator, should have been executed along with his friends, but his family name saved his life. When Julian fails to save his friends, and when he realizes that his actions have brought disgrace and danger to his family, he runs away from Rome to the city of Petra. Meanwhile, a young mother, Cassia, and her son, Alexander, make plans to leave their hometown of Damascus. Cassia's husband is an abusive, dangerous man who uses his family in schemes to swindle traders out of their money. When one swindle turns bad and Aretas is killed, Cassia knows she has nowhere to turn but to Aretas' mysterious family in Petra. Although she knows nothing about her husband's family, she hopes that they will be kind enough to take them in, providing a future for her son.

When Cassia arrives in Petra, she is befriended by an elderly man, Malik, and his group of friends. Malik places his hands on Cassia, healing an injury she sustained, through the power of prayer. Cassia learns that Malik is a spiritual leader in Petra, running an underground Christian church, teaching believers about Jesus Christ. In Petra, as in Rome and many other cities across the world, Christianity was a new religion - Jesus had been crucified less than 100 years earlier - and anyone found to be Christian was thought to be going against the royal house and was executed. But Malik and his congregation risked persecution and death to worship their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is Malik and his friends who inform Cassia of Aretas' true parentage in Petra: he was the crowned prince of the city, and next in line to rule the entire Nabatean empire. With Aretas dead, this means that Alexander, Cassia's young son, is next in line to inherit the throne. Cassia is rocked by this news, and hopes that this means both she and her son will have a secure future in the palace. But Cassia does not know that King Rabbel, Aretas' father, has remarried a dark, evil woman with plans of her own to rule the country. After struggling with fertility, Queen Hagiru has aligned herself with the evil gods of the underworld in exchange for the birth of a healthy son. King Rabble is old and sick, and Hagiru knows that her son, Obadas, is too young to rule the kingdom alone, and that she will be appointed his regent, ruling in his stead. When Cassia and Alexander arrive at the palace gates, Hagiru's plan for power is foiled.

Hagiru manages to convince the king to take Alexander into the palace, but to throw out Cassia, who has no legal claim to her son now that he has been discovered to be the royal prince. As time passes, Hagiru convinces Rabbel that in order to keep Petra out of Roman clutches - Rome has been encroaching on the city, ready to invade and conquer the capital in the name of Rome - the gods demand a blood sacrifice: Rabbel's grandson, Alexander. When Cassia learns of this, she and her friends at Malik's church



device a plan to steal Alexander from the queen's evil clutches, and to return him to Cassia's arms where he belongs. During the time that Cassia has been staying with Malik, she meets and falls in love with Julian, whom Malik is training to take over his church in Petra. Cassia is terrified of falling victim to another powerful man, so she fights against her emotions toward Julian, and does everything she can to keep him at arm's length. Her inability to trust also prevents her from fully engaging in Julian's plans to rescue Alexander, and she is nearly killed in the process of defying him. The whole while, Malik and Julian work diligently to show Cassia the light of Christianity, and to convince her that Jesus Christ is her God, and that He would never leave her or forsake her. In the climax of the novel, Cassia is locked in the queen's cellar for trying to rescue Alexander, is physically beaten and emotionally broken, when she has a vision of the Lord walking with her beside a quiet stream. She lets his love and dedication flow through her, filling her with a new strength and new sense of trust. Cassia escapes from the dungeon and meets with the Roman leader, convincing him that she will hand over Petra to Roman rule, if he promises to take the city peacefully, without any bloodshed.

With the city of Petra safe, Cassia can once again return her focus to rescuing Alexander from the sacrificial offering set to take place that evening. She makes her way to the altar, prepared to fight with the Holy Spirit beside her, in the name of the Lord to rescue her son. Meanwhile, Malik, Julian, and the rest of the church followers congregate at the bottom of the mountain where the altar is set, and wage war against the demons and dark forces that have too long controlled Petra. The angels from Heaven descend to Earth to aid in the battle, and in the end, love is victorious. When the Roman soldiers arrive, Hagiru makes one last attempt to kill them, and the soldiers are forced to stab her through the stomach, knocking her onto the altar which immediately ignites in flames. At the end of the novel, Cassia is reunited with her son Alexander who, after Rabbal's untimely death, is named sole heir to the throne of Petra. Cassia ensures that Petra is peacefully handed over to Rome. Through Cassia's acceptance of Jesus Christ's love for her, she is able to love others in turn, and builds a life with the only man she's ever truly loved, Julian. Peace descends on Petra, and all the pains of the city have been washed away by the merciful grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.



# Chapters 1 - 5

## Chapters 1 - 5 Summary

Julian: Rome, AD 106: Julian runs through the streets of Rome toward the Flavian Amphitheatre where his friends and fiancé are scheduled to be eaten by lions in front of a cheering crowd. He flashes his pass to the usher, embarrassing the usher with his elite status, and exploding into the arena. Inside, Julian's mother grabs his arm and attempts to stop him from what he is going to do, and the two get into an argument. Julian wants his father to use his position of authority to stop the execution, but Julian's mother, perhaps numbed by societal expectation, wants Julian to sit down - it is too late, there is nothing they can do to save his friends. Julian feels deeply guilty for his friends' situation, and knows that he should be down there with them, but his societal position saved him. His actions at the arena today have brought further embarrassment to his family, and when he watches in horror as the lions tear his friends apart as entertainment for the screaming crowds, Julian knows he must escape from Rome - he will flee to Petra.

Cassia: In Damascus, a woman named Cassia inspects her black eye in the mirror. She peers out into the walkway to see if her husband, Aretas, is on his way home, and is surprised when she sees her young son, Alexander, walking with his head down. Alexander's school friends have refused to play with him today because they heard his father is a bandit. Cassia is outraged that Aretas' bad choices have started to affect their son's life, and vows that he will never hurt their son again. Inside the house, Cassia raises her son's spirits by letting him help her decorate the house for dinner, and by teasing him about his two loose teeth. A friend comes over to help Cassia tend to her wounds from Aretas' earlier beating, and claims that Aretas must come from money - it's written all over his face. Cassia knows very little about her husband's family, but would love to know more. If she could gather some financial support, she would be able to leave Aretas for good. When dinner is ready, Aretas comes stumbling home with a huge bag of gold coins. He is bleeding from the stomach where he's been stabbed by a trader who realized that Aretas was swindling him. Cassia stops everything to nurse Aretas, although he is rough and abusive toward her. Aretas demands that Cassia and Alexander join him on the job tomorrow morning, even though it puts them in great danger, and Cassia doesn't want Alexander to see his father cheating people. Still, Cassia agrees in the hopes that she can steal Aretas' money and escape with Alexander.

The next morning, Aretas, Cassia, and Alexander join a foreign caravan of travelers making their way to a market. Cassia is dressed in a fine yellow silk dress, in the hopes of making her look wealthy. Aretas, who sells diluted myrrh to traders, engages a group of interested buyers. Clutching a silent Alexander to her side, Cassia saunters up, buys a bottle of myrrh professing that if she wants the best quality, she always comes back to the same seller. The plan works as it always does, and the traders make a large purchase from Aretas. He insists on putting the gold coins in with the rest of his money,



and securing it to his belt, away from Cassia. At just this moment, Alexander sprints over shouting that he wants to show his father his two loose teeth, and the traders realize that the woman and small boy are Aretas' family. As soon as they realize this, they know Aretas has fooled them, and a chase breaks out. They run safely to their home, eat dinner, and fall asleep. That night, the family is awoken by banging at their front door. The traders have followed them home and are now here for blood: they beat and stab Aretas, then lunge for Alexander. Thinking quickly, Cassia bashes one of the intruders over the head with a terra-cotta pot, and then orders the other intruder to take the money - which is what he came for in the first place - and go. Aretas, who is gravely injured, is outraged that Cassia would save Alexander over him. His dying words to her are hurtful and abusive. Without any money or any information about his family, Cassia decides to travel to Petra, where she heard Aretas' ancestors were from, and hope for the best.

Hagiru: The evil queen Hagiru is attempting to commune with the gods in her private antechamber where she knows no one will bother her. She desires power over the entire Nabatean kingdom - not just Petra - and communes with the dark gods for reassurance. When she cannot hear the voices of the gods, she slices open her hand and pours her blood onto the flames. And then, the voices come to her, squabbling and screeching at first, before the voice of Dushara, the voice Hagiru knows best of all, comes in focused and clear. Dushara hisses that the rule of Petra is not secure, and that danger is coming to the city.

## Chapters 1 - 5 Analysis

This opening section of the novel introduces all the key characters in the novel: Julian, Cassia, Alexander, and Hagiru. The novel is told all in third-person limited omniscience, but fluctuates between three characters' points-of-view. Many important characteristics are defined in this opening section. Julian, for example, is an elite member of society who, in theory, wields a large amount of power, although his experience at the amphitheatre proves that his family only has power in theory, not practice. Julian races toward the theatre to save his friends who have been sentenced to execution for their beliefs and secret meetings. The reader does not yet know what specific beliefs these people have been condemned for, but clever readers will likely deduce a religious theme, particularly since Christians were regularly fed to lions in Rome around this timeframe. It is also interesting to note that Julian races to save his fiancé Vita not because he is desperately in love with her, but because he is betrothed to her and he wants to honor that agreement. Although Julian appears to share the subversive beliefs of his friends, he has been spared execution due in large part to his parents' societal position. This grace infuriates Julian, who despises his parents for sitting back quietly, refusing to ruffle society's feathers by demanding the release of Julian's friends. In the moment Julian decides to run away from Petra, he is divorcing himself from family and his hometown beliefs, in search of safety and security in a foreign land.

Meanwhile, Cassia is also fleeing to Petra, where she has heard her husband Aretas' family is from. It is interesting to note that Aretas has refused to discuss his family with



his wife, obviously insinuating that he has something to hide. Cassia's friend's comment that Aretas looks like he comes from money is important for the reader to remember, because Cassia will soon discover that Aretas was the crowned prince of Petra, and that his royal face is mirrored in Alexander's. This hidden history will be the central conflict of the remainder of the novel. Although Cassia is not a greedy woman, she knows that she will need a substantial amount of money, or support from family, to raise her son on her own. At this time in history, it was difficult for a single woman to get a job and make enough money to support a family. In today's society, a single-mother would not necessarily need the support of her extended family to survive, but this was not the case in Cassia's era. Nothing is known about Cassia's family, or why she has only Aretas' family - who are complete strangers - to turn to. The short chapter centered on Queen Hagiru introduces not only the villainess of the story, but also enhances the theme of religion and spirits. Hagiru is deeply invested in the dark arts - as seen by her séance with the spirits, fire, and blood. Hagiru's favorite god, Dushara, is described as having a hissing voice, and is only seen in shadows, which could mean that Dushara is meant to symbolize Satan, or the evil god of the underworld. When Dushara warns Hagiru that Petra is in danger, she could be referring to either Julian or Cassia's impending arrival.



# Chapters 6 - 10

## Chapters 6 - 10 Summary

Cassia: After traveling for many treacherous nights with the caravan of traders, Cassia and Alex arrive in Petra. The city is stunning, full of beautiful sculptures and religious iconography. Cassia tries to convince herself that Aretas' family will find room for them even though they have never met. Surely people living in such a religious city will take pity on family. They arrive to Petra at night, as the market is closing up. Cassia feels the chill and realizes that she doesn't know enough about Aretas' family to find them tonight. They will have to seek shelter elsewhere. Cassia makes Alexander promise that should they ever get separated, they will meet at the fountain in the center of the city. Cassia leads Alexander to the orchestra of the outdoor theatre hoping they can sleep there tonight. She is followed by a rough trader, who rips the purse from around Cassia's neck. When Cassia falls from his violent attack, her shoulder slams against a rock and she passes out from the pain.

