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1

THE ERRAND

Light began to flow from the jug of the morning. Horns at the holy Temple on Mount Moriah lifted their long throats and welcomed the sun with silvery blasts. The first rays splashed on the window ledge of the high attic room and slipped under the sagging shutters to form golden puddles at the feet of the sleeping boy.

In the towers of the Fortress Antonia, looming over the room where the boy slept, a sentry walked to an open balcony and, putting his hands to his mouth, announced a change of guard.

The boy awoke with a start and, thrusting back his blanket with his feet, stretched his toes toward the trickling sunbeams. He smiled as his toes communicated the promise of a beautiful day. Then, turning on the pallet, he held out his hands to the golden beams. They filled the hard brown palms and spilled down his wrists. Dust particles danced in the golden stream, and he laughed as he snatched at them.

His laughter bubbled from within with the singing gladness of fine wine rushing from the tap. The same bubbling gladness filled him as filled the vats in the commissary cellars far below.

Today was *his* day to do with as he willed.

There would be no work in either vegetable garden or hop fields, no errands to run for the fortress, because Nicolaus, the commissary steward, had promised him that today would belong to him.

“You deserve it,” the steward had said, blinking his pale blue eyes to keep out the tears, as the boy confessed his desire. “You deserve His favor, boy, and He will know it, for it seems He knows the hearts of men. I wish I could go with you to find Him, but the armorer has my promise to help with his inventory.”

It had not been easy to confide in Nicolaus, either,

though they loved one another as a father and a son loved. The hope had developed slowly. His heart had cradled it as the nest of his friend the sparrow would cradle its speckled eggs. And it had only been this week, as the Temple shook with the voices of the multitudes, that the hope had cracked the shell and thrust forth to articulate speech.

“I am going to ask Him to heal me,” he said, and Nicolaus, who had been pouring the milk for him, stopped and laid his hand on his shoulder. That was all, but he knew that the steward’s blue eyes would be filled with tears, even as his own were swimming, and he did not raise his head to see.

But he had been glad when Nicolaus said he could not go with him to find the Nazarene on the great porch of the Temple. The joy would be too great for either of them—they were both soft of heart. No, it was better for Nicolaus not to be there. But when it was done he would come back, and Nicolaus would put his hands on his face and turn him this way and that, and his voice would rise—booming big and rough and ragged—and he would probably wipe his nose on his big apron.

The boy laughed as he thought of it. He rolled over on the blankets; then he jumped to his feet and lifted a simple hop-hemp garment from the peg by the window. He yanked it down over his straight red brown hair and his clean, tanned body. Twisting a length of rope about his waist, he thrust his feet into the pair of boots Nicolaus had cut down for him. He pulled the straps together and laced them with the thongs. Nicolaus had told him it would be best to reserve the boots for another summer, but the steward would not care if he wore them to the Temple today.

His legs looked thin in the calf-high boots—thin as

the sparrow's. He flung open the shutters and looked up toward the eaves where the new nest had been built. The sparrow, waiting for him, fluttered down with a chirping welcome. The boy leaned out to smile at the waking world.

His eyes shone like amber wine, and the rays of brightness struck red from his hair. But in the glow of the sun, as his face lifted, the left cheek remained blotched and darkened as if the dregs of a heavy purple juice had stained it.

The sparrow settled with a rustling of wings on the worn slab of the sill. He cocked an apologetic eye as the boy began to scold.

"Sparrow! Did I not tell you to waken me early? Have I not told you what great and marvelous thing will be done for me this day?"

The bird flicked an embarrassed tail.

"You still expect me to feed you?"

The answer was a decisive chirp.

"If I failed to do what Nicolaus asked me to do, would I be fed?"

The sparrow bobbed its head, and the boy laughed. He reached for a small bag of grain on the shelf by the window. "You're right." He poured a palmful of the grain on the window ledge. "Nicolaus would feed me no matter what. He is soft of head and heart, Nicolaus is. But tomorrow, if you do not waken me in time to get to the hop fields early, there will be no morning rations. Today I have to forgive you. I cannot allow the smallest weevil of ill-will in this day's omer."

The sparrow chirped, fluffing his feathers, and some of the grain drifted down into the sunless area of the barracks' ground below them.

"Even you will not know me tonight," the boy said, shaking his finger at the bird. "Not even you, my un-

dependable friend. And after the mark is gone they will not call me names again. None of them can call me names again." The boy's eyes went out to the bulky shadow of the Roman barracks. "The new ones will have no reason to inquire of the boy with the liver face."

