

The Courtyard & The House

Lauren Teague

Palti • *God Liberates*

Gallia • *The Lord Has Redeemed*

The Courtyard wasn't a horrible place to live. But it wasn't exactly a nice place either. Sometimes the kids were mean to each other. Not all the time; sometimes they were kind too. Sometimes there were parties or feasts and sometimes they helped each other. Most of the time, the Courtyard seemed fine.

The problem with the Courtyard is that it never really felt like a home.

There was a house at the end of the Courtyard, however. It was built from white marble so clean and smooth, it seemed to shine like the moon. All the kids who lived in the Courtyard wondered who lived there.

"What do you think it would be like inside the House?" Palti asked his best friend Galia.

Galia answered immediately- she thought about the inside of the House often. "I think it feels safe. And you never have to try to find a place to sit. There's places all around for everyone. No one has to search for anything because everything you need is right there."

"A safe place to belong. That would be different, wouldn't it?" Palti smiled a little sadly.

At that moment another boy shoved into Palti. "Move over. We want to sit here." He nodded towards his friends. At that moment, a small smudge appeared on his wrist. Palti and the boy noticed it at the same time. *Selfish* the smudge spelled out before blurring and settling into a dark stain. Palti and the boy both knew it would always be there now. The boy tugged on his sleeve to try to cover it.

Palti looked away, embarrassed for the boy. "Fine. Let's go near the steps, Galia."

"He got a mark! I think I saw it! What'd it say, Palti?" a girl nearby asked loudly. Galia noticed a smudge appear on her ankle. *Gossiper* it said before blurring. Galia looked up to see if the girl had noticed. She hadn't. "I bet it was that he was unkind. I see so many of the marks say unkind. And unloving. I'm not really sure what the difference is, to be honest. So-what did it say?!"

Palti blushed. "It....I didn't really get a good look," he said, then immediately wished he hadn't.

"I saw! I saw a mark on your finger! It said *dishonest*. It did!" the girl exclaimed.

"Wow, I'm so sorry, Palti," another girl spoke up. "I wonder how many marks he has. Probably a lot. And now you have another new one? That's so awful for you. I haven't gotten any new ones today-" she cut off her speech with a gasp. Near her thumb, a small mark spelled out *prideful* before blurring into a stain. She looked in horror at the mark and then at Galia. "I didn't mean to be prideful," she said quietly.

Galia pretended she didn't hear as she looked down. Her glance landed on her small toe as *unloving* appeared. She sighed. She knew it was true. She could have said something to comfort the girl. But it was getting cold and she was tired. Still, the stain that had spelled unloving made her feel ashamed as she walked away from the group.

Palti had seen the unloving mark before it blurred. He followed her. "It's okay, Galia. It happens. We all get the marks," he shrugged.

It was true. All the kids who loved in the Courtyard were covered in marks of different dark shades. New ones appeared all the time. It was a little easier when no one noticed. Most of the kids wore long sleeves and tried to sit down in ways that kept their feet and legs covered.

Not all the kids tried to hide their marks, though. Some tried to act like they were proud of them and would loudly compare theirs to others'. Soon after they would notice new ones spelling *foolish* or *boastful*. They would point to each new mark and laugh a little too hard to seem like they really meant it.

The marks were a part of what made life in the Courtyard so frustrating and at times feel so hopeless.

Galia felt her eyes fill with tears. "Palti, do you think the marks are the reason we never go into the house?" she whispered.

Palti paused. "Maybe? We never go in because the doors never open. But... you think there's a reason the doors stay shut?"

Galia nodded. "It seems like that house is...perfect. And look at us." She looked down at her hands and feet and all her small, dark, stubborn marks.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the Courtyard. Palti and Galia stopped talking. They looked around to see a crowd forming.

The girl who had received the gossip mark earlier ran back to them. “Come on! There’s a new kid in the Courtyard! He says he’s from the House!”

Galia and Palti got up quickly and went to join the crowd.

“Who are you?”

“Are you really from the House?”

“Why aren’t the doors open?”

The Courtyard kids surrounded a boy and shouted their questions one after another.

Palti and Galia tried to see what the boy looked like. The crowd was so large, they could only see glimpses of a spotlessly white cloak. The kids continued yelling their questions and pushed in until Palti worried the boy couldn’t breathe.

“Give him a chance to answer!” Palti called out as he ran up. The kids quieted and stepped back a little as they waited for the boy to speak.

“I am from the House. I live there. It’s my Father’s,” the boy began.

More questions came flying and echoed through the Courtyard.

“Why don’t you open the doors?”

“Why haven’t we seen your father?”

“Why are you here?”

The boy started to answer when he was interrupted by one of the kids who didn’t bother to cover his marks. “You’re lying!” he stated.

“The doors don’t open. You’re not the son! You look just like us. Except for that cloak and you probably stole it from the House! You just want us to think you’re special. But you’re not.” He turned to speak to the crowd. “He’s nobody. Just like the rest of us.”

The crowd got quiet. The kids waited for the boy to defend himself. When he didn’t, most of the kids moved away with disappointed grumbles.