Cassia awakens to the sound of murmurs around her and a cup of warm wine at her lips. She is lying on a comfortable bed with woven blankets. An old man is standing over with kind eyes and soft voice. He tells Cassia to be still, peace be upon her. Cassia tries to rise, insisting that she has no money to pay the man, but still, he urges her to rest; he does not want her money. The old man, Malik, informs Cassia that her shoulder is out of its socket and he must pull it back in even though he is not a doctor. The old man has very intense eyes and he murmurs to the gods, which leaves Cassia to question whether or not she is safe. Cassia braces herself for the excruciating pain of setting her shoulder, but strange warmth emanates from Malik's hands. Cassia feels it surging through her body and the pain disappears. She rolls her shoulders a few times to be sure, and the pain has completely disappeared. Two women come to Cassia's side bringing her more wine and food. They have already fed Alexander and he is now sleeping peacefully by the fire. They ask Cassia questions about Aretas' family in the hopes of helping her find her way to them. As Cassia answers their questions, the women's faces turn pale. Their eyes go wide and they stare at each other in silence. The older woman, Zeta announces that Aretas was the crowned prince of Nabataea, the sole heir to the throne. Cassia quickly realizes that if King Rabbal had no other sons, Alexander would stand to inherit the throne.

The next morning, Cassia and Alexander set out to the palace in the hopes of meeting Aretas' family. Cassia is extremely nervous about how she and Alex will be received, and hopes that the family will welcome Alexander into their lives. On the way, they stop at the Nymphaeum - the city water fountain - where a man has scaled the side of the fountain to remove a blockage preventing the city dwellers from collecting the day's water. The man is clearly enjoying the attention and plays to the excitement of the crowd. Cassia contemplates how she was once attracted to men like this, men who seduce the affection of crowds much as Aretas did. Before she can scold herself for thinking about a man again, she realizes that Alexander is gone. She is horrified to





discover that he has scaled the side of the fountain, much like the silly man, and is now in danger of falling to grave injury. The climber quickly comes to the rescue and manages to coax Alexander into his arms, much to the delight of the crowd. Cassia is incensed and wants nothing to do with this man, Julian.

Julian: Julian watches as Cassia stalks away with Alexander, and finds that he is attracted to this fiery mother and her gap-toothed son. As he watches them walk away, an old man - Malik - approaches him. The old man offers Julian a job that would benefit from his "skills." Julian is flattered by the offer, but uncomfortable when the old man insists that Julian is meant for greater things. Julian feels as if the man can see through him, deep into his soul. "We will meet again," the old man says as he walks away, but Julian has no intention of seeing the man ever again (Page 68).

Hagiru: Hagiru is in her incantation chamber with Bethea - whom she hates - when a servant informs them that a young woman and child are on their way to the palace to meet with the king. As she makes her way to the throne to greet the unwelcome visitors, she encounters her son, Obadas, in the corridor. Although Hagiru tries to be affectionate with her son, it's clear he would rather be anywhere else than around her. As she watches Obadas run away, Hagiru fears what will happen to her son, the king's only living prince. He is starting to look more and more like a man, but Hagiru isn't ready for him to grow up; her plan has not yet reached fruition.

## Chapters 6 - 10 Analysis

As in the first section of the novel, this section functions primarily to set up the characters and major plot points for later in the novel. Cassia finally arrives in Petra, a city more beautiful than she ever imagined. Almost immediately, Cassia is attacked and robbed, signaling to the reader that Petra is a city of great danger to Cassia and Alexander. Despite the fact that no one on the streets would help her, Cassia promises Alexander that there are nice people everywhere, you just have to find them. It is unclear how Malik found Cassia - perhaps he was spiritually drawn to her distress - but he took it upon himself to care for her and Alexander. When Cassia tries to pay him for his trouble, he refuses the money, claiming that it is "our" great joy to care for the needy. It should be clear to the reader that Malik is a man of great spirituality, but they may not fully understand the context of his character yet. Malik is a healer, bestowed with what appears to be the healing power of Jesus Christ, although this name has not been mentioned yet. Malik is able to heal Cassia through touch and prayer, without medical intervention. When Malik touches her, Cassia feels a warm current pass through her, similar to the warm current other characters will feel later in the novel when they feel forgiven for their sins. Although the main theme of religion still hasn't been introduced, Higley is laying the groundwork for this, the novel's most integral element. It is also interesting to note that Malik seems sure that he and Julian will meet again, despite the fact that Julian is uncomfortable around the old man. The reader does not yet know why Julian is uncomfortable around Malik, nor why Malik is so keenly interested in striking up a relationship with Julian.



This section is also important because it brings tighter the three separate point-of-view characters. Julian, who hasn't been the focus of a chapter since the novel's opening, has clearly arrived in Petra and is quite smitten with Cassia. For her part, Cassia is weary of Julian because his personality reminds her too much of Aretas'. Julian's ability to woo a crowd may be a turnoff to Cassia now, but it will be integral to her safety and success later in the novel. Also in this section, Cassia learns the truth about Aretas' family although the reader doesn't know why Aretas fled from Petra. Aretas' mother, Gamilath, was King Rabbel's first wife. Before her death, she bore him one son, Aretas, the sole heir to the throne. Because Aretas is no longer alive to claim his crown, the throne passes down to Aretas' offspring. In Hagiru's section, the reader learns that the king has another son, Obadas. As of now, Obadas would have likely inherited the throne, but the introduction of Alexander will certainly challenge that. The reader already has the sense that Hagiru is an evil queen who will stop at nothing to gain power, but Cassia knows none of this as she blindly brings Alexander to the palace hoping for a loving reunification.



# Chapters 11 - 15

## Chapters 11 - 15 Summary

Cassia: The palace in Petra is impossible to miss. Cassia is extremely nervous before entering, and has worn her best silk dress, the one she was only allowed to wear for Aretas' schemes. Even though she looks beautiful, Cassia still feels poor, and she nervously smooths Alexander's hair repeatedly. Inside the palace, Cassia is immediately greeted by the slaves who seem to be expecting her. When the slave who brings Cassia to the throne room states that Cassia is to meet with the queen, she realizes that the king has married again. She hadn't expected this; the new queen will have no emotional ties to Alexander and might even feel jealous of him. Cassia insists on meeting with the king but the slave ignores her. Hagiru is awaiting Cassia's arrival perched on the King's throne so as to look as powerful and regal as possible. When Cassia lays eyes on Hagiru, she thinks she is the most beautiful woman she has ever seen. Despite the queen's beauty, Cassia immediately notes the dark energy in the room and the queen's chilled smile. Speaking meekly, Cassia introduces herself to the icy queen, and introduces Alexander as the son of Aretas. The queen's expression does not waver, but she insists this is impossible because Aretas is long dead. The queen also declares that Bethea is Aretas' true wife. The queen is obviously trying to embarrass Cassia for her societal position - she met Aretas when she was a servant - but Cassia holds her ground, informing the queen that Aretas has only been dead for two weeks, and that despite her societal station, Alexander holds rights to the throne as the rightful heir. Hagiru has heard enough and demands that Cassia take Alexander and leave Petra forever, when King Rabbel shuffles into the throne room. He is clearly ill, but the rest of the color leaves his face when he lays eyes on Alexander, the spitting image of his father, Aretas. Although the queen demands proof of Alexander's parentage, the king is unable to speak - the proof stands before him. Tears begin spilling from Cassia's eyes when she realizes that Alexander will be welcomed by the king who desperately misses his son, but she must break the news to him that Aretas has not just run away, he is also dead. Just as Cassia begins to relax in the happy reunion between grandfather and son, another boy bounds into the throne room. In the following moments, Cassia realizes that the boy is Hagiru's son, Alexander's direct competition for the throne.

It is clear that Hagiru wants nothing to do with the boy, and she tries to convince Rabbel that Cassia has beat him - she notes the bruises on the boy's arms sustained during the fight with Aretas' killers. Rabbel refuses to dismiss the boy; he is overwhelmed with joy at the reunification, but he is clearly very ill and must retire to his bedchambers to rest, leaving Hagiru in charge of taking care of Cassia. Hagiru pompously takes her position back on the throne and Cassia's heart sinks. A smirk creeps onto Hagiru's face as she announces that Alexander will be raised in the palace without "foreign influence." Cassia is to leave Petra today. As a slave-woman, she no longer has claim to the boy, the royal prince. Hagiru clasps her hands on Alexander's shoulders and pulls him away from Cassia as the slaves, in turn, violently pull Cassia from the throne room, kicking and screaming, and throw her down the palace stairs. Cassia lies weeping and bloody at the



bottom of the palace stairs. Those who pass turn away from her, and Cassia considers that death may be the best thing for her. A man appears at her side and gently gathers her in his arms. He carries her through the streets asking everyone if they know who she belongs to. Eventually, the man carries her to Malik's home. Cassia's eyes open enough to realize that the man carrying her is Julian, the climber from the fountain. Julian is overwhelmed to have been reunited with Malik, just as Malik prophesied. Over the next few hours, Malik and his friends attend to all of Cassia's needs, and Julian never leaves her side. When she recounts what has happened to Alexander, everyone, particularly Julian, is outraged. Zeta has washed the yellow silk dress Cassia wore to the palace, and hands it to her. Defiantly, Cassia throws the dress in the fire, symbolizing a new start in her life.

Julian: After leaving Cassia in the care of Zeta, Julian joins Malik at his home, and quickly realizes that Malik is a nobleman, living in an expensive palace, although he dresses in the clothes of commoners. Servants arrive with glasses of warm wine, but Malik shoos them away and begins firing questions at Julian. Although Julian attempts to sidestep the questions about "The Way" and "our people" it is clear that Julian - who is from Rome - somehow belongs with Malik. Julian resigns himself to the fact that Malik can see the truth in his soul, and begrudgingly answers his questions about Roman martyrs but does not mention his friends. When the conversation closes, Malik again offers Julian a job as a mason at the carving site, and this time, Julian accepts. Later, when Julian visits with Cassia, he informs her that he's secured work for her too, collecting the fragments of rock carved away by his chisel. It's not much, but it should provide enough income for her to fuel her plans to save her son. Through the long work days, Cassia tries to draw out Julian's history, but he is generally silent about his past. At the fountain, Cassia listens to the women from the palace gossiping hoping to catch some news about her son. She learns that Obadas is a bully and that he's been picking on Alexander, making life miserable for him. When she breaks into a run toward the palace to save him from the torment, Julian intervenes, promising that they will find a way to get Alexander back.

## Chapters 11 - 15 Analysis

Cassia finally reaches the palace and has the happy reunion with the king that she had hoped for. The reader, however, likely always knew that Cassia's return to Petra would not be smooth, and that Queen Hagiru would be devising a plan to ensure Obadas' rule over the city. In royal tradition, kingship is handed down through the line of the eldest son. It is only if the eldest son is unable to produce an heir that the kingship would pass to the second born son, in this case, Obadas. In the years that Aretas has been missing from Petra, the king remarried and bore a second-born son, Obadas, who likely spent his entire life assuming that he would inherit the throne. Likewise, so did his mother, Hagiru, assume that Obadas would one day be king. If a king is deemed too young to rule a nation, the power passes to his mother, the queen. There should be no doubt that Hagiru is evil and power-hungry, so Alexander's unexpected arrival in Petra compromises Hagiru's plan for ultimate power. Through the few interactions the reader has seen thus far, it is clear that Obadas cannot stand to be around his mother, and is



constantly squirming out of her grips. This could be symbolic of the tight hold Hagiru has over her son and what could be his inherited power over Petra. Clearly Obadas is uncomfortable with Hagiru's firm grip over the future, and may overtly act out against that control later in the novel.

