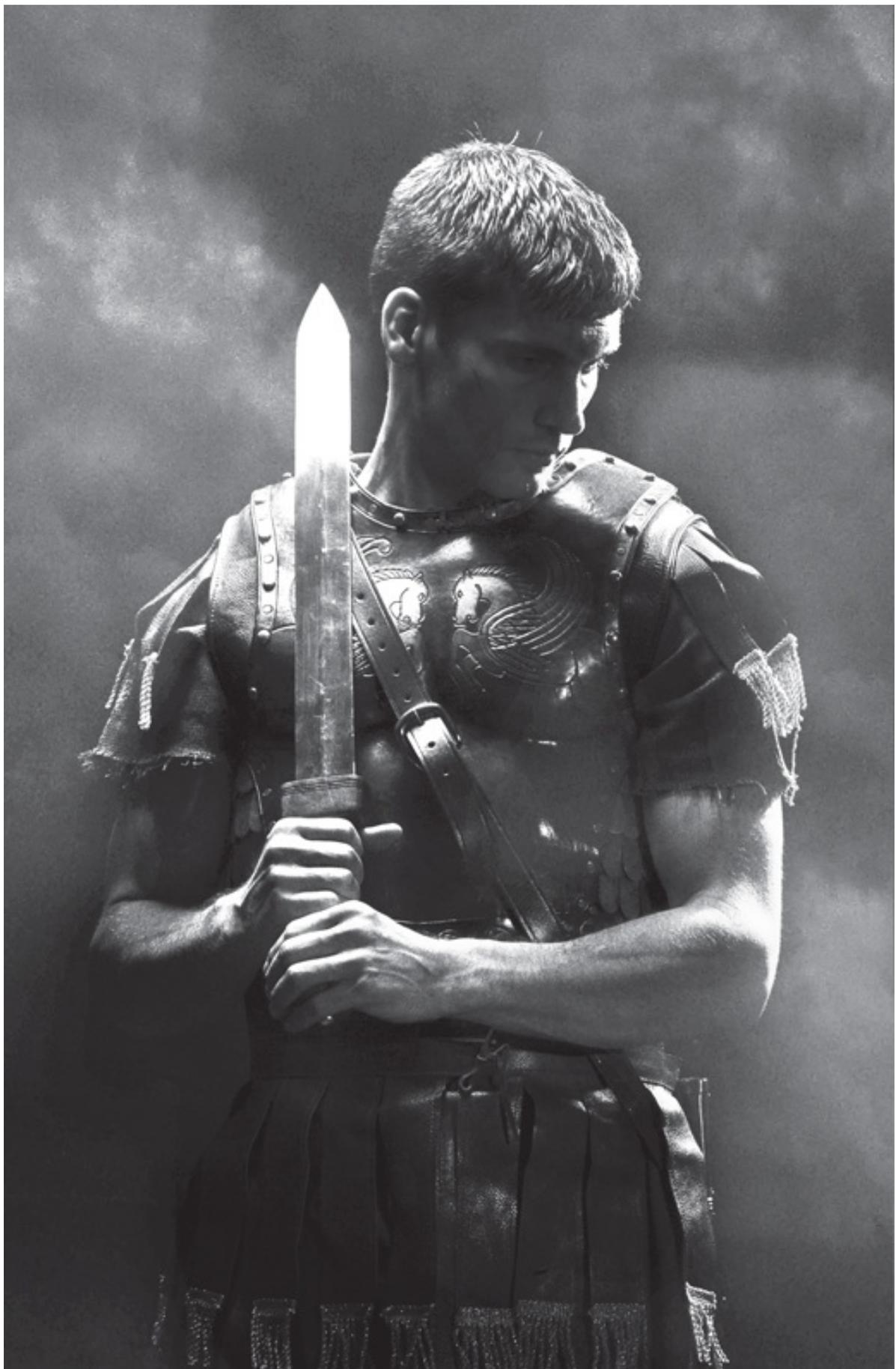


HANK
HANEGRAAFF ✚ SIGMUND
BROUWER



THE LAST TEMPLE

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



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LAST
TEMPLE



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*To my daughter Elise Hanegraaff.
Brilliant and beautiful, she relentlessly
explores the world through the power of story.*

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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.

hora prima: first hour: 6–7 a.m.

hora secunda: second hour: 7–8 a.m.

hora tertia: third hour: 8–9 a.m.

hora quarta: fourth hour: 9–10 a.m.

hora quinta: fifth hour: 10–11 a.m.

hora sexta: sixth hour: 11 a.m.–12 p.m.

hora septima: seventh hour: 12–1 p.m.

hora octava: eighth hour: 1–2 p.m.

hora nonana: ninth hour: 2–3 p.m.

hora decima: tenth hour: 3–4 p.m.

hora undecima: eleventh hour: 4–5 p.m.

hora duodecima: 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.