That’s when Galia noticed something. “Palti,” she said quietly. “He doesn’t have any marks.”

Palti focused on the boy’s feet and hands. She was right. “He is someone important. I think he’s telling the truth.” He looked at the boy’s face. “He must be the son.”

Even though he was much too far away for him to be able to hear their whispers, the son turned around and looked right at them. He motioned that they should join him.

Galia and Palti walked and talked with the son for a long time. They had never enjoyed talking with someone so much. He was kind and patient and seemed to truly care about Galia and Palti. It was as if he had always known and loved his new friends.

He spoke with joy of his loving father and for the first time, Palti and Galia heard what it was like inside the House. The House had large, clean rooms filled with platters of food, pitchers of clear water, and beds covered with the softest linens. He described how the walls, the ceilings, the doorways, the windows, even the floors were perfect. All ready and waiting.

“You said everything in the house is ready. Ready for what?” Galia asked after awhile.

The son looked at her with a joyful grin. “For you! For all of you! You’ve been in the Courtyard a long time. There was something that happened long ago...your great great great grandparents, they chose to leave the House. But my father, he wants you all to be in the House with him. He’s sent me out here for you. To open the doors! And bring you all home.”

Palti couldn’t believe what he was hearing. But he wanted to. He desperately, desperately wanted to. “We can leave the Courtyard and come live in the House?” he asked. “We always thought that was impossible. We all have these marks and...they don’t seem like they belong inside the House.”

“Oh, that’s definitely true. Like I said, the house is spotless. You can’t bring marks in with you,” The son said. “So I’ll take them.”

Galia froze. “You can make these go away?” She stared at her hands and feet covered with stains that had brought her so much shame, the ones she tried to hide, the ones that kept appearing. The marks that stayed.

“That’s why I’m here,” the boy answered. “Do you believe the others that I am not from the House? Who do you think I am?”

Galia answered, “You must be the son. You’re the only person who doesn’t have any marks. And your cloak and your kindness- there’s never been someone like you.”

Palti agreed, "If there is any way that we can be invited to live in the House, you must know how to do it."

"Then it's time," the boy said. He dipped his hands into a large wooden bucket of water.

"Where did you get that?" asked Palti.

"It's why I'm here," smiled the son.

Galia took a deep breath and stepped into the tub. The son used his hands to gently wash her dark, covered feet. Galia stared into the water. The marks were coming off. Her feet were clean. She looked at the son with a smile of relief and happiness that immediately turned to shock. His face was twisted in pain.

"Son?" she asked him. He continued to wash her feet and hands. She looked down and noticed that his hands were swelling and red. The water was turning red, too.

"Wait! What's happening? This is..this is hurting you!"

Galia looked at his hands again and noticed the mark unloving form on one of his wrists. It didn't blur away. "That was from me," she realized. "But you didn't do anything! You shouldn't have that mark on you! You have only been kind and- what's going on? Why?" She began to cry.

The son smiled through the pain. "It's why I'm here, Galia." He seemed to be getting weaker as he struggled to reach her hands to wash them as well.

Every mark she had ever earned was appearing on him. *Uncaring envious uncompassionate deceiver prideful* on his hands and feet and even his face. The marks became countless. *Cruel unfair hateful selfish rude mocker* Soon he didn't even look like himself — every part of him was stained and marked.

She remembered with such guilt how she had spoken sharply, ignored others, had unkind thoughts, didn't do the things she knew she should, did the things she knew were wrong and mean and hurtful. She could only cry and weep the words, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so, so sorry."

She bent over the filthy water and saw her hands as spotless and clean as the son's had been. Galia felt a hand on her head. "It's why I'm here, Galia. You are loved and my father wants you to be with him always." His voice was raspy and broken.

The son placed something soft over her shoulders, covering her as she realized that she had always been loved, even when she had been stained and marked. Her "I'm sorry"'s became grateful whispers of "Thank you... thank you..."

Galia sat and breathed. She felt relief and joy and sadness and freedom. Looking up at last to face the son, she couldn't find him. Her hands went up to her shoulders as she realized the soft cloth he had so lovingly placed over her was a spotless white cloak.

She stood up as many other kids from the Courtyard also stood up. Like her, their hands and feet were clean and unmarked. They all also had spotless cloaks.

"He came for all of us," she realized. "He cleaned all of us."

“Palti?” She looked for her friend. He was nearby. “What about the son? He was covered in marks and I think that means he can’t-”

Palti interrupted her. “Look!”

Galia turned to see the doors being thrown open.

The son came out with his white cloak shining brilliantly in the sun.

“Everything is ready! Come in!”

As the Courtyard kids left the dirt and cold behind them, Galia and Palti ran to hug their friend.

“All those terrible marks! They’re gone! You’re you again!” Galia exclaimed.

The son smiled. “They couldn’t keep their hold on me. It was why I came to the Courtyard. My father has been loving you through the doors for so long. It is time for you to be home.”

The Courtyard wasn’t a terrible place to live. But it wasn’t a home. Their home was with their father. His House had rooms for everyone. Each one was beautiful and completely filled with reminders of his love. And everything was ready.



An original story by Lauren Teague