When Cassia arrives in the novel, she is keenly aware of the dark energy that surrounds the building, particularly when Queen Hagiru is around. Queen Hagiru communes with the dark gods through fire and blood, similar to the way people conjure evil spirits during a modern-day séance. Spirituality, whether organized into a formal religion or not, is an important element in this novel. Although Cassia is not religious, she is very spiritual and prides herself on her sixth-sense - the ability to sense good and evil forces around her. Many of the other characters, including Malik and Julian, share a sixth-sense for communing with the spirit world, but each sense is individual to the particular characters. Cassia's sense that evil lurks in the palace is realized when Hagiru announces that Alexander will be raised by Bethea, Aretas' true wife, and that Cassia must now relinquish any claim to the prince. The practice of raising royal children away from their parents was not an uncommon practice, particularly if the children were birthed by commoners. Traditionally, royal children were raised by a slew of nannies and tutors, bringing the children up with royal etiquette and manners, but it is clear that Hagiru is exacting her power simply to control the boy and manipulate his mother. There is never any doubt that Hagiru has dark plans for the boy and will stop at nothing to remove him from the palace. With Rabbel overjoyed to be reunited with the little prince, her plan will become trickier, and she first has to get rid of Cassia, the only one dedicated to Alexander's success. The king, despite his obvious affection for Alexander, is old and very weak. It is clear that he is wrapped around Hagiru's finger, and is easily swayed by her manipulative power.

Back at Malik's house, Cassia burns her yellow silk dress as a sign of independence. The yellow dress symbolized Aretas' power over her since he only allowed her to wear the luxurious fabric when it suited his schemes. Cassia thought she was taking control over her life by running away from him and wearing the dress at the palace, showing her ownership of the luxury. But the dress failed to impress the queen who immediately called Cassia out for who she really was, a slave-girl. Cassia's burning of the dress symbolizes a complete severance from Aretas and his family's control over her. She will not attempt to battle the evil queen on her own level - with expensive silks and furs - but as a commoner, alongside Malik and Julian, fighting with the power of love.

Julian's conversation with Malik is clearly about religion, but "The Way" has not yet been defined for the reader. Careful readers will probably deduce that Malik and Julian are speaking about Christianity, following the teachings of Jesus Christ, who would have lived 100 years before this time. In Rome, followers of Jesus Christ were particularly tormented, fed to the lions as was seen in the first chapter. Malik's reference to the martyrs informs the readers that he and Julian both follow the same teachings, but that their beliefs must be kept secret, hence Julian's restraint in discussing religion with the old man. It also gives the reader clues into Malik's healing powers and spiritual insight. He is a clear disciple of Christ, gifted with strong spiritual powers that have made him the leader of Petra's underground Christian movement.



# Chapters 16 - 20

## Chapters 16 - 20 Summary

**Malik:** Malik prepares his house for a meeting of his congregation. He hopes Julian will join them for the teaching, but he holds no hope for the young man. The followers begin to arrive, and Malik takes his place at the front of the table after ensuring that there is enough food and wine for everyone to leave with full bellies. He looks up from his teaching and cannot hide his surprise when he notices Julian hiding in the shadows of the room. The believers enjoy their grand meal and their warmed wine together, listening to each other's fears, concerns, and well-wishes. When the meal is complete, Julian requests to address the audience. Malik is surprised, believing Julian would like to preach, but instead, Julian requests the help of Malik's congregation to help Alexander return to his mother's arms. Julian hopes that many in the congregation will join the task, and find work in the palace getting as close to the boy as possible. The hope is that once there are enough people in place, Julian will be able to distract the king and queen long enough for those inside the palace to secretly slip the boy away back to his mother and out of the city. As Malik listens to Julian engage and excite the minds of the believers, he knows that one day, Julian will take over his church.

**Cassia:** Cassia is not pleased with Julian's plan. It reminds her too much of a scheme that Aretas might have pulled, and she wants to exert her own independence from controlling men. Still, she must admit that it's a good plan. While on her lunch break one afternoon, Cassia begins talking to another woman on the work field who points out Queen Hagiru's incantation chamber, which rests atop a large hill near the palace. She remarks that it must take the queen half a day to get up there and back. When Cassia hears this, she knows what she must do. The next day, when Hagiru is scheduled to visit the incantation room, she and Julian make their way to the palace, but not before Malik warns Julian to do all he can to protect them from the dark forces in the palace. Cassia and Julian march to the palace where Cassia demands to see the king. She spots him sitting quietly by the palace fountain being fanned by two women. Cassia speaks quickly and bluntly with the king, knowing that she may not have much time. She begs the king to reunite her with Alexander. She does not care where they live so long as they live together. She also promises to bring Alexander to visit with the king as often as he'd like. She pulls on the king's heartstrings as a parent by reminding him of the pain of being separated from a beloved child. In a desperate moment, she even offers the king sexual favors in return for his agreement, but the king is not given enough time to answer before Cassia feels a cold wind tunnel through the palace walls: Hagiru has returned. She demands that Cassia leave the city at once, and to Cassia's horror, King Rabbel agrees with a sigh. With that, Cassia is escorted from the palace.

**Julian:** While Cassia is in her argument with Hagiru in the palace, she turns to see Julian murmuring to himself, palms outstretched and upward, as if protecting her from some evil force. When they leave the palace together, Cassia spits that Julian's prayers were powerless, but Julian knows that she is wrong. He had felt the dark power





of the queen when she had returned from the incantation chamber, and he believes that his prayers shielded them from her flaming power. Outside the castle, Julian loses Cassia in the darkness that surrounds the buildings. He gropes for her, but she moves quickly toward something. When his eyes focus in the darkness, he sees that Cassia kneels beside Alexander, with Bethea struggling to decide whether or not she should sound an alarm. Julian senses that there are guards quickly approaching, and manages to pull Cassia away from Alexander in enough time to save her. He feels the evil forces pressing down on them and knows that his incessant prayers are not strong enough to hold them off forever. He wills Cassia not to grab the boy and run. She doesn't, and Julian can see Cassia is steeled for battle.

Cassia: Back at Malik's home, Cassia wonders how life could ever go on as usual, but somehow, it does. Cassia continues to work in the caves alongside Julian, whose plan to snatch Alexander is slowly taking form. Many of Malik's friends, members of his church, have secured positions inside the palace, but still, Cassia is impatient, sure her son is in danger. At night, she creeps out of Malik's home, scurries across town, and into the darkened amphitheatre. There, she meets with an old gladiator named Yehosef who is teaching her how to fight. Cassia does not tell the old man why she wants to learn to fight, confiding only that her family is in danger. One evening as they are sparring, a huge soldier descends upon them and tries to strike Cassia. Yehosef comes to the rescue and discovers that the soldier has been sent by the queen to kill Cassia.

## Chapters 16 - 20 Analysis

Many interesting things come to light when Cassia secretly visits King Rabbel when she believes Hagiru is worshiping in the incantation room. First, the reader sees, once again, that Rabbel is completely under Hagiru's control. His emotions are softened when he sees the love Cassia has for her son, which reminds the king of the love he still carries for Aretas, and there is a moment when everyone believes he may hand Alexander back over to Cassia, but the moment is lost immediately when Hagiru sweeps back into the castle. Despite her clear sense of power in the castle, she seems to know not to overstep her boundaries. Although she clearly wants Cassia killed immediately, she knows better than to demand too much of the king, so she makes it seem that the king is making all the choices, choosing when to attack and how, but it is clear to everyone that she is manipulating him. Before Hagiru's unexpected return, the king was considering Cassia's offer of sexual favors. This shows not only Cassia's love for Alexander - she truly would do anything to protect him - but also the king's flawed nature. Despite the fact that he is married, old, and ill, and that Cassia is clearly a desperate mother looking to protect her son, the king selfishly considers her offer. This should signal to the reader that, despite his affection for Alexander, King Rabbel is not necessarily a "good guy."

The entire time Cassia was with the king, Julian prayed to his God, the One God, with outstretched, upturned hands, as if he were forming a wall with his body and his words to protect Cassia from the evil in the palace. There are strong dark forces at work in the palace, although, for now, they only appear in the energy surrounding the building. The



way the dark forces work has not yet become clear. The evil energy is stronger when Hagiru is around, which should not come as a surprise. Somehow, Julian's prayers to God seem to protect the two of them from feeling the full force of this evil, but his prayers are only strong enough to hold the power off for a short time. Cassia too feels the weight of the dark energy, but because Cassia is not religious, she does not understand what that energy could symbolize or signify. While Hagiru is pure evil, Bethea shows a moment of humanity by allowing Cassia a tender moment with her son before crying out to inform the guards of Cassia's trespassing.





# Chapters 21 - 25

## Chapters 21 - 25 Summary

Cassia: A few days after her visit to the palace, Cassia learns that Talya, Zeta's daughter, has been hired to work as a nanny caring for Alexander. Cassia is overjoyed, and looks forward to Talya's return home from work each evening to inform her of every detail about Alexander's day. Despite the closeness she feels to Talya and Zeta, Cassia wonders why these women would do so much to help her with her son. What do they want in return? She hears the women speaking openly about their religion and their meetings with Malik, but they never invite Cassia to join them. One evening, when the women return home from a church meeting, Talya's face is white. She tells Cassia that Julian has been attacked and is recovering at Malik's home. Cassia knows that Julian has been targeted for his involvement with her, and because of his presence at the palace the other day. Her heart weights heavily with guilt. When Cassia visits Julian at his bedside, Malik finally asks if Cassia would like to join them all at a church service. Although Cassia is not religious, she accepts. At the meeting, Cassia looks around at the faces of the believers and sees a peaceful, yet intensely joyful expression on each of their faces. She doesn't understand how this emotion could be possible, but she feels it too, strongly, when she is around them. When Cassia learns that the believers are Christians, she is shocked. She had heard that all Christians were atheists because they refused to pray to the traditional gods. Despite this, she still feels a connection to the Christians, particularly to Malik and Julian, and she knows that due to the persecution of Christians, Malik showed great trust in her by inviting her to one of their meetings. When it is finished, Julian walks Cassia back home, and they are greeted by Yehosef on the way. Cassia needn't say anything to Julian; he immediately realizes that Cassia is being trained to fight by this old man, and he cannot hide his frustration that she does not trust him, his plan, or his God to safely return Alexander to her.

