



THE
LAST
SACRIFICE

HANK • HANEGRAFF
SIGMUND • BROUWER



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The Last Sacrifice

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CALENDAR NOTES

The Romans divided the day into twelve hours. The first hour, *hora prima*, began at sunrise, approximately 6 a.m. The twelfth hour, *hora duodecima*, ended at sunset, approximately 6 p.m.

<i>hora prima</i>	first hour	6 – 7 a.m.
<i>hora secunda</i>	second hour	7 – 8 a.m.
<i>hora tertia</i>	third hour	8 – 9 a.m.
<i>hora quarta</i>	fourth hour	9 – 10 a.m.
<i>hora quinta</i>	fifth hour	10 – 11 a.m.
<i>hora sexta</i>	sixth hour	11 a.m. – 12 p.m.
<i>hora septima</i>	seventh hour	12 – 1 p.m.
<i>hora octava</i>	eighth hour	1 – 2 p.m.
<i>hora nonana</i>	ninth hour	2 – 3 p.m.
<i>hora decima</i>	tenth hour	3 – 4 p.m.
<i>hora undecima</i>	eleventh hour	4 – 5 p.m.
<i>hora duodecima</i>	twelfth hour	5 – 6 p.m.

The New Testament refers to hours in a similar way. Thus, when we read in Luke 23:44, “It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour,” we understand that this period of time was from the hour before noon to approximately 3 p.m.

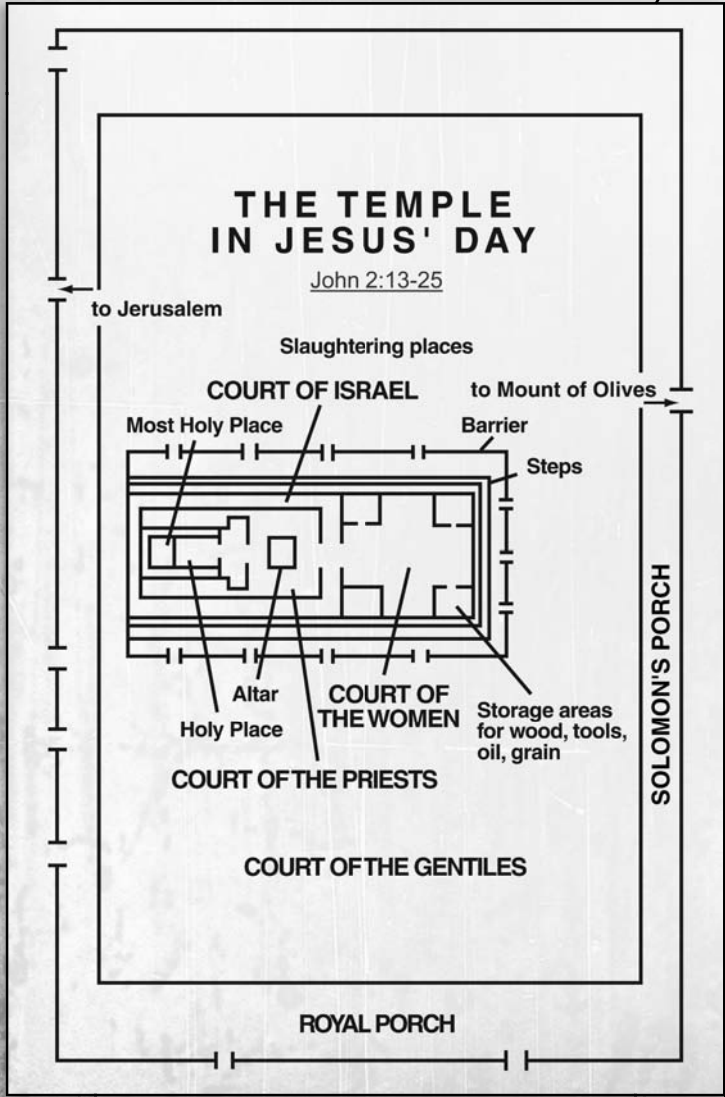
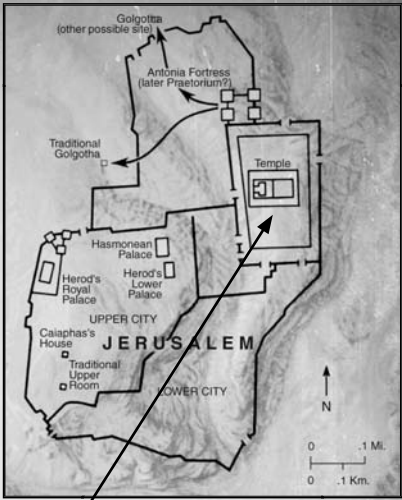
The Romans divided the night into eight watches.

Watches before midnight: *Vespera*, *Prima fax*, *Concubia*, *Intempesta*.

Watches after midnight: *Inclinatio*, *Gallicinium*, *Conticinium*, *Diluculum*.

The Romans' days of the week were Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn.

The months of the Hebrew calendar are Nisan, Iyar, Sivan, Tammuz, Av, Elul, Tishri, Heshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat, Adar I, and Adar II. In AD 65, the date 13 Av was approximately August 1.



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Alypia: Wife of Lucius Bellator; former lover of Maglorius; step-mother of Valeria and Quintus

Amaris: Wife of Simeon Ben-Aryeh

Ananias: High priest; father of Eliazar

Annas the Younger: Former high priest

Atronius Pavo: Captain of the ship carrying John and Vitas to Alexandria

Bernice: Queen of the Jews; sister of Agrippa II

Boaz: A Pharisee of high standing

Caius Sennius Ruso: Wealthy senator; friend of John

Chara: Wife of Strabo

Chayim: Son of Simeon Ben-Aryeh; in Rome as a “hostage”

Cosconius Betto: Sailing master on the ship carrying John and Vitas; brother of Kaeso

Eleazar: Governor of the Temple; son of Ananias

Falco: Prominent Roman citizen

Gaius Caipurnius Piso: Plotted to kill Nero

Gaius Cestius Gallus: Governor of Syria

Gaius Ofonius Tigellinus: Prefect of the praetorian guard; member of Nero's inner circle

Gallus Sergius Damian: Slave hunter; brother of Vitas

Gallus Sergius Vitas: Famed general of the Roman army; former member of Nero's inner circle; husband of Sophia; brother of Damian

Gessius Florus: Roman procurator of Judea

Helius: Nero's secretary; member of Nero's inner circle

Hezron: Famed rabbi in Rome; father of Leah

Issachar, son of Benjamin: Silversmith in Alexandria

Jerome: Slave of Damian

John, son of Zebedee: Last disciple of Jesus of Nazareth

Joseph Ben-Matthias: Prominent citizen in upper city Jerusalem

Leah: Daughter of Hezron and a follower of the Christos

Lucullus: Roman commander on Patmos

Maglorius: Former gladiator; servant in the Bellator household

Malka: Old, blind woman Quintus lives with in Jerusalem

Nahum: Glassblower in Jerusalem; husband of Leeba; father of Raanan

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus: Roman emperor;
persecutor of the followers of the Christos

Nigilius Strabo: Farmer on the island of Patmos; husband of Chara

Quintus Valerius Messalina: Seven-year-old son of Lucius Bellator;
in hiding in Jerusalem

Simeon Ben-Aryeh: Member of the Sanhedrin; escaped Jerusalem;
fugitive of Rome with Sophia

Sophia: Wife of Vitas; fugitive of Rome with Ben-Aryeh; a follower of
the Christos

Sporus: Nero's young lover

Valeria Messalina: Daughter of Lucius Bellator; in hiding in Jerusalem

PROLOGUE

ROME

CAPITAL OF THE EMPIRE

They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

Revelation 12: 11



SUN

HORA OCTAVA

The early afternoon sunshine blazed down on a large pen out of the sight of amphitheater spectators. The *bestiarius* began covering the eyes of the hobbled bull elephant he had selected to kill Gallus Sergius Vitas.

Perched on its neck, the beast master hummed as he did his work, patting the hide of the massive animal, trying to settle and soothe it. In his mind, he saw clearly how it would happen. He would remove the blinds only after he strapped Vitas to a tusk and led the beast to the center of the sand. Then, while two bears fought the elephant, another condemned man would be forced to dart between the elephant's legs to release the chains that kept it hobbled. After the bears had killed the condemned man, and after the elephant had killed the bears with Vitas still on its tusk, it would finally redirect its rage to shake and scrape Vitas loose, then stomp him into a red smear. The process would, with luck, entertain the crowd for half an hour.

It was routine, actually, except that the man who was to die today once had Nero's ear. So the *bestiarius* knew it needed to be done properly.

From below, a voice interrupted his thoughts: "Nero wants Vitas so close he can taste his blood."

The *bestiarius*, a small, dirty man with no teeth, secured the blinders and patted the animal's head before looking down to answer. At the side of the elephant, he saw the former slave most citizens in Rome recognized. Helius, Nero's most trusted adviser.

In his late twenties, Helius was a beautiful man, with smooth, almost bronze skin. His hair was luxuriously curly, his eyes a strange yellow, giving him a feral look that was rumored to hold great attraction for Nero. Helius wore a toga edged with purple, and his fingers and wrists and neck were layered with jewelry of gold and rubies.

“Did you hear me?” Helius said, impatient. He sniffed the air cautiously and wrinkled his nose at the smell of the elephant.

The bestiarius would have answered any other man with derogative curses. “No man alive,” the bestiarius finally said, “can direct or predict the movements of a raging elephant.”

“Nor can any man dead,” Helius told him. “Make sure Nero is not disappointed.”

