

JOHN HAGGE

AVENGER
OF BLOOD

A Novel

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November, A.D. 96

JACOB SAT AT THE elegant mahogany writing desk, intently focused on two goals: composing a letter and ignoring his brother, who was leaning against one of the tall marble columns in the spacious room that had served as their father's library and home office. Ordinarily, ignoring his brother was not a difficult task; this afternoon, however, Peter seemed determined to distract him with questions.

"What are we going to do about Rebecca?" he asked for the second time.

Jacob finally looked up. "What do you mean?"

"Rebecca," Peter repeated. "I'm worried about her."

Peter shifted his weight and limped clumsily toward the desk, obviously fatigued after a full day in the harbor, and Jacob frowned. He didn't want to deal with his brother's worries about their young sister right now. He wanted to finish his correspondence and then finalize his plans to travel to Rome.

"Marcellus is worried too," Peter said, and the older man nodded his agreement.

"Haven't you noticed how despondent she is?" Peter continued. "She mopes around the house and doesn't talk much—doesn't even come downstairs for dinner some days. I'm very concerned. Rebecca is not the same person she used to be."

Neither am I, Jacob thought. He set the pen down and moved a leather weight on top of his unfinished letter. A picture flashed through his mind of his father sitting at the same desk, his bulk filling the room, his frame perched on the same backless chair covered in striped brocade, his massive hand clutching a fragile reed pen as he scratched words and numbers on an unrolled parchment with a flourish. His mother, Elizabeth, entered the mental picture, gently chiding her husband: "Put your work aside, Abraham; dinner is ready. The family is waiting." But the family was not waiting for Abraham anymore. In fact, both of Jacob's parents were dead now.

Clamping down on the enormous sense of loss that swept over him, Jacob said curtly, "You wouldn't be the same person either if you'd spent the last year on Devil's Island instead of living like this." He looked around the lavishly furnished room in the sprawling villa his father had built in the hills overlooking the harbor of Ephesus.

Jacob was reluctant to admit, even to himself, just how much he resented the fact that Peter had escaped the previous year's persecution. Granted, Peter had not forsaken his faith and sacrificed for Caesar as their older sister, Naomi, had; instead, Peter had cowered and hidden while the rest of the family was arrested and forced to either make the imperial sacrifice or be sentenced to hard labor. And Jacob did admire the way Peter had overcome his physical disability and his timid personality to take over the daily operation of one of the empire's largest businesses. Still, while Rebecca had endured the living nightmare of Devil's Island and Jacob had been sentenced to backbreaking work as a rowing oarsman on a Roman warship, Peter had enjoyed the benefits of the family's vast wealth. A palatial home, the finest food, luxurious clothes—all the things Jacob had once taken for granted before he lost them in an instant.

"It's not necessary to keep reminding me that you and Rebecca suffered a great deal while I didn't," Peter started to leave, taking a few stiff steps, then he turned back around. "Our quibbles with each other aren't important," he said after a moment. "What *is* important is Rebecca. We need to do something so she doesn't become a recluse."

“I’m sure Rebecca will be fine.” Jacob attempted to soften his tone as well. “She just needs time adjust to the idea of being home again, to being free.”

“She’s been home over a month and she hasn’t adjusted,” Peter pointed out. “Instead, she’s becoming more and more withdrawn.”

Marcellus finally joined the conversation. “And more fearful. As much as she went through Devil’s Island, Rebecca wasn’t as afraid then as she seems to be now. The least noise startles her, and she is so protective of Victor that she will scarcely let him out of her sight.”

“That’s not necessarily bad, is it?” Jacob asked the retired medical officer. “After all, he’s only three months old.”

Marcellus answered, “It goes beyond maternal instinct, I think.”

“Another thing,” Peter said. “She never cries anymore.” He eased himself onto one of the lounge settees. “There was a time I would have considered that good news, but somehow it’s not.”

Jacob silently agreed that the changes in his sister were not good news, and he realized just how much he missed her stormy outbursts of tears as well as the sunshine of her quick laugh. These days her behavior, as well as her appearance, was dull and flat. Rebecca truly wasn’t the same person. None of them were, really, but especially not Rebecca. And her suffering hadn’t ended once they’d been set free. When they returned home, she’d endured yet another crushing blow.

That thought galled Jacob, and he suddenly gave the desk a resounding thump with the heel of his hand. “How I’d love to get my hands on—”

“That won’t help,” Peter said quickly. “You know how we all feel about not seeking revenge.”

“I wasn’t referring to Damian this time, although I’d like a piece of his hide as well.” Jacob clenched and unclenched his fist reflexively. From the moment he’d been released, Jacob had been determined to pursue his family’s persecutor and to exact vengeance for the deaths of his mother and father, not to mention what Damian had done to Rebecca. But the apostle John had reasoned with Jacob and, when that failed, had argued with him and pleaded with Jacob not to seek revenge. John had eventually worn him down, but Jacob’s anger still boiled over from time to time, and his relationship with John had become strained.

Now there were not only Damian’s atrocities to consider, but someone else had wounded his sister and Jacob’s instincts were to go after him as well. For the moment, however, he suppressed those instincts and conceded to his brother’s original question.

“All right,” Jacob said. “What are we going to do about Rebecca?”

“She needs to be distracted from her situation,” Marcellus suggested. “To get involved with something outside of herself.”

Peter spoke slowly and thoughtfully, as was his custom. “She often accompanied Mother on visits to the sick and needy. Rebecca’s very good with people—at least, she used to be.”

