

# THE SWORD

MAGNUS AND THE MYSTERY OF ROMANS

Marty  
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illustrated by  
Flavia  
Sorrentino

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## INTRODUCTION

**THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK** is to introduce grade-school children to Paul's letter to the Romans. Romans is the clearest, most complete, explanation of the gospel in the New Testament. John Piper calls it "the greatest letter ever written," and he compares its theological insight to Mount Everest.

Why write a book for children that is so steeped in God's deepest truths—truths that adults can hardly begin to understand? The gospel is like the ocean. Children can safely wade in the shallows of the broken waves that lap the sand, even while our most accomplished scientists have still to plumb the ocean's greatest depths. Yet the foamy inches of seawater that roll across the shore provide the same critical nutrients for life. Water an inch deep is just as wet as the water in the darkest trenches. The water of the gospel, though we step but ankle deep, has the power to transform the heart and provide life-transforming truth for the soul.

To draw in children and keep them reading, a fictional adventure is woven alongside the study of Romans.

*The Sword* is designed to be read alongside your Bible. A Bible study section follows each chapter of the fictional story. Read the assigned Scripture verses, followed by the short commentary which explains key truths from the Bible passage for the day. While your children may be eager to move through the study quickly to return to the fictional story, give the study sufficient time.

The main goal of *The Sword* is to help children understand the sobering bad news of sin so that they better understand the good news of our gospel rescue through the cross of Christ. Like many books in Scripture, Paul's letter to the Romans carries several more mature themes. These topics, defining and explaining circumcision, for example, are left to parents.

Children in a range of ages can appreciate *The Sword*. The text is written for older grade-school children, but the illustrations will help younger students follow along as their parents read and assist them in uncovering the mystery of the swords.

Many blessings to your family as you begin this journey along the Romans Road, up the theological foothills to the pinnacle of Paul's Mount Everest.



## THE JOURNAL

**MY PARENTS OFTEN SAY** that choices have consequences. Sometimes they're positive, and other times they're negative. But God has a way of using even my mistakes for my good.

This was particularly true one chilly morning during apple harvest when I rose early and did something I'd soon regret.

I should have ignored the call I heard from the ancient wooden chest that sat atop the fireplace mantel. I should have left it alone, but I couldn't. While silently peering over my shoulder to ensure no one else was watching, I reached for it. I did not want to get caught. Temptation is like that. It grips you with desire so strong that you can hardly silence it. And, rather than running the other way, I fell right in—dismissing the reality of what might happen next.

Standing on a pile of books on my tiptoes, I could almost reach the chest on the mantel. My fingernails scraped the grain of the bottom, but

it wouldn't budge. *Gotta jump.* So I did. Like a dog jumps to snatch a treat, I sprang and leapt into the air. I thrust my hand upward to knock the chest outward. The chest lurched and then landed with a loud thump. *One more try,* I reasoned. Any more thumps would surely wake someone. The chest now hung over the edge of the mantel. Thump!—the loudest yet—sounded through the dense wood. The chest lurched over the edge.

"Brant!" Katana shouted, hands on hips. A jag of fear coursed through my body.

Then, without warning, the corner of the falling chest stabbed my shoulder and tumbled down my arm. On its way to the floor, the lid flew open. A wooden sword shot out and skidded across the floor. It spun round and round before stopping with the point directly at me, as if accusing me. The old chest lay beside it.

"Dad is going to kill you!" Katana said.

“Shhh!” I said as I scooped the sword off the floor. I noticed then that the chest’s bottom panel had detached.

“What’s going on down there?” Mom called from upstairs.

“Help me get it back up,” I hissed, “before Mom comes down!” Katana was a head taller and a ton bossier.

“You broke it,” Katana said, handing me the bottom panel.

“Phew, it’s okay. The bottom just popped off,” I announced after checking for any sign of damage.

“Look!” Katana said while holding the chest open.

A hidden cavity lay open in the bottom of the chest, exposing an age-old book.

The master bedroom door opened with a click, then a squeak. “Quiet, your father is sleeping,” Mom’s whisper scolded from the second floor. *Now we are in trouble*, I thought. Then footsteps on creaking stairs sounded a five-second warning.