Hagiru: Hagiru races to the incantation chamber to commune with her gods, whose voices snarl, shiver, and whisper all around her. She calls out to Dushara, as she usually does, but her calls are interrupted by Hagiru's priest, arriving to tell her that he is about to begin the sacrifice. Emboldened by her conversation with the gods, Hagiru asks to watch the ritualized slaughter. The blood pours over her hands, turning them red and sticky. After she washes her hands, Hagiru walks through the gardens contemplating how she will secure Petra for her own son's rule. She watches the two of them playing in the garden, and snickers with delight when Obadas steps on the tiny lizard Alexander had been playing with, smashing it. Hagiru is stunned when Rabbel strides over to the boys and disapprovingly dismisses Obadas to his room. Her shock boils into anger and hatred when she watches Rabbel embrace Alexander, denounce Obadas as "cruel," and promise him the purchase of one hundred lizards if that would make him happy. Sensing that she must intervene soon, Hagiru strides confidently over to the king. She mentions that she had been communing with the gods earlier, and that they have told her how difficult it will be to secure Petra against the encroaching Romans. The king is incensed and terrified. He claims he will do anything to ensure that



his army beats the Romans, protecting their fair city. This moment is exactly what Hagiru had been waiting for. She tells Rabbel that the gods want only one thing from him to ensure the safety of their city: they want Rabbel to sacrifice his firstborn grandson, Alexander, to appease them. Rabbel immediately says no, he would never hurt Alexander, but Hagiru's argument and her emotions are powerful, and soon she sees she has won the king's approval. Alexander will be sacrificed to the gods in celebration at the Festival of Grain.

Cassia: After her fight with Julian over her involvement with Yehosef, work with Julian is icy, as if an invisible wall has been built between them. Cassia knows she has offended Julian, but doesn't understand his anger. Eventually, Julian confides in Cassia that his ex-fiancé, Vita, along with many of his close friends, were killed in a gladiator arena. Although Julian's friends were killed by lions, many other believers of The Way were killed by gladiators. Later that night, at the church meeting, Julian notes the numbers of their church are decreasing. Malik agrees, noting that there is great fear of being discovered. If members of the church are found to be following a religion other than the one promoted by the palace, they will be killed. When Talya enters the meeting, her face is drained of color and she announces what she has heard at the palace: that Alexander will be sacrificed. A shocked murmur runs through the congregation as they realize their plan must go into immediate effect, regardless of their preparedness. They have no time to contemplate their mission, however, as the meeting is broken up by palace guards who, as many members feared, have discovered the underground church and have come to arrest its members. The guards bind the members with rope and lead them off to the gladiator arena where they will be fed to the hungry panthers. After hearing the news about Alexander's imminent death, Cassia doesn't have the emotional strength to fight. Both Julian and Malik attempt to give Cassia spiritual strength, and urge her to accept the gift of eternal life promised through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Cassia wavers, wanting desperately to believe in The Way, but feeling overwhelmed by guilt - how did she get to this place of death, with Alexander suffering the same fate? She rebukes Malik and Julian's God, swearing that she will do this on her own. Moments later, Yehosef arrives with keys to the arena cages and sets them all free.

Regrouping at Malik's home, the group goes over their plan to save Alexander again. The plan involves a string of palace employees deftly moving Alexander out of the palace using various vehicles and disguises. Cassia is to wait at the exit to the city with all their belongings, ready to flee to Jerusalem. Julian plans to run away with Cassia, but Malik pulls him aside and tells him that he expects Julian to stay in Petra to lead the church. Julian is outraged, but knows that leading the church is in God's plan for his life. He has always known this, and always feared it.

## Chapters 21 - 25 Analysis

Cassia continues to struggle between feeling an emotional attachment to her friends, and fearing that they will want something in return for their kindness. Through Cassia's distrust, it appears that she had a rough childhood and no real friends in adulthood. She was abused and taken advantage of by her husband, and has no one else to turn to for



support, hence her suspicion of Malik and his church. This insecurity leads Cassia to Yehosef, an old gladiator, whom she pays to train her in the fighting ways of a soldier. When Julian finds out, he is extremely disappointed, not just because Cassia is putting herself in danger, but because her training proves that she does not trust in Julian's plans to return Alexander to her safely. Cassia has always relied only on herself, so it is difficult for her to trust a man she has only known for a few weeks, particularly when it comes to her most prized treasure: her only son. Cassia's inability to trust others and to release her control will have a large role to play in exploring Cassia's spiritual journey through the novel. When the novel opens, Cassia is a broken, destitute woman in dire need of help. She is emotionally closed-off, adamantly self-sufficient, and terribly frightened. These elements create the perfect backdrop for Cassia to explore her spirituality, particularly as she befriends strong Christians like Malik and Julian.

Higley skillfully uses Julian and Cassia's work site, the crevasse they are chiseling away, as a metaphor for their growing relationship. After Julian's obvious disapproval of Cassia's involvement with Yehosef, Higley describes their daily work as tense and silent. Yet alongside this conflict, Higley describes Julian's work on the wall: "Amazingly, with so little encouragement, the red rock would split ... enough for his slim chisel to work itself into the crack and widen the split" (Page 164). The parallels between the rock wall and the relationship continue throughout the chapter, alluding to the way Julian's honest words about his life, history, love, and loss, work their way into Cassia's heart, creating an opening for her to love him, despite the emotional walls she has built against him. When the wall Julian carves is finished, it will be a beautifully carved tomb with vine and bud ornamentation. Likewise, the reader should assume that once Julian and Cassia fully realize their love for each other, their relationship will blossom into a beautiful example of love.

Julian's resistance to God's plan in his life is explored to a greater depth in this chapter. Through her character actions, Higley alludes to many famous Bible stories to add texture and metaphor to the novel's plot. Julian's resistance to God's wishes is similar to the Biblical character, Jonah. Jonah infamously runs away from God's plan for him to lead a church in Nineveh, and sails away from the city on a large ship. In this biblical story, the Lord sends a huge storm to capsize the ship, throwing Jonah overboard and into the sea where he is swallowed by a whale - or another large fish, depending on the translation. After three days and three nights inside the belly of the whale - which symbolizes darkness, loss, and depression - the Lord orders the whale to vomit Jonah back up onto shore, where he realizes that he cannot run from God's plans, returns to Nineveh, and leads the church. The reader may see many similarities in Julian's story: It is clear that the Lord had asked Julian to be a leader in Rome, but he has run away to Petra. Now, the Lord is calling him to lead the church in Petra, but he wants to run from that responsibility as well. Although Julian is clearly a man of faith, he struggles with his own pride and desire to control his life his way. The reader can expect Julian to be held in an emotional state of darkness and depression, a feeling that all is lost, before realizing that he must submit to the Lord and to his faith if he wants fulfillment in his life.



# Chapters 26 - 30

## Chapters 26 - 30 Summary

Cassia: Julian's plan is set to take effect the next day, and Cassia can barely contain her nervousness. She tries to busy her hands at Zeta's home, baking bread and tending to the spicy hare stew on the stove, but all she can think about is Alexander's face when Talya informs him that he is to be reunited with his mother tomorrow. She thinks back on Alexander's misstep during their last scheme with Aretas and fears that the boy will give them away this time, too. When Malik joins them for the meal, Cassia ponders her relationship with Malik, something she hasn't had time to do since arriving in Petra because she was always preoccupied with Alexander. Malik worries that Julian will lead the church astray because he is too concerned with his own plan, as if he is the one holding Petra's fate in his hands and not the Lord. He also tells Cassia that Julian hoped to run away with her to Jerusalem, but that his place is with the church. Cassia's heart sinks - she hadn't realized how desperately she wanted Julian with them - but acknowledges that Julian's place is here in Petra. Before he leaves, Malik gives Cassia a pouch containing 250 denarii, more money than Cassia has ever seen in her life, to help her on her journey to safety. Cassia is overwhelmed with emotion. Julian arrives a short time later and asks to speak to Cassia in private. He confesses his love to her and confides that, despite Malik's wishes, he is running away with Cassia. He no longer desires to lead the church if it means having to separate from the woman he loves. Cassia falls into his arms and the two embrace, covering each other with kisses. When Cassia confides that she plans to sneak into the palace tomorrow - leaving her assigned post at the city border - Julian is firm, forbidding her to enter the palace because it goes against their plan. When Cassia hears the control and determination in Julian's voice, she is reminded of Aretas and his dangerous control over her. She has sworn that no man will ever control her again. She bluntly tells Julian that she does not want him to leave Petra with her. She does not feel the same way about him as he does for her. She wants nothing to do with him, and she will enter the palace tomorrow as she planned, whether he likes it or not.

Julian: On the morning of the plan's execution, Malik again warns Julian not to be too concerned with his own plan, but to have faith in the Lord's plan, whatever that may be. The congregation meets one final time to go over their plan: Julian will pose as a Roman soldier threatening an invasion of Petra. This will draw both the king and queen's attention away from the fact that Talya will be leading Alexander out of his room, through the palace hallways. Talya will deliver Alexander to Tabitha and Marta who will hide Alexander in a large woven laundry basket and carry him to a covered wagon that will be waiting outside. From there, the wagon will race off and deliver the boy to Cassia, who should be waiting by the exit to the city, to take Alexander to Jerusalem, the closest city outside of Nabatean control. Everyone is excited and terribly nervous, but eager to start. Moments before they disperse, palace guards pound on Malik's front door. The queen has demanded that the church leader be brought to her chambers for questioning. Julian decides that he will walk ahead of Malik and meet with



the queen, starting the plan in motion, before her meeting with the church leader. Malik silently agrees. At the palace, the queen recognizes Julian from his earlier visit with Cassia, which throws Julian: he hadn't expected the queen to recognize him. Still, he continues with his plan, claiming to have an urgent message from the Roman Emperor, and demanding a meeting with the king. The queen is suspicious, but Julian can sense nervousness creeping into the queen's expression. She claims that the king is ill and in bed. As Julian is speaking, he gives Talya a tiny nod, urging her to start her part of the plan. As Talya rushes away, Bethea joins the queen in the throne room. The queen turns to Bethea, eyes burrowing into her, and Julian senses a silent communication passing between them. Something like a cold wind whips up between the women, and Julian can feel a dark power filling the room, sucking his confidence; he staggers backward. The queen rises from her seat, voice roaring, "You do not represent Rome! You speak for no one but that old troublemaker and his peasant crowd of rebels" (Page 214). As the guards arrest Julian, he knows that his plan has failed.

Cassia: Meanwhile, Cassia has sneaked away from Malik's home and walked to the fountain carrying her travel pack with all her belongings and cash. She places the pack inside a large terra-cotta water jug and dons the palace servant's tunic she stole from Talya's sewing basket. She straps a short dagger to her inner thigh, and sets off toward the palace. She fears that Alexander will be too afraid to run away with strangers, and wants to be inside the palace in case his fear gets the best of him. The servant's tunic provides enough cover for her to sneak into the palace and hide in an empty supply closet. Cassia waits patiently inside the dark closet and is terrified when she hears something moving behind her. At first she thinks it is Julian, and moves toward him, but the man's face catches a glimpse of light, and Cassia realizes that she is terribly wrong. The man grabs Cassia by the shoulders and slams her into the wall. Cassia realizes almost immediately that the man is a Roman soldier, which could mean only one thing: Rome has come to overtake the city today. After ordering Cassia to keep her silence, the soldier runs from the closet. When he opens the door, Cassia hears Marta and Alexander running down the hallway in her direction. Her heart catches in her throat: the plan is working! Her happiness lasts only a moment before she sees two other figures racing behind Marta and the boy: two massive palace guards. The guards smash Marta down, cracking her head on the granite palace floor. As the other guard roughly grabs Alexander, he turns toward Cassia and shouts, Mama! revealing her hidden position to the guards.