The bestiarius cautioned himself that this was Helius, who had almost as much power over the lives and deaths of Nero’s subjects as Nero himself. “I’ll have two women chained in the sand below the emperor’s place in the stands,” he said after a few moments’ thought. Once the bull was in a rage, he knew it would attack everything in sight, including those women. It would rear on hind legs and stomp with the full force of its weight, something that would surely excite Nero. The bestiarius would also strap Vitas on so tightly that the elephant would not be able to shake him loose too soon. That would bring Vitas in close enough to the emperor. “He will get the blood he wants.”

“Ensure that the women are Christians and see it’s done properly,” Helius snapped. “You don’t want me back here again.”



Nearby, but in a world removed from blue skies and fresh air, Gordio and Catus, the two soldiers assigned the task of finding and escorting Vitas, had already entered the labyrinth of prison cells below the stands of the amphitheater.

While both were large, Catus was the larger of the two. In the flickering light of the torch, they gave the appearance of brothers, each with dark, cropped hair, each with a wide face marked by battle scars. They were old for soldiers, sharing a common bond back to the days when they were both recruited from neighboring farms north of Rome, sharing survived battles in Britannia and Gaul and all the years of monotony between them.

As they traveled through the dark corridors by torchlight, the rumbling of the spectators above sounded like growls of distant thunder. Each soldier had drenched his face and shoulders with inexpensive perfume to mask the odor; each knew from experience that no other smell on earth matched the stench of fear exuded by hundreds of prisoners.

The torch Gordio carried was a beacon to all the prisoners, a flame serving notice that yet another among them would be plucked away for a horrible fate outside on the sunbaked sand. Halfway to the cell that held Vitas, a woman thrust her arms between iron bars in a useless effort to grasp at Gordio and Catus.

“Kill me!” the woman sobbed at them, her hands flailing. “I beg you!”

Neither of the soldiers broke stride.

“Have mercy!” she wailed at their broad backs. “Give me a sword or a knife. I’ll do it myself!”

Behind them, the woman’s pleading blended with the yells and groans and swearing of all the other men and women in the dozens of crowded, dank cells along their route. To Gordio and Catus, the men and women they were sent to retrieve for death were less than animals, troublesome debris, criminals deserving of their sentences.

“My fate is tied to yours,” Catus growled to Gordio. “I want you to say it again. We are in this together.”

“Yes, my friend,” Gordio said. “We are in this together. How can you doubt me after all the years we have shared?”

The answer was unnecessary, for if ever there was a time for one to doubt the other, this was it. Nothing during their years as soldiers serving the empire had prepared them for what they had resolved to do next.

The unthinkable.

Treason.



The chosen seat of the man who had been born Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus placed him so close to the sand of the arena that on occasion blood would splatter his toga, spots of bright red soaking in and fading against the purple as they dried.

On this morning, slaves shaded and fanned him as he anticipated the

death of Gallus Sergius Vitas. A ferocious hangover diminished some of his anticipation, and despite the efforts of the slaves, the heat irritated him. But not enough to drive him away before the death of Vitas.

He waited with a degree of impatience and swallowed constantly, trying to work moisture into his mouth. His thin blond hair failed to cover the beads of sweat on his scalp. He'd once been handsome, but closing on his thirtieth birthday, his face was already swollen from years of decadent wine and food, showing a chin that had doubled and was on the verge of trebling. His eyes were the most telling of the horrors he had inflicted on others during the previous decade—they had a dulled mania and an emptiness that bordered on eerie. Few dared to look fully into those eyes, and most shivered under their attention. For this was the man now known and worshiped by his subjects as Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus.

Nero did not sit alone in the spectators' box. To his right sat the boy Sporus, whose knee he touched casually; to his left, Helius, who had returned from the animal pens.

"How much longer until Vitas?" Nero said.

"Soon," Helius said. A pause. Nero's head throbbed as he concentrated on listening. Helius then spoke quietly. "Have you told Sporus about your intentions?"

Nero shifted, turning to face Helius fully. "You seem anxious for him to know."

"The arrangements were your request," Helius said. "What you want done is what you want done. But the doctors say it must be done soon, that any day now he will reach puberty."

Nero frowned. "It seems you take pleasure in the procedure. Why should it matter to you when Sporus learns of it?"

"I'm only thinking of him," Helius said, looking down in deference. "Perhaps it would be best to give the boy time to prepare himself."

Nero turned away and, to disapproving murmurs from the crowd, kissed Sporus. He pulled back and stroked the boy's hair for a few moments, then leaned over and spoke again to Helius.

"Prepare himself?" Nero asked. "Are you suggesting Sporus won't be delighted to honor me in such a manner? that there will be anything of more magnitude in his life than my love for him?"

“He lives for you,” Helius said. Another deferent look downward. “As does every subject in the empire.”

“Of course they live for me,” Nero said, feeling his irritation lessened by the obsequious reminder of his power. He allowed a smile, thinking again of Vitas suffering on the tusk of an elephant. “Unless I want them to die.”



“Gallus Sergius Vitas,” the soldier with the torch said to the prisoner. The soldier spoke quietly, compassionately, respectfully.

The prisoner knew his moment was upon him. He hoped that all his preparations for death would be enough.

He had been deliberate in thinking it through. During the long night of waiting, this grim contemplation had prevented him from wondering about the pain of his final moments, from wondering about the method of execution that Nero had chosen for him. Meticulous planning helped him maintain an illusion of control in a situation where all power had been taken from him. And most importantly, focusing on how he would face death dispelled the doubts that pressed at the edge of his consciousness like snakes trying to push beneath a locked door, insidious questions about the faith he’d staked his life upon and whether that faith would lead him to the eternity he believed was beyond.

“If this is my time,” the prisoner replied, his voice barely more than a croak, “let me prepare myself.”

Without waiting for an answer, he moved against the wall and squatted to void his body wastes in the darkness. This was the first thing he’d decided was necessary. Aside from whatever bravery he could find as he faced the beasts in the amphitheater, no other dignity would remain when his naked body became an offering of entertainment to be shredded for the delighted scrutiny of a crowd of thousands; at the very least he did not want his body to betray his fear.

When he finished, sadness crushed him so badly he could barely breathe. The moment had arrived, and the emotion he had expected was far greater than he believed possible for a man to bear. Not fear but sadness. Sadness not for his death but that he would never see his wife or children again. It took all of his focus to push that sadness aside. It was not time to allow it to fill him. Not yet.

"I am ready," the prisoner said. He moved closer to the torch, its light hardly more than a blur to him.

Clanking told him the soldiers were opening the cell door.

The blur of the torchlight grew brighter, and he heard both soldiers gasp.

"His face," one said.

The day before he had been beaten so badly that his eyes were puffed shut to the point that he could barely see. His bruised face felt like an overripe fruit about to burst.

"Jupiter!" the other said.

The prisoner gave a weak wave and repeated himself. "I am ready."

"We are not," the second one said.

They stepped into the cell.

Had Nero given orders for him to be beaten further? the prisoner wondered. He took a deep breath and offered no resistance as he waited for the first blow.

"His face," the first again. "That will make it difficult for him."

"No. It will help. All he has to do is reach the streets. His face will make it impossible to guess his identity once he has escaped."

"Escape?" the prisoner said. Thirst made his throat dry, and he found it difficult to speak without a croak. "I . . . I don't understand."

"Nero has gone too far," the first said, his voice soft but firm. "All of Rome knows you are here. And the injustice behind it."

"The arena is where criminals die," the second said. "Not military heroes."

"We were not under your command in Britannia," the first soldier continued. "But your reputation is enough for us. You do not deserve this fate."

The prisoner felt something pressed into his hand. The handle of a sword?

"When the first line broke in the final battle against the Iceni," the second said, "any other commander would have served politics first. Thrown away the lives of soldiers by sending them to defend immediately, without support. You risked your reputation because you refused to have them slaughtered. They owe you their lives. I, too, owe you. My brother was among them."

“Some of them found a way for us to be here to repay you on their behalf,” the first said. “You are a man soldiers would follow if ever you decided . . .”

The second spoke when the first faltered. “The complaints about Nero grow every day. If a general stood up to him and sought the support of the legions . . .”

“I am not that man,” the prisoner said.

“No one will doubt that the legendary Gallus Sergius Vitas overpowered us,” the first soldier answered. “Strike us hard. Make certain we are injured badly enough to be believed.”

“I have my duty.” The prisoner thought of his wife. How his death would spare her. “Take me to the arena.”

“To die for the emperor who inflicted such an injustice upon you as this?” the first said. “Take my tunic. Leave here as a guard. When you are free, you can begin action against Nero. Or throw your support behind another general.”

“You must live,” the second urged. “His reign must end.”

“I have my duty,” the prisoner repeated. He lifted the sword. “Keep this.”

“At the least then,” the first soldier said, pushing the sword back at the prisoner, “spare yourself the horror and fall on this here. Or give us the honor of assisting you. We will end your life quickly and claim you attacked us.”

“No,” the prisoner said. He felt his legs grow weak. The sorrow again threatened to overwhelm him as images flashed into his mind. Of his younger boy as a toddler, rushing toward him to be comforted after stumbling on the bricks of the courtyard floor and scraping his knees. Of quiet summer evenings, intertwining his fingers with his wife’s, sharing dreams with her beneath the starlight. Of comforting his daughter one morning as she knelt on grass still wet with dew and wept over the death of a tiny bird found among the flowers.

The prisoner used all his resolve to force these images from his head. *Not yet*, he told himself. There would be a time for the memories. Soon enough. But not yet.

“Take me to the arena,” the prisoner said firmly. “I have my duty and you have yours.”



“I also need two women,” the bestiarius snapped at Catus and Gordio. “Go back and get them from the cells of Christians. And send someone to help me strap this man to the tusk.”

Neither soldier moved. The prisoner was behind them, head bowed, wrists shackled.

“Another thing.” The bestiarius shook his head. “The women? Cut out their tongues. I’m tired of the hymns these cursed Christians sing as they die.”