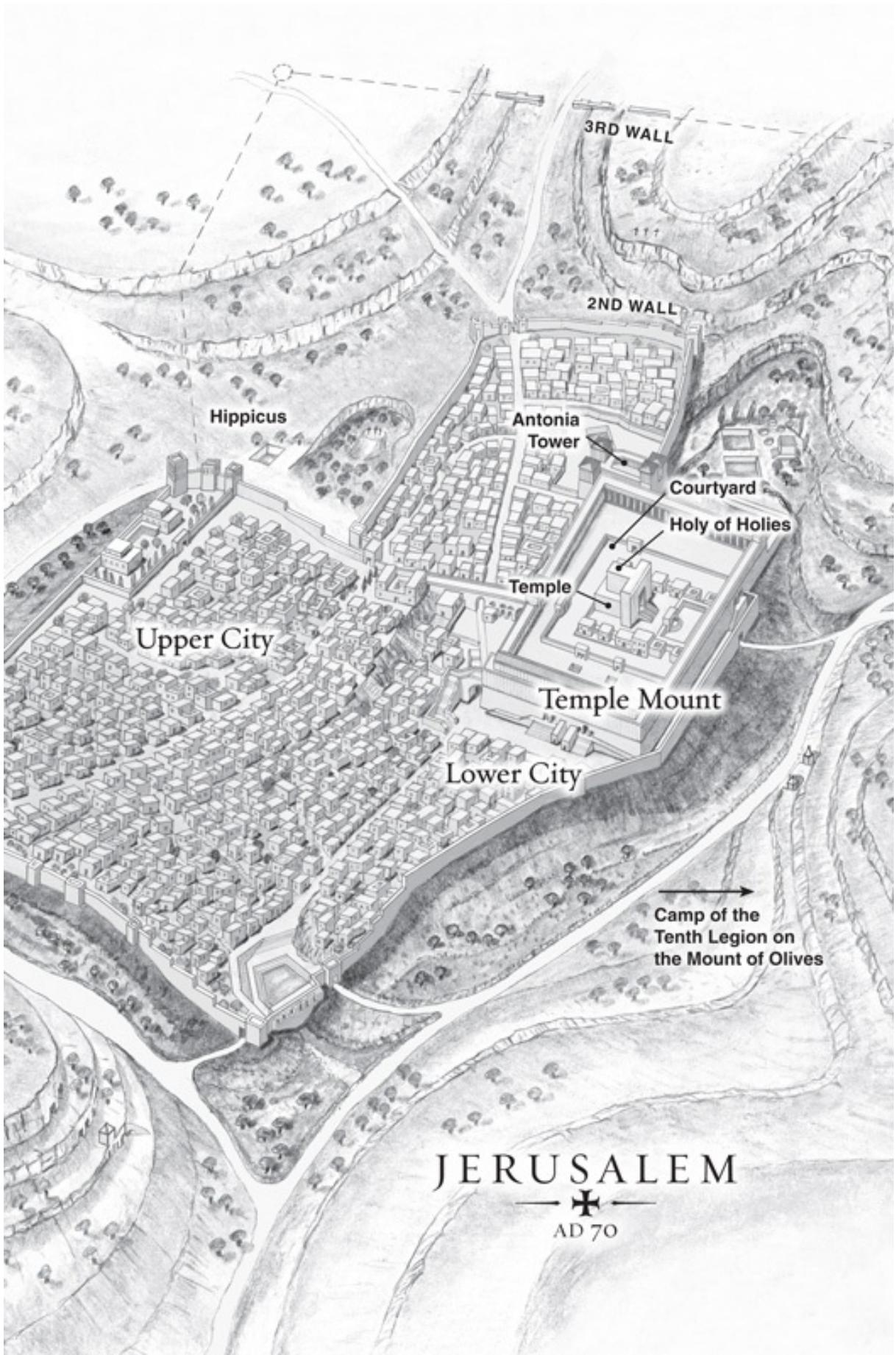
The Romans divided the night into eight watches.

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.



Dramatis Personae

Alypia: Widow of Lucius Bellator; former lover of Maglorius; stepmother of Valeria and Quintus

Amaris: Wife of Simeon Ben-Aryeh

Annas the Younger: Former high priest

Atrionius Pavo: Captain of the ship that carried John and Vitas to Alexandria

Bernice: Queen of the Jews; sister of Agrippa II

Caius Sennius Ruso: Wealthy senator; friend of John

Chayim: Son of Simeon Ben-Aryeh

Dolabella: Wife of Gnaea Lartius Helva

Gaius Calpurnius 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: Former Roman procurator of Judea

Gnaea Lartius Helva: Fiscal procurator of Judea

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

Hezron: Famed rabbi in Rome; father of Leah

Jerome: Slave of Damian

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

John of Gischala: Leader of the Jewish Zealots in Jerusalem

Joseph Ben-Matthias: Prominent citizen in upper city Jerusalem

Leah: Daughter of Hezron and a follower of the Christos

Maglorius: Former gladiator; former servant in the Bellator household

Marcus Antonius Julianus: Roman procurator of Judea

Marcus Cocceius Nerva: Roman senator opposed to Nero

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

Quintus Valerius Messalina: Ten-year-old son of Lucius Bellator

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

Simon Ben-Gioras: Leader of a Jewish faction in Jerusalem

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

Sporus: Nero's young lover

Titus Flavius Vespasianus: Son of Vespasian; general of the Roman legions besieging Jerusalem

Valeria Messalina: Daughter of Lucius Bellator

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.

