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— An oath to uphold, a tragedy to avenge

✦ *An oath to uphold, a tragedy to avenge*



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THE
LAST
TEMPLE



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The Last Temple

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FEBRUARY, AD 67
CAESAREA

Province of Judea



The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.

REVELATION 13:5-8

From the Revelation, given to John on the island of Patmos in AD 63

☽ SUN ☽

HORA QUARTA

THE CROWDED MARKET SQUARE of Caesarea, in a city that was solidly a Roman possession, should not have been a place of danger. But a good soldier should always remain watchful. So later, in the early hours of the following dawn—before the first hammer blows descended on his helpless body as a result of his carelessness—Gallus Sergius Vitas would look back on what had happened and realize he had made his first mistake when he allowed irritation to overcome his habitual watchfulness.

He could not excuse the lapse, even though there were plenty of reasons to justify his irritation. Not the least were the fresh tattoo marks on his forehead that identified him as a slave, a criminal punished with bondage—a possession of the Beast named Nero. With these markings came a copper band on Vitas's wrist and the rough tunic of the new class of society to which he now belonged.

Since arriving in Caesarea months earlier, Vitas had posed as a slave to his brother, Damian, because that was his best protection as a fugitive from Nero. His tattoos were not from ink but from a paste made of the powdered leaves of the henna plant. They would not remain permanently. While the false markings were a symbol of hope, signifying Vitas's expectation that someday he would no longer be a fugitive but a free man again, in his heart Vitas felt this hope was a mere pretense. Each morning was an event that dulled his soul, for waking brought with it the ache that never seemed to lessen—knowledge of his wife's death.

Only recently, Damian had proposed that since Vitas was already perceived as a slave, there would be no harm in carrying the deception a step further. He had convinced Vitas to allow himself to be sold into servitude to the household of Gnaea Lartius Helva, the fiscal procurator of Judea. Damian, a slave hunter who had engaged Vitas to join Helva's household and spy on a domestic situation, had promised him it was only a temporary situation.

Vitas should have known better. Once he had agreed—with reluctance—to assume an identity as a slave named Novellus, Damian had promptly left for Jerusalem to find an old friend—Maglorius, who had been a renowned gladiator in Rome. Vitas guessed that Damian now probably spent his evenings on silk in Jerusalem, while Vitas slept on a filthy straw mattress each night, sharing cramped quarters—and fleas—with two other men who had not bathed in weeks, if not months. Vitas itched in places he'd never itched before, and for every flea he caught on his body and pinched with grim delight between the nails of his thumb and forefinger, there were scores more to replace it.

These were minor irritations, however; after he had survived a campaign in Britannia, nothing seemed worth complaint.

Just before the disastrous events in the Caesarean market unfolded, Vitas's major source of irritation was the woman his new master had assigned him to guard. Helva's wife, Dolabella. The mistress of the house rotated her bodyguards and, it was rumored, occasionally subjected them to her lascivious whims. But because her retinue numbered a dozen, she had yet to turn her attentions fully to Vitas.

Vitas had observed her closely and did not like what he saw. She was the sort of woman who relied heavily on her looks and was at an age where she had realized her looks would not remain eternal. For this day's visit to the governor, she had dyed her hair a blonde that verged on orange, donned the most luxurious clothing possible, and draped herself with pounds of jewelry, then set

out to enjoy a stroll through the market, grandly pretending she was just another Roman citizen.

In the marketplace, Vitas walked behind her with another slave, a monstrous mute named Jerome, at his right side, and two other slaves at his left. Like Vitas, Jerome had been assigned to this deception by Damian; unlike Vitas, Jerome truly was a slave and had belonged to Damian for years.

Dolabella's husband, Helva, hurrying ahead because of an urgent summons from the governor, was accompanied by half a dozen soldiers. Caesarea was not an area of unrest like Jerusalem, and the soldiers were mainly a show of prestige. The group formed a wedge that shoved aside the people at the entrance to the market.

As they made progress through the market, a trumpet sounded three times. Vitas had his mind on the synagogue beyond the market, and the noise of the trumpet barely registered on his consciousness. The smells of the market, however, were difficult to ignore.

The morning was ripe. In all senses. Perhaps in the hills, where an aqueduct fed water to Caesarea from Mount Carmel across the fertile plains, the growing strength of the sun would be welcome, as a breeze moved among the green vines. Here, in the market, where the buildings trapped the heat and the smells, the mixture of camel dung and fish and fly-speckled goat carcasses was strong enough to overpower even Dolabella's perfume.

She stopped abruptly, pushing aside a boy who was waving a branch above a skinned lamb to keep it clear of flies.

"I want that!" she shouted at her husband.

Helva stopped too. He had to raise his voice above the noise of the market. "The governor expects us. We can't be late."

"That porcelain dish!" She pointed past the boy at an old woman in a formless dark dress, rocking back and forth on her heels in front of a set of plates and cups arranged on an old blanket. "I want it."