Still Catus and Gordio did not respond.

“Well?” the bestiarius demanded. Here he had near total authority. His skills with animals were seen as magical and very necessary to the success of the entertainment. “I need the women immediately. Nero waits.”

Catus spoke. “You cannot strap such a man as Vitas to the elephant.”

“You tell me what I cannot do?” Still angry at how he’d been humbled by Helius, the bestiarius vented his frustration on the soldiers. “Don’t forget. You are expendable. I am not.”

“This man fought for Rome,” Catus said, pointing at the prisoner. “He helped defeat the Iceni. Led the triumph through the gates of the city. He deserves to die a soldier’s death. Give him combat against gladiators.”

The bestiarius spat, unswayed by the soldier’s passion. “I follow the orders of Nero. If you choose otherwise, expect to be strapped to the other tusk.”

“The crowd will know,” Gordio said. “He’s a hero. They will not tolerate it, no matter what Nero wants.”

The bestiarius stepped between them and clutched the prisoner’s hair, lifting his head and exposing his swollen, bruised face to the sun. “After a beating like this? No one will recognize him.” He dropped the prisoner’s head and yelled at the soldiers with surprising force for such a small man. “Now go! Get the women! And don’t forget to cut out their tongues.”



With the soldiers gone, the prisoner stood near the elephant, drawing deep, hard breaths.

So this was how he would die.

He drew the deep breaths to calm himself. This, too, he had calculated for this moment. He'd anticipated the renewed fear. But after his time in the stench of the cells, he'd guessed the fresh outdoor air would be as joyful to his body as clear, cold water.

The calm he had hoped for did not arrive. This was beyond his power.

"Christos," he whispered. "Dear Christos. Let my death honor you."

He lost himself in silent worship. Then suddenly his body seemed to come truly alive with every heave of his lungs, every sense totally engaged. The portion of the sky he could see beneath his swollen eyelids had never seemed so blue; sounds had never seemed so clear. A fly landed on his arm; he thrilled with the sensation of the tiny movements across his skin. The nearby elephant swished its tail, a sound that seemed as loud as a shout.

"Thank you, Christos," he breathed. Yes! He was still alive; he wanted to drink in every sensation.

Doing so stretched each moment for him, and he was unaware of the passing of time. This amazing vibrancy lasted until rough hands grabbed and spun him, rough hands that belonged to men who were only a blur in his diminished vision. Until his body was lifted from the ground and held against the tusk of the elephant.

Men grunted as they strapped him in place. As his hands brushed against the tusk, he was startled to feel rough fissures in the ivory.

Strange, he thought. He'd always believed ivory was smooth. He puzzled about this, as if momentarily unaware of his body and the events happening to it. Ah, he realized, the only ivory he'd ever seen was carved and polished. Not still connected to a living beast. That explained it.

He became aware then of a different sort of movement. This new movement was the nervous swaying of the blinded elephant, unsure and nervous about the unfamiliar weight upon its tusk.

The prisoner was strapped in such a way that the sky filled his vision. It was interrupted by a flash of motion that he guessed at more than saw through the thin gap between his blood-crusting eyelids. A pigeon? He marveled that any creature could fly, as if he'd never seen a bird in the

air before, and he regretted that he had never taken time or thoughts to observe the wonders of the commonplace that had surrounded him all his life.

The passing of the bird, however, reminded him of his daughter holding the tiny dead sparrow in the garden, and thoughts of his wife and young children flooded his mind again.

Not yet, he pleaded with himself. Even filled with the joy of faith, he could not totally leave behind all that had been important to him on earth. *Not yet. Save those memories for the approach of death.*

That had been his plan. To use those precious memories to find a calmer place as the madness of the arena began to sweep him away. But in the quiet moments beneath the blue sky, so intimately joined to the elephant that its swaying was the mockery of a lullaby, he could not find the willpower to push away the thoughts of those he loved most on earth.

This, he decided, was what he would say to every father or mother: *Time gives the illusion that it passes slowly, and only in looking back do you see how quickly it moved. So cherish each moment with your children, for you never know how and why you might be taken from them or them from you.*

He found himself weeping. With joy for what he was about to gain in death. Yet in sorrow for what he was about to lose in life.



“The man you will see on the tusk of the elephant,” Catus told a crowd of men in the upper stands, “is Gallus Sergius Vitas. Surely you’ve heard why Caesar has him in the arena.”

Normally these members of the mob would have ignored a soldier, jeered at him. But Catus carried beer and was dispensing it to them as he spoke.

There were nods.

“Don’t you think,” Catus continued, “that such a man as Vitas deserves a chance to fight for his life? Especially if he is guilty of nothing more than defending his wife against Caesar?”

The men around him were half drunk already and bored because nothing had happened on the sand for a few minutes. Immediately a few shouted agreement.

Catus pressed coins into the hands of the nearest men. "Buy more beer," he said. "And pass word of this injustice to those around you."



The two women chained to the sand below Nero and Helius were kneeling in silent prayer, blood flowing from their mouths.

Helius ignored them; he was lost in reverie. With his enemy Vitas about to die, he was on the verge of simultaneously enjoying another enemy's humiliation: Sporus. The boy whose knee Nero stroked with undisguised affection. Any moment now, Nero would deliver the news to the boy and . . . Helius shivered in delicious anticipation.

When the gates opened at the far side of the arena, however, Helius became instantly alert. Finally! Vitas, about to die! What joy!

The crowd noise abated briefly in anticipation of the drama to be provided next.

In this silence, the bestiarius prodded the bull elephant toward the center. It moved slowly, its front legs chained together. Well before it had reached the middle of the sand, a shout began in the upper stands, where the unruly mob always gathered.

"Let Vitas fight! Let Vitas fight!"

Spectators around Helius and Nero exchanged glances as they tried to decide what this meant. Exchanged glances became exchanged conversation as the news spread quickly around the amphitheater: This was Gallus Sergius Vitas! On the tusk! Where was honor in that? What an outrage!

The shouting was soon overwhelmed by boos, all of them directed at Nero.

Helius knew that if there was any one thing Nero could not control in the empire, it was the mob. He could influence it, bribe it, placate it, but never control it. Nero feared the mob; it was a beast as unpredictable and dangerous as himself.

Nero leaned into Helius. "Do I have a choice?"

Helius shook his head.

Nero stood, and all eyes of the thousands of spectators were upon him.

Bitterness filled Helius' stomach. How he wanted Vitas destroyed. He should have suggested to Nero that the man be poisoned. Or directed to empty his veins. But Helius had wanted to see Vitas humili-

ated in death. And this was the result. Yet another chance for Vitas to become a hero.

Nero raised his arms.

The crowd instantly quit chanting.

“Release that man!” Nero’s voice echoed through the silence. “Let him fight!”



Catus and Gordio found a spot among the mob and looked downward in satisfaction. They’d bribed the bestiarius into sending out one of his least skilled gladiators—a *retiarius*.

Considered the lowest of gladiators, the *retiarius* fought with a net and a trident, a spear tipped with three points. His only piece of armor was the *galerus*, a piece of metal that protected his left shoulder. The method of fighting employed by a *retiarius* was simple—dart in and out, looking for a single moment to throw the net and attack.

Catus and Gordio were confident that Vitas, weakened as he might be from the beating, would still be able to handle an inexperienced *retiarius*.

Below them, on the opposite side of the amphitheater, musicians began to play the long, straight trumpets they would use to accompany the rhythm of the battle, their music intended to rise and fall in waves that heightened the drama.

On cue to the beginning strains of music, the *retiarius* ran onto the sand and squinted upward, as if judging the interest of the crowd. If he was looking for support he received none, as most were chanting the name of Vitas.

Then the prisoner stepped into sight. In the animal pens, he’d been removed from the tusk and hurriedly equipped for the battle.

Both soldiers frowned. They turned to each other and exchanged perplexed glances.

Something was wrong.



The will to live is an unreasoning creature.

The prisoner had spent hours in thought and prayer, finding the strength to face death. Now, with the chance to fight for his life, he

could think of nothing except what it might be like to kneel again with his daughter and stroke her hair and hug her close. Or to run across open grass with his sons. Or fall asleep with his wife at his side.

He did not hear the roars of the crowd, feel the heat of the sun. He'd been given an honorable solution that might lead him back to his family. He would only face one opponent, and all it would take was a single fortunate blow for him to be declared victor. Yes, there were glory and joy in eternity with the Christos, but if it was the Father's will, perhaps he would be allowed more time on earth with his family.

So he gripped the handle of the sword and held out his shield as best he could.

His arms were weak, his legs sluggish. His eyes were swollen, and the weights of the sword and shield were unfamiliar to him. None of this mattered. At worst, he would die, but that was no worse than he'd expected, and his death would be merciful and quick, something he had not expected. At best, no matter how remote his chances of surviving, he would live. And see his family again. He was glad for the chance to fight for love.

He turned in slow circles, trying vainly to see his opponent through swollen eyelids. He held his sword in position, ready to swing at any flash of movement.

Then came the ragged breathing of his opponent closing in. He staggered in one direction, then another, trying to get a glimpse of the retiarius.

His efforts were in vain. Far more quickly than he could dodge came the swoosh of net. It draped him completely, and he dropped his sword, clawing uselessly against the webbing. He felt the blow to his side, a body blow that knocked him onto his shield. The weight of a foot squeezed against the soft cartilage of his throat.

Dimly, he could see the outline of the man above him, a man with a trident poised to pierce his chest. A man waiting for the signal from Nero.

Hope of life on earth was gone. With its departure came the truest test of faith any man or woman could face—the specter of looming death.

He closed his eyes in prayer again. Joy returned to his soul. Yes, he would die but, in so doing, would give life to his wife and children, for

their release from this same arena had been part of the bargain he'd made with a stranger the day before. He would die, but this close to the door to the other side, he fully sensed the presence of the Christos, even more than in his most joyful moments of worship. This was the truest and greatest hope, worth far more than death. And with prayer came peace, an outpouring of certainty that his faith was justified, and a full understanding that he would see his family again.