## Chapters 26 - 30 Analysis

Cassia's biggest character flaw is the fierce control she has over her life. She grew up without parents - they abandoned her at a young age - and she spent the majority of her adult-life going against her own morals and wishes in the hopes of earning a man's love. This led her to Aretas, an angry, abusive man. When she left Aretas, she swore a man would never control her again. This mentality has prevented Cassia from forming healthy, trusting relationships with any of the people she's met in Petra, including Malik and Julian. Cassia is determined to save her son, and struggles to accept that another's plan might be better than her own. Cassia is always on the cusp of desperation, and this





greatly affects her judgment, and therefore, her safety. Cassia is prone to making bold, impulsive decisions, such as running to the palace every time she hears Alexander is in danger, without fully thinking through the consequences. Although Cassia has worked superficially with Julian on his plan to save Alexander, she has always had her own plan brewing, which she plans to see into fruition regardless of how that might affect Julian's plan. This mentality is mirrored in Julian who values his own plan over the plan of the Lord. Both Julian and Cassia are determined, hard-headed thinkers who don't give much thought to how their actions will affect those around them. Although Cassia's desire to keep Alexander safe is a good, motherly instinct, the reader can safely assume that Cassia's bristly opposition to Julian's plan will have an effect on its outcome. It is also safe for the reader to assume that by the end of the novel, both Julian and Cassia will realize the futility of trying to control one's own destiny, and both will give in to the power of love - whether romantic or spiritual love, and the trust that comes along with it.

Starting with Chapter 27 and the execution of Julian's plans, the chapters become much shorter, averaging 3 - 5 pages, adding to the frantic pace of the novel. As the reader likely expected, Julian's plan does not work as he planned, and is fraught with unexpected complications. The most notable event to take place during the mission is the strange interaction between Hagiru and Bethea. When Bethea enters the room, Hagiru seems to suck the life from her, and it appears that her own dark power grows with this new force. After gathering strength from Bethea, Hagiru is able to see through Julian's rouse, and expose him for what he truly is. She calls for the boy to be brought to her immediately, calling for the palace guards to chase him down. It is also interesting to note that Cassia feels the strong dark power of the palace, and notes that while Julian is inside, her sixth-sense, the connectedness she feels to Julian's soul, is severed. "Somehow that palace could swallow people, and it was as though [Julian] had disappeared into the underworld when he entered, lost to her" (Page 207). It is clear that Higley is referencing the dark power of Satan, or evil, in the palace that threatens the spiritual - Christian - connection between Cassia, Julian, and their God. This power is what Julian's prayers protected Cassia from during their initial visit, and is likely what passes between Hagiru and Bethea in the throne room. The other unexpected complication to arise is the introduction of the Roman guards who have clearly come to overtake Petra.



# Chapters 31 - 35

## Chapters 31 - 35 Summary

**Julian:** In the throne room, Julian tries to throw off the guards that hold him, as Queen Hagiru shouts curses upon him. Hagiru promises that the god of Petra, Dushara, will not be dethroned by Julian's One God. She calls for Alexander to be brought to her, and when he arrives, his face lights up and he calls Julian's name. Feeling a new sense of strength, Julian returns to the streets to regroup the church. Outside, however, with the news that Marta has died at the hands of the palace guards, depression sets in and Julian feels hopeless, as though all is lost. He does not go to regroup the church, but wanders the streets, ending back at the tombs where he works each day. He starts work on his latest assignment, violently smashing his tools into the rocks, and is shocked when he turns to see that Malik, a very old man, has climbed up the rock face to speak with him. Emotions pouring out of him, Julian confides in Malik his shame at not being able to save his loved ones in Rome, and his desperation knowing that he will lose his loved ones here in Petra as well. When Malik tries to offer Julian words of comfort, Julian pushes the old man away, silencing him.

**Cassia:** Meanwhile, Cassia snaps, as if from sleep, to realize that the palace guards are circling around her. Two guards lunge at her, and she pulls the dagger from her thigh, slashing one of the guards across the arm. They threaten to beat or kill Cassia, but their plans are interrupted by another slave with a message from Hagiru: the queen is demanding that Cassia be brought to her at once. The queen laughs when she sees that state of Cassia and promises that her son will be dead by tomorrow, and that there is nothing Cassia can do to stop her. She plans to kill Cassia then and there, but an urgent message from a servant, informing her that the king's health has taken a turn, causes her to rush off, ordering Cassia to be locked in the dungeon until she can return. In the dungeon, Cassia reaches her lowest emotional state, and fears all is lost. She can do nothing from inside this cell except await death. The pain in her arm, which is likely broken, is so terrible she blacks out. During her unconscious state, Cassia has a vision of herself walking with Jesus Christ along a riverbank. The Lord tells Cassia that she has reached the truth. His advice to Cassia is, "You must find the love you seek before you can love others from your strength. And you must love from strength, not from need" (Page 233). When she awakens, she feels the power of the Lord with her, and she knows that all is not lost.

**Malik:** After his disastrous meeting with Julian on the rock face, a dejected Malik struggles to come to terms with God's plan. He knows that the Lord desires Malik to leave his Petran church in the hands of Julian, but Julian is so young, so angry, and seemingly so unable to trust in the Lord. Like the other strong characters in the novel, even Malik's faith in God's plan falters, and he wonders what will become of Cassia, Alexander, and the church in Petra. He feels friendless and alone, bringing out his anger in shouts against God. And then a vision strikes him: Malik turns to see the High Place where Hagiru performs her sacrifices bursting open like the mouth of a volcano. God



promises that it is here that his power will be shown. Malik feels like a fool for doubting in the Lord, and knows that his divine love and promise to protect his people will reign supreme when the battle between Heaven and Hell is forged tomorrow evening. He runs through the streets, collecting his flock of believers, with a renewed sense of urgency for the cause. The two that he cannot find are Cassia and Julian. He knows not where they are, and he begins to worry that something terrible has befallen them.

## Chapters 31 - 35 Analysis

All three of the novel's main characters, Cassia, Julian, and Malik have their faith tested in this section of the story, and each of the characters are met with despair and seeming aloneness. In this section, both Cassia and Malik have intimate conversations with God, and visions from Jesus Christ that bring them a sense of hope and joy.

The main turning point in this short section of the novel is Cassia's spiritual awakening in the dungeon. At first, Cassia is completely distraught, realizing that it was her selfishness, not her strength, that has found her in the queen's dungeon. Had she trusted in Julian, and his love for her, she would be safe in his arms now, not facing death at the hands of an evil queen. She also realizes that had she heeded to Julian's wishes, Alexander would have a better chance at survival. If she were free in the streets, she would be able to formulate a new plan to save him before the harvest festival the next night. Imprisoned, she is useless to him. Despair sets in, and Cassia has a vision of walking along a riverbed with Jesus Christ. He can see deep into Cassia's soul and yet, He does not judge her. Love emanates from within Him, and Cassia feels truly accepted for the first time. He tells Cassia that she doesn't need to fight for love any longer; love has found her. Christ may be referencing the love Julian feels for Cassia, but it is more likely that He is referring to the eternal love of Jesus Christ, should Cassia choose to accept it. Because Malik and Cassia's faith emerged much stronger at the end of their tests, the reader can safely assume that Julian will also emerge with a renewed spirit.





# Chapters 36 - 40

## Chapters 36 - 40 Summary

**Cassia:** Cassia is filled with a new strength after her vision from God. Although she still feels powerless, she is no longer desperate, trusting that God will take care of her and her son. She longs to find Julian and declare her love for him, and to tell him that she has met his Jesus. As she thinks of this, the dungeon door scrapes open and Bethea appears in the torchlight. Unsure why Bethea is here, Cassia braces herself for a fight. But Bethea has come to help save Alexander. It is clear that during her time raising the boy, she has developed feelings for him and wants to save him nearly as desperately as Cassia does. She is too afraid to stand up to Hagiru, but she manages to help Cassia escape from the dungeon and out of the palace walls without being detected. As soon as she is safe outside the palace, Cassia rushes to the market and buys the fastest horse she can afford. She takes off at full speed through the desert, searching for the Roman encampments, knowing they must lie just outside the city's borders. When she reaches the hidden camp, the Roman soldiers refuse to let her in, but one soldier, Decimus, recognizes Cassia from the storage room in the palace. He allows Cassia to enter the camp and takes her to the Roman leader, Commander Corvinus. With Commander Corvinus, Cassia devises a plot that would exchange rule over Petra in exchange for the safe return of her son, the crowned prince of Petra, to her.

**Julian:** Meanwhile, Julian climbs to the top of The High Place, where the sacrifice is set to take place the next evening, in search of some solitude. Instead of solitude, Julian finds that he has simply placed himself nearer to God, and can thus hear his voice more clearly. He is overwhelmed and distraught, wanting nothing more than to be a good leader for the church of Petra and to have a life with Cassia and Alexander, but he does not see how any of this is possible anymore. When the voice of God comes to him, it simply says, "You are My dear son." Julian is deeply moved that God does not make demands of his leadership, or mention his successes. He simply reaffirms His love for Julian, regardless of what happens, he is God's child. As Julian climbs down from The High Place, he rests his palm on one of the large obelisks, a djinn stone, and is nearly knocked down by the powerful voice of Dushara. The evil spirits worms his way into Julian's soul, threatening to throw him off the mountainside. Through prayer and determination, Julian manages to climb safely down the hill, free himself of the demon possession, and formulate a new plan to save Petra from the dark forces that threaten to overtake it.

## Chapters 36 - 40 Analysis

Bethea's decision to come to Cassia's aid is not explained except to suggest that Bethea has developed feelings for Alexander, loving him as the son she never had. It is clear that Bethea does not love or respect Queen Hagiru, but she is too afraid to stand up to her. It is interesting to note that Bethea chose to stay in Petra all these years



because she truly believed that Aretas would return one day. As his wife, she was required to wait for him even though she didn't love him. Aretas' control over Bethea was as strong, if not stronger, than his control over Cassia had been, and the two women bond over their mutual victimization and prospective freedom.

As soon as Cassia is free, she somehow manages to find the hidden Roman camp outside the city gates. Some readers may complain that the novel begins to lose some of its believability at this stage. Many things seem to happen randomly - Cassia peacefully meeting the Roman guard in the palace storage closet, the same guard who happens to be guarding the gate when she arrives, and the same guard who is close enough to the Commander to give Cassia a meeting with him. Later, it will be revealed that this guard is also Julian's long-lost brother. While the events of the plot begin to stretch the reader's suspension-of-belief, Higley explains away all the unbelievable events as part of God's plan. While the narrative is built on God moving mountains for his faithful believers, the perfect circumstances in which many of these frayed events come together may be tying up the story too neatly for some readers, and they may feel that the divine intervention plays too large a part in the story's ending. It is a bit like a magician waving a magic wand to make everything perfect again, rendering many of the character's actions, emotional drive, and tenacious spirits meaningless. Nevertheless, Cassia makes her way to Commander Corvinus and makes an exchange with him: once her son has been safely returned to her, Alexander will be named ruler of Petra. Because he is too young to rule, Cassia will rule as his regent, and she promises to peacefully hand over the city of Petra to the Romans who would have taken it anyway, but likely in a much more violent and bloody fashion. The only reason why this plan works is because King Rabbel is dead. Cassia learned this from Bethea during their escape, and Queen Hagiru is now desperate to do away with Alexander. Soon, the city will learn of the King's death, and will likely not hand over power to Obadas - and thus Hagiru as his regent - while Alexander, who is older, is still alive.

Meanwhile, Julian comes face-to-face with the evil forces of Dushara, and formulates a new plan to rid Petra of the evil that threatens to overtake the city. Before Julian's experience with the devil, he reaches his lowest emotional state - the belly of the whale - in which he doubts that he will ever amount to anything. As expected, God speaks to Julian, assuring him that He loves him, and that Julian will have everything he desires so long as he succumbs to God's plan.