Hora Quinta

Screams rose in reaction to the mayhem. Vitas pushed Dolabella backward, toward the market stalls.

“You filthy—” Her hand rose in an arc to slap him yet again, but this time, Vitas lifted his own forearm in a lightning-swift move of self-defense and blocked the blow with his wrist, stunning her into silence. He rammed a shoulder into her belly and rose with her over his back, carrying her with his right arm.

His path to safety, however, was blocked by the old Jewish woman. He crouched and grabbed the old woman’s wrist, pulling her to her feet. He was just about to attempt to lift her with his other arm when Jerome moved him aside and pulled the old woman into his arms. He rushed ahead of Vitas with the fragile woman and set her in a stall, beneath a table covered with copper pots and pans.

Vitas rushed in the same direction with Dolabella and, with no effort at gentleness, tossed her beneath the table. As both men backed away from the table, Jerome grabbed the overhang of the stall and pulled it down, bringing the front half of the entire structure over the table. It was the best protection they could offer as they turned back to the market. Even with half a dozen soldiers, Gnaea Lartius Helva was vulnerable. Gone berserk, camels were nearly unstoppable.

Yet that wasn’t the danger.

Vitas was taller than most, and he saw it unfolding. Against the flow of the stampede of people fleeing the camels, men in long robes, perhaps twenty of them, advanced. Vitas saw a flash of steel in sunlight. A short dagger.

Sicarii. A planned assassination.

These extreme Jewish Zealots were known to conceal their *sicae*, or small daggers, beneath their cloaks to stab their enemies—Romans or Roman sympathizers, the Herodians, or wealthy Jews who embraced Roman rule—then lament with those around them to blend into the crowd.

In Caesarea, because of the rebellion, no longer were crowds allowed to assemble for events or holidays. Lighting camels on fire was a brazen tactic, and they could have only one target in mind: Gnaea Lartius Helva, the fiscal procurator of Judea.

Protecting Helva was more than duty for Vitas and Jerome and the other bodyguards. It was literally life or death—not only for Helva, but for his slaves. Allowing an owner to be murdered meant punishment by death for all the slaves in the household.

As Vitas sprinted forward, he saw one soldier go down. Then another. And another. The Sicarii swarmed in deadly precision, taking down the ring of men around Helva.

A camel plunged toward Vitas. He dodged, feeling the bulk of the camel’s body

brush against him and the heat of the unquenchable fire on the camel's hide.

When he looked again, Helva was down.

Knowing Jerome was beside him and knowing the mute's intelligence and ability to assess a situation, Vitas stopped and held up a commanding hand, for a moment becoming the Vitas of old. This sense of authority was second nature to him, something he'd had to set aside after the copper band had been put on his wrist and the mark on his forehead.

"Too late," Vitas said tersely to Jerome. "We've failed."

Vitas understood too well the implications. They had not only failed, but failed spectacularly. As fiscal procurator of Judea, now including Galilee and Samaria, Gnaea Lartius Helva had been one of the highest-ranking officials in the province, with only the procurator Marcus Antonius Julianus—governor of Judea—having more authority. Even so, Helva did not report to Julianus but directly to Nero. That the second-highest official in the land had been assassinated was disastrous enough. To give the triumph to the Jews was double disaster. It would only add to their sense of invulnerability that had grown in the weeks after routing Gaius Cestius Gallus and chasing him and his army back to Syria.

Vitas put his hand on Jerome's shoulder. The man had a blocky head with ragged hair and could not speak, his tongue having been cut out in his childhood. Vitas knew this because Jerome, too, had been sold by Damian to Helva.

"My friend," Vitas said, looking upward into the large man's face, "we should take care of ourselves now. We need to run and find a place to hide until Damian returns tomorrow to vouch for us. In this chaos, it's our opportunity. Follow me."

He turned, expecting Jerome to instantly obey. But Jerome spun him around with a hand on his shoulder. As Vitas stumbled off balance, Jerome hammered him in the forehead with an elbow. An ox would stagger under a blow like this from Jerome; Vitas had no chance. He fell flat onto his back.

With fleeing people streaming around them as if they were boulders in the center of a river, Jerome dropped on top of Vitas, sitting across his chest, pinning both of Vitas's arms with his knees.

Vitas was too dazed to speak. Against the glare of the sun, he saw Jerome's arm rise, then slowly descend. Vitas felt a bite on his throat. He knew what it was. The sharpened edge of steel. He'd seen the knife in Jerome's hand.

It was an incomprehensible turn of events. Jerome had been Damian's slave for years. To turn against the master's brother was beyond belief.

Yet it was happening. And Vitas was powerless.

He closed his eyes, seeing the face of his dead wife, Sophia. If he was going to die, that was what he wanted to take with him. In this moment, he didn't need to pray that he would see her on the other side. That had been his prayer every night before sleep and every morning before rising from bed. If those pleas had not been heard in all the months since her death, a prayer in the confusion of the market stampede would not be heard either.