But not in this life.



Helius was surrounded once again by boos and catcalls from the crowd.

This time the mob's anger was directed not at Nero, but at Vitas.

The fight was over before it had begun. Within seconds, the retiarius had trapped Vitas in netting and knocked him over, and he now stood with one foot on his throat, ready to deliver the death blow. There'd been no entertainment, no rising up of the hero against death. There'd barely even been time for the musicians to trumpet the macabre melody of battle.

The angry shouts grew louder as the retiarius gazed at Nero, waiting for a signal that would give him permission to dispatch his opponent.

This should have been a moment of joy for Helius. Vitas had been defeated, so humiliated that the crowd had turned against him.

Yet something was wrong.

What is it? What is it?

Then it hit Helius. *The shield!*

Vitas had been equipped with a visored helmet and a short sword. His thighs and torso were bare as was customary, and he wore a wide leather belt designed to protect the area below his waist. None of this was unusual, nor was the oval shield he'd been given.

What was unusual was how he held the shield.

For a moment, Helius wondered if he should alert Nero, but in that same moment, Helius understood the disastrous political implications if Nero realized the same thing. So Helius remained silent and waited too for Nero's decision, hoping Nero would suspect nothing.

With the eyes of all in the amphitheater upon him, Nero delayed his decision. He knew drama and when to prolong it.

Finally, Nero nodded.

The spear came down and the retiarius walked away, raising his arms in victory.

Helius could only close his eyes in stunned disbelief as the man on the sand bucked in his final moments of life, his blood soaking the sand below him.

What had gone wrong and how?

The matter with Sporus was suddenly utterly insignificant. Helius knew he should immediately rush from his seat and get to the penned area behind the spectators. He needed to examine the body of the dead man before it was thrown among all the other corpses.

Yet if he left now, Nero would certainly wonder why, and that, too, might raise dangerous questions. Helius had no choice but to pretend the same satisfaction that Nero showed in the death of Gallus Sergius Vitas.

Nero might believe it was over.

Yet Helius knew differently.

And again cursed the gods.

22 MONTHS
AFTER THE BEGINNING
OF THE TRIBULATION

(AD 66)

ROME

CAPITAL OF THE EMPIRE

TYRRHENIAN SEA

OFF THE COAST OF SICILY

I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority.

Revelation 13:1-2



MOON

HORA QUARTA

When Gallus Sergius Vitas woke, he was weak and parched, unsure of the swaying sensation that moved his body. He had no sense of the passage of time, only that he'd fought a long and restless fever. Flashes of the delirium still lingered, and he screwed his eyes shut to force them from his mind.

He shifted without rising to a sitting position, and a blanket fell from his chest. He didn't remember covering himself with the blanket.

Drawing a full breath, he looked upward and slowly found some focus. Though the sky was gray and featureless, the light still pained his bleary eyes. Above him was the foresail of a ship, full with wind. He heard the slap of waves against the hull, the dull murmur of voices farther down the deck.

A ship. It was the swaying of the ship that had taken him from Ostia, Rome's port. He dimly remembered that evening. A small riverboat had taken him in the darkness from Rome, down the Tiber to Ostia. There sailors had forcibly escorted him onto this seagoing ship, where the *magister*—the captain—had taken him belowdecks to a cabin. But he could not recall moving up to the ship's deck away from the stench of the stifling air below.

As Vitas tried to make sense of the fragments of memory, one thought exploded into his consciousness. *Sophia!*

The horror flooded back. His unsuccessful attempt to defend his wife against Nero. The blow from an emperor's guard that had knocked

him out. Waking in a cell below the stands of the amphitheater. The beating in the cell from a stranger who had drugged him.

Vitas fought to a sitting position and touched his face, exploring it gingerly with his fingers. The pain was a brutal reminder that he could not deny the horror. Nor the overwhelming ache in his heart.

Sophia! Back in Rome!

Vitas groaned and fell back on the netting that had served as a bed. Another memory returned. He had been expecting guards to take him to his execution in the arena at any moment. Instead, that stranger had entered his cell and spoken cryptically before methodically beating Vitas across the face with a leather-wrapped dowel.

"I am going to leave you with a letter. You must decipher it to find the answers you need," the stranger had said, thrusting a scroll upon Vitas. *"Second, there is an obscure matter that Tiberius once brought to Senate vote. You will find it somewhere in the archives. It will be marked with a number. Remember this, for the life of your family may depend on it someday. It is the number of the Beast. Six hundred and sixty-six."*

Vitas swallowed hard, trying to work moisture into his mouth. He tried to find enough concentration to puzzle over this memory.

The answer to this mystery was in the scroll. He patted his body for it. His last memory of it was hiding it beneath his tunic.

No scroll!

When he'd boarded the ship, it had been night and far too dark to even glance at the contents. What was in the scroll? Would the answers inside lead him back to his wife? In his delirium, had he left it behind in the captain's quarters?

Vitas pushed up on his elbows. He had to find the scroll.



Hundreds of miles away, on a hillside estate in Rome, the brother of Gallus Sergius Vitas sat beneath the shade of an olive tree with several oranges in his lap as his giant of a slave approached with a bound man.

Damian was several years younger than Vitas. His hair was a mixture of blond and red. His nose had been broken several times and not once set properly before healing. The lower portion of his left ear had been bitten off in a drunken brawl years earlier, and the baby finger of his

right hand was still crooked from a punch so poorly timed that he'd smashed a wall behind his opponent in that same brawl. Damian was a devout disciple of wine and parties, and it was more a factor of heredity than physical work that left him with a lean, trim body.

He frowned now, seething with frustrated rage, a mood hardly helped by a ferocious hangover. He was determined to leverage this mood into the resolve he would need to torture the man that his slave Jerome was about to deliver to him.

Jerome walked as effortlessly as if he carried a child. The captive was folded over Jerome's left shoulder, legs wrapped against Jerome's chest by one of the slave's monstrous arms, his head dangling down Jerome's back. Damian doubted the captive had struggled at all during the journey from a shed at the edge of the estate to the olive press; few men, unbound or even armed, would have dared to fight the monstrous slave.

When Jerome reached Damian, he squatted and rolled the captive off his shoulder onto the grass at Damian's feet.

Damian wrinkled his nose. The captive was a middle-aged man in rough clothing and smelled of body waste. This did not surprise Damian. The man had been in that shed with ankles and wrists bound since the afternoon of his capture, two days before. After refusing to speak a single word in answer to Damian's questions, Damian had allowed the man no more water. No more food. It had been Damian's intent to bring him to a horrible thirst and hunger and to humiliate him by making him soil his clothes like a baby.

"Too close," Damian told Jerome. Damian did not like treating a man like this, but the stakes were high. And, in a foul mood because of what had happened to Vitas, he was glad for a way to vent his anger.

Jerome grunted understanding and dragged the man a few steps farther away.

Damian looked at the captive, feigning disinterest. Although their glances met, the man, as expected, did not say a word.

Damian picked up an orange from his lap. The man's eyes followed it in silent desperation. He had been captured late afternoon of the day of Saturn. This meant he'd gone without water for a night, a day, and one more full night.

Damian bit through the skin of the orange, welcoming the oily, acrid

taste of the small chunk of peel as a distraction from the hangover's foulness that clung to his tongue and the roof of his mouth. He spat the chunk of peel to the side, eased his head back, squeezed the orange with his right hand, and sucked the juice from inside. The relief of the fruit's juice was insignificant compared to the throbbing of his head and the queasiness of his stomach, but it was better than nothing. Thirsty as he was, he was not ready for water. He'd tried gulping some at dawn and had immediately heaved it out again, the effort leaving his body in trembling weakness.

This was a hangover Damian intended to conceal from the captive, but one that he welcomed as punishment. For yesterday, while the blood of his brother, Vitas, had soaked the sands of the amphitheater, Damian had been in the privacy of a rich woman's villa, enjoying in equal measures her wine and her lack of inhibition to fill the hours that he needed to wear down the captive.

In a way, Damian could not be blamed; he had not even known that Vitas had been sent to the arena. During the day that followed Vitas' arrest, Damian had been in pursuit of the man now bound in front of him. He'd spent the following morning at home, but had departed for the rest of the day to spend time with the lonely rich woman. Damian had been unreachable by any of his slaves who could bring the news; discretion had forced him to enter and leave the woman's villa unannounced. No one except Jerome had known where to find him, and Jerome had had his orders to guard the captive at the shed without straying from his post for a moment. For two days, then, Damian had been totally unaware of the efforts of Helius and Nero to arrange for the arrest and execution of Vitas and of the invitation sent to Sophia, Vitas' wife, to commit suicide.

Damian had only discovered all of this upon returning to his own estate last evening, and, in near shock, he had savagely consumed more wine until he passed out. While Damian doubted he could have done anything to prevent his brother's death, he loathed himself for entertaining a woman during the moments that Vitas had entertained Nero and Helius in the amphitheater.

Unconsciousness had provided far too short a period of oblivion for Damian. The discomfort of this day's early heat had woken him and

spurred him out of his villa to pursue whatever revenge he could inflict upon Helius for his brother's death. Beginning with what he could learn from the captive in front of him.

"Well, Jew," Damian addressed him, "are you ready to speak?"

The captive blinked several times but did not answer.

"Lay this man across the olive press," Damian ordered Jerome, finally rising. "I'm tired of waiting for answers."



"Father!"

Leah rushed across the courtyard to hug him. What an answer to prayer! When guards had taken her from the prison cell just after dawn, Leah had expected her destination would be the arena. And the death that came with it.