“Quick! Put it back!” I pleaded, handing Katana the panel. She returned the false bottom to its place, closed the chest, and set it back on the mantel.

As Mom’s foot hit the last stair, Katana turned, thrust her shoulder into my gut, and tackled me. I shouted as I hit the oak floor. Katana’s full weight forced all the air from my lungs, leaving me

gasping. Her shoulder-length brown hair hung in my face.

“Now, how does *that* feel?” Katana said as Mom entered the room with her blonde hair reflecting the early morning sunshine beaming through a window.

“Hey! Enough wrestling,” Mom ordered. “Don’t you know what time it is? Your father is still sleeping!”

I gasped as I looked up. Katana winked at me, then stood up and backed away but didn’t say a word.

Mom took inventory of the room. She glanced at the floor, the fireplace, and then the mantel.

*Oh no!* I thought. The chest wasn’t centered on the mantel. I waited for her questions; Mom wasn’t buying the wrestling ruse.

“If the two of you want to run around and make noise, do it outside,” said Mom. “Brant, comb your hair first. And stay in the backyard. The workers are busy with the first of the harvest.” She then turned toward the stairs, adding, “Remember: quiet! I’m going back upstairs.”

“Yes, we understand,” I replied. *Maybe she didn’t notice*. Katana and I waited for the squeak of the wooden door to signal all clear.

“Thanks for tackling me, I think,” I said. “We need to get that chest back down and get that book.”





“What, are you crazy? You want to get us grounded? Mom could tell the chest was out of place,” Katana said as she returned to the fireplace. She adjusted the chest an inch to the right and squared it with the mantel.

“We need to get that book! I’m getting a chair . . .”

Then, like a magician unveils a bouquet of flowers, Katana presented the book from behind her back and exclaimed, “Ta-da! To the tree house!”

Before I could get my wheels turning, Katana burst through the kitchen and out the back door. The wooden doorframe smacked the house, bounced, and slapped me in the face as I followed. I raced down the cobblestone path and across the lawn to the old apple tree where Katana stood waiting. Leaping onto the ladder attached to the tree trunk, I climbed up to the tree house. Katana followed.

Halfway up, I paused and glanced toward the house. The ivy-covered stone of our farmhouse gave way to the terracotta roof tile. It shone orange in the early morning sun. In the distance, rows of pruned apple trees stood like soldiers guarding our hideout. The workers looked like busy ants. I suddenly felt hungry. My fingers captured the biggest apple in reach and

snapped it from its branch in the overgrown shade tree. Our town, Thones, grew the best Reinette apples in France. I crunched on the apple as I finished the climb.

Once we were both up in the tree house, Katana released the trapdoor with a bang. Now we were safe; no one else could enter. I leaned back onto the tree trunk and gazed at the towering peaks of the Alps.

“Quit your daydreaming,” Katana said. She held the old book in her hands and read the cover aloud, *Gladius Gladiatoris*. Then she held it up for me to see.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It’s Latin. *Gladius* means sword, and *Gladiatoris* means ‘of the gladiator.’”

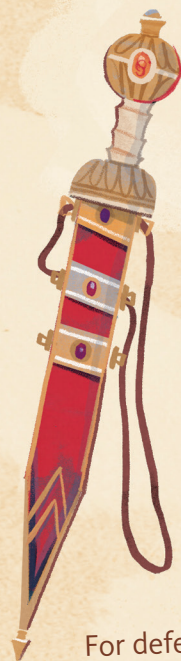
“The Gladiator’s Sword!” I said, putting the words together. Then I remembered the rudis. “The sword in the chest! That must mean the rudis in the chest is real, not some carved fake look-alike. Come on, open it and read it,” I urged. Katana moved so slowly that I wanted to grab the book from her, but I was afraid I’d tear it.

“Okay. Okay, see I’m opening it.”

After turning a blank page, Katana came to the introduction. She shifted a bit closer so I could read along.

To the Finder,

This book comes with a sacred charge. If you dare to read on, you will be held responsible for the truth written here. If, on the other hand, you return the book to its keep, you'll never discover the mystery of the three swords that mark my life's story.



The first sword is the bejeweled gladius, forged by my father but then stolen. I reclaimed it in my defeat of the renowned champion gladiator Nicabar. The second sword is the rudis, which granted my freedom from slavery and the games that threatened my life. Third and most precious is the Sword of Truth—not made of steel or pointed wood but breathed out by the very Spirit of God.