“That’s a wonderful idea.” Jacob drummed his fingers on the desk, then abruptly stood and began giving directions. Once his mind latched onto a solution to a problem, he saw no reason to delay its implementation. “Instruct the household staff to prepare additional food, and find out which of the church members are in need. Then tell Rebecca she’s to carry on Mother’s ministry of good works.”

“Not so fast,” Peter objected. “You don’t just *tell* someone to take over a ministry like that. Besides, Helena has been coordinating the charitable efforts Mother used to oversee, and she’s already tried to enlist Rebecca’s help. Rebecca wouldn’t do it.”

Jacob groaned and sat back down. "If Helena's involved, I pity the poor and needy more than ever. The woman's spiritual gifts must be confusion and calamity."

With a smile that momentarily widened his thin face, Peter said, "Helena can be rather flighty sometimes, but she's a good-hearted soul. Her compassion manages to overcome her confusion, and she gets the job done." His face resumed a somber expression. "And it's been quite a job. There have been far greater needs in the church body since the emperor's persecution."

"The *late* emperor, thank God." Jacob shuddered slightly. If Domitian hadn't been assassinated, he and Rebecca and John would still be prisoners.

Peter explained to Marcellus that a number of families had been split up when one or both parents were sent to Devil's Island. "The consequences have been devastating," he said.

"All the more reason for Rebecca to get involved in helping the prisoners' families." Jacob spread his hands in an appeal to the other two. "So how do we persuade her to do it?"

Marcellus rose and stretched. The late afternoon sun streamed in through an unshuttered window, highlighting the few streaks of gray in his dark wavy hair. "I can talk to her if you like. Perhaps she'll listen to me."

Jacob nodded. "Then do it." He knew Rebecca regarded the retired soldier as a father figure, and sad to say, she'd be more likely to listen to him right now than she would to Jacob. He'd been separated from his sister for almost their entire imprisonment, and their relationship had not quite gotten back to its original footing.

Jacob watched as Marcellus clapped Peter on the shoulder and the two of them left to find Rebecca. Then he picked up the reed pen and returned to his letter, thinking of what Peter had said about so many families being torn apart.

All the more reason for me to go to Rome, Jacob thought. Dozens of Christians from Ephesus and Smyrna and the surrounding cities were still being held on Devil's Island. The new emperor, Marcus Cocceius Nerva, had indicated that Domitian's political exiles would be recalled. Jacob had a few contacts in the higher echelons of Roman politics, and he intended to go there and plead the case for the religious exiles as well.

Just as you interceded for me, he silently promised his late father.

Marcellus knew where he would find her: at the top of Mount Koressos. Like a tortoise reluctant to stick its head out of its shell, Rebecca seldom left the house. When she did, it was only for an afternoon walk in the high hills surrounding the villa.

It grieved him that she no longer showed any flash of spontaneity or stubborn endurance, qualities Marcellus had seen her exhibit under the direst of circumstances. He had been stationed on Devil's Island as the medical officer for the prison camp. It was not a posting he relished, but one he had endured with a certain stoicism. His long stint in the army had ended about the time Rebecca, his brother, and the apostle John were released, and Marcellus had returned to Ephesus with them. He had been so openly welcomed into the family, and into the family of believers, that it seemed he had been there for years, not a matter of weeks.

He reflected on Rebecca's despondency as he climbed, praying silently that he would be able to encourage her. He was still wondering how to coax Rebecca out of her shell when he topped the hill and found her sitting in a clearing just off the main path.

"Hello, Marcellus," Rebecca said evenly, with no trace of a smile.

Marcellus returned the greeting, only slightly winded by the quarter-hour climb, and sat down beside Rebecca. She rocked the infant she held swaddled in her cloak, which she had draped around her like a sling to form a carrier.

They fell into an easy silence, enjoying the spectacular view. The city of Ephesus, third largest in the Empire, sprawled below them. Off to their left, in the distance, was the busy harbor, now quiet at the end of another long workday. Marcellus shaded his eyes against the reflected glare of the sun, which was about an hour from sinking below the watery horizon. He could make out the lines of a number of cargo ships moored along the docks; several of them, he knew, belonged to Rebecca's family.

"Not so long ago we spent many hours like this, sitting on a hilltop, looking out over the water," Marcellus finally said.

Rebecca didn't respond for a moment, then softly said, "It's why I come here, you know."

"No . . . I didn't." Her statement puzzled Marcellus.

"It reminds me of Devil's Island. Not the bad part," she hastened to add as he turned toward her in surprise, "but the good part."

"You mean there *was* a good part?" He looked in her direction and smiled. In spite of all the misery he had enjoyed some good times with Rebecca and John, times of laughter and sharing memories of the lives and families they'd left behind. The two unlikely prisoners—an elderly preacher and a sweet, innocent girl—had also spent many hours disciplining Marcellus in his newfound faith. Yes, there had been good times on Devil's Island, Marcellus recalled, and he was encouraged that Rebecca seemed to want to talk about them.

"The good part was finding you," Rebecca said. "And finding myself, in a way."

"What do you mean?"

Rebecca paused while she bent over and tucked her cloak around Victor, who had fallen asleep. Then she brushed her long, chestnut-brown hair back across her shoulders. "Like the work I did for John," she said. "Copying his letters to the churches about the revelation. It seemed I had a purpose for being there, that what I was doing really mattered."

"It did matter. And it does. We'll be delivering those letters—God's messages—to the churches soon."

"It's more than that, though . . . it's . . . I don't know exactly." Rebecca shrugged and grew quiet.

Marcellus sought for a way to draw her out; she was more talkative than she had been in days, and he wanted her to continue. If nothing else, he was just glad to hear her voice; more than that, he thought perhaps if she could put what was bothering her into words, she could conquer it.

