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Crusader Gold

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Extract

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The spoils in general were borne in promiscuous heaps; but conspicuous above all stood out those captured in the Temple at Jerusalem. These consisted of a golden table, many talents in weight, and a lampstand, likewise made of gold, but constructed on a different pattern from those which we use in ordinary life. Affixed to a pedestal was a central shaft, from which there extended slender branches, arranged trident-fashion, a wrought lamp being attached to the extremity of each branch; of these there were seven, indicating the honour paid to that number among the Jews . . . The triumphal ceremonies being concluded and the Empire of the Romans established on the firmest foundations, Vespasian decided to erect a Temple of Peace . . . into that shrine were accumulated and stored all objects for the sight of which men had once wandered over the whole world, eager to see them severally while they lay in various countries. Here, too, he laid up the vessels of gold from the Temple of the Jews . . .

Josephus, *Jewish War* VII, 148–62

Prologue

The two golden eagles swept in low over the city from the west, their wingbeats slow and deep as they flew unswervingly towards the podium. In the pastel light of dawn their shadows seemed to undulate and magnify across the temples and monuments of the forum, like two denizens of Hades come to take their rightful place at the table of victory. At the last moment the eagles dipped their wings and veered north along the line of the Sacred Way. The man with the laurel crown who stood alone on the podium felt the brush of their wings, saw the purple streamers issuing from their talons and the speckly radiance where their plumage had been brushed with gold. They were his prize pair, descendants of mighty eagles he had brought back to Rome for another triumph half a lifetime ago, snatched from their

desolate mountaintop eyries on the northern fringes of the empire. Now as he watched they rose majestically over the very heart of the city, their wings lifted as if on an updraught from the massed exhalation of the people thronging either side of the Sacred Way far below. At the highest point they seemed to hang motionless, as if Jupiter himself had reached down and seized them in his embrace. Then with a raucous screech they flapped upwards and dived down on closed wings, swooping low over the Capitoline Temple and out of sight back towards the massed legions waiting on the Field of Mars.

In the tremulous silence that followed, all eyes strained towards the podium. The man drew his cloak up over his head in the customary way and raised his right arm for all to see, palm facing outwards. The omen had been propitious. The greatest triumph of all time could now begin.

As the thudding drumbeat of the procession began to echo from the Field of Mars, a slave mounted the podium and proffered his hand.

'Fresh from the mint, *princeps*.'

The man took the coin and quickly turned back, impatient not to miss any of the spectacle. He held the coin up so it was framed by the triumphal arch at the beginning of the Sacred Way, the place where the procession would appear. He could see that the coin was a silver denarius, minted from the spoils of war brought up from the river port at Ostia only the day before. He squinted and read the inscription around the edge. *IMP CAESAR VESPASIANUS AUG*. Imperator

Caesar Vespasianus Augustus, holder of tribunician power, consul for the third time, pontifex maximus. He had been emperor for less than a year, and the words still sent a tremor through his heart. He saw the image in the centre and grunted. It showed a heavy-set, balding man, advanced in years, with jutting chin and hooked nose, deep creases round his eyes and mouth and lines on his forehead. It was not a pretty sight, but his was a grunt of satisfaction. He had ordered his portrait deliberately made in the old fashion of the Roman Republic, warts and all, in contrast to his reviled predecessor Nero, whose effeminate Greek-style images were being torn down and erased all over the empire. Vespasian was tough, gritty, honourable, a man close to the earth. A Roman of the old ways.

He flipped the coin over and held it high so the first rays of the sun behind him glinted off the silver. In the centre was a bowed, weeping woman, her hair done up in the Eastern fashion. Beside her was a Roman legionary standard, identical to those that lined the Sacred Way today. Below her was the word he had ordered put on all his coins, the word that made this day his crowning triumph.

IVDAEA.

Judaea captured.

At that moment the crowd, hushed by the flight of the eagles, erupted in a huge crescendo of noise. The insistent drumbeat which had been coming up from the Circus Maximus suddenly became a thudding boom. Through the arch emerged an enormous African elephant, its trunk

swaying from side to side almost to the hands of the spectators who were reaching out to touch it. Astride the elephant sat two immense Nubian slaves, their heavily muscled arms beating in unison on drums slung to either side. Immediately behind came the six Vestal Virgins, their hair in braids and their white robes shimmering as if they were emissaries from heaven itself. Then came a cohort of the Praetorian Guard, resplendent in their black breastplates and plumed helmets, giants among men recruited from the finest warriors across the Roman Empire. Then the first in a long procession of men and boys, senators and equestrians and members of Vespasian's own family, all dressed in purple togas interwoven with gold. Between them at close intervals came wagons piled high with fabulous riches, some resting on biers and pedestals and others held aloft by slaves from all corners of the empire.