# Chapters 41 - 44

## Chapters 41 - 44 Summary

In the morning, Cassia and ten of Corvinus' best guards take off to the palace to rescue Alexander and kill Hagiru. As they ride through the desert, they are attacked by a band of marauders. At first, Cassia thinks the bandits want only to steal their weapons and money, but then she realizes that they have not come to rob them, they have been sent by the queen to kill her. The Roman guards manage to kill all the attackers but one, who flees toward the palace, presumably to inform Hagiru that Cassia is not working alone. The guards are wary to enter the palace today, since they will be expected, and ten Roman guards would never be able to overtake an entire palace army. They turn back to camp, but Cassia is determined - she must reach the palace today or all hope of saving Alexander is lost. She gallops ahead alone, with no idea how she will save her son without the help of the Roman guards. With nowhere else to go, once she is certain that she is not being followed, Cassia makes her way to Malik's home where the entire church congregation is waiting. Julian is in front of the crowd giving an impassioned speech, when his eyes fall on her. The entire congregation runs toward Cassia, embracing her with love, before giving her time alone with Julian. Cassia is extremely nervous, but tells Julian how she feels about him. She is shocked when he looks at her coldly and says that she will always have his friendly love, but he has tied himself to the church now, and can see no other future for himself than as the church's leader. Cassia falls asleep in Malik's bed, heartbroken.

A few hours later, Malik wakes Cassia telling her that "it is time." The sun has set, which means the sacrifice is only a few hours away. Cassia still has no plan, and she feels frightened and alone, but Malik assures Cassia that Jesus Christ is always walking by her side. Yet even as he speaks, Cassia can see a flicker of fear in Malik's eyes. He confides in her that his time on earth is coming to a close. He knows that the Lord will be calling him home soon, and he fears leaving Earth. He knows that Julian will do well as the church's new leader, but it is actual death that he fears, the fear of the unknown. Cassia begins to weep, calling Malik the father she never had, and then the two prepare for battle. Cassia and the rest of the congregation make their way to the High Place, which is flooded with city dwellers that have come out to watch the sacrifice. This knowledge turns Cassia's stomach. She fights her way to the top of the mountain, where the altar is held, and comes face-to-face with Hagiru. Hagiru seems amused that Cassia believes she can overtake the queen here, at her own festival, and breaks out into laughter. She calls for Alexander to be brought out, hogtied like the sacrificial lamb he is.

## Chapters 41 - 44 Analysis

This section functions almost solely as preparation for the final, closing section of the novel. Cassia has reached Malik's home, again destitute, with nowhere else to turn. The



difference this time is that she has had her spiritual awakening and knows that she can rely on the powerful love of Jesus Christ to protect her and her son. Cassia attempts to speak to Julian about her feelings, wanting to apologize for treating him rudely earlier, but Julian is not interested in Cassia's apology. After his experience on the mountain, he has decided to dedicate himself fully to the church, and he cannot be with Cassia if she is a non-believer. Cassia is so disheartened by Julian's cold demeanor that she does not have the chance to tell him that she has met his Jesus, and that she too is a believer. Going their separate ways to fight the same battle, Cassia and Julian separate in the morning to take on the battle against evil - Cassia to save her son, and Julian to save the souls of Petra.



# Chapters 45 - 51

## Chapters 45 - 51 Summary

Julian: Julian leads the congregation to the center of the crowd and is overwhelmed by a feeling of grief. There are so many lost souls in Petra, and he knows now that it is his job to save as many of these souls as he can. He wants to use the Lord's power today, which will surely be exposed during the battle between Heaven and Hell, to bring more people of Petra to the truth. The congregation circles, joining hands in prayer, asking for divine protection over Cassia and Alexander, and to help rid Petra of the evil demon spirits that threaten to overtake it. As they pray, the church can feel the mighty opposition of the underworld, and can see the demons, like dark shadows, creeping toward them, hissing and spitting curses. The demons begin possessing the people of Petra, causing them to pull out their hair, claw at their own skin, and throw themselves from the side of the mountain. In the fray, one of the possessed Petrans attacks Malik, stabbing him with a knife, hissing with the venomous voice of a demon that, "You are nothing here!" (Page 309). Malik can hear the Lord's music, and see the host of heavenly angels that have descended to protect the believers during the fight. As he bleeds out on the rock face, he knows that now is his time to say goodbye. Julian runs to Malik's side and stays with the old man until he passes. He feels the heat of Malik's body, the same heat that healed Cassia's shoulder, course through him, like fire through his fingertips, and speaks to the people in the words of God. The words fill his heart and mouth, and Julian knows they are not his own. He shouts, "On every side there is tribulation, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. We carry in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed" (Page 316).

Cassia: Meanwhile, Hagiru taunts Cassia, saying that she is powerless to stop what is about to happen. She shoves Alexander onto the sacrificial altar and draws her dagger to slice through Alexander's neck. The priest objects to the queen's presumption, arguing that it must be the priest who kills the sacrificial beast, but the queen is determined to do this on her own. From the shadows, Obadas shouts for his mother to Do it! Hagiru smirks at Cassia, commenting on her son's powerful voice, the voice of a future king. When Cassia tries to lunge for Hagiru's dagger, the queen turns it on Cassia, sending a demon to possess Cassia. Cassia feels insects crawling through her mind, biting her thoughts, chewing on her emotions. She clutches her head to stop the voices which hiss and snarl, commanding her to throw herself off the mountain. Just then, the angels of Heaven descend on the mountain and bright light casts the demon from inside Cassia's head. Hagiru drops her dagger, and Cassia wastes no time snatching it off the ground and cutting Alexander free of the ropes that bind him. He smiles when he sees Cassia, even laughs, saying he was never afraid because the angels surrounding Cassia told him there was nothing to fear. The Roman soldiers arrive at just this moment, and Hagiru, who has picked the dagger up from where Cassia left it next to the altar, lunges at them. The Roman soldiers have no choice but to impale Hagiru with their swords, killing her. She slumps onto the altar, still clutching a



torch, and immediately sets it ablaze, engulfing her body in flames. Decimus turns to the crowd below and spots Julian. He shouts his name, and Cassia realizes the two know each other.

In the moments that follow, Cassia, Alexander, and the rest of the church climb down from the mountainside. Decimus and Julian embrace as the long-lost brothers that they are. A shocked Cassia wants to run to Julian, but she knows that he has no romantic feelings for her any longer. She makes her way to the palace with Commander Corvinus to sign the rights to Petra over to him. After, Decimus sits down with Julian to discuss all that has happened in their lives over the past years. Decimus left Rome because he could not align himself with his parents' religion: Christianity. He has been a life-long unbeliever, but after witnessing the events on the mountainside, he has reconsidered and wants to align himself with Jesus Christ. Malik's home fills with all the new believers, and when Cassia returns from the palace, her heart is warmed to see Julian at his rightful place in front of the crowd, leading them in a sermon. When he is finished preaching, Julian pulls Cassia into Malik's side bedroom. Without wasting any time, she tells Julian that she has met his Jesus, that she is open to love and that she wants to love no one else but Julian. Julian realizes he had been rash with Cassia earlier and embraces her as a lover. Together, they turn to face the congregation. Julian notes that there are many newcomers to the church, many converts who will need much spiritual guidance. With Julian's arm wrapped tightly around her waist, Cassia smiles and says, "We will love them all, Julian. In the strength of God, we will love them all" (Page 328).

## Chapters 45 - 51 Analysis

The final section of the novel focuses primarily on the battle between good and evil, Heaven and Hell. Although most readers will have been able to guess the outcome of the battle from early on, it is still an exciting read. Malik's death may come as a surprise to some readers even though he has been hinting that his time is drawing near throughout most of the novel. In Christian allegorical writing, one of the key elements to a Christ story is a sacrificial lamb. The novel was set up to use Alexander as that sacrificial lamb - the one who gives up his life to save those he loves - but instead, it was Malik who died in the battle against evil. Critics may argue that Malik's death was not a true sacrifice since he was very old and was emotionally prepared to die. While Malik's death may have been a weak symbol for Christ, this is likely the theme Higley was attempting to elicit when crafting the battle scenes. Likewise, Hagiru is unwittingly offered up as a sacrifice to the gods of the Underworld when she accidentally lights herself on fire at the sacrificial altar. There should be no question that if Malik went to Heaven, Hagiru went to Hell. This can be seen in the symbols surrounding the two characters' deaths: when Malik dies, he is surrounded by the light of the heavenly hosts who have descended from Heaven, and he hears God's music in his ears. Hagiru, on the other hand, is surrounded by shadowy demons and fire. In Malik's death, there are references to other great prophets called to Heaven in the Bible. Malik's death on a mountainside is no coincidence, as God called home many of his great prophets this way: Moses, for example, died atop Mount Nebo, and Aaron also died in the mountains

of Petra. Higley is clearly drawing strong parallels between Malik and the most famous biblical prophets.

The duration of the battle happens in a matter of moments, with many Old Testament images of possessed spirits and Revelatory images of the heavenly hosts, demons among man, and the sulfurous smell of Satan. It should come as no surprise to the reader that Cassia - who symbolizes good - is victorious in the end, and that she and Julian end up happily ever after. The overarching message of the novel is that if you trust in the Lord, he will make your path straight. In true biblical fashion, at the end of the novel, those who were faithful to Jesus Christ ended up happy, and those who turned against him ended up dead.





# Characters

## Cassia

Cassia is a fiery, single mother who will stop at nothing to protect her beloved son Alexander from falling into the evil clutches of Queen Hagiru in Petra. When Cassia is living in Damascus with her husband Aretas, she is the victim of violent spousal abuse. Her husband is a bandit, making his living off swindling traders, constantly putting himself, Cassia, and their young son, Alexander in danger with his schemes. Cassia had long planned on running away from Aretas, but she had nowhere to run, no family of her own, and no knowledge of Aretas' mysterious family in Petra. When Aretas is killed by some of the traders he scammed, however, Cassia has no choice but to pack up what few belongings she has and seek solace with Aretas' family in Petra. Although she knows nothing about these people, she hopes they will have compassion on her young son and take them in. When Cassia arrives in Petra, however, she discovers that her son, Alexander, is the crowned prince of the city and is next in line to inherit the throne. Cassia's arrival in Petra badly damages Queen Hagiru - King Rabbel's second wife's - plans to rule the city, so she makes it her personal mission to see both Alexander and his mother killed. With no one to turn to, Cassia is adopted into the home of a kindly old man, Malik, and his congregation of Christian believers. They embrace Cassia with love and warmth, doing everything they can to protect Alexander from the queen's evil clutches, even going so far as to risk their lives to save him. While she is living in Petra, working on the plan to save her son, Cassia meets and falls in love with a Roman named Julian who is being primed to take over the church in Petra. Because she has a history of being hurt by men, Cassia is wary of Julian's love and does everything she can to build a wall between them. With the help of Malik, Julian, and the rest of the church in Petra, Cassia exacts a plan against Queen Hagiru but it goes terribly wrong. While lying in the palace dungeon awaiting death, Cassia has a vision of the Lord Jesus Christ walking alongside her at a riverbank. After this moment, Cassia is able to dedicate herself fully to the beliefs of Christianity, and has a renewed sense of love and trust. Through this trust, and with the help of Jesus Christ, Cassia is able to overthrow the evil queen, rescue her son, save Petra from the encroaching Romans, and live happily ever after with Julian.