"So you come here," he said, "because it reminds you of Devil's Island and the meaningful work you did for John. Anything else?"

"The rest of it is more like a feeling . . ."

"What kind of feeling?" he prompted when she hesitated.

Rebecca looked down and stroked the baby's cheek for a moment before answering. "When I was on Devil's Island—after I recovered, anyway—I seemed to have an inner strength. Even when things were really bad, and I had no hope I would ever get off the island, I could somehow manage to be strong. But now that I'm home and everything is fine, it's like I'm falling apart inside."

Her beautiful brown eyes moistened as she continued speaking. "I'm more scared now than when

was a prisoner, and I don't know why. I keep waiting for something else to happen, but I don't know what. Something bad, I suppose.

"I know that's not acting in faith," she added quickly, "but I can't seem to help it." She dropped her head, looking embarrassed. "I should be a better example. Sometimes I think I'm not much of a Christian."

"Not much of a Christian? Let's see, as I recall the circumstances that sent you to Devil's Island you stood in front of an entire cohort of Roman soldiers and refused to sacrifice to the emperor—proclaiming instead that Jesus Christ is Lord. I wouldn't call a person who does something courageous as that 'not much of a Christian.'

"You're just human, Rebecca. You've been through a lot, even since you've been home, and it's taken a toll on you."

"I thought I would feel safe again when I got home, but I don't. The house I grew up in doesn't seem safe anymore—instead of comfortable and familiar, it just seems big and scary."

"Perhaps your fear is understandable," he said. "You spent almost a year in a small enclosure—spacious, as far as caves go, but still a very small place."

Marcellus leaned backward, bracing his arms on the hard ground for support. "A Scripture passage comes to mind. The twenty-seventh psalm, I believe. 'The LORD is my light and my salvation; who shall I fear?' . . . You taught me that psalm, remember?"

"Yes, and I remember who taught it to me." A brief smile flitted across her face, the first he had seen in days. It hinted at the spark of vitality that still smoldered somewhere beneath the surface of her sadness.

"As a little girl," Rebecca said, "I never wanted the lamps to be extinguished at night. My father explained that we couldn't leave them burning because they might start a fire while we were sleeping. He said it was the job of our steward, Servius, to snuff out all the lights—but only after he had checked each room to make sure it was safe and that nothing could harm us. That comforted my fear as long as my father was in the next bedroom. I knew that if I cried, he would hear me.

"But when I was five, Papa sailed to Rome on business. He was gone for several months, and I got scared again. So Servius included me in his evening ritual while Papa was gone. He would carry me in one arm and a small clay lamp in the other. We would go from room to room, snuffing out the flickering lights of the lampstands one by one, quoting Scripture the entire time. Psalm 27 was one of his favorites. Then he would carry me upstairs to my bedroom, and I would go to sleep saying, 'The Lord is my light. The Lord is my light.'"

Rebecca grew quiet again when she finished her story, and Marcellus knew she must miss Servius, who had died on Devil's Island a few months after being sentenced.

Marcellus gave her a moment to let the memories fade, then he said, "A few minutes ago you were talking about how you had found your purpose on Devil's Island. I'm sure there's a purpose for you here, as well. A ministry God has for you—perhaps something only you can do. But you can't find what that is if you don't look beyond yourself, Rebecca."

She looked doubtful. "What could God possibly have for me to do?"

"Perhaps the same kind of work your mother did. Peter says she visited the sick and took food and clothing to those who needed it."

"Mother always took care of the less fortunate."

“Peter also said you used to go with her sometimes and that you were good with people, just like she was. I already know how you took care of John every day for the last year.”

“The truth is that neither one of us could have survived without you, Marcellus. You’re the one who risked your career, and probably your life, to hide us, bring us food.”

“All of which simply proves that we need each other. And from what I understand, there are many believers in Ephesus who need help, especially the families of prisoners.”

“Helena has already talked to me about that.”

Her voice was flat but a glimmer of interest seemed to light up her eyes, and Marcellus pressed the advantage. “Evidently she could use your assistance. According to Jacob, she has the gift of confusion.”

Rebecca rewarded him with another fleeting smile. “That sounds like Jacob . . . and Helena.” The baby fussed in his sleep, and Rebecca comforted him until he quieted. “But I can’t traipse all over Ephesus with Victor, and he’s too young for me to leave him.”

Marcellus was ready for this objection, and he had already thought of a solution. “You could leave for a few hours. Agatha is always saying that she’ll watch Victor for you.” Peter had hired Agatha, a recent convert, as part of the villa’s housekeeping staff. Agatha had a young infant of her own, so she could nurse Victor if need be.

“I suppose,” Rebecca agreed, yet she looked pained and almost panicked. “But even if I weren’t worried about Victor, I still couldn’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“I’m afraid. Afraid of what people would say. Or what they wouldn’t say. Some of the other Christians think I’m a bad person. Oh, most of them won’t say it to my face, but they talk about me behind my back. I don’t know who my friends are anymore.” Her face fell as she admitted, “And I’m still too sad to be around people most of the time.”

Now, there was a problem, Marcellus acknowledged silently. A few people had been upset when Rebecca returned from Devil’s Island with Victor. Instead of rejoicing over a fellow believer surviving the ordeal of a brutal prison camp, they had wagged fingers at an unwed mother. *If they only knew the whole story*, Marcellus thought. He’d been the one to find Rebecca after she had been sexually assaulted and savagely beaten.

