



GREGORY THE GREAT: AN APE WHO BECAME A LION

593. ROME.



GOVERNOR CASTUS SHOVED past the heavy doors of Saint Peter's Basilica. "The Lombards have breached the gates!" he cried.

Hundreds of terrified Roman citizens had crowded into the cluster of church buildings northwest of the city. Huddled along the extensive corridors, they clutched their children tightly, praying that the enemy might show mercy.

Castus found a deacon in the atrium who was trying to distract a group of children with a spinning top. He pulled him aside and said quietly, "King Agilulf is almost to our door. Take me to the pope."

In a tower chamber above the gatehouse, Pope Gregory rose from his knees and moved to the window. It was eerily quiet in the courtyard below. All but one garrison of soldiers had been sent to defend the city gates. The troops who remained had surrounded Saint Peter's as a final layer of protection against the approaching swords. They stood at attention, shields raised, ready to die for their pope.





Gregory willed himself to look away from the row of grim faces. The road in front of the church was deserted. Fearing certain death, the people had fled to Saint Peter's, or to their cellars, stables, or smokehouses—anywhere they might hide from the Lombard army.

An acrid stench hung in the air. Swirling clouds of smoke rose above the city walls, the torched farms and storehouses marking the enemy's approach into the city.

Silently, Gregory backed away from the window and returned to his secluded corner to pray.

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your will be done—." He stopped, took a deep breath, and started again. "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

A tear ran down his nose and dripped onto his linen robe. "What am I to do, my God?" he cried. "I did not want to be your pope, but you put me here. You have led your people into the wilderness, into a time of sieges and disasters. Now give me the wisdom to lead them out!"

He had been pope for just a short time. Only two years ago, he had been a Benedictine monk serving Pope Pelagius as archdeacon. Then, too, the church had faced an extraordinary crisis. The attacking Lombards were flooding into Rome now, but two years ago, it had been powerful storms and rising floodwaters that threatened to destroy nearly all of Italy.



It had rained heavily for days. Swollen streams in the northern plains rushed down hillsides, emptying into the swollen Tiber River along Rome's border. When the riverbanks gave way, foaming waves surged into the city, etching channels in the streets and carving away ancient buildings. The Romans were forced to their rooftops as the water swallowed their homes.





“As if Rome didn’t have enough trouble!” grumbled Pope Pelagius, gripping the arms of his chair for balance as he stood. “Our granaries are washed away and sewage is rising to our windows!”

Surrounding him in his chambers at Saint Peter’s were the members of his court, quietly awaiting orders. A young deacon offered his arm to help the pope to his feet.

“Reports from the north indicate that the storms there have carried houses out to sea.”

The ailing Pelagius steadied himself with his staff. “If this rain keeps up, Martin, the entire western empire will be under water.”

“Rome and the west are no longer the emperor’s priority,” said a figure, entering the chamber.

Pelagius greeted his friend with relief. “Gregory, give me an update.”

Taking Pelagius’ other arm, Gregory assisted Martin in helping the pope to the window. “Constantinople is the favorite city now,” he whispered.

Pelagius chuckled despite his distress. “Yes, thank you for the politics lesson. I mean an update on our emergency efforts.”

Gregory frowned. A man of average height, he had a round face framed with a yellow beard and a receding hairline. As archdeacon, he handled much of the pope’s business.

“As long as the war with the Lombards rages on, the emperor won’t spare any troops to bail us out,” reported Gregory. “The few contingents left in the city were preparing to go north to battle, but I ordered them to stay and help with the relief efforts.”

“Good,” nodded Pelagius, patting Gregory’s shoulder with a feeble hand. “I knew that having a former prefect of Rome in the service of the church would come in handy.”

“Yes, but it is my brother, Germanus, who should be given the credit. He’s the prefect now.”





Pelagius peered at him sharply. “You still object to being archdeacon?”

“I am honored to serve the church of Christ. But I retired from public service for a reason. I would prefer to serve my Lord in solitude at the monastery at Saint Andrew’s.”

“You are gifted for public service.”

“I am a scholar, not a man of action.”

It was a frequent discussion. The pope was tired of arguing and clearly had more important issues to deal with at the moment. With an abrupt gesture, he changed the subject.

“The deacons and soldiers shall continue with the rescue of those stranded by the flood,” he said. “Gregory, send for your disciples at Saint Andrew’s. We’ll need their strong hands, and any food supplies they can bring with them.”

“We can open up the upper levels of the church,” Gregory suggested. “Some of the refugees can stay there until the waters recede.”