## Julian

Julian is a Roman citizen who flees the city after his friends and fiancé are fed to hungry lions at the amphitheatre in the center of the city. This group of individuals has been discovered to be Christians, and the Roman government has ordered their deaths in the arena, mauled to death by lions. Julian, whose father is a powerful Christian senator, should have been executed along with his friends, but his family name saved his life. When Julian fails to save his friends, and when he realizes that his actions have brought disgrace and danger to his family, he runs away from Rome to the city of Petra. In Petra, Julian hopes to work quietly and keep himself out of trouble, but he is discovered





by the old man, Malik, who seems determined to pull Julian into his fray of Christian followers. In time, it is revealed that Julian, too, is a Christian and Malik believes it is Julian who has been destined to lead the church in Petra. Julian is weary of undertaking this task, especially when he learns that it will separate him from the woman he has fallen in love with, Cassia. Julian pours his heart out to Cassia, confessing his love to her, but because of her fears of being controlled by men, Cassia rebukes him, saying she could never love him. Emotionally battered, Julian swears off love - both romantic and spiritual - and his faith is tested. Like many other characters in the novel, Julian receives a vision from the Lord that renews his faith, giving him enough strength the wage battle against Hell in the name of Heaven. When he subscribes to the power of the Lord, Julian is able to successfully win the battle against evil in Petra, help save Alexander's life, properly lead the church in Petra, and live happily ever after with Cassia.

## Alexander

Alexander is Cassia and Aretas' son, and the crowned prince of Petra. Growing up, Alexander had no idea that he came from a royal family, but when he and his mother moved to Petra, he became the prized token in a battle against good and evil, Heaven and Hell.

## Ariella

Ariella is Julian's mother, the wife of a Roman senator, and a secret Christian. Ariella proves to be a beacon of light and support for Julian in the wake of his fiancé Vita's death, but Julian knows that his erratic behavior could bring danger to his beloved mother, so it is for her sake that he runs away to Petra.

## Aretas

Aretas is Cassia's husband and the crowned prince of Petra. Aretas escaped royal life in Petra and fled to Rome where he met Cassia, married her, and raised their son Alexander. Aretas worked as a trader, selling myrrh diluted with alabaster powder. Aretas regularly got into fights with traders once they realized that Aretas was swindling them, and one such encounter led to Aretas' death. Cassia did little to save her husband because he was terribly abusive - both physically and verbally - and she had been hoping to leave him soon anyway.

## Malik

Malik is the old man and prophet of Petra's Christian community. Malik is described as having a lean frame, gray hair, and a deeply lined face. Most of the attention on Malik's physicality is used describing his eyes, which seem to burrow into people's souls, almost reading their thoughts and desires. When Malik isn't working as a healer, he is



leading the people of Petra toward Jesus Christ, whom Malik believes is the true savior. It is Malik who trains Julian to take over the church in Petra when he dies.

## Bethea

Bethea was Aretas' first wife, before he met Cassia. Bethea is described by Hagiru as being whining, bored, pathetic, and useless. She has dark hair, and a somewhat dull personality when Cassia first meets her. Because Bethea never bore Aretas a child, she is powerless in the royal court, but Hagiru keeps her around as something like a pet. When Alexander comes to live in the castle, he does so under Bethea's supervision, although she likely reports everything back to Hagiru. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that Bethea also loves young Alexander, and would do anything to save him from death at Hagiru's hand. She is integral in saving Cassia from death in the dungeons and eventually helping her rescue Alexander from the evil queen.

## Obadas

Obadas is Queen Hagiru's only child, a son. Hagiru had always hoped that Obadas - a spoiled and naughty child - would inherit the throne and the power that comes along with royal rule, but this plan is interrupted with the introduction of Alexander into their lives. Perhaps jealous of King Rabbel's affection toward Alexander, Obadas acts out by bullying Alexander.

## King Rabbel

King Rabbel is the king over all of Nabatea. At the time of the novel's setting, he is an old and ill man, wrapped completely around his second wife Hagiru's finger. There are moments in which Rabbel shows sympathy for Cassia and her situation, but he is powerless to stop Hagiru. In the end, Rabbel dies as weak and useless a character as he was at the beginning of the novel.

## Yehosef

Yehosef is an old gladiator whom Cassia hired to teach her how to fight. Yehosef is an old man with long, gray hair and a penchant for saving Cassia when her life depends on it most. First, Yehosef saved Cassia from a soldier sent by the queen to kill her. Then, Yehosef frees Cassia and her friends when they are arrested for their religious beliefs and threatened to be fed to panthers for the city's entertainment.

## Zeta

Zeta is Cassia's first friend in Petra, and a close friend of Malik. While Cassia lives in Petra, she stays with Zeta, who feeds, clothes, and takes care of her.



## Talya

Talya is Zeta's daughter and fellow follower of The Way. When Julian's plan calls for the congregation to seek out work in the palace, Talya is lucky enough to be hired as Alexander's nanny. Despite Talya's close placement to Alexander, Julian's plan fails, and Talya is overwhelmed with grief.

## Decimus

Decimus is a Roman soldier and spy whom Cassia meets while hiding out in the palace storage closet during Alexander's attempted escape. Although he is rough with Cassia, he chooses not to kill her because she is a woman. When Cassia arrives at the Roman encampment in search of their leader, it is Decimus who brings Cassia to the commander. Later, it is revealed that Decimus is also Julian's long-lost brother.

## Commander Colvinus

Commander Colvinus is the leader of the Roman army and their quest to overtake Petra. He is surprised to meet the fiery young mother who promises to peacefully hand Petra over to him in exchange for her son's safe removal from the palace, but he chooses to trust her and agree to her plan.

## Queen Hagiru

Queen Hagiru is the second wife of King Rabbal. She is an evil queen who has aligned herself with the god of the Underworld, Dushara, to ensure that her son, Obadas, becomes king. Hagiru will stop at nothing to ensure her son's rule over Petra, but her plans for power are destroyed when Cassia arrives in Petra, bringing with her the true heir to the throne, Alexander. Hagiru concocts a devilish plan to sacrifice Alexander to Dushara and to have Cassia killed. In the end, it is Hagiru who is killed as a sacrifice, and Alexander takes his rightful place on the throne over Petra.



## Objects/Places

### The Flavian Amphitheatre

The Flavian Amphitheatre is where Julian's friends and his fiancé, Vita, were fed to the lions in front of a cheering audience for being Christians. Julian should have been executed along with them, but his position in society saved him, although he was overcome with guilt for living.

### The Nymphaeum

The Nymphaeum is a fountain in the center of Petra where people come from all around the city to collect the day's water. It is also where much of the city gossiping takes place. It is at the Nymphaeum that Cassia first meets Julian, who is wooing the crowd by removing a blockage to the fountain's flow. It is also here that Cassia learns that Alexander is to be sacrificed by the jealous and evil queen Hagiru.

### The Yellow Silk Dress

The yellow silk dress is a symbol of Aretas' control over Cassia's life. While she was living with Aretas, he would only allow Cassia to wear the dress when they were executing one of his schemes. When Cassia ran away from Aretas to Petra, she took the dress with her as a sign of her independence from him - she could wear the dress whenever she pleased now. When Queen Hagiru took Alexander from Cassia, however, Cassia burned the yellow dress over a fire to symbolize a new start in her life; a life in which no one controlled her destiny but herself.

### The Way

The Way is the name for Christianity in the novel. Followers of The Way believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, a holy spirit coming to earth in the body of a man to make the ultimate sacrifice - his own life - in the place of his believers who would have otherwise been sacrificed to atone their own sins. In the novel, followers of The Way belong to the makeshift church led by Malik out of his home.

### Petra

Petra is the setting of the novel. The city of Petra itself is a historical city (6th century BC) found in Jordan. The city is carved almost completely out of the surrounding rock, and is a breathtaking display of architectural design and aquatic cultivation. The novel describes Petra as laying "within a sandstone gorge, cut into the mighty mountains of Arabia as though the finger of a god had carved a slit through the dark red stone and



hidden a city away" (Page 36). Almost all of the buildings and architecture have been carved straight into the rock face, casting the entire city in the red glow of the rock, and all of the architectural interiors to resemble caves, which they technically are. The city is in a constant state of being rebuilt, which is one of the reasons why Julian, a seasoned sculptor, is drawn to the city. Because of the city's secure place surrounded by tall rock, it is usually teeming with merchants and traders looking to unload their wares. Petra is located within the crossroads of the trade routes, the center of India and China, Egypt and Syria.

## Djinn Stones

The djinn stones that surround the palace are thought to house the spirits of dead gods. Hagiru has two large obelisk djinn stones placed at the top of The High Place where she performs her sacrifices. In one of these djinn stones, the evil powers of Dushara are stored.

## The Great House

The Great House is the meeting place of the Petran senate, for which Malik is a senator. This is also where Malik goes when he is feeling depressed, doubting in the plan of God. He shouts out to God that he is not yet ready to leave his church, and the Lord brings Malik a vision of what is to come, bringing peace to the old man.

## The High Place

The High Place is where Queen Hagiru makes her sacrifices to the dark god, Dushara. This is also where Alexander is meant to be sacrificed, and where the great battle between Heaven and Hell takes place.

## Dushara

Dushara is the god with which Hagiru regularly convenes when she needs assurance or guidance regarding her political control over Petra. Dushara is generally described as an evil spirit god, working for the dark underworld, which is likely why Hagiru, herself an evil queen, knows Dushara's black heart and hissing voice best.

## The Festival of Grain

The Festival of Grain is a harvest festival held every year in Petra to honor the gods of the fields by giving them a sacrifice of grain in the hopes of another successful year of farming. At this year's Festival of Grain, however, Hagiru plans to sacrifice Alexander to the gods in the hopes that their favor will protect Petra from the encroaching Romans who threaten to overtake the city.



# Themes

## Independence Versus Dependence

The main conflict with which both Cassia and Julian struggle is their sense of independence. For Cassia, this struggle for independence comes from a long history of abandonment and abuse at the hands of the men who were supposed to love her. After leaving Aretas, Cassia swears that she will never again be controlled by a man - neither real nor spiritual. For this reason, she struggles to understand her relationships with Julian and his Savior, Jesus Christ. Cassia has always relied only on herself, so it is difficult for her to trust a man she has only known for a few weeks, particularly when it comes to her most prized treasure: her only son. Cassia's inability to trust others and to release her control play a large role in Cassia's spiritual journey. When the novel opens, Cassia is a broken, destitute woman in dire need of help. She is emotionally closed-off, adamantly self-sufficient, and terribly frightened. She trusts no one but herself, mistaking her strong-will and desperation for strength. When Cassia is locked in the queen's dungeon, she has a vision of herself walking with Jesus Christ. In this vision, Christ tells Cassia that she must love out of strength, not out of need. This is Cassia's turning point. When she realizes that it is not strength but fear that has been propelling her all this time, Cassia is willing to give into the love of Jesus Christ and of Julian.

Likewise, Julian struggles with his control over God's plan for him in the church. Julian's resistance to God's wishes is similar to the Biblical character, Jonah. Jonah famously runs away from God's plan for him to lead a church in Nineveh, and sails away from the city on a large ship. In this biblical story, the Lord sends a huge storm to capsize the ship, throwing Jonah overboard and into the sea where he is swallowed by a whale - or another large fish, depending on the translation. After three days and three nights inside the belly of the whale - which symbolizes darkness, loss, and depression - the Lord orders the whale to vomit Jonah back up onto shore, where he realizes that he cannot run from God's plans, returns to Nineveh, and leads the church. The reader will see many similarities in Julian's story: It is clear that the Lord has asked Julian to be a leader in Rome, but he ran away to Petra. Now, the Lord is calling him to lead the church in Petra, but he wants to run from that responsibility as well. Although Julian is clearly a man of faith, he struggles with his own pride and desire to control his life his way. When Julian's plan to rescue Alexander fails, he feels that God has turned his back on him, and that perhaps he does not belong in the church. In time, Julian realizes that God would never leave or forsake him, and he promises to align himself with God's plan from then on out.