“I understand,” he said. “But hiding at home all the time won’t quell the gossip. And I’m sure the people who need your help won’t really care that you came back from prison with a baby but no husband.”

Marcellus stood and offered his hand to Rebecca. The brilliant fireball of sun had faded to a burnished glow that shimmered over the Aegean waves.

“Let’s go home before it gets dark,” he said as he helped her stand and secure Victor for walking down the hillside. “Just promise me you’ll think about it, all right?”

Rebecca had thought about their conversation for several days, then she had decided to help Helena, who urgently needed her.

For the past week Rebecca had risen early each day to help coordinate their efforts to minister to the needy. The first day she’d been so upset about leaving Victor that she’d fretted constantly and had tried to rush Helena out of every home they visited. But when she’d returned to the villa, Victor was fine, sleeping contentedly in the handcarved crib that had once been hers, with Agatha and her baby.

girl close by.

After a few days Rebecca was still trying to hurry Helena along, but simply because the woman had no concept of what it meant to keep to a schedule. The needs had indeed multiplied far beyond anything Rebecca's mother had overseen. In their area of the city alone, some twelve families were in dire economic situations. In households where someone was sick, they tried to visit every day, and in one place Helena had taken several children home with her because their mother was too ill to care for them.

Rebecca's worries about people being unkind or thinking she was sinful had also evaporated. From home after home she had been embraced warmly, grateful men and women telling her how much they missed her mother, what a kind person Elizabeth had been, and how glad they were to see Rebecca following in her mother's footsteps. Rebecca's spirits had lifted immeasurably, and she was beginning to feel much more hopeful about life.

One afternoon as they returned to the villa, Helena commented on the changes in Rebecca. "It's good for you to be with people," she said.

"I enjoy your company, Helena." It was true. In spite of the air of confusion that sometimes surrounded her, Helena brought a lot of joy to people. She was warm-hearted and generous to a fault.

"I was really talking more about people closer to your own age. In fact, I was thinking you should get to know Antony."

Rebecca noted that Helena's hazel eyes—which were beautifully tinted but too large for her small heart-shaped face—always sparkled when she talked about Antony.

"My son is a good man," Helena said, "even though he is not a believer—yet. He will be someday, I know in my heart. And Antony has never opposed my charitable work, though he sometimes complains that I spend so much of my household budget to feed others that my own pantry is empty. But I notice that he's taken more of an interest in good deeds since you've been helping me."

Helena chattered on about her oldest son for a moment, and Rebecca frowned when she finally realized that her friend was trying to play matchmaker.

"Have I said something wrong?" Helena asked, then didn't give Rebecca a chance to reply. "I don't mean to be insensitive, and perhaps it's not the right time to bring this up, but you don't want to spend the rest of your life alone . . ."

She would have to think of a way to stop Helena. Antony seemed to be very nice, even though she had only met him a couple of times. An attorney, he was helping Peter and Jacob through the legal morass of getting their father's will probated. However, nice wasn't the issue. Rebecca simply was not interested. She would have to find a polite way to tell Helena.

When they arrived at the villa there was no bustle of activity as they entered the atrium, the large central room of the home. Rebecca was looking forward to a quiet hour or two. Peter and Jacob would not have returned from the harbor yet, and Marcellus was usually visiting John at this time of day. Perhaps she could even take a nap before dinner.

"We'll talk about this later, Helena," Rebecca said firmly as she headed upstairs. "I need to check on Victor right now."

"Oh, bring him down if he's awake," Helena called after her. "I love that precious boy. It's been so long since mine were babies, and I do enjoy holding them . . ."

Helena's voice trailed off as Rebecca reached the top of the stairs. She was glad to get back home to her son. Until this week Victor had never been out of her sight for more than a few minutes, and she

missed him.

Rebecca tiptoed into the bedroom and closed the door softly behind her, in case the baby was sleeping. She had taken only a few steps into the room when she stumbled and almost lost her balance. She looked down to see what had tripped her and found Agatha lying crumpled on the floor, bound and gagged, a deep gash on the back of her head. Blood had pooled and caked on her face and neck.

Rebecca knelt down beside the housekeeper. Agatha was alive but unconscious.

Instinctively, Rebecca loosened the gag and was starting to untie Agatha's hands when an icy fear gripped her heart. *Victor!*

Stifling a sob, Rebecca stood and looked around frantically. Then she ran to the other end of the room, where Victor's crib stood next to her bed.

A long, gleaming sword lay across the empty crib.

“FOR ALL PRACTICAL PURPOSES, it’s over.” Antony was delighted to deliver the good news to his clients. He sat across from them in their office at the harbor, the sounds of the cargo handlers drifting in from the dock outside as the three of them conferred over the case.

He marveled once again that the brothers were actually twins. Peter and Jacob were physical opposites—Peter, thin and frail; Jacob as muscular and sturdy as a plow ox. Antony had quickly learned they had opposite temperaments, as well. Peter was cautious and deliberate, while Jacob was impulsive, a man of constant action. He was pacing the floor, in fact, as Antony spoke.

“There will be an official ruling by the court,” he continued, “but I can assure you that it is just a legal formality.”

“You’re positive?” Jacob asked. “I don’t want to leave for Rome until I know everything’s settled.”

“About as positive as I can be. Both the law and public sentiment are on your side. Your father was well respected in this community, while the late emperor was not only despised but has now been officially dishonored by the new government in Rome.”

The case was certainly unlike anything Antony had ever seen. He had handled fairly complicated wills and estates for a few prominent citizens, but nothing that could compare to this. To begin with, the size of the estate was enormous. Abraham had been one of the wealthiest men in Asia. But political maneuvering, not to mention treachery, had complicated the situation.