“If they *ever* recede,” Martin said quietly.

Pelagius sighed and stared out the window. “The emperor has abandoned the center of his empire. People are missing. Livestock are dead. A whole season’s worth of crops are gone. We’ve even lost many of our old churches.”

“All of Italy may be under water,” Gregory insisted, “but God will not abandon the city of Peter.”

“You are right, of course,” agreed Pelagius, sinking back into his chair. “But the flood is only the beginning.”

For weeks the waters flowed through the city. Food was sparse, and many people needed medical attention. Archdeacon Gregory and his aides did all they could to tend to the victims.

Finally, the waters began to recede. Though he was feeble, Pope Pelagius insisted on surveying the damage in person.

Rome was covered in mud. Walls eroded by the water had





tumbled into moldy heaps. Sewage contaminated the streets, attracting rats and flies. The stench of rotting garbage and animal carcasses was putrid.

Pelagius wore a scarf over his nose, but it wasn't a very effective filter. As he shuffled through the city with Martin, the desperate people tugged at his muddy robes and begged for help.

"Please, Papa Pelagius," pleaded an old woman with open sores on her face and neck. "Take my grandchild. I have no food to feed him."

Pelagius nodded to Martin, who lifted the child from her arms.

"I promise you, sister," Pelagius said gently. "We will take care of your grandson."

"Bless you, Papa." She turned away, sobbing.

"I will take him to the closest monastery and see that he is fed and bathed," said Martin. "But how will I find her later?"

Pelagius' pale eyelashes were wet. "You won't, Martin," he said in a low voice. "She won't survive. Leave the child with the monks. They will care for him."

Gregory joined them in front of a house that was in surprisingly good condition. "I've secured several more buildings to turn into makeshift hospitals like this one," he said. "We're moving in the sick already."

Pelagius went to the open doorway and saw people lying on tables, shivering and talking to themselves. "May God have mercy," he said, and moved on.

"Help, Papa! Help!" A man wrapped in a filthy blanket stumbled through the door, shrieking.

The pope went to him. "What can I do for you, my son?"

The man rocked back and forth, mumbling.

"There is nothing you can do for him," Gregory said. "You should continue your survey."





“No!” The man grabbed at Pelagius with a red, sweaty hand. “They’re coming!” he shouted. “Stop them!”

“Who is coming?” demanded Gregory.

“*They* are coming! Out of the river and into the city.”

“Who do you see?” asked Pelagius gently.

“Angels of death are coming!” the man cried, wild-eyed. “They are coming for all of us!”

A woman caring for the sick pulled the man away. “Papa Pelagius,” she called from inside the hospital. “It isn’t safe for you to be here.”

“This man is suffering from the Black Death, isn’t he?”

“Yes. And many others are as well.” She pointed. “That man over there is seeing dragons. The woman in the corner is hiding from giant insects. It is not safe for you to be in the streets, Papa.”

“She is right,” insisted Gregory. “If you stay out here, you will get sick. You should go now.”

“Yes,” said Pelagius, “but not until I pray for this man.” He bent to his knees beside the man and asked God to give him a painless death.

Gregory steered Pelagius back toward Saint Peter’s.

“My brother tells me that as a result of the devastation and famine, we can no longer pay our soldiers,” Gregory said. “We have no defenses against the continued threat from the Lombards.”

“Those unspeakable Lombards!” seethed Pelagius. “The emperor is doing a poor job of defending the empire.”

“I’ve spoken with Castus, but even as governor, his hands are tied. We wanted to open peace negotiations with the Lombard King Autharis, but apparently he just died.”

“Then perhaps they will withdraw!”

“No. They continue to advance while a successor is being appointed. But when he is, Castus and I will again pursue peace talks.”





“We must pray that you will be successful. As long as our army is weakened and our food is scarce, Rome is not defensible.”

Pelagius paused and leaned on his staff. His face was pale and haggard.

“Are you ill?” asked Gregory.

“I will be fine,” insisted Pelagius. “I just need to rest. Tramping through the mud takes a bit more energy than this old man has.” He looked at the devastation around him and shook his head. “Why would the Lombards want Rome? Not even the vultures wish to be here anymore.”

The weeks passed and the ground began to dry out. Houses and stables were rebuilt. But the plague spread rapidly, and thousands of bodies were carried outside of the city to be burned.

The pope’s health grew steadily worse and, shortly after the new year, he was confined to his bed. Within days, he was shaking and sweating.

Gregory recognized the grim signs of the Black Death.