She had not expected to be escorted here, to the royal palace. Nor that female slaves would help ease her into a hot bath to wash away the stink of the prison, then dress and perfume her as if she were the emperor's wife.

But she was not an emperor's wife. She was a poor Jew, from an area of Rome crowded with *insulae*, apartments. She was young—at the age of marriage—and so modest that she'd unsuccessfully protested the attention of the slaves, taking no pleasure in their comments about her beauty.

She'd been arrested a day earlier and had spent the entire time in the prison, alternating between prayer and hymns with other Christians in her cell and silent worry about her elderly father, Hezron. He'd been arrested with her but taken to a different cell. She had expected never to see him again, and she agonized far more over how he might die than the prospect of the torture that awaited her.

After all, she'd been responsible for their arrest.

So as the female slaves had escorted her through the gardens, she had been too distracted by worry to enjoy the scent of the flowers and the gentle breeze and the ornate sculptures that filled the garden.

Then she saw her father through the arched entrance in the courtyard, and joy overwhelmed her. She did not even feel her feet touch the inlaid bricks as she flew toward him.

Now he was holding her in his strong arms, the arms that had always welcomed her all through her childhood, no matter how busy he might have been in his studies or how engrossed in conversation with the men who came to sit at his feet for teaching.

“Father,” she said again, burying her head in his shoulder.

He stroked her hair.

Leah was aware that not all Jewish fathers were so affectionate to their daughters and that not all Jewish fathers treated their daughters with the same respect they accorded their sons. It made her treasure his respect and affection that much more.

“My child, my child,” he murmured.

He did not push her away, but waited until she slowly withdrew from his arms.

And gradually became aware that they were not alone. She’d only had eyes for Hezron in her rush through the courtyard. Now she noticed two other men. One sat on a bench. The other stood beside the bench, arms crossed, staring at them with an expression difficult to read.

The first man she knew. Chayim, who had told her he was a Greek from the city of Agrigentum in Sicily and, like her, a Christian. Unlike her, though, he was wealthy. She knew all this because of what they had endured together just days earlier—a visit by soldiers to a secret meeting of Christians. This young man with handsome dark features drew her as if she were a shy doe seeking clear waters.

The other man, wearing a toga edged with purple, she also recognized. Helius—Nero’s Helius. She knew his reputation well; he was a man capable of Nero’s cruelty and who wielded almost as much power.

Her joy began to diminish. Who had betrayed them? What could this be about? Why was Chayim here? Had he been arrested too?

Perhaps Nero had special plans for them. Leah tried to push away the stories and rumors she had heard about the hideousness of Nero’s perversions and how freely he indulged them. Surely she hadn’t been bathed and perfumed for the enjoyment of the one man responsible for the Great Tribulation forced on those who chose allegiance to the Christos.

Dread weakened her legs. Nero had murdered his own mother, taking three very public attempts to succeed. He had divorced then mur-

dered his first wife and kicked to death his second wife. He'd become a master of every sin known to man and openly reveled in it. As any ordinary man of ordinary means he still would have been a monster without compare, but as the most powerful man in the world ruling the most powerful empire in history, his unbridled absolute power allowed him to pursue evil as if evil were merely a whim. This was a man who believed he was a deity and killed Christians because they would not worship his image, the man who had killed the apostles Peter and Paul and seemed intent on ridding the earth of the first generation of Christians.

Without realizing it, Leah drew close to her father again.

As if sensing her fear, Hezron stepped in front of her, blocking her from Helius.

"You have nothing to fear," Helius said. "For reasons that are obvious now that I see your daughter, this man wishes to purchase your freedom."

Over Hezron's shoulder, Leah saw Chayim bow his head then raise it again to quickly explain to her father. "I have only honorable intentions, Rabbi. I had hoped to discuss this with you in far better circumstances. And only if Leah gave me encouragement to do so."

"You know this man?" Hezron said to her softly.

"I do," Leah said.

"How long?"

Implicit in the question was another: *Why have you kept it hidden from me?*

"Not long enough for her to understand my feelings for her," Chayim answered. "But after I heard of her arrest, I knew there was no other choice but to approach Helius and—"

"My question was not directed at you." In her father's quiet voice, Leah heard the steel that had made him legendary among the Jews of Rome. "My daughter can and will speak for herself."

Chayim bowed his head.

"How long?" Hezron asked her again.

"Only a few days," Leah said.

"Where did you meet?"

Part of her marveled. The royal palace was a place as foreign to him as it was to her. Helius, the second most powerful man in the world,

was only two steps away. Yet Hezron ignored his circumstance, his surroundings, and the man with the power of life and death as if he were at the synagogue, where dozens gathered to glean wisdom from his interpretations of the Law.

Where did you meet?

Leah agonized. Chayim had been invited to a secret meeting of Christians. Soldiers had burst in to arrest all of them. Chayim had defied the soldiers, proving his trustworthiness to all the other Christians.

Yet to answer would be to let her father know that on that same evening, she had committed her heart and soul to the Christos. That she—like her brother Nathan, who had already died in the arena for his faith—believed that the promised Messiah had arrived and fulfilled the laws and promises of God’s covenant with Israel, thereby inaugurating the kingdom of God on earth.

Shortly after Nathan had died for his faith, Hezron had lost his eldest son, Caleb, because Caleb had tried to defend Nathan. Leah was Hezron’s only remaining child, and despite all that he had lost and despite how fully she knew and understood his pain because of losing his two sons, she had still chosen the Christos. How could she explain that to him? That she’d made her choice, even knowing that she, too, might lose her life on account of her faith in the Christos, and worse, that the Christos himself had warned faith would turn family members against each other?

“Where did you meet?” Hezron repeated. “Was it when the Sabbath ended, the evening you told me you needed to visit a sick widow?”

“Yes,” Leah whispered, feeling great shame for the lie she’d told that night.

He turned and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Whatever happens here, know that I understand. I don’t condone it. But I understand that love between a man and a woman is a powerful force. I would have done the same to be with your mother.”

A tiny smile crossed his strong features, and she knew he was remembering her mother and their love. “In fact,” Hezron said, still smiling, “your mother did the same for me before we married.”

Again, he spoke as if they were alone. As if it were love for a man that had drawn her out of the house. He was unaware that she had betrayed

him and his faith. Would he be this forgiving if he knew it had been a rejection of his teachings instead?

Hezron turned to Helius. “The Romans are men of law. While I am not a citizen, I have obeyed all your laws. We do not need our freedom purchased. I am formally requesting that you either release us or allow me to hire a lawyer to defend us against whatever charges have been laid against me.”

“Christians get no such privilege,” Helius said. “They are treasonous, and Caesar has made very plain the consequences for those who will not worship him.”

Hezron snorted. “If that is your accusation, let me bring forth the witnesses who will attest otherwise. I am a rabbi, well-known for my teachings against the Christians.”

“What about your daughter? Will witnesses clear her of the accusation too?”

Hezron drew an indignant breath, then released it slowly, as if finally understanding the sudden and unexplained arrest by soldiers.

He turned to Leah. “You? You too?” His voice was broken of the strength it had just contained.

Tears began to stream down Leah’s face at his obvious pain. She ached for her father to reach out and touch her face, to wipe her tears as he had done all her life.

Hands at his sides, he spoke. “It is true, isn’t it? You are a follower.”

Before she could utter the words that she feared might kill him, Chayim interrupted, speaking to Helius. “The charges are irrelevant. I’ve arranged for you to receive the amount agreed for you to release them. You said nothing about bringing them here. Or bringing me here, for that matter.”

“Things have changed,” Helius said, still staring at Leah and Hezron. “This was before I found out who the old man was.”

Hezron moved his gaze from Leah to Helius, who continued to speak.

“I began to wonder why anyone would pay such a large ransom to release you from the arena, so I made inquiries,” Helius said. “I discovered you are a great rabbi. Which is very convenient. I need your help inter-

preting a letter written by a Jew. Once you have done that for me, I will release you and your daughter.”

“Give me the letter now so that I can be done with it,” Hezron answered. Strength seemed to return to him, as if he’d made a decision. “I will do anything to save my daughter, no matter what faith she follows.”

Hezron lifted a hand and gently touched Leah’s cheek. He brushed away a tear, and she knew that he was giving her a silent message of love and acceptance.

“You will be provided the letter and a place to work,” Helius said. “See to it that you understand the letter well enough to explain everything in it to me.”

“This was not what we agreed!” Chayim said.

“Silence,” Helius said calmly. “Before I have your tongue removed.”

Chayim looked across at Leah. Their eyes met briefly. Then she dropped her head, torn with emotion.

One man, a man she might be able to love, had taken great risk to rescue her by bribing Helius. The other man, her father, had been put at great risk because of her and was still willing to rescue her at any cost. She felt as if she’d been placed between them, and she could find no words.

The tension was broken by the appearance of a large man stepping through the archway of the courtyard. He had a well-scarred face and a savage smile. He carried a sack in one hand. Tigellinus, prefect of the emperor’s soldiers.

Gaius Ofonius Tigellinus had become friends with Nero when Nero was still a teenager, and had always encouraged Nero’s excesses. It was Tigellinus who had revived the hated treason courts, and Nero used this new power with ruthlessness, taking property and life with mere accusations.

Tigellinus caught Helius’ eye and lifted the sack high, as if it were significant.

“Go now,” Helius immediately told Leah, Hezron, and Chayim. He waved at the slaves standing at the far side of the courtyard. “These slaves will ensure each of you is placed under guard in separate quarters.”

“Me!” Chayim said. “You have no right to do this to me. Not after what I’ve paid for this.”

“Of course I do,” Helius said. He turned his attention to Tigellinus, who was nearing them. Red liquid seeped from the seams of the sack.

“If you want to make an issue of this,” Helius told Chayim, “we could always have Tigellinus here add your head to the one he carries now.”