Abraham had been caught in the web of Domitian’s religious persecution of Christians and executed in Rome. Abraham’s oldest daughter, Naomi, the wife of a top-ranking senator, had betrayed her father, knowing it would lead to his death. And then, with the help of her powerful husband, no doubt she had managed to get herself named as sole heir to her father’s estate.

Antony had seen the decree presented to the court; it had been issued by Domitian shortly before his death. The document stated that because Abraham had died as a traitor to the Empire, all his possessions were to be confiscated by the state and then subsequently awarded to Naomi and her husband, Senator Mallus.

“The codicil to your father’s will was properly executed, and it clearly disinherits Naomi. Naturally, it was dated prior to Domitian’s decree, which the court will set aside *pro forma*. The Senate, working with Emperor Nerva, is trying to undo much of the damage Domitian did in the last few years, and the court has signaled it will take notice of that. Even if Naomi appealed to Caesar, he would not uphold Domitian’s ruling; it’s well known that the emperor is behind the move to publicly vilify his predecessor.

“So your legal worries with your sister are over. We should have a formal ruling in a few days, and then your lives can go back to normal.” “Our legal worries may be over,” Peter said, “but somehow I doubt Naomi will just pack up and leave.”

“What else can she possibly do?” Jacob asked. “Besides, she doesn’t even need the money. Mallus is ridiculously wealthy in his own right. When Naomi finds out her little scheme has been defeated, she’ll hurry to reclaim her place in Roman society.”

“You’re probably right.” Peter’s brow wrinkled in obvious concern. “I just can’t shake the feeling I had the last time I saw her.”

Antony knew that Peter had stood up to her then, vowing to fight Naomi if she tried to claim the

estate. She *had* tried, of course, which was when Antony had gotten involved in the case.

Now, thankfully, it would soon be over.

Helena wished her body would move as fast as her mind, but at forty-four her agility was not what once was. When she heard Rebecca's bloodcurdling scream, she ignored her usual aches and pains and scrambled upstairs as rapidly as she could.

What she found astounded her. She didn't know whether to go to Rebecca, who was holding a heavy saber, a look of sheer terror on her face, or Agatha, who appeared to have been mortally wounded and lay bleeding on the rare Persian carpet.

"Victor's gone!" Rebecca trembled as she looked around frantically.

Helena stood paralyzed for a long moment, then she went in six different directions at once. "Go get help and search the house," she said to Rebecca while stooping down beside Agatha's still form.

Rebecca dropped the sword on the bed and started to run out of the room as Helena cried, "No! Wait!" She left Agatha, retrieved the sword, and clumsily handed the heavy weapon to Rebecca. "Take it with you," she ordered. "The attacker could still be in the house."

Helena knelt beside Agatha again and untied her hands. The woman was breathing but didn't respond. Realizing there was little she could do for her, Helena ran to the hall. *Where was everyone? Why hadn't there been any servants around when this happened?*

She ran back to Agatha, thought about trying to get her off the floor and onto the bed, but couldn't do it by herself, so she started downstairs. But when she got to the landing, she saw Rebecca charging upstairs with the chief steward close behind her, wielding the sword over his head.

After that, everything seemed to happen at once. Rebecca and the steward led a search of all the rooms upstairs while the cook and the kitchen crew searched through the many downstairs rooms. Helena sent one of the servants to the harbor to notify Jacob and Peter, and another one to John's house to fetch Marcellus. Perhaps there was something he could do for Agatha.

Helena went up and down the stairs several times to check on the progress of the search, then she finally collapsed in the bedroom where the pandemonium had started. Her legs, unaccustomed to the much exertion, shook with pain and exhaustion; her hands trembled as she placed them on the empty crib and began to pray.

Antony had never been on the upper floor of the villa, where the bedrooms were located. He ran upstairs behind Jacob, and Peter followed, climbing much more slowly and with great effort.

When a messenger had interrupted their meeting to deliver the news that Rebecca's baby was missing and a housekeeper had been attacked, Peter had told the others to leave the waterfront without him. But then Jacob had spied one of the company's delivery wagons that had just unloaded and was about to leave the pier. He commandeered the vehicle and Antony helped Peter climb in, then they drove the horses at breakneck speed through the city.

Now about a dozen people, most of them servants, were assembled in what appeared to be Rebecca's bedroom. Helena had her arm around an ashen-faced Rebecca, and a woman, who must have been the injured housekeeper, lay at an odd angle across the bed. One of the other maids was tending to the bloody wound on her head.

"What happened?" Jacob demanded.

"Any sign of Victor?" Peter asked simultaneously.

Helena shook her head. "No, we've searched the house thoroughly. Some of the servants a

combing the grounds, but I don't think they'll find anything. Many of them were in the garden when it happened, and they didn't hear any unusual noises."

"Why not?" Jacob shouted. "Why wasn't someone here with Victor? How could this have happened?" He kept firing questions and people kept trying to answer, but with everybody talking at once, nobody could be heard.

Finally, Antony stepped forward and raised his voice. When he had everyone's attention, he said, "It would help if we heard the story in an orderly fashion. Jacob, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask some questions. You're too upset—understandably—to think clearly at the moment."

Jacob scowled, but he sat down and listened.

"Now," Antony said, "who discovered that Victor was missing? Mother, you seem to have been here the whole time. What do you know?"

"As soon as we arrived, Rebecca came upstairs to get Victor. Almost immediately, I heard her scream, so I came up to see what was wrong."

Antony walked over to Rebecca and knelt beside the large chest on which she was seated. "What did you find when you came upstairs?"