Muttering commands through chattering teeth, Pelagius handed over more and more of his responsibilities each day to his archdeacon. One evening, he called for Gregory. Martin found him sitting in his chamber, reading the Rule of Saint Benedict.

“I looked everywhere for you,” said Martin, poking his head through the door. “You’ve been so busy, I guess I didn’t expect to find you in the most obvious of places.”

“Come in.”

“I can’t,” replied Martin. “Pelagius sent me to find you. He wants to see you right away.”

“I know what he wants to discuss,” said Gregory, “and I do not wish to discuss it.”

“He doesn’t have long. You know as well as I do that tonight may be his last!”

“I respect Pelagius, but I do not wish to be God’s pope,” insisted





Gregory. "I just wish to return to the monastery."

Martin threw up his hands. "That is between you and God and the pope. I have delivered the message, and I have other tasks to do."

Gregory sighed and followed the young man out the door. But before they reached the pope's chamber, they were intercepted by Germanus, the prefect. With a gentle hand on his brother's shoulder, Germanus said, "You are too late. Pelagius is dead."

Within an hour, the bells of Saint Peter's announced the news to the already dejected city. Priests, deacons, and monks filed into the basilica to pray. Gregory was soon surrounded by anxious colleagues waiting to hear his orders.

Hours later, tired and exhausted, he took the first opportunity to slip away from the commotion. But his departure was observed. Germanus quietly followed his brother into Pelagius' dark office.

"Gregory?"

He was met with silence.

"I saw you come in here," Germanus insisted.

"I just want to study Scripture, read, and live by Benedict's rule," Gregory muttered from the corner. "I've had enough of public life."

"This city is in ruins, Gregory! The plague continues to spread. The new king Agilulf of Turin is beginning to gather the Lombard chiefs to take Rome. Our people need their pope!"

"Yes, they do. But I am not the pope."

"Pelagius made it clear that he intended you as his successor."

"I didn't even want to be archdeacon, but Pelagius pressed me into service."

Germanus shrugged. "He needed your gifts, brother. Frankly, we need them even more now."

Gregory closed his eyes, suddenly realizing how tired he was. "I trust in the Almighty God," he said quietly, "but he keeps taking away the solitude I desire most!"





“Forget the solitude, Gregory! God has a lot of work for you.” Germanus was insistent, but his voice softened. “He will make you a great pope.”

“If it is God’s will, then I await a confirmation from Emperor Maurice himself.”

Gregory refused to accept the title, but continued to serve the church during the following months. He led the efforts to end the famine and care for those stricken with the plague. But rumors that he would be forced into the vacant position distracted him from his work.

Late one morning, after visiting patients in one of his makeshift hospitals, he returned to the office where he had spent so many hours with Pelagius. The pope’s copies of Scripture were still on the desk where he had left them when he had taken ill. Gregory absently ran a hand over the large leather book covers, disturbing a thin layer of dust.

I have heard nothing from the emperor yet, he thought. Perhaps there is still time to convince him that I am not the right man to be the highest bishop of the church. He sat down at the pope’s desk and opened a pot of ink.

To our most serene lord the emperor, he wrote, careful not to drag his hand across the wet ink. I understand that you intend to confirm my position as pope, and I ask you to reconsider. My heart is with the simple life of the monastery. I am not ready to handle the problems of the world. You need a powerful leader, not a gentle follower. You are asking an ape to become a lion! I cannot change who I am, even to accomplish this honorable task. Please appoint someone else, and soon.

He sealed the letter and asked Martin to oversee its delivery.

Martin immediately called for Pelagius’ most trusted courier. “Take this letter straight to Emperor Maurice in Constantinople,” Martin told him. “These two soldiers will travel with you to ensure that you and the message arrive safely.”





Gregory fell into his bed that night exhausted, but with hope. *Once the emperor reads my letter, he will appoint a successor and I can finally return to Saint Andrew's.*

Down the corridor, Martin knelt at his bedside and prayed that, whatever the emperor decided, he would appoint a new pope soon.

And outside, under cover of darkness, the courier and his bodyguards slipped out of the city and headed for the eastern road. But just beyond the gate, they were stopped by a small contingent of the prefect's soldiers.

"You have a letter in your possession," the captain called to the courier. "Prefect Germanus has ordered me to take it."

"The letter is addressed to the emperor, not the prefect," insisted the courier.

The soldiers moved in closer, nudging their horses into a circle. "The prefect insists," said the captain, his hand on his sword.