Though I defeated Nicabar in the arena and held the gladius in judgment above him, the crowd cheered for their champion, whose life was then spared by Emperor Claudius. From that day, Nicabar plotted revenge against me, eventually stealing back the gladius.

For defeating the champion, Claudius awarded me the rudis, granting me freedom from slavery and release from the games. However, without the funds to open a blacksmith shop to continue the trade of my youth, I enlisted in the Roman army. I deployed to Gaul, where I lived for some time in the mountainous eastern countryside, which I grew to love. After two years, Claudius granted citizenship to my entire legion. Though I wished to remain in Gaul, my service as a soldier took me away. My tribune sent our unit on special assignment to escort a dignitary to Lycia.



On my return trip to Rome, I met Paul, the prisoner who called himself an apostle of Christ Jesus. Paul and his centurion guard boarded our vessel as we set sail for Italy. We failed to reach our destination because we ran aground in Malta during a fierce storm and were forced to abandon ship. Amazingly, everyone survived. Eventually I went to Rome, where I took an assignment with the Praetorian cohort to guard a prisoner under house arrest. This prisoner, it turned out, was Paul, the very same apostle I had met earlier.



Paul's story captivated me. He knew this and offered me a parchment scroll to read. His companion, Aristarchus, led me through a study of the scroll, a letter Paul first wrote to the Christians in Rome. He helped me translate a copy to keep. The truth it contained pierced my heart like a sword. Through its reading, I gained my eternal freedom. The book you now hold includes the notes of my study.

Your quest is to examine Paul's letter to the Romans and my notes given to you within the pages of this journal. If you do this faithfully, you will unlock the mystery of the swords.

Your Servant,

*Magnus*

Katana looked up from the book and said, “We must show this to Dad.”

“No! Not yet. Let’s read a little more,” I begged, intrigued by the mystery. “We just got started. Besides, he’s sleeping in.”

“Okay, we’ll read through the first section, but that’s all. Then we need to tell Dad. I think we’re going to need his help.”

“Okay,” I agreed. Katana was right. If anyone could solve the mystery of the swords, Dad could.

As we journeyed through the stories of Paul’s life, shipwreck, and voyage to Rome, time escaped us. When we read the last sentence of the first section, we looked at each other wide-eyed. Katana closed the book and declared, “Let’s go. It’s time.”

“But what if we get in trouble?” I replied.

“Look, we can’t escape the consequences of going into the chest. But finding this journal should make a difference. Dad loves old things, and this journal is about as ancient as they come,” Katana said.

I thought Katana was pretty wise for being just a year and a half older. “Could we leave out the part about dropping the chest?”

“If Dad asks how we came upon the journal, we’ve got to tell him the truth. But let’s not bring it up. Even if we get a consequence, Dad’s

excitement about the journal will be worth it.”

Katana tucked the book under her arm and stood up. The rusty hinges of the trapdoor squeaked as I pulled up on the handle. Katana went down first. When she was halfway to the ground, I followed. Katana jumped with a thud, skipping the last rung and racing toward the house.

“Wait for me!” I shouted, scrambling down the ladder.

Katana turned everything into a race when she carried the advantage.

For a brief second, I pondered how to get back at her. But then I saw her kindly waiting for me at the back door.

“I won,” she gloated with a smile.

“I wasn’t racing,” I replied.

“Could’ve fooled me,” she said.

“Forget it,” I told her. “Let’s go face the judge.”

Dad was waiting for us in the family room. He watched us enter—a stern expression on his face. In his lap was the open chest with the secret panel askew.

He raised his right hand, holding the rudis. He tapped the wooden sword on his left palm, marking the time. “Where is the journal?” he asked.

Katana held out the book for him—an admission of guilt.



“We discovered it and have been excited to show you,” I said, but my words fell flat.

“I see,” said Dad.

Katana handed it to him. She asked, “What do you know about this book, Dad?”

“Well, I know that it is a priceless artifact from the first century. I know that it has endured for nearly two thousand years through trial and fire—until meeting the two of you.”