She looked at him with such obvious agony in her dark eyes, luminous with unshed tears, that it tugged at his heart. Rebecca didn't speak for a moment, and Antony realized he was staring at her. She was a very beautiful woman, no doubt about it. He looked away quickly and cleared his throat. "Can you tell me about it?"

Her voice was quiet but steady. "When I came into the room, I tripped over Agatha. She had been tied up and it looked like she'd been hit in the head with something heavy." Rebecca paused to take a deep breath. "Then I looked over at the crib and saw that a sword had been placed across the top."

"A sword?" Jacob asked, then he quickly muttered, "Sorry," in Antony's direction.

"Yes, I picked it up. Victor wasn't in his crib, and we couldn't find him anywhere."

One of the servants held out the sword. "Here it is."

Antony exchanged a long look with Jacob; no doubt he also recognized the insignia on the hilt.

After a few more questions directed to the staff, they learned that the cook and a few workers had been preparing dinner in the kitchen, at the very back of the house, when the child disappeared. The housekeeping staff—except for Agatha, who was watching Victor—had been in the gardens adjoining the main part of the house. The steward said he often allowed them to take a break in the afternoon after they had finished their cleaning chores and before the family arrived for dinner. An intruder had apparently entered the villa at the quietest time of the workday.

Once they'd learned the gist of the story, Peter dismissed the staff and they filed out, their heads down. Several of them looked chagrined because they had failed in their responsibilities and evil had managed to invade the home. As far as Antony knew, however, there was no reason for them to have suspected anything like this.

It must have been a simple abduction, Antony reasoned. There appeared to have been no robbery involved, and no one had known anyone who could possibly have wanted to hurt Agatha—and if someone did, why would they want to take Victor? No, someone must have been watching the villa and learned the family's routine. If Agatha survived, perhaps she could identify her attacker.

When everyone had left except Rebecca and Helena, who didn't want to leave Agatha, Jacob told the others, "Meet me in the library." He headed downstairs, taking the sword with him.

Peter laboriously made his way downstairs with Antony following close behind, ready to offer steadying hand if needed. Peter's was the only bedroom on the ground level, and he seldom visited the upper floor because it was so difficult for him to navigate the stairs.

When they entered the library, Jacob was still holding the sword. He set it on the desk, then turned to ask, "Do you know whose this is?" His voice was barely under control.

Peter winced in pain as he sat down behind the desk. "Of course not."

"From the insignia I can tell it belongs to a Roman soldier," Antony said. "It's odd, though. The only time troops were ever stationed here was last year, when you and the other Christians were arrested. But the troops left months ago."

"I know whose it is," Jacob announced.

That the sword belonged to a Roman soldier was an ominous sign, Peter thought, but he had no idea why Jacob would believe he knew the weapon's owner. "You recognize it?" Peter asked his brother.

"Look closely at the insignia."

Antony moved the sword closer to Peter and stood behind him so they could both inspect it. The insignia was an eagle's head, the symbol of the Roman army; above it had been engraved a numerical inscription: X.

"The Tenth Legion?" Peter asked. It was a cohort of the Tenth Legion, he recalled, that had carried out the orders for a mandatory sacrifice to the emperor.

Jacob nodded. "And this sword belongs to the commander of the first cohort. A living devil named Damian," he added for Antony's benefit, "who raped Rebecca and left her for dead."

Antony grimaced at the disclosure, then asked, "How can you tell it's Damian's sword? Maybe one of the soldiers left it behind and some common criminal found it."

"Some common criminal who hatched a plot to steal my nephew and then was stupid enough to leave his sword behind? I don't think so. It has to be Damian. No one else would want to hurt us like that."

"But Damian is off serving with the army somewhere," Peter objected. He thought Jacob was jumping to an unwarranted conclusion simply because he had wanted vengeance against Damian for so long. "As Antony said, no troops have been here in months."

"Think about it. Whoever did this didn't just drop his sword in haste. You heard Rebecca. The sword was carefully balanced across the top of the crib—it was left intentionally, like someone wanted us to find it."

"I agree," Antony said. "It didn't appear to have been left behind accidentally."

Jacob turned to Peter. "Earlier you said that you felt Naomi wouldn't just pack up and leave. I thought you were wrong, but maybe she's out to retaliate against us because she knows she's lost the battle over the estate."

"Slow down, I'm lost." Antony held up a hand toward Jacob. "You just said you thought the Damian character was the guilty party. Now you think your sister is behind this?"

"My guess is, they're in this together," Jacob said.

The sinking feeling that Peter had had earlier returned. He had been worried that Naomi would not give up easily, and he knew that she had never taken defeat well. But this was beyond anything he could have imagined.

Peter explained to Antony, who still looked perplexed, "If Damian has returned, it's likely the

Naomi would know where he is. She's his stepmother."

Antony landed on the nearest settee, his head in his hands, as Peter continued, "Naomi's husband Senator Mallus, is Damian's father."

Another thought was assaulting Peter's mind, and he spoke it out loud. "If this *is* Damian's sword then . . ."

Jacob finished his brother's sentence. "That's right. It's the sword that murdered our mother."

Peter pushed the weapon away and stood up from the desk. His ankle was throbbing and he badly needed to lie down. He couldn't bear to think about his mother's death; he still missed her terribly. And now Victor was gone. It was incomprehensible.

"I'll tell you something else," Jacob said to Peter's retreating back. "If I'm right, and if Damian dares to harm that baby, I'll kill him with his own sword. And nobody is going to talk me out of it this time."

PETER NEVER MADE IT to his bedroom to lie down. As he left the library, he met Rebecca, who was outwardly calm but still visibly shaken.