## The Struggle for Power

The struggle for power is at the center of the novel's conflict. Many of the characters are hungry for power, although they crave different facets of power. Julian, for example, clearly craves to have the respect of the Petran church, which could come only from his



power as a church leader. This desire for respect and power leads him to make many mistakes, mistakes that cause him to turn away from God's plan and to focus instead on his own wishes, bringing his own plans into fruition. Cassia longs for physical power and meets with Yehosef, the gladiator, to train in a way that will make her a dangerous fighter. The Romans are in constant search of power, overtaking cities and states in an attempt to expand their vast empire. But no character is as hungry for power as Hagiru. Hagiru's entire character is built on the pursuit of power at any cost. Hagiru's desire to rule over Petra takes her to the darkest shadows of the underworld as she aligns with the demons and evil gods that dwell there. First, Hagiru promises allegiance to Dushara if he will grant her a son. Then, Hagiru resorts to killing her husband to ensure her son's inheritance of the throne, and plots to kill an innocent boy who stands in the way of her rule over the city. In the end, Hagiru ends up friendless, without family, and completely powerless. Her desperation leads to her own demise and death. Likewise, the characters who rely on their own power, and their own struggle for power, are unhappy in their pursuit. In Petra, true happiness comes only from trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ, and submitting to his plans.

## The Power of Prayer

The reader first sees the power of prayer to the One God when Cassia visits King Rabbel to request Alexander's return. The entire time Cassia is with the king, Julian prays to his God with outstretched, upturned hands, as if he were forming a wall with his body and his words to protect Cassia from the evil in the palace. There are strong dark forces at work in the palace, although, for now, they only appear in the energy surrounding the building. Somehow, Julian's prayers to God seem to protect the two of them from feeling the full force of this evil, but his prayers are only strong enough to hold the power off for a short time. Through the power of prayer, Julian devises a plan to save Alexander from the evil queen, although it is not a successful plan, and it is through the power of prayer that many other events in the novel occur. While some events begin to stretch the reader's suspension-of-belief, Higley explains away all the unbelievable events as part of God's plan. While the narrative is built on God moving mountains for his faithful believers, the perfect circumstances in which many of these frayed events come together may be tying up the story too neatly for some readers, and they may feel that the divine intervention plays too large a part in the story's ending. It is a bit like a magician waving a magic wand to make everything perfect again, rendering many of the character's actions, emotional drive, and tenacious spirits meaningless.

The main action involving the power of prayer occurs in the novel's final battle scene. This scene conjures Revelatory images of the end of times, in which good and evil must battle it out to the end. The congregation circles, joining hands in prayer, asking for divine protection over Cassia and Alexander, and to help rid Petra of the evil demon spirits that threaten to overtake it. As they pray, the church can feel the mighty opposition of the underworld, and can see the demons, like dark shadows, creeping toward them, hissing and spitting curses. The demons begin possessing the people of Petra, causing them to pull out their hair, claw at their own skin, and throw themselves from the side of the mountain. The Lord hears the prayers of his faithful followers and



sends down his heavenly hosts to help in the battle against evil. The overarching message of the novel is that if you trust in the Lord, he will make your path straight. In true biblical fashion, at the end of the novel, those who were faithful to Jesus Christ ended up happy, and those who turned against him, ended up dead.





# Style

## Point of View

The novel is told in third-person limited omniscience narration from the revolving point-of-view of four different characters: Cassia, Julian, Malik, and Hagiru. In all the character's chapters, the narration is completely reliable. The modulating point-of-view is crucial to understanding the plot of the novel as a whole. The characters are all connected through a web of relationships, and all are tied together in the great battle between good and evil. Much of the characters' thoughts and plans occur simultaneously within their own heads. So while Cassia is planning to rescue her son from the queen, the queen is concocting plans to kill Cassia, and Julian is devising plans to protect her while Malik tries to sway Julian into a position of power within the church. Each of these aspects is vital to the plot overall, and the story would only work if the reader could slow down time and experience moments from multiple character's perspectives. The novel is divided equally between dialogue and exposition, with much of the exposition occurring within the thoughts of the characters, not from an external narrator. The descriptive passages work hard to conjure exciting images of the historic city Petra, and it is clear that T.L. Higley has researched her novel well and is comfortable incorporating historical information into a successful fiction book.

## Setting

This novel takes place in the city of Petra around the year 106 AD. The city of Petra itself is a historical city (6th century BC) found in Jordan. The city is carved almost completely out of the surrounding rock, and is a breathtaking display of architectural design and aquatic cultivation. The novel describes Petra as laying "within a sandstone gorge, cut into the mighty mountains of Arabia as though the finger of a god had carved a slit through the dark red stone and hidden a city away" (Page 36). Almost all of the buildings and architecture have been carved straight into the rock face, casting the entire city in the red glow of the rock, and all of the architectural interiors to resemble caves, which they technically are. The city is in a constant state of being rebuilt, which is one of the reasons why Julian, a seasoned sculptor, is drawn to the city. Because of the city's secure place surrounded by tall rock, it is usually teeming with merchants and traders looking to unload their wares. Petra is located within the crossroads of the trade routes, the center of India and China, Egypt and Syria. At the time of the novel's setting, organized religion was against the law of the state, because this government, along with many other governments at the time attributed free religious thought to anarchy. Christians were persecuted and even killed for their beliefs, which drew a large division between the palace and the city's religious people.



## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is easy and engaging for modern day readers. Completely straightforward, the few metaphors and analogies are almost strictly religious. This creates a dual understanding of the language. On one level, readers with a religious background will find greater depth to the story, particularly the passages that reference specific biblical stories or verses. The religious symbolism simply adds depth to the novel and having a religious background is certainly not needed to understand the novel, although the understanding will be relatively more superficial. It is clear that T.L. Higley hoped to market this novel to mainstream rather than niche Christian readers, and this shows in her language choices throughout. Perhaps Higley hoped that if her novel appealed to mainstream readers, her Christian messages would be heard by an unsuspecting readership. That said, there are many religious words and phrases used throughout the novel, particularly by Malik and Julian who are church leaders. Higley has skillfully created Cassia as a nonbeliever, so any questions the reader might have about Christianity are asked in-text by Cassia, who acts as a representative for the reader. In recreating a real historic city, Higley dedicated years of research to the culture, society, politics, and religious movements of the time. This research shows in Higley's writing, and the vivid world of historic Petra breathes life into the pages of the novel.

## Structure

Petra: City of Stone consists of 51 short chapters modulating between the experiences of Cassia, Julian, Malik, and Hagiru. The chapters tend to be very short and full of action. This pace propels the reader quickly through the novel, holding their breath with excitement the entire time. Often, chapters end on a cliffhanger moment, forcing the reader to turn the next page and start the next chapter. This intense action, combined with the very short chapter lengths may entice readers to read the entire novel in one or two sittings. The overall plot of the novel is somewhat complicated, relying heavily on character's back stories to understand their current motivations and actions. The main plot surrounds Cassia and her desire to rescue her son from the clutches of the evil queen who wants to sacrifice him. Intertwined with this is Cassia's spiritual journey, her reconciliation with love, her relationship with Julian, and her search of family and a home to settle down in. Meanwhile, there is a great war being waged between the two powers of the universe: good and evil. Malik heads the army for good, while Hagiru heads the battle for evil. At the same time, there is a battle for control over Petra, with the Roman army constantly encroaching on the city's borders, threatening to overtake it. Despite the novel's complicated plot, Higley ensures that the reader is never lost in the web of action. Almost all the actions are explained in great detail, both when they are happening, and afterward, with the characters ruminating on their motivations and the action's outcome.



## Quotes

"For more than anything else, more than grief, or fear or even shock, and even with all that was now unknown about their future, what Cassia felt was a sickening, betraying, yet welcome sort of relief" (Page 31).

"This is a special joy of ours. To feed and to care for the sick and strangers, even for the least of them. A special joy" (Page 51).

"Resentment and bitterness can live longer than even memory at times" (Page 56).

"At only six years old, he was still old enough to understand. She had kept the truth from him all his life. But today was a new beginning, and beginnings were sometimes painful" (Page 77).

"She had always thought Alexander was a gift from the gods, one they had mistakenly bestowed upon her, a weak and worthless slave girl who did not merit such a gift. And now Alexander would be loved and protected by royalty, and brought up to claim the kingship of Nabatea. The thought did not surprise her" (Page 88).

"They are devoted to each other, that is clear. And you have taught them well in the truth. But they are complacent. They are not ready for what is to come. You must show them how to be strong" (Page 97).

"God is faithful and will not leave His people bereft. Even now there is one among you who will be raised to lead" (Page 113).

"And he could feel the darkness. He had the strange sensation that he hovered over the two, arms outstretched like mighty wings, taking the brunt of the onslaught of evil, protecting them somehow, in some way far beyond his own ability" (Page 125).

"We must stand firm yet remain loving. Remember that it is by our love that they shall know we are His disciples. Love one another, and love them - he extended his hand outward to the city - pray for them and love them until they ask you why" (Page 149).

"Cassia cursed her own foolish need to belong, that constant frailty that had brought her to these people, and now into bondage" (Page 173).

"The truth, my child, always has enemies" (Page 180).

"You must first find the love you seek before you can love others from your strength. And you must love from strength, not from need" (Page 233).

"On every side there is tribulation, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed. We carry in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed" (Page 316).



## Topics for Discussion

Describe the setting of the city of Petra. How does the construction of the city - the fact that the entire city has been carved out of stone - affect the plot of the novel? In what ways does this setting provide a metaphor for the emotional struggles of the characters? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Both Cassia and Hagiru are very powerful women, but powerful in vastly different ways. Compare / contrast the power of these two women. Why do you think Higley chose to spar two women against each other in this novel? Through the exploration of these two characters, what do you think is the novel's overall message about women, their value in society, and their power to exact change? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Cassia and Hagiru both want what is best for their sons, but they go about ensuring their children's future in very different ways. First, compare / contrast the futures Cassia and Hagiru envision for their sons. How do they go about ensuring this future for their children? Why is one successful while the other fails? What does this comparison tell you about the power of motherly love? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Why does Cassia struggle to accept a romantic relationship with Julian? What parts of Cassia's past deter her from believing in love? What moment in the novel would you consider to be Cassia's turning point? Why? How does this moment affect Cassia's ability to love and be loved? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Throughout the novel, Higley references many biblical stories, characters, and morals. If you have a religious background, how does this information affect your understanding of the novel? If you do not have a Christian background, do you think you've missed out on important aspects of the novel? What affect do the biblical references have on your understanding of the novel as a whole? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe Malik's relationship with the church of Petra. Why is the church so important to him? As a leader, how is he similar to Julian? How is he different? Do you think Julian will make a better or worse leader for the church of Petra? Why? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What role do the children play in the overall plot of the novel? Are they simply pawns in the plans of the adults, or do they symbolize something deeper in the novel's overall message? What is it about the children's age, specifically, that gives greater meaning to their presence in the novel? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.



Describe the different battles - both personal and public - that take place in the novel. How do these battles interlink, supporting the overall plot of the novel, meaning, in what ways are these battles all the same? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.