“Sorry, Dad. It’s my fault,” I replied. “I wanted to look at the rudis. The journal popped out when—well, when the chest kind of fell to the floor.”

“Oh, it just ‘popped out?’” Dad asked. Then his expression softened to a smile. “Did you read past the introduction, or are you returning the book to its keep?”

“We read through the first chapter. Both of us,” Katana said, shooting me a quick glance.

Dad replied, “You’ll both be held accountable for what you encounter in its pages.”

“Will you help us uncover the mystery of the swords?” asked Katana.

“You must do that on your own, but you’ll find a way. It’ll just take some work,” said Dad.

“So, it’s real?! The rudis is real?!” I asked. “Is it the rudis that the emperor awarded to Magnus?”

“It is. It’s the finest remaining example of an authentic rudis. It is priceless, and you’ve been playing with it like it is a toy.”

“And you knocked it off the mantel!” Katana blurted out.

“Katana!” I shot back. *Sisters love to cause drama.*

“So that was the commotion I heard this morning.” Dad paused. “And you were responsible, Brant?”

I lowered my head and nodded.

“The wrestling ruse was your clever diversion, Katana?”

“Mom told you?” she asked.

“And I saw the chest ajar on the mantel.”

*How do parents know?* I wondered. We knew what would happen next.

Dad turned over the book, inspected the cover, and carefully examined the pages. “You’re fortunate. It could have been much worse.”

“Can we keep reading it?” I asked. “Please?”

“Only together,” Dad replied. “I’ll be the one to turn the pages. It’s fragile and must be handled with care.”

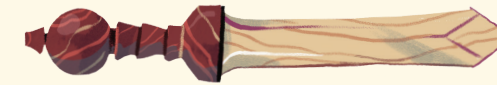
I nodded, even though I desperately wanted to solve the mystery myself.

“The mystery of the rudis, this chest, and this journal have been passed down through our family for generations. They belong to our family and will remain here,” he said. He dropped the journal back into the chest and returned it to the mantle.

*Our family?* I pondered. *Was Magnus one of us?*

Dad continued, “My father taught me additional parts of the story—things not contained in the journal—legend, really. It is said that Magnus returned to this valley and may have started the orchard now in our care.” After a pause, he said, “You two must be starving. It’s nearly lunchtime.”

I was hungry, but I felt a deeper, more pressing hunger—to unveil the mystery of the swords.



**AFTER LUNCH,** we learned more about the apostle Paul. I asked Dad, “Whatever happened to the scroll Paul gave Magnus?”

“He returned it.”

“And the copy?” Katana asked, remembering that detail from the story.

“I believe Magnus shared it with his son Peter, along with the notes hidden in the chest. Peter later passed them to his son Stephen, to ensure that the line of stewards remained unbroken. The Stewards of the Swords recopied the scroll and updated the journal seven times. Then,

three generations ago, our family farmhouse caught fire on Christmas. The journal survived, protected in the chest, but the scroll was dried and brittle with age, and it was lost.”

Dad stood up, took the chest back from the mantel, and turned toward us. “Do you see the singe marks of the flame here?” he said, pointing to the bottom corner.