“Marcellus is with Agatha,” his sister said. “She’s awake and trying to talk.”

“Does Marcellus think she’ll recover?”

“He said the wound wasn’t as bad as it seemed, and he sounded reassuring.” In spite of the great effort her words seemed to require, Rebecca touched his arm in concern. “You don’t look well,” she said.

“I’m all right, just hurting some. I’m much more worried about you. And Victor.”

The tears Rebecca had been holding back finally started to spill over. “Why would somebody want to take my baby?” she asked in a voice that wavered with anguish. “Who would do a thing like that?”

Peter wrapped his arms around her, offering what comfort he could. “We’ll find Victor,” he said, “and we’ll get him back.” Peter certainly wasn’t about to tell her Jacob’s theory that Damian had taken the baby. He still thought Jacob was overreacting, and he didn’t want to alarm Rebecca any more than she already was.

He led Rebecca into the main room on the lower floor of the house, the *triclinium*, where the family took their meals. Soon the servants would begin preparing to serve dinner, but the room was quiet for the moment. Peter stretched out on one of the sloping sofas, easing the pain in his badly misshapen ankle. Rebecca sat beside him, holding his hand, her shoulders trembling as her tears subsided.

A few minutes later Marcellus came to find them. “We moved Agatha to her quarters,” he told Rebecca, “but she needs to rest quietly. Perhaps you could look after her baby for the time being. Aurora is fussing for her mother.”

Rebecca hesitated for a moment, then said, “Of course. I’ll move Aurora into my room.” She gave Peter’s hand a squeeze as she stood to leave. “Did Agatha say anything?” Rebecca asked. “Does she know who did this?”

Marcellus paused slightly before he answered. “She saw the man, but she didn’t know who he was.”

When Rebecca left the room, Marcellus sat down on one of the other sofas. His jaw was set in a grim line.

“What is it you didn’t want to say in front of Rebecca?” Peter asked.

“Agatha got a good look at her attacker. Her description sounded familiar—too familiar.” Peter paused, shook his head, then stared at the floor as if carefully inspecting the elaborate pattern in the mosaic tile. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m jumping to conclusions.”

“Jacob is convinced he knows the attacker’s identity just by looking at the sword,” Peter said. “However, I’m afraid he’s letting his imagination run wild.”

Marcellus looked up. “Agatha mentioned a sword. What about it?”

“It’s army. Tenth Legion.”

“Tenth Legion?” Marcellus repeated, and Peter nodded yes.

From the look on the other man’s face, Peter knew the retired army officer had reached the same conclusion his brother had: Damian.

“I don’t think it’s a coincidence,” Marcellus said. “My instincts tell me Jacob isn’t imagining

things.”

Peter rubbed his eyes wearily. *His* instincts told him they were about to have a confrontation with Naomi. And if he'd thought the last encounter with his sister had been unpleasant, he knew that would be nothing compared to this one.

Rebecca balanced the nine-month-old on her hip while she walked. Several times she had tried to place Aurora in the crib, but the infant had wailed so forlornly that Rebecca gave up the effort.

Why did Marcellus have to ask me to take care of Agatha's baby? she wondered. Perhaps he had thought it would take her mind off the kidnapping. Instead, every time Aurora cried, Rebecca thought about what had happened to Victor and worried whether someone was comforting *her* son when Victor cried for his mother. Just when she had almost conquered her unidentified fear—the vague sense she had been harboring that some other catastrophe was about to befall them—this had happened. And now each pitiful little cry of another woman's child brought a knifelike pain to her heart.

It was impossible to concentrate on consoling Aurora when her own baby was gone, Rebecca decided; she would find someone else to care for the child overnight. But as she started to leave the room, she recalled how Agatha had been injured trying to protect Victor, and she felt a twinge of guilt. She reached for the door and then stopped.

You're stronger than this, Rebecca told herself, shifting Aurora to the other hip. *You can do this one thing for a woman who tried to save your child.*

The baby nestled against Rebecca now, her ragged little sobs diminishing as Rebecca patted her back and tried to soothe her. In days past she had occasionally been able to coax a shy smile out of the tot, but most of the time her large gray eyes held a solemn expression; even at such a young age, Aurora was a very serious child.

“Don't be sad, little one,” Rebecca said. “Everything will be all right.” It was more of a prayer than a statement.

She wondered if Agatha, like her daughter, had been somber as a girl. Rebecca didn't know Agatha that well; she had not been part of the congregation before Rebecca had left home. She had found the newest maid to be a pleasant person. Mostly Agatha was quiet, respectful, hardworking, and private. Of course, she was a servant, so that would be considered appropriate behavior; but Rebecca was used to more of a family relationship with the household staff.

Many of the family's servants, like their former steward, Servius, had helped raise her. They had always been a part of Rebecca's life, and she missed them now. Most of the household staff had been believers, and the majority of them had been sentenced to Devil's Island at the same time Rebecca had.

Six weeks ago, when Rebecca had returned, the changes had been jolting: not only were her mother and father gone, but she no longer saw other familiar faces around the house. She was home again, yet everything was completely different.

Rebecca tried putting Aurora in the crib again, but she immediately started whimpering.

“You miss Victor too, is that it?” Rebecca asked, remembering that Agatha often put the two babies in the crib together. It was an oversized crib that had originally been built for her twin brothers, then it had been Rebecca's.

She also recalled that Aurora was getting teeth, which was probably why the baby was crying now, and it was why Aurora had not been in the crib with Victor when the kidnapper entered the house.