"We must keep moving," her husband answered.

“Then you keep moving,” she said. “I want this, and I want it now. Continue without me, and I will catch up.”

She did not say “*we* will catch up,” although Vitas and Jerome and the two other slaves assigned to attend her made it a group of five. Slaves were objects; it would be ridiculous for their mistress to speak as if they were somehow with her.

Helva gave a wave of frustration, his face displaying a universal look of impatience and helpless exasperation. Then he walked away, flanked by his soldiers.

“How much?” Dolabella demanded of the old woman.

The old woman’s reply was barely audible as she named a price.

“What?” Hands on her hips, Dolabella projected outrage. “Robbery.”

Unlike most slaves, Vitas had a sense of the value of fine objects. In another lifetime, he’d accumulated more than his share, only to have his entire estate confiscated by Nero. He knew the old woman’s request was anything but robbery.

“It is the last of our household,” the woman said. “I need the money to—”

“Save your lies,” Dolabella snapped at the old woman, then cocked her head. “Your accent. You’re a Jew. Here, in the market. I should have you arrested.”

“My entire family was killed during the riots,” the old woman said. “My home taken. Please. This is all that I could rescue. I need to sell it to survive.”

The riots had taken place months ago, in the fall, just before Vitas had arrived in Caesarea with Damian and Jerome. Vitas well knew what had happened. A dispute between Greeks and Jews over a building project near the synagogue had festered, then erupted because of the former governor’s incompetence and greed. Twenty thousand Jews had been slaughtered in the city, triggering rebellion all across Judea. Jerusalem had rebelled against Rome and was in the hands of the Jews. Then came the formal declaration of the empire’s war against Judea. Rome had two legions in Ptolemais.

Vitas had heard that the Fifteenth Legion was on the way from Alexandria to add to the buildup of military power; the news reminded him of all he had lost through Nero's persecution.

"I said, save your lies. This is my offer." Dolabella named a sum that was one-tenth of what the old woman had requested. Then Dolabella noticed that Vitas was frowning. "Is this your business?" she demanded.

Vitas stared at the ground. He should not have given any indication that he'd been listening. But seeing the old woman had awakened what was never far from his thoughts. Memories of his wife. A Jew. Murdered by Nero. If only his estate were all that Nero had taken from Vitas.

A blow struck his face. Dolabella had slapped him. "I asked you a question!"

Vitas lifted his eyes again to Dolabella, whose cheeks were tightened with rage, exposing the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes that she was so desperate to hide with makeup.

"It is not my business," Vitas said.

"Make sure it remains that way." Dolabella leaned forward, grabbed the old woman's hair, and yanked her to her feet. "Jew, perhaps you should just give me the dishes. I won't tell the authorities about you."

Vitas stepped forward and grasped Dolabella's wrist. "Let go of this poor woman."

"What? You defy me? I shall have you crucified."

Vitas doubted that. The household had paid too much to acquire him and Jerome. Helva would not allow execution. Vitas did expect punishment for this, but he guessed it would be a token effort to satisfy Dolabella's pride.

"Let go," Vitas repeated to Dolabella. "Now."

She must have seen the cold resolution in his eyes. Heard in his voice the iron of a man long accustomed to giving orders.

She dropped the old woman's wrist and glared at Vitas.

This, Vitas realized later, became the moment where irritation

overshadowed his military-trained watchfulness. Vitas had some coins hidden in his belt. He smiled at Dolabella as he dug out the coins. Easily a month's wages for a laborer.

Later, thinking about these events before he faced death for his role in them, Vitas would wonder if his impulse came from a sense of justice, from sympathy for the old woman built on the love he had for his dead wife—who had also suffered because of her Jewish identity—or from the satisfaction of defying Dolabella. Whatever the answer, later he would tell himself he should have been more aware of the impending danger.

Somehow the mood in the market had shifted, quieted. While he noted it, he did not act upon it. Instead, he remained focused on what was directly in front of him. Vitas gave the coins to the old woman. "Hold on to your porcelain," he said. "And may God be with you."

Dolabella slapped Vitas again. "On your knees," she spat. She snarled at all of her bodyguard slaves. "Each of you. On your knees with him. A lesson will be taught here."

Still standing, Vitas glimpsed motion over Dolabella's shoulder, and he looked past the woman.

A transport man had been trying to move a herd of camels away from a silk vendor's stall, each animal tethered to the next. But there was smoke. Of torches. And . . .

Another slap across his face. "On your knees," Dolabella shouted.

Vitas felt a hand on his waist. Jerome, already kneeling, was trying to pull him down.

But Vitas had greater concerns. Someone had thrown oil across the backs of the camels. Others, armed with the torches, were lighting the soaked camels, turning them into living firebrands. In seconds, the huge beasts had begun to plunge up and down in panic, breaking free of the tethers and crashing among the people of the crowded market.