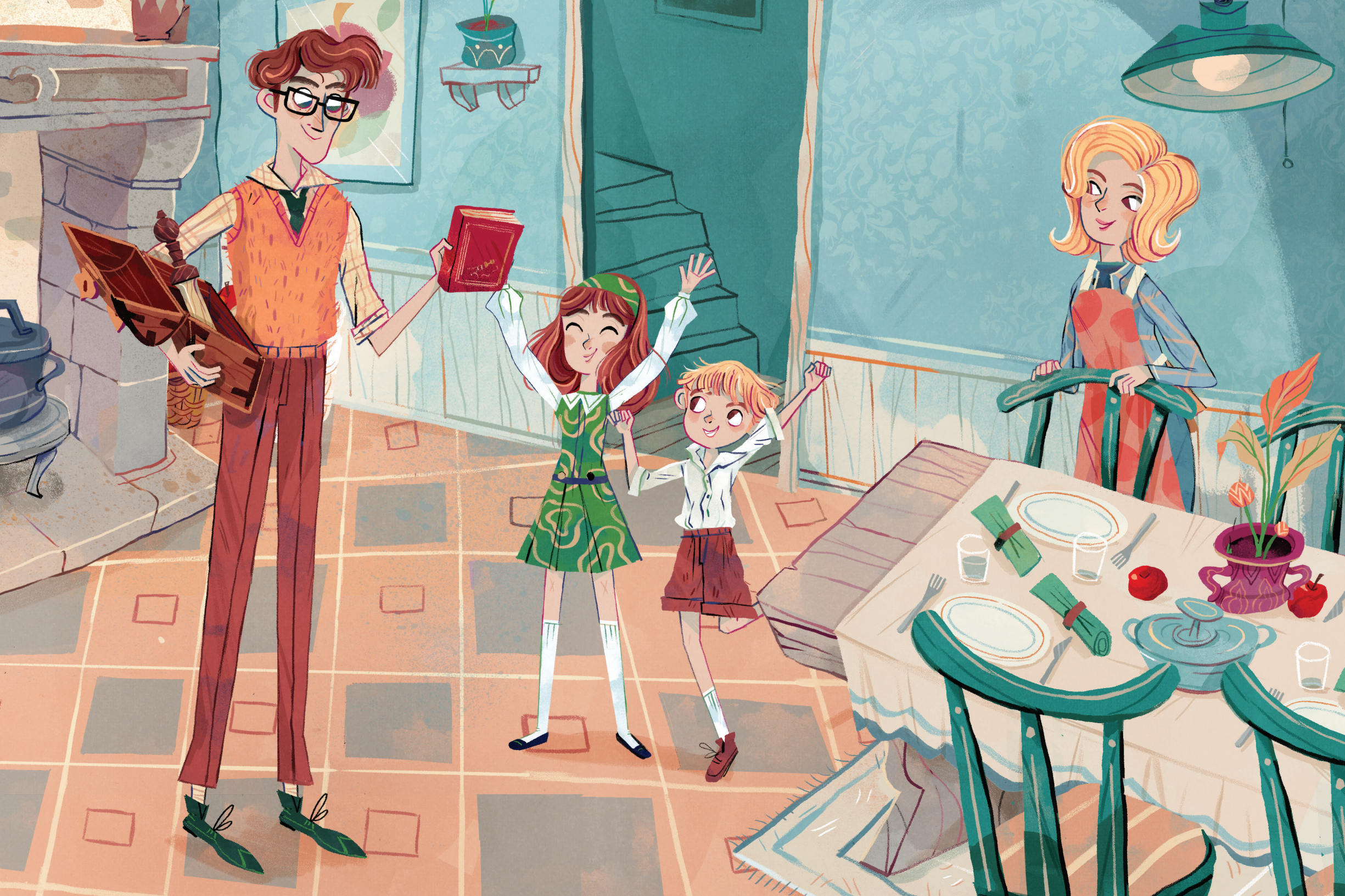
“I’ve noticed the brown before, but only now do I see that it is a burn mark,” Katana said.

“Your great-grandfather discovered the fire,” Mom added. “He saw a billow of smoke and followed it here to the sitting room. The Christmas tree had caught fire, and the flames licked up the wall. He pulled the tree away from the wall and cried out for help. Together, he and his family smothered the flames with a wet blanket. The oak chest and the journal survived. The scroll sitting atop the chest did not.”

“But thanks to Gutenberg and printed Bibles,” Dad said, holding up his own Bible, “Paul’s letter to the Romans is preserved. So the stewardship remained unbroken.”

“The journal is worn. We were almost afraid to turn the pages. It looks like it’s time to make a new copy,” I said.

“You’re absolutely right!” Dad agreed. “The first to solve the mystery of the swords will be charged with producing a copy and will become



the next Steward of the Swords. The steward may also add to and update the journal.”

Right then, I made it my goal to become the next steward. I had to solve the mystery of the swords before Katana.

“Can we study the book on our own?” Katana asked, revealing her desire to be first.

“You may study Paul’s letter as much as you like,” Dad replied. “But we’ll read the journal together. Remember, the pages are delicate. Plus, when we read it together, you will each get an equal chance at solving the mystery.”