Glancing from the mounted soldiers to his two bodyguards, the courier finally pulled the sealed message from his belt and threw it on the ground. "The church will not be happy to hear about this!" he cried. He turned back toward the city.

"Hold on," called the captain. "You still have a message to deliver. See that the emperor gets this." He handed the courier a letter, addressed to the emperor, with Gregory's seal. "You will say nothing about this encounter. Is that understood?"

He had no choice. The courier tucked the new letter into his cloak and took to the road with his bodyguards.

The captain turned his horse around and signaled for his men to return to Rome. "The prefect will not let his brother jeopardize the safety of the city by refusing to be pope," he said to no one in particular.

While the counterfeit letter was on its way to the emperor, Gregory called the people to a special service at the basilica of St. John the Lateran.





“He is going to preach a sermon accepting the office of pope,” Martin suggested.

But Gregory had something different in mind. He stepped boldly into the pulpit.

“We must repent!” he announced. “Because of our sins and our wickedness, God has refused to deliver us from the plague. We must turn away from our sins and repent publicly. If it is the will of God, he will show mercy.”

The people murmured, but they leaned forward to listen, hoping he was right.

“We will pray and sing psalms for three days,” he continued. “At the end of the three days, we will gather for city-wide worship. Seven processions will march to St. Maria Maggiore, singing to the Lord and asking for mercy.”

For three days, the streets of Rome echoed with prayers and singing. On the fourth day, the people marched from every corner of the city to the church of St. Maria Maggiore, where Gregory urged them to mourn over their sins and pray for forgiveness.

With the support of Governor Castus, Gregory organized volunteers to distribute food and clean water donated by the churches in Sicily. The sick were quarantined, the dead were buried, and the mud was washed from the streets. The clouds of flies began to disappear. The plague was coming to an end.

Meanwhile, the counterfeit letter had reached its destination. Instead of a list of reasons why Gregory was unqualified to be pope, Emperor Maurice read a letter joyfully accepting the position.

Apparently my advisors were mistaken about the situation in Rome, Maurice thought. No matter. I can't be bothered with a church vacancy while I'm at war with the Lombards! He wrote a brief reply confirming Gregory as the new pope.

With a groan, Gregory sank into his chair at Saint Peter's, clutching the emperor's letter. “I can't believe this!” he said to the





empty room. "The emperor doesn't even mention my objections. It's as though he never read my letter!" *I am trapped. My life will be politics and plagues instead of reading and writing in peace.*

Gregory refused to leave his office that morning. On his knees, he prayed for wisdom. *Perhaps I can flee the city before word of the emperor's letter gets out!* His pulse quickened.

He pulled a simple tunic over his head and slipped quietly out of Saint Peter's. Walking briskly, he tried to stay in the afternoon shadows. He passed a block of houses and turned left at the cross street. Were those footsteps behind him? He hadn't passed anyone. *If I turn around, I risk being recognized,* he told himself, and picked up his pace.

He headed toward the market stalls in the forum. There were few vendors. Many had died of the Black Death, and those who had survived had little left to sell. At least the mud had been swept away. He crossed the square and ducked under a dingy awning.

Footsteps behind him clattered on the cobblestones. Glancing back, he saw half a dozen men crossing the square toward him.

He broke into a run and darted between two vegetable stands. Dodging a bin of half-rotted potatoes, he doubled back and then stopped short.

Blocking his way was his brother. Governor Castus and several men stood a few paces behind him.

"What's the rush?" Germanus gave him a smug smile.

Gregory swung around and saw that he was surrounded. "I'm leaving Rome for a few days."

"We know about the letter."

Gregory threw up his hands. "You also know my objections! I made them clear to Pelagius, I made them clear to you, and I made them clear to the emperor."

"Apparently the emperor never got the message."

"I see." Gregory folded his arms across his chest. "And I suppose





my brother the prefect, whose army controls the road, had something to do with that.”

Germanus shrugged. “Emperor Maurice requires your service.”

“I serve God, not the emperor.”

Martin stepped forward from the crowd. “God requires your service to the emperor,” he said. “I’m sorry, my friend, but you must accept God’s call, for the good of the empire!”

The crowd moved in and seized him then, carrying him back to Saint Peter’s. His aides were waiting with fresh garments. They led him into the sanctuary, where the people had already gathered. In a flurry of singing, chanting, and burning incense, Gregory was consecrated pope.



Those were bittersweet memories. *I was fearful and overwhelmed that day*, he thought as he knelt in the tower. *Now I realize that it is God’s will for me to be pope, but it seems he continues to test me and the empire!*

“Father, I was short-sighted and disobedient,” he prayed. “I didn’t want this position, but in your wisdom, you put me here. Now Agilulf is nearly to the door of your house! Deliver Rome from the Lombards. Please show me what you would have me do.”