Vitas was tempted to let himself fall back into unconsciousness. The swaying of the ship would make it very easy. But he needed to find the scroll!

Before Vitas could rise, however, he sensed, rather than felt, a presence beside him.

“Drink,” a soft voice said. “Your body needs it after your fever.”

A hand cradled the back of his head and helped him sit completely upright. It hurt Vitas to turn his head sideways.

The man helping him was dressed in a simple tunic, a covering that left only his arms exposed, showing corded muscle. Vitas guessed him to be in his fifties, but he could have been older, for his face showed no softness that came with easy living. His hair matched his beard—gray hairs far outnumbering the remainder of black.

Vitas knew this man. He was a Jew. He’d been on the same riverboat from Rome to Ostia and had introduced himself as John, son of Zebedee.

Vitas groaned. Not from recognition but from renewed hopelessness. Both had been placed on this ship as prisoners; neither had known why or where the ship was headed.

Would the scroll have answers to these questions too?

John responded to the groan by lifting a ladle of water and helping Vitas drink.

“How long?” Vitas said after gulping the water.

“Your fever?”

Vitas nodded.

“The first night,” John said. “All of yesterday. And last night.”

Vitas blinked. A full day and a half on the water. A full day and a half of travel from Rome. From Sophia.

“Do you know why we are here?” Vitas asked.

The older man smiled. “The will of God.”

“Our destination?” Vitas asked, impatient with the man’s vague answer. Regardless of what the scroll might tell him, Vitas needed to get back to Rome. To find Sophia. “Did you find out from any of the crew?”

“Alexandria.”

“Alexandria!”

Vitas was not a naval man, but he knew the route to grain ports of Alexandria. Depending on winds, the ship would reach the Straits of Messina on the third or fourth day. He could leave the ship when it stopped there.

Vitas lurched, trying to get to his feet. He was first and foremost a man of action. He’d find the magister and convince him that he needed to get off the ship at the first port.

The sudden effort was too taxing. A wave of nausea knocked Vitas to his knees. Then came the convulsions of his stomach. He’d eaten so little in the past hours that he was only capable of dry retching.

John had a damp cloth and gently wiped Vitas’ face.

It was an odd sensation for Vitas, to be cared for as if he were a child. More fragments of memory returned. Vitas had not been alone during the fever. He’d woken occasionally, dimly aware of that same damp cloth during the worst of it.

“That was you,” Vitas said. He struggled again to his feet. “The blanket. Lifting me onto the deck. With me all through the fever.”

John nodded.

Vitas wanted to ask if John knew anything about the scroll, but caution tempered him. Perhaps what was inside the scroll was too valuable to let anyone know of it. Vitas, after all, had no reason to trust this Jew. The man was a stranger to him; all Vitas knew was that the Jew had defied Nero and once been exiled for it.

Vitas tried a step and nearly fell.

John reached to steady him, but Vitas pushed away his hand. “Enough. I am well now.”

The gray-haired man appeared to take no offense. “Of course.”

Vitas moved a step past him. The search for the scroll could wait. First, he needed to find the captain.

Vitas glanced around the deck. The ship was a *corbita*, a common merchant ship. Over a hundred feet long, if the ship was going to Alexandria, it would be carrying exports from Rome. In Alexandria, it would pick up grain for its return. But perhaps not for months. Too soon the winter winds would stop all travel back across the Mediterranean.

Vitas could not wait months. He knew the commander of the legion stationed in Sicily. News of events in Rome would not have reached Sicily yet, and Vitas could plead his case to the commander. Sicily was far enough from Rome to be safe, yet close enough that he could return to Rome within days, not weeks or months.

Vitas surveyed the crew, searching unsuccessfully for the captain. There were a dozen crew members in sight, engaged in the various activities necessary for sailing a ship this size. Vitas had spent months on similar ships, transporting his soldiers to Britannia and back to Italy, so the activities were familiar to him.

There was the *gubernator*—the pilot—guiding the ship with the tiller bar that controlled the enormous steering bars on each quarter. A couple of crewmen were adjusting the lines of the huge square rig, the mainsail. Another couple worked the foresail. Several more were engaged in the tedious, unending task of bailing buckets of bilgewater up from the hold. At the far end, the ship's carpenter and two assistants moved two heavy beams of lumber. Beside the carpenter, on the floor of the deck, was a large triangular frame of wood, with tools scattered beside it. It looked as if the carpenter had set aside that task to move the beams.

Vitas frowned.

No passengers.

Without fail, merchant ships carried passengers and their servants, men and women who would spend idle time in card games, dice, or commenting on the crew around them. A ship this size could be expected to have dozens of passengers.

None.

Vitas knew from experience that passengers would not be hidden belowdecks. The only quarters there belonged to the captain. They'd be

on the deck, in or near tents that their servants pitched and maintained for them.

No passengers.

He frowned again, looking more closely at the carpenter and his assistants. It appeared to Vitas that they were lashing together the two beams, forming the shape of a cross.

This was confirmed moments later when all three men strained to set the cross upright. They leaned it against the spar of the mainsail. All the rest of the crew stopped work. The exchanged glances among them were obvious.

And chilling.



“As a Jew, I’m sure you are aware of the Roman method of ruling the provinces,” Damian told his captive in the hillside olive grove.

Damian sat on the edge of the lower half of the olive press, his feet dangling just above the ground. This half was a huge horizontal disk of stone, flat on the ground, like a wheel on its side. It was fully three paces in diameter, and the top surface was the height of a man’s waist. A wide and shallow trough had been carved between the center of the disk and its outer edge, going the entire circumference of the disk. This wide groove was filled with freshly harvested olives.

“Caesar grants privileges and citizenship to those who cooperate,” Damian continued, “and ruthlessly destroys those who do not.”

The bound wrists of Damian’s captive were tied to an upright axle in the center of the olive press. His arms were stretched across the trough of the press, just above the olives that filled it. The rest of his body hung down over the edge of the press, and he stood awkwardly, his belly pressing into the stone.

“You may recall my first words to you,” Damian said. “I invited you to eat and drink. I promised to give you comfort in exchange for answers.” Damian shrugged. “You should not be surprised, then, that when you refused to speak, your food and drink were removed. That, however, is only the beginning of what you face for refusing to cooperate.”

Damian pushed himself off the edge of the olive press. He felt his ha-

tred for Nero and Helius coiling in his belly, and he used it to lash out at this prisoner. Damian needed the hate—he was not capable of torture without it.

Damian spoke to the giant slave who had been standing silently to the side. “Let’s show him what we have in mind.”

A half hour earlier, Damian had instructed other slaves to deliver several wooden beams to be left near the press. These beams were the height of a man and the thickness of Damian’s arm.

Damian picked up the end of one beam. Because of the fierceness of his hangover, his vision seemed to explode in small dots as blood rushed to his head. He fought the urge to vomit again and pretended nonchalance as he laid the beam across the olive press, several feet down from the captive’s arms and parallel to them.

This beam now rested halfway between the captive’s arms and the upper portion of the olive press, which was a second disk of stone that sat upright and fit snugly within the shallow walls of the trough of the lower disk. Like a wheel too, it had a wooden axle protruding horizontally, with a ring at the end that fit over the vertical axle in the center. This heavy wheel of stone was designed with the protruding horizontal axle to be pushed by three men walking around the outer edge of the olive press, so that the disk could be rolled continuously within the trough of the lower disk, its tremendous weight squeezing oil from olives that drained from the trough into a catch basin.

“Begin,” Damian said, holding the outer end of the beam. He’d instructed Jerome on what to do next.

Jerome moved to the axle of the upper disk and grabbed it with both hands in front of his chest. He set his weight against the axle. His head was shaved, and the layers of muscle between the bottom of his skull and the top of his neck bulged as he leaned into the axle.

Although it normally took three men to move the stone disk, Jerome shoved it forward with little sign of strain. Olives in front of the round upright stone disappeared beneath it, becoming pulp as the disk passed over. Two steps later, moving around the outside of the lower disk, Jerome reached Damian and stopped with the upper disk resting against the beam across the trough.

Jerome paused.

Damian looked at the captive farther down, whose eyes were fixed on the beam. Damian nodded. “Jerome.”

Jerome pushed the upper wheel forward another step as Damian held the beam in place so that it would not slip. The disk rolled over it, snapping it like kindling.

“I believe the sound of your arm breaking would not be much different than that. If we could hear it over your screams.” Damian grabbed another beam and laid it across the olive press a few feet closer to the captive, allowing Jerome to roll the disk over it, too, with the same splintering results. “To refresh your memory, I am a slave hunter. A man of great power has hired me to capture you. But before I deliver you to him, I want to know more about your vision, the one that is in a letter circulating among followers of the Christos.”

After all, if this was something Helius wanted badly, it would have value for Damian.

“Talk to me about your vision,” Damian continued.

He watched the face of the captive closely. A muscle twitched along the man’s jaw. But there was no other sign that the captive would respond.

“Jerome,” Damian said, “this man needs more persuasion.”

The giant slave began pushing again, until the massive wheel touched the captive’s nearest arm. A quarter turn more and his arm would be pulverized.

Damian spoke to the captive in a conversational tone. “Perhaps now you’ll answer my questions?”



“Well?” Helius demanded of Tigellinus as soon as they were alone in the courtyard. “Whose head is it?”

“I don’t like your tone,” Tigellinus said casually and just as casually placed a hand on Helius’ shoulder. “I searched among the bodies myself because I recognized the need for secrecy. But it doesn’t mean you can speak to me like I’m one of your slaves.”

Tigellinus smiled as he spoke but squeezed hard with his powerful fingers, digging into the meat of Helius’ shoulder.

After all their years together in close service to Nero, Tigellinus had

a rough affection for Helius. Tigellinus was drawn to Helius' elegance, crudeness to his effeminacy. As a devious man himself, Tigellinus admired Helius for the same quality. Yet Tigellinus knew that Helius would seize on the first sign of weakness, and he was ever vigilant to squash any signs of imperiousness.