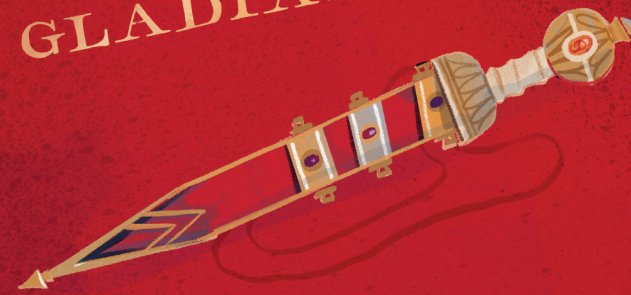
As Dad spoke, I made a vow: As the next steward I would add an explanation of how I knocked the chest off the mantel and discovered the journal. I’d also add all the stuff Dad knew—the legends and such. And I’d give it a name:

*The Sword.*

Until then, I would hang on Magnus’s every word, hoping that I might be the one to solve the mystery.

Dear Reader, Open your Bible to begin studying Paul's letter to the Romans along with Magnus's own notes.

GLADIUS  
GLADIATORIS



PAUL'S LETTER  
TO THE ROMANS



PART 1

# PAUL JOURNEYS TO ROME

(From Acts 25–27 and Romans 1:1–17)

I first met the apostle Paul on a ship bound for Italy. He was a prisoner accompanied by a centurion. On initial observation, he appeared compliant, so I paid him no mind. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that a strong gale would soon destroy our ship, or that I would become his guard in Rome.

Before I get ahead of myself, it seems wise to introduce the apostle Paul, who authored the scroll I now study. In addition to what I learned during my shipwreck experience, a doctor named Luke—who was a close friend of Paul's—agreed to assist me. We begin our study of Paul's letter to the Romans with the story of his incredible conversion to Christianity. According to Luke, Jesus appeared to Paul and commissioned him to take the gospel to the Gentile world. Paul's letter to the Romans is the gospel message he proclaimed throughout the known world.

## PAUL MEETS JESUS

When candidates in the military complete their training, their commander issues a commission, which is an order telling them where to go and what to do. When Saul of Tarsus encountered Jesus—the greatest commander of all time—he also received a commission.

Up until that time, Saul considered those who believed in the resurrection of Christ a threat to Israel. In fact, he made it his mission to destroy the church. But as he traveled to arrest Christians in Damascus, Jesus appeared to Saul, knocked him to the ground, and blinded him. Jesus opened Saul’s heart so that he believed in God’s plan to save humanity, and then Jesus commissioned him to preach the gospel. God, in his mercy, chose the church’s greatest enemy to serve the cause

of Christ. Jesus personally appeared to Saul and told him that he was sending him to the Gentiles “to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18).

After his baptism, Paul began preaching the gospel to the Jews (the people descended from Abraham). When they refused to believe, he took the gospel to the Gentiles (people from other nations). Paul’s former zeal in persecuting the church became a zeal for proclaiming the gospel of Christ. What the enemy used for evil, God used for good.

Paul started churches in Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus. Paul hoped to travel to Rome, enlist the support of the Gentile believers, and carry his church-planting mission beyond Italy to Spain. Ahead of his visit to Rome, he wrote a letter that is now part of the Bible. We call it Paul’s letter to the Romans.

## PAUL SAILS TO ROME

The ocean is strong, unpredictable, and unstoppable. If you choose to build your house by the sea, you must respect the ocean’s power, strength, and boundaries because the advance of the ocean cannot be stopped. Its power will prevail and swallow up a house built too close to the surf.

Yet Jesus is even more powerful than the sea. When he sets a plan in place, it will prevail. When the Jews fought against God’s plan for the advance of the gospel, they did not succeed. It was as if they were fighting against the unstoppable strength of the sea.

After the Romans seized Paul, the Jews hatched a plan to kill him on the way to his trial. But Jesus appeared to Paul and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome” (Acts 23:11).

Paul’s imprisonment delayed his mission to Rome for more than two years. But, just as the ocean’s waves cannot be controlled, God’s mission for Paul to preach in Rome could not be thwarted. Paul, knowing the ill intentions of the Jews and convinced of God’s call upon his life, appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:11). He claimed his right as a Roman citizen to stand trial in Rome. The governor answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go” (Acts 25:12). And so it was that they assigned a centurion named Julius to escort Paul to Rome where he would stand trial before Caesar (Acts 27:1).