Vespasian watched as the wagons trundled slowly by, each new wonder bringing a gasp of awe from the crowd. There were magnificent statues of gods in gilt bronze, sumptuous royal treasures from the kingdoms of the East, wild-haired slaves wearing heavy gold neck-torques from Gaul and Germany, mounds of emeralds and diamonds from beyond the Indus, shimmering silk tapestries from the far-off land called Thina. All the wonders that men had previously travelled the world to see were here today in this one place, this eternal city.

Only Vespasian knew that many of these treasures were being seen for the last time. Beside him on the podium was

a thin sheet of marble prepared by his architects, its surface etched with an intricate city plan dominated by a huge elliptical structure. As the last of the wagons rolled past, Vespasian glanced beyond the procession to Nero's Golden House, the wreathed head of Nero's monstrous Colossus just visible over the tops of the temples. On that site Vespasian would build a vast amphitheatre, the biggest the city had ever seen, the first of many projects he had planned to give the spoils of conquest to the people of Rome.

Next in line came a garish procession of dwarves and deformities, freaks the gods had created for their own amusement, culled from all over the empire. Some were carried high on silver platters like pigs to a feast, children with bulbous heads, others with shrivelled limbs and elephantine growths. There was even one screaming monster with a single eye in its forehead, a Cyclops in the making. Following them was a manic chattering dwarf driving a four-horse chariot, an imperial *quadriga*, only this one pulled by haltered goats. The dwarf was attired as a Greek god with an absurdly oversized golden wig, and bore a placard with the words *damnatio memoriae*, Of Damned Memory. It was a grotesque parody of the hated Nero. Vespasian slapped his thighs and guffawed along with the crowd. He was a man of the people. This was not just a triumph. It was entertainment on an epic scale. And the best was yet to come.

There was a gap in the procession and then a blast of

trumpets. Through the archway came two horsemen riding side by side, both bedecked in crimson and wearing laurel diadems just like the emperor. The crowd erupted in thunderous applause, and Vespasian felt a surge of nostalgia as he watched his sons Titus and Domitian receive the acclamation. The next spectacle had the crowd dumbstruck, and Vespasian himself felt his jaw drop. Following the horsemen came a succession of immense travelling stages, each drawn by a team of white-garlanded bulls and carrying a vast scenic backdrop that towered to the full height of the arch. Each was a living tableau of scenes from the war, with prisoners and legionaries playing their part. One showed a countryside laid waste and its occupants put to the sword. Another depicted Roman siege engines battering a huge wall, the city's occupants valiantly defending from above. Others showed scenes of utter destruction. Enemy soldiers annihilated on the battlefield. Whole families committing suicide in a clifftop citadel rather than surrendering. A great temple ripped down and destroyed in a conflagration, its priests locked inside. A triumphant legion marching through a ruined city, shackled prisoners and carts of booty in tow. Scenes of desolation so chastening that even the bloodthirsty Roman crowd was cowed to silence, and roared its approval only after the last tableau had been hauled past.

The triumph was heading inexorably towards its climax. Next came the prisoners, men, women and children, hundreds of them chained together and corralled between lines of spear-carrying legionaries. Following time-honoured

practice, they were well dressed in purple robes, a way of concealing their wounds and making them seem more formidable adversaries. Vespasian leaned forward and eyed them keenly. These were a different breed from the wild-eyed savages he had brought back from Britain thirty-five years previously. His Jewish informant Josephus had told him his people believed their God came with the Romans to purge their temple and blot out their city, as punishment for corruption. Yet these seemed a proud people, their heads held high, not captives broken by remorse. In their midst was the rebel leader Simon, shackled between two legionaries, a handsome bearded man struggling to walk tall and seemingly contemptuous of his fate. As he came level with the podium he flashed his dark eyes up towards the emperor, and for a second Vespasian felt his soul pierced, a fleeting moment of disquiet that he quickly put aside.

Another blast from the trumpets signalled the climax of the procession. Vespasian turned from the prisoners and looked towards the arch. Josephus had told him about the spoils from the Temple and he was eager to see them. Now they came, not heaped extravagantly on carts like the earlier treasures, but carried individually so they could be properly viewed. First came the sacred curtain that screened the sanctuary from the rest of the Temple. Then came the vestments of the high priests, heavy garments dyed in precious Tyrean purple and bedecked with brilliant jewels. Next the scrolls of their ancient testament, the sacred laws

that Josephus called the *pentateuch*. Then a long procession of ritual objects from the sanctuary, cups, platters, ablution vessels, all in solid gold, followed by a heavy golden table carried by four legionaries, wreathed in smoke from incense burners attached to each corner. As the heady aroma of cinnamon and cassia wafted over the podium, Vespasian felt himself transported back to his early days of soldiering in the East. When he opened his eyes he was met with an apparition that left him gaping in awe.