Like now.

"You do want to apologize, don't you?" Tigellinus said, smile still in place.

"Of course," Helius said, his grimace plain. "I forgot myself simply because of my distress at this situation."

Tigellinus eased the pressure and stepped back.

"Was it Vitas?" Helius asked more respectfully.

"See for yourself." Tigellinus hid a grin as he lifted the sack and extended it to Helius.

Tigellinus was aware of Helius' squeamishness, aware that Helius had flicked a glance at his blood-crusting fingernails and swallowed back revulsion. But, because they were always involved in a subtle power struggle, Tigellinus enjoyed the chance to expose weakness in Helius. A true Roman like Tigellinus had no compunctions about the blood that flowed when hacking apart another man's body.

"That's not necessary," Helius said. "I've done my part."

"By sending me at dawn into the pile of bodies outside the arena?"

"You agreed with me," Helius insisted. "Vitas was a soldier. He would not have strapped the shield on his right arm."

Tigellinus nodded at that. Soldiers—even left-handed soldiers—were trained to handle a sword with their right hand and strap the shield to the left arm. This way, an entire line of soldiers, each guarding the next, presented an unbroken row of shields to the enemy. It was inconceivable that Vitas would have fought the retiarius with a sword in his left hand. And that could only mean something else just as inconceivable: it had not been Vitas in the arena, but a left-handed man unfamiliar with military training.

"As you promised, the face was bruised badly, almost beyond recognition," Tigellinus said. "That's how I was able to identify the body."

"Does the head belong to Vitas?"

"Check the teeth first," Tigellinus said, holding the sack open and

peering inside. "Vitas came from wealth. You'd expect the teeth to show that. And you'll also see that without blood to fill the bruises, the bone structure of the face gives a semblance of recognition."

"Please!" Helius stamped his foot, much to the enjoyment of Tigellinus. "You've already seen the head. Why do I need to do so?"

Tigellinus gave a wolflike smile. "For the same reason you asked me to bring it here."

Helius became still.

"After all," Tigellinus said, "you could have simply asked me to look closely at the body and report back to you."

Silence from Helius.

"Why then did you insist I bring the head here?"

"Enough games," Helius snapped. "Because I trust no one and you trust no one."

"You wanted the head here, in this courtyard, in case you did not like my answer. In case I told you it was Vitas. Because you are as suspicious in nature as I am. You are wondering who might have arranged for Vitas to escape, and it has occurred to you that I am one of the few with that power. You fear that Vitas and I might band together against you."

"Does the head belong to Vitas?"

"Yes," Tigellinus said.

Silence again from Helius.

Tigellinus waited, guessing the thoughts going through Helius' mind.

More silence.

Tigellinus shrugged, turned, and began to walk out of the courtyard.

"Where are you going?" Helius asked.

"To whatever business I had intended for the day before you begged me to scavenge carcasses. Since it was Vitas who died in the arena, you have nothing to fear."

Tigellinus made a bet with himself. That he wouldn't be able to reach the arch at the edge of the courtyard before . . .

"Stop," Helius said.

Tigellinus continued.

"I need to see that head!" Helius called to his back.

Tigellinus grinned in self-satisfaction. The arch was still three steps ahead.

“Certainly,” Tigellinus said. He turned and waited.

Helius approached. “Yes, yes,” he said, irritated. “You are proving yourself correct, and I’m forced to admit it. I have to see the head for myself.”

“Because . . .” Tigellinus wanted this conversation to remind Helius that, brawny as Tigellinus might be, he was still as astute as Helius. It was a way to prevent Helius from ever attempting any betrayal of any kind against him. Such were the politics of those who served Nero.

“Because,” Helius said after some hesitation, “if you helped Vitas escape, you would tell me it was his head in the bag and let me believe he was dead.” He sighed. “Are you pleased with yourself?”

“Very.” Tigellinus let his answer settle on Helius, emphasizing that he was still too smart for Helius to ever attempt to cross him.

With reluctance, Helius reached for the sack containing the head.

Tigellinus relented. “Don’t bother. I can save you the effort of looking. It is not Vitas. That tells you two things. I was not—and am not—part of the plot to aid his escape.”

“And?”

“The obvious. Vitas is still alive.”



Vitas turned to the Jew behind him.

John was already seated, his gaze on the horizon. Vitas sat beside him. The crew members had returned to their various tasks, but occasionally one would glance in their direction.

“What can you tell me about the cross?” Vitas said.

John slowly moved his eyes toward Vitas. His smile was sad, thoughtful. “I can’t think of a better question for any man to ask.”

This Jew, Vitas knew, was a Christian. Vitas also knew from his wife, Sophia, the significance that the cross played in the faith of the followers of the Christos. This, however, did not appear to be a time for any discussion about faith. The ship, for Vitas, was a floating prison, surrounded by hundreds of square miles of open water. If the crew had malevolent intentions, it was imperative to know.

“That cross there,” Vitas said, again impatient, “against the mast. What did I miss during my fever?”

“The crew is near mutiny,” John answered. “They believe this ship is doomed.”

“There’s no storm.”

“The sky has been cloudy since departure.”

Vitas knew the importance of that. Without stars at night or the sun during the day, navigation was difficult. “Still,” he said, “the breeze at this time of year is steady. Any sailor can use it for rough navigation.”

“You know as well as I do when this ship departed,” John said. “At night. Without the customary sacrifices. Nor did the captain wait for the right omens. This crew is as superstitious as any.”

Vitas needed no explanation. On occasion, captains waited days for the right omens. And they never departed without the appropriate sacrifices.

John looked away, paused in thought, and looked back. “And there is the matter of a dream the pilot had.”

“This dream?”

Dreams were highly significant too—good or bad—enough to speed or delay a ship’s departure.

“Both the first night at sea and the second night, he dreamed the sirens of the whirlpools at Messina drew the ship onto the rocks. He’s reported this dream widely, and nearly all are afraid of drowning when we reach the straits. The men grumble that it will happen because the gods have not been properly appeased.”

“The crew, then, blames us for the troubles they fear,” Vitas said.

“I’ve been told,” John replied, “that several dozen passengers had made a booking on this voyage, but were left behind because the ship left without warning. Without paying passengers, the crew expects to receive reduced wages.”

“The crew blames us.” Vitas grunted this repetition.

“They wonder who you are and why you are so valuable that the captain risks the wrath of the gods to speed you from Rome in the dead of night without the proper omens or sacrifices.”

“They could be asking the same questions about you.”

“They’ve seen me with you.” John smiled and pointed at the damp

cloth beside the netting, the cloth he'd used earlier to gently wipe the face of Vitas. "Most think I'm your slave."

"Then let me ask what they won't. Why are you on this ship?"

"Perhaps God intended for me to help spare your life."

"I don't understand."

"You understand," John, son of Zebedee said. "Why else did you ask about the cross?"



"Your name is John, son of Zebedee," Damian told his prisoner. "You are a Jew. A fisherman in your youth, raised in Galilee. I know this much about you, but not much more, except that you, like all other followers of the Christos, defy Caesar by refusing to worship him or his image."

In the olive grove, Caius Sennius Ruso had not expected it to come to this—the rough edge of stone biting into his skin, a massive weight poised to crush the bones of his arm, the smell of fresh olive oil below his face a strange contrast to the horror of the impending torture.

"Speak to me," Damian said. "End your silence."

Ruso met Damian's eyes squarely but kept his silence. If he spoke, his accent would betray him, and this man would know he was not the Jew named John, son of Zebedee.

Damian gave a barely perceptible nod, and Jerome pushed the wheel forward slightly.

Ruso could not help the cry of pain that escaped him as the stone dug into his flesh.

Damian nodded again, and Jerome pulled the wheel back slightly.

"If I understand correctly," Damian continued, intently studying Ruso's face, "you were one of twelve disciples who spent a few years with this Christos before he was crucified by a Roman procurator. John the Beloved, I believe, is how many refer to you."

Ruso clamped his jaws. He could not deny to himself how afraid he was. Yes, Ruso had expected to be captured days earlier. Yet Ruso's careful plan had fallen apart in the moment of capture. Instead of delivering him to Helius, Damian and his monstrous slave, Jerome, had taken Ruso to a shed hidden in the olive grove and begun an interrogation.

Answering any of Damian's questions that evening had been unthinkable. Doing so would have ruined what little of his careful planning was still intact. So Ruso had chosen silence and been punished for it by over thirty-six hours of hungry, thirsty solitude. And now this, a massive stone about to pulverize his arm.

"I'd prefer this to be a two-sided conversation," Damian said. "I do have real curiosity about the Christians' claims. You, of all people, would be in a position to answer, if indeed you were one of the man's best friends. How can you maintain that this Christos was risen from the dead and still expect me or any other man to believe you are sane?"

Damian gave the slight nod again. Jerome pushed the wheel forward, and again the stone's weight brought a gasp of pain from Ruso.

Lord Jesus, he prayed to his Christos, please give me strength to endure.

"If you are going to speak at all," Damian said, "I would much rather know about your vision than a claim about resurrection, which I cannot believe no matter how sincerely you might repeat it to me."

This time, however, Damian did not nod for Jerome to release the stone. It remained in place, squeezing on the muscles of Ruso's forearm and biceps. An inch more, and he knew that it would snap his elbow. Another few inches, and the bones would be mashed into pulp.

"I've had a Jewish rabbi translate and interpret your letter for me," Damian said. "The Lamb against the Beast, your Christos against the Roman emperor and the Roman Empire. Am I correct?"

Ruso was so thirsty that it felt like he verged on madness. Moments earlier, watching Damian suck juice from the orange had forced him to use all his willpower not to beg for a single drop for himself. Dizziness disoriented Ruso further; he could not think beyond a single act of resolve.

