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JOTAPATA 67 AD **Angelica & Joel**

The cacophony of the battering ram and ongoing construction of siege towers and ramps paused briefly, replaced by the soldiers' sickening screams as boiling oil seared their flesh. For forty-seven days, those trapped behind the walls of Jotapata held off sixty thousand Roman soldiers. Late at night, with babies sleeping and the townspeople silently praying, pebbles, loosened by the rams, skittered to the ground as a constant reminder that the wall would soon crumble. It was only a matter of time before the massive army would flood the town. The four legions would gain access either through the smashed wall or the newly finished ramp's height.

Under cover of darkness, one traitor escaped unseen. Boldly approaching the commanding Roman officer, Vespasian, the informer disclosed the Jew's dire situation and where the exhausted sentinel slept. Concealed by heavy fog, the soldiers nimbly scaled the walls, quickly slitting the sleeping guard's throat, then opening the gate.

Armed with swords, torches, daggers, revenge, and fury, the army marched through the streets, slaughtering the rebels who wanted freedom from Roman rule and anyone else who was unlucky to be trapped in the crossfire. Jotapata would be an example for those foolish enough to violate Roman peace. There would be no mercy.

Arriving in Jotapata two months earlier for her wedding, the young bride clung to her husband. Her family surrounded them. Quickly, they moved all the furniture in front of the door. Hiding in the shadows of the small house with knives, sticks, and jagged shards of pottery for weapons, the group waited for the soldiers to break down the door.

Praying as tears fell down her face, Angelica listened as the victims' shrieks came closer. She held her ears, pushing her face deep into her husband's chest. Thick smoke overpowered the smell

of sweat. The soldiers planned on burning the town until all were dead or taken captive.

Removing Angelica's head covering, the groom wrapped it around her face to block out the smoke. Frantically trying to escape, the small band of survivors tossed the furniture aside.

The young newlywed let go of his wife's hand only long enough to yank the handle of the door. The horrors of the siege paraded past: women pleading for their lives, children taken as slaves, and men's bodies piling up on the ground.

Angelica reached for her husband, but he was no longer there. The sword had thrust through his stomach and pinned him to the ground. Grunting, the soldier yanked out the blade and spat on the dying man.

Unable to scream, Angelica's eyes grew large as she trembled uncontrollably. Her brother, Joel, encircled his arms around his sister and parents.

The soldiers held their swords to the necks of the shattered family. Joel shoved the sword aside and charged the leader, stripping him of his dagger, grazing the man's side. One soldier put him into a chokehold as the others readied their weapons.

Retrieving his knife, the tall leader wiped the blood from his wound and smiled. "Unfortunately, you are worth more to me alive than dead." He ordered his men to put away their weapons. Sneering, he smashed his fist into Joel's stomach and said, "We will see if that fighting spirit will keep you alive in the arena. Gladiators are in big demand. If you survive, the women will love you."

Peering at the huddled group, the centurion pointed to Angelica. "Bring me her." He pulled the face-covering down and nodded his head. "She is beautiful. Some lucky man will enjoy her body. The money I make selling these two and others like them is payment for the hell I have lived through the last forty-seven days. Do what you want with the rest."

A man grabbed Angelica's arm, bound her wrists with the head covering, and then shoved the grieving widow. Angelica screamed as she tripped over her husband's body.

Her mother, Joanna, shouted as her children were dragged away, "Meet us in Jerusalem."

Micah asked his wife, "Why Jerusalem?"

“It is the safest city in the empire. The soldiers will never break through the walls.”

2

GALILEE 67 AD Joanna & Micah

Under the scorching sun, sores festered around Thaddeus's lips, where the soldier kept licking to relieve his thirst. His face was so dusty; he could write his name across his cheeks. Turning to the other soldier, Hermon, he said, "General Vespasian is determined to send a message to anyone who should dare to violate the peace of Rome."

Hermon grunted. "Rome is so generous. They allow people to practice their local customs and religions as long as they pay taxes and not compromise their laws."

With a faraway look in his eyes, Thaddeus said, "I dream of blood. No matter how much I wash my hands, the crimson stain is always there. Screams live in my head, along with captive children and women, led to the slave market. I am walking away from the army. I can't claim to be a Christian, then be part of this monstrous machine that devours Jews, Christians, and rebels, crushing hopes and families."

Hermon nodded his head. "I understand. But they will find you; they can't allow one soldier to put the rest at risk. They will stone you as an example of what happens to deserters."

"Death by stoning is preferable to the slow death that is draining the life from me." Tears streamed down Thaddeus' face, turning the dirt into streaks of mud.

Sweeping his arm from left to right, Hermon said, "Look around us. God has placed other soldiers from the Way as our comrades. He has kept us from battle."

"Instead, we stay behind, gazing into the eyes of corpses, watching the innocent march into the arms of slave masters. We make sure no one removes the bodies of their loved ones from crosses," said Thaddeus.

"God has a plan. He removed us from Jerusalem safely; he will use us where we are." Hermon patted his pouch, "With this gold, we will make a difference."



The four drunken soldiers laughed and called out to Thaddeus and Hermon, “You missed all the fun in Jotapata. We got ourselves some nice slaves,” he said as he pointed to the three men and two women.

“Would you be willing to sell them?” asked Hermon as he looked Joanna up and down. Pointing to the woman, he said, “She would keep me warm at night. The others I will sell on the slave block.”

Thaddeus slit off Micah’s tunic. “He is built like a gladiator, although too old for the game.” He turned to the bare-chested man, “Those muscles better not just be for show.”

The tall soldier said, “Five of the finest quality slaves.” He slapped Joanna’s bottom and told Hermon, “I know you fancy this one.”

Hermon said, “Three are very old, and the other two are middle age; we will take them but expect a discount.” Joel and Angelica’s family stood rigidly, not knowing what to think.

The deal was made. Hermon and Thaddeus emptied their pockets and gained five slaves.

Angelica’s father, Micah, yanked hard on his chain. He intended to strangle Hermon; instead, he pulled down the other four captives. Hermon gently helped each to stand and said, “We will get you out of here; I am not certain how.”

The commanding officers approached the two soldiers. “I have a job for you.” Pointing to his sister and her children, the superior said, “We have family outside of Pella; my sister will be safe with them. I want you to be their escort, then get back here as soon as you can.”

Hermon winked at Thaddeus and whispered, “I told you God had a plan.” The Christian soldiers hoped to rescue Angelica’s family from slavery.