When Antony had questioned the servants earlier, one of them had said that Aurora had been fussy a few days after the afternoon, and Agatha had taken her out to the garden for someone else to watch so Victor could go to bed and sleep. Then when Agatha had gone back upstairs to check on Victor, she had encountered the intruder.

What if the kidnapper intended to take Aurora and got Victor by mistake? Rebecca suddenly wondered. Rebecca didn't know anything about Agatha's former husband or his family. What if one of the servants or even they themselves had wanted to steal Agatha's baby?

She immediately felt guilty for such a thought. It was useless to speculate, she told herself, and she should be grateful that only one child was abducted and not both of them.

No one had cleared the room after Marcellus had examined Agatha, and now Rebecca noticed a cup of *mulsum* on a tray near the bed. She poured some fresh water into a small basin and added a few drops of the honey-sweetened wine to it. Then she soaked one end of a clean handkerchief, in the liquid and gave it to the fussy infant to suck on. Aurora settled down, and after a few minutes fell fast asleep, one plump little fist resting against a damp cheek.

Earlier, Rebecca had asked for a maid to bring dinner to her room. She wasn't hungry at all and knew she wouldn't be able to eat more than a few bites, but she also knew she had to eat something. She had to keep her strength up, for Victor's sake.

Instead of a maid, however, it was Jacob who knocked on her door to deliver the meal. He was wearing a cloak over his tunic, as if he were about to leave the house. It would soon be dark outside, however, so if Jacob were leaving, it could only be for an important reason. Perhaps he intended to search for Victor.

"Are you going somewhere?" she asked.

Jacob sat the serving tray down and looked at her for a moment, evidently choosing his words carefully. "We think we may know where Victor is," he said.

"Where?" Rebecca's heart soared with hope.

Again Jacob paused before speaking—not a trait he was given to. "I'm not sure exactly where," he said, "but based on Agatha's description, we have an idea of who might have done this. So we'll start our search from there."

"Just let me find someone to watch Aurora, then I'll get my cloak and be ready to go."

"You can't go!" Jacob blurted out as Rebecca rushed toward the door.

Rebecca stopped suddenly and turned to face him. "Why not?" she demanded, hands on her hips. "He's my son, and he needs me."

"But you're a . . ." Jacob caught himself before he finished the thought.

"I'm what? A woman?" Rebecca stared up at her brother, angry at his patronizing tone.

"Well . . . yes . . . and it might be dangerous."

"And you think Devil's Island wasn't?" At the moment Rebecca didn't care about potential danger. All she could think of was that she wanted her baby.

Jacob looked flustered when she didn't back down. "That's beside the point," he said. "Look, we're wasting time arguing. I've already had to talk Peter into staying. He wanted to go with us to Naomi's house, but it truly could be dangerous, and if we had to make a run for it, what would he do?"

"Naomi? You think *she* did this?" Rebecca took a step backward, stunned.

"Rebecca . . ." Jacob sighed in frustration and ran his hands through his thick black hair.

So that's what he had been trying to avoid telling her. Jacob thought Naomi was involved in

Victor's kidnapping.

"Just stay put. Please," Jacob said as he turned to leave. "I have to go now. Antony and Marcellus are waiting for me."

Rebecca caught his arm. "You didn't answer me. Do you think Naomi put someone up to stealing my baby?"

"That's what we're going to find out," he said, grim determination lining his face. Jacob paused at the door. "I won't rest until we get Victor back. I promise you that, Rebecca."

When Jacob left she stared at the door, then she tucked the blanket around Aurora and sat down on the bed. *My own sister.*

Two hours later Rebecca snuffed out the lamp and tried to sleep. She had managed to eat some of her dinner, then she had paced the floor and prayed, pleading with God for the safe return of her son.

With heightened senses, she strained to hear every sound, alternately thinking that the least noise must be Jacob and the others returning, then wondering if an intruder had managed to enter the villa. Gradually the large house grew quiet, and Rebecca's mind finally gave up the struggle to stay alert.

Her sleep was not peaceful, however. Victor's disappearance invaded her dreams in disturbing images as Rebecca groped her way through an endless series of dim caves, searching desperately for her baby. She stumbled and fell, stumbled and fell, as she wandered through the cavernous realms of unreality on her frantic pursuit.

Finally, a beam of light appeared in the distance, and she recognized it as the entrance of the cavern. She made her way toward the light and emerged into the bright sunshine, blinking at the vista that had greeted her every day of her life on Devil's Island: a rugged mountain peak with a sweeping view of the surrounding ocean.

Standing a few yards in front of her, staring out at the water, was a man. Even with his back toward her, Rebecca recognized him, and a profound mixture of relief and joy washed over her.

"Galen!"

At the sound of her voice he turned around, and Rebecca saw that her fiancé was holding Victor. She gasped. "Oh, Galen, you found him for me!"

"Yes," he said sadly, fixing his familiar, intense gaze on her. "But you know I can't keep him."

Before Rebecca could answer, Galen swiveled back toward the cliff and swung his arms in a wide arc, releasing Victor into the air. Rebecca watched helplessly as her baby sailed over the barren trees and plunged down, down, down toward the brilliant-blue water below.

She woke and sat straight up in bed, clutching the bedcovers, her heart pounding. For several long minutes Rebecca was barely able to breathe. The vivid image had been frightfully disturbing, but she was aware that that's all it was: a nightmare.

Rebecca knew Galen couldn't possibly have Victor; Naomi did. Galen was a gentle man, a complete stranger to violence; he would never kidnap her son, let alone throw him off a cliff.

Yet Galen had thrown away something cherished, something Rebecca had treasured for years . . .

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