Remain silent!

Ruso was intensely focused on Damian. Dreading the next slight nod that would release the giant slave to push the stone forward that next inch.

Remain silent! Speaking would immediately reveal to Damian that Ruso did not have the Galilean accent that Damian expected to hear.

"Your letter predicts the death of Nero and suggests the possibility of civil war," Damian said. "That, truly, is what I want to discuss with you."

Remain silent! At first, in the shed, Ruso's silence had been simply to ensure that the man Damian did seek would have time to escape by ship.

"Do you have any evidence of a conspiracy that allows you to promise Nero's death to the followers of Christos?" Damian's voice had lost its conversational tone, and he leaned in, stopping inches away from Ruso's face.

Remain silent! If Damian discovered he'd captured the wrong man, he'd realize he needed to kill Ruso or face a trial and probably execution. It would be much easier for Damian to bury his mistake than allow Ruso to go free and tell the world about it.

"This is all I need from you," Damian said. "Tell me and you have your freedom. Speak or the second arm will be crushed after the first. Then your legs. And finally, your skull."

Seconds passed like hours to Ruso. He fought the urge to vomit, such was his fear. Yet even now, was John the Beloved safe from this slave hunter?

Then came the slight nod that Ruso dreaded. Jerome eased the wheel forward again, and Ruso felt the joint of his elbow begin to separate. He did not have the courage to remain silent. Eyes closed in shame, he screamed in primal fear and pain.

The pain suddenly ended.

Ruso opened his eyes. Had shock mercifully ended it?

He saw instead that Jerome had pulled the wheel away from him, while Damian shook his head in disgust.

Had the slave hunter somehow understood Ruso's shame?

"I'm a weak man," Damian said to Jerome. "I cannot do this. Not even to avenge my brother."

Damian leaned against the lower half of the olive press, still speaking to Jerome. "Put this man back in chains. Give him food and water, but make sure he remains under guard."



"Shall we wager on who will kill us?" Tigellinus asked, grinning. "Nero or Vitas?"

Helius was in no mood to make light of their situation, much as the proposed wager accurately summed up their situation. It had taken

great resolve to go ahead with the previously arranged appointment with Chayim and Leah and Hezron. He'd barely been able to focus on the conversation as he worried about Tigellinus and whose head he would bring back to the palace.

Well-justified worries.

If Vitas was still alive, Helius and Tigellinus faced a double threat. The first would come from Nero, who would lose all confidence in both of them if he discovered that they had allowed Vitas to escape Nero's wrath and punishment.

The second, just as dangerous, would come from the revenge that Vitas might seek. Aside from the fact that Vitas most certainly knew Helius and Tigellinus had encouraged Nero to provoke the physical attack that had resulted in Vitas' arrest, Vitas would discover that they had also engineered his wife's suicide and the confiscation of his estate.

Helius had no doubt that if Vitas so chose, the man had the ability and patience to find the time and place to hunt and murder each of them, no matter what precautions Helius and Tigellinus arranged. Vitas was a former soldier and war hero renowned for coolness under pressure. Who knew when he would strike with his legendary fighting abilities?

Worse, what if Vitas decided instead to marshal a circle of military allies in an attempt to overthrow Nero? The possibility was all too real. All it would take was the support of enough generals united in opposition to Nero. Their emperor, after all, had no son as successor. And, as Julius Caesar had proven decades earlier, the real power was in the loyalty of soldiers.

"We kill Vitas first," Helius said. "It is that simple. Then we have no need to worry about our own deaths."

"Parturiunt montes, nascetur ridiculus mus," Tigellinus said, lapsing into the formal grammar of a common adage. *The mountain groaned loudly in great labor, then bore a tiny mouse.*

"What are you implying?" Helius snapped.

"That your solution is no better than a mouse. Yes, Vitas' death is necessary, but it's hardly enough."

Although Helius was tempted to protest the insult, he was curious enough to remain silent.

"Listen," Tigellinus said. "His escape was plotted by men with

power, agreed? Men who had a way to find or force someone to die instead of Vitas. Men who were able to smuggle him out of the cell. Men who were intelligent enough—”

“Your point is made.”

“Even if Vitas was killed tomorrow, we still face those unseen enemies. And their malevolent motives.”

“Piso . . .” Helius said softly. Piso, the man behind a massive conspiracy that had nearly succeeded in the assassination of Nero. Piso and dozens of conspirators had been executed, but the discontent behind their effort had spread.

“With each passing month,” Tigellinus said, “Nero orders more suicides, confiscates more estates, creates more enemies. The empire is nearly bankrupt, yet he is determined to tour Greece, and you know better than I do how ruinously expensive that will be. If he is killed or dethroned before we have a say in picking a successor, we, too, are dead.”

“By the gods,” Helius swore, “do you have any idea how difficult it will be to find those who set Vitas free while keeping the hunt for them secret from Nero?”

“No,” Tigellinus said. “I’m a stupid man, capable only of holding a sword.”

“Too stupid to recognize a rhetorical question.”

“Sarcasm for sarcasm. That is certainly helpful at this point.”

Helius couldn’t understand how Tigellinus could appear to take all of this so lightly. “What if Vitas suddenly appears? How will we explain that to Nero?”

“We make sure Vitas is captured first,” Tigellinus said, “then tortured until we find out who conspired with him against us.”

Helius paced several steps. “Since you called my solution a mouse, let me point out that your solution is like mice deciding to bell the cat. Easier said than done.”

Tigellinus shrugged. “Start with his brother, Damian. Perhaps he was among those who arranged Vitas’ escape.”

“No,” Helius said with enough certainty that Tigellinus raised his eyebrows. Helius realized he’d made a tactical error, but in comparison

to their shared trouble, it was minor. "I have a spy in Damian's household."

"Interesting that you've kept that knowledge from me."

"And you don't have your own private spies scattered across the city?"

Tigellinus gave that a broad grin. "If I do, I'm not stupid enough to let it slip out in your presence."

"Hopefully your spies are as useful as mine."

"In other words," Tigellinus said, "you are confident that Damian had nothing to do with it."

"And that Vitas did not visit him or seek refuge at his estate," Helius added.

"Good. Is Damian someone we should have killed as a precaution? He, too, may have plans of revenge."

"Probably," Helius answered. "I've been informed that he's captured John and is holding him prisoner. But as he hasn't brought me John yet, I can only conclude he is plotting in some way against us."

"John?"

"The Jew. You agreed with me that we would give Damian a bounty to capture him for us."

"Ah yes. The Jew from Patmos. Responsible for that cursed letter circulating among the Christians. One that you fear may pose a threat to Nero."

"We need to understand it to know for certain. You *do* recall that conversation."

Tigellinus shrugged. "Barely important enough to remember. Especially under these circumstances."

"'Barely important enough to remember'? Let me remind you of just one rumor I've heard about it. It predicts the death of Nero. If that gets to him, we'll have another bloodbath. He sees conspiracies everywhere. If Nero hears about it—and he will—we need to be prepared."

"We won't be around for that bloodbath unless Vitas is taken care of. Which means we must have Damian killed and then take his prisoner. I assume you're going to put me in charge of the torture of both to find out all that has, shall we say, conspired?"

It was Helius' turn to smile. "As a favor to you, of course."

“Of course,” Tigellinus said, seemingly unaware that Helius was playing ironic. “I’ll make the arrangements today for Damian’s capture. It won’t be easy. He doesn’t go anywhere without guards. And there’s that giant of his.”

“Jerome,” Helius said. “He’s not a problem.”

“No? It would take ten men to kill him.”

“Leverage, my friend. You can manipulate anyone as long as you have the right leverage.”

“Leverage.”

“His family. My spy tells me that Jerome’s family lives on Damian’s estate. Why attack Jerome if you can get him to betray Damian by threatening his family?”

Tigellinus slapped Helius on the back with affection. “Sometimes you are a good man to work with.”

In his thoughts, Helius had already moved past the logistics of killing Damian. He was thinking about John’s letter. Once Hezron interpreted the strange Jewish code, he’d get John of Patmos and interrogate him to see if his answers matched Hezron’s. Once satisfied that he understood the letter completely, he’d have Hezron and John tied in sacks and dumped in the Tiber. As for the Jew girl, Helius supposed he could give her to Chayim as reward for arranging the capture of Hezron. It seemed that Chayim had somehow convinced the girl that he, too, was a follower of Christos. Chayim was turning out to be very capable and would undoubtedly prove to be of good use in the future.

But that didn’t solve the far graver problem of Vitas. Without that solved, everything else was meaningless. Helius was all too aware that Nero’s increasing lust for power was becoming more of a danger. Time and again, as Nero’s secretary and confidant, Helius had rushed from one situation to another, using a mixture of diplomacy and threats to find ways to satisfy Nero while limiting the outrage among highly placed citizens. Until now, he’d been able to juggle the dangers, fearful each time of failure and the possibility that Nero might desire to literally have his head to hold at arm’s length.

Until now . . .

“Back to my question,” Helius said. “How are the mice going to bell the cat?”

“Leverage, my friend.” Tigellinus spoke with irony, mocking the earlier words of Helius. “You can manipulate anyone as long as you have the right leverage.”

“Leverage.”

Tigellinus nodded. “If we can’t find Vitas, we find his wife. Once we have her, we have leverage against Vitas. Leverage to stop him from taking revenge. Leverage to find out from him who is behind this.”

“What good does her corpse do? In hindsight, it’s a pity we invited her to suicide, but we certainly can’t bring her back to life.”

“Are you sure she’s dead?” Tigellinus asked. “After all, you were once certain that Vitas was a prisoner of Nero.”

Helius blinked several times, suddenly understanding his companion’s line of thought.

“Find her body,” Tigellinus said, “and confirm she is dead. Or torture all of her slaves until you get the truth.”