There was a quick knock at the door, and Governor Castus entered. “He is on his way, Great Gregory.”

“I know.” The pope rose slowly to his feet.

“The prefect and I support any decision you make.”

“Thank you. Come with me. I think I can convince Agilulf to leave in peace.”

He went out to the top of the wide staircase at the front of the basilica and waited for the enemy to appear.





Outside the gates, the conqueror was shouting orders to one of his generals. "The troops will remain here under your command. Kill anyone who tries to leave the city. And get these animals into some kind of order before I get back!"

He turned his horse around. "Leric, you and your men are with me. There will be no more resistance from these Romans. We take our prize now!"

A shout went up from the grimy, fur-clad soldiers as they raised their weapons high and charged toward the gates.

Agilulf galloped boldly into Rome, his blonde hair streaming behind him. Slowing his horse, he surveyed the spoils of war. The city had not fully recovered from the flooding and plagues of the last two years. The streets were rutted, the buildings moldy, the walls black from his army's torches. Frowning, the Lombard king spurred his stallion toward the looming edifice of Saint Peter's. Leric and his men followed closely on foot. They came to a sudden halt as their commander threw up his hand.

A man in white robes and a tall hat stood atop the massive steps. Around the perimeter, a line of soldiers stood at attention, shields raised in a well-disciplined row. Agilulf's troops snarled at them and shook their bloody weapons, anxious to attack. The Romans waited unflinchingly for the command to charge, but their leader was silent.

Pope and king stared at one another.

"Stay where you are," Agilulf called to Leric over his shoulder. He swung down off his mount and climbed the steps. The Roman troops made no move to stop him.

Pausing a few feet from Gregory, he called out loudly so all could hear. "So you are the cleric who controls the armies of Rome."

Gregory didn't respond.

"I have no desire to kill you," the conqueror stated grandly.





The pope remained still, arms behind his back. “What *do* you desire, Lombard king?”

Agilulf chuckled with surprise. “I think I’m in a position to take whatever I desire, don’t you?”

“Do you desire this city?” Gregory demanded with a sweep of his arm. “Rome is not the prize it used to be.”

“It is not as beautiful or prosperous as I was led to believe, that is true. But it is still mine.”

The pope took a step forward. “Listen to me, young conqueror. To take this city is to take upon yourself a burden that even the Roman Empire does not welcome. Our own emperor doesn’t bother to defend us.”

Agilulf cocked his head and squinted at his opponent. “What do you propose?”

“I will give you 500 pounds in gold for your spoil. You can boast that you brought Rome to her knees and received a great reward to pay your army.”

“I would have taken the gold anyway,” Agilulf grinned confidently. “What else do you offer?”

“You won’t have the burden of repairing the city.”

“How clever.”

“And I will personally seek to establish a permanent peace between our people.”

Agilulf paused, and looked behind him at his filthy, malnourished men. “I get the gold, the bragging rights, and the opportunity to get my men out of this stinkhole immediately.” He flung his bearskin cloak over one shoulder and reached out to grasp the pope’s hand. “How can I refuse such an offer?”

Behind Gregory, cries of relief burst from the people crowded in the entrance to Saint Peter’s.

The church coffers were opened, and Martin and the other deacons carried out the gold. Gregory’s soldiers presented the





tribute to Agilulf. Leric's men hooted as they filled their packs with the treasure.

"I will write to the emperor immediately and ask him to begin peace negotiations with your people," Gregory promised.

"I think you are the one who should do the negotiating, Gregory the Great." Agilulf mounted his stallion. "Your people are fortunate to have such a wise ruler."

The Lombard king nodded at the pope, turned his horse, and led his men back toward the gates with their spoils. Governor Castus stepped forward and placed a hand on Gregory's shoulder.

"The emperor will not be happy about those 500 pounds of gold," Gregory murmured.

"That gold purchased the lives of every Roman citizen today. You've done the right thing."

"God has been merciful to this city."

"God has been merciful to the entire empire. I knew you were the right man to be pope."

The refugees behind him began to cheer.

"Send these people home, Castus," Gregory said with a sigh of relief. "And get the soldiers to put out those fires on the walls. It's time we brought this city back to order!"



In 598, the Roman Empire signed a peace treaty with the Lombards. Gregory's role in saving Rome and negotiating peace forever changed the role of the Roman pope.