Through the swirling smoke that lingered in front of the arch came a treasure like nothing seen before in Rome. Josephus had described it well but Vespasian had not expected such an immense weight of gold, so burdensome it took twelve legionaries to heft it on their shoulders. As they emerged slowly into view he began to make it out, a glowing object the height of a man or more. Rising from a two-tiered octagonal base was an ornate tapering column, and on either side were branches extending upwards symmetrically to the same level. It was like a huge golden trident of the sea god Neptune, only here the tips of the prongs were fashioned into ornate lamps, seven in all. As the bearers cleared the arch a slave emerged with a burning torch which he used to light incense in each of the lamps, sending thick white smoke tumbling down over the throng on either side of the Sacred Way and enveloping them like a dawn mist.

Vespasian knew this was the menorah, the most sacred symbol of the Jewish Temple. Josephus had told him that the number seven held special significance for his people, and

harked back to the days of their earliest prophets. He said that robbing the Temple of the menorah would be like an enemy stealing the statue of the she-wolf from the Capitolium, an unimaginable desecration that would tear out the heart of Rome itself.

A sudden commotion to the right drew the crowd away from the menorah. They had drunk their fill of treasure and were now baying for blood. Vespasian knew what was coming next, an act fixed in ritual since the days of Romulus and Remus. Far up under the Capitoline Hill he could see where the crowd had parted to form a wide circle around an ugly gash in the ground, the swaying mob held back by a detachment of the Praetorian Guard, their swords drawn. Here had gone Jugurtha, enemy of the Roman Republic, Vercingetorix the Gaul, the British chieftains Vespasian himself had dragged to this spot. He could see where the Jewish prisoners had been formed up around the edge of the circle, their chains removed but motionless and silent. In the centre the bearded man was being tormented like a dog, baited and prodded by the surrounding guards like a beast in an amphitheatre. He was doing all he could to remain upright and dignified, but offered no resistance as his tunic was torn off and a noose was thrown violently round his neck. The crowd jeered as he was jabbed at spearpoint towards the hole. Suddenly he tumbled out of sight. At that moment the scene was lit by a blinding beam of light, the sun having risen above the Temple of Mars, the war god, behind Vespasian, and reflecting dazzlingly off the

menorah and the other golden spoils assembled in the forum.

The crowd erupted. It was yet another good omen.

Vespasian remembered those dark eyes, and set his face impassively to the west.

Let this be an end to it.

For a few moments there was a hushed silence, like the silence when the eagles had flown over, then a hooded man emerged from the pit holding up something in his hand. The crowd roared. Now it was the turn of the other prisoners. Vespasian watched dispassionately as the children were separated from their parents and led forward. A woman fainted and was held up by the hair and decapitated on the spot. A man broke free to stagger after his child and was stamped to a bloody pulp by one of the Nubians. The children were pushed to the edge of the pit in groups of three and had their throats cut, their little bodies hurled into the chasm. Then the women, then the men. The men were beheaded, gladiators with masked helmets bringing their giant curved swords down in unison, each sweep of steel accompanied by a single drumbeat as if they were oarsmen in a galley. Bodies piled upon bodies. Steel flashed up and down in the glare of the sunlight. The crowd swayed, gorging on blood. Vespasian glanced again at the menorah. The seven prisoners he had ordered spared hung from posts on the far side of the pit, their naked bodies sprayed crimson. They would go home to their compatriots in the desert of Judaea and bring news of the vengeance of Rome, of the

submission of their most sacred object to the vaults of the victor. As long as Rome held the treasure of the Temple they would never dare rise against her again. Any trouble and their guiding light would be extinguished for ever. It was the Roman way.

The executioners had done their work. Now the triumph could begin in earnest, days of feasting and games, piety and acclamations. Even before the crowd had shouted their exaltation, the bulls which had drawn the carts of treasure had been led up under the Temple of Jupiter, and already the altar and the statue of the she-wolf were spattered with blood from the first sacrifice.

Vespasian turned to leave the podium, still fingering the coin. He shrugged off his purple cloak and donned the crimson robe held out for him by two slaves. He would join his sons Titus and Domitian on horseback at the rear of the procession, leading a line of priests to the altar below the Temple of Jupiter, where he would perform his customary rituals as pontifex maximus. Before leaving he glanced one last time at the marble plan and made a silent vow. The age of conquest would end. His would be an age of reconstruction, a return from decadence to the virtues of his ancestors. On this very spot where he stood he would build a Temple of Peace, a temple greater than any other. Here he would store for all time the treasure of this vanquished people. He remembered those dark eyes again. He would do all in his power to ensure that the menorah was never again paraded in triumph through the streets of Rome. He turned

to go, then hesitated and tossed the coin far into the crowd, watching it streak in a high arc in front of the shimmer of gold as it disappeared for ever into history.