The glow had left his eyes, and there was a slight edge to his laughter. "And Phineas—ha, my good friend Phineas. How angry he will be, Sparrow. When the butcher sees what the Nazarene has done for me, his eyes will pop out like those of his own dead fish."

The amber eyes began to sparkle again. "When you have finished with the grain, Sparrow, you must fly out toward Bethany and find Jesus for me." He pointed. He could not see, but he knew it well, the road to Bethany that led away beyond the eastern gates, up the slopes of the mount where the silver gray olive trees dotted the hillside, and out of sight over the hill where Bethany lay at a crossroads. And the Man who stayed with friends in Bethany would be on His way to Jerusalem.

"Go, Sparrow, and find Him. He has come in on the Bethany road each day this week. I could not leave the hop fields to speak to Him, for the plants are tender and weak as your birdlings will be when they break the shell. If you wish to be forgiven for not waking me, you must find Him. Tell Him that Vinegar Boy of Jerusalem is coming to seek a favor. Tell Him it is a very little favor, Sparrow, for One who can do so much."

The last of the grain dust drifted off the sill. The sparrow spiraled upward into the sunlight and passed over the barracks and the foremost towers. The boy watched him out of sight and then put the bag of grain on the shelf and closed the shutters.

He was folding the blankets of his bed when Nicolaus called from the foot of the narrow stone stairway.

“Get up, boy, the trumpets have blown.” The steward’s hearty voice brought a smile. Nicolaus too had been warned to waken him early.

“I’m coming.” He ran down the steps. The hobnails in his boots struck happy sparks in the dark stairway. Nicolaus was at the foot of the stairs, blocking what light came from the wide doorway beyond.

“I’m sorry I had to waken you, but—”

“I was awake—talking to Sparrow. I’ve sent him out to Bethany to tell Jesus that I am coming. I want to be among the first to greet Him on Solomon’s Porch.”

Nicolaus moved back, and the boy caught sight of his face.

“What is it, Nicolaus?”

“I’m sorry, boy. Your trip to the porch will have to come later. There is an errand for you. I just got an order from the fort.”

“But Nicolaus . . . you promised!”

The boy stopped. He knew the man well enough to know that if Nicolaus was breaking a promise it was something he had to do. Something that Nicolaus could not help, so he might as well not cry about it.

He tried to hide his disappointment as he stepped from the stairs into the wide hallway where doors led into various workrooms of the commissary. At the rear of the hall a ramp led downward into a labyrinth of cellars and storerooms that wound like monstrous entrails beneath the hulking height of the Roman stronghold.

“I’m sorry,” Nicolaus repeated. “I meant for you to have the whole day. But I’ve just asked Phineas to bring up the vinegar when he fetches his own rations for the day.”

Vinegar! The boy's heart dropped. When Nicolaus said it like that it meant just one thing. A crucifixion. Vinegar laden with a drug called myrrh was given to the condemned men to ease the pain.

He could feel himself go pale and knew that the blotched cheek must be standing out in extra ugliness. "No," he whispered. And then, "Who?"

"Their names I do not know, but I had orders to fill a bottle for three. The fellow who brought the order didn't know much. He said he thought two of them were from the rebels in the dungeons. One of them broke a guard's arm last night as he passed the food to him. But there seems to be an element of mystery about the third man."

"Would it be Barabbas?" Barabbas was the most notorious prisoner in the cells. A leader of a band of marauders who ravaged the Roman caravans, he had gathered about him a band of rebels and zealots who had never surrendered to the dominion of Rome when the land fell under the control of the Caesars.

"Marconius is in charge."

The boy knew that Nicolaus was trying to lighten his disappointment. Centurion Marconius was a good friend.

"I wish I could send someone else, boy, but as long as the tribune considers you garrison property . . ."

The boy understood. Nicolaus had raised him as a son from the time a patrol had brought him in from the hills where he had been abandoned, but Nicolaus had not adopted him legally. Not that he was not willing, but the boy himself, since he had been old enough to understand, had not agreed. Nicolaus was too good—too honorable—to be burdened with a birth-marked son. If a boy's own mother and father could not stand the sight of him, why should the steward be

afflicted with him?

But in the past weeks, as the hopes for a miracle had slowly developed in the boy's breast, they had discussed the adoption at great length. The boy would pick a name—a real name—and then they would go before a judge and have all things done legally and in order.

“When you are my son you will never be sent to the hill again.” The boy knew that Nicolaus had been talking to him as his mind wandered.

“It is all right, Nicolaus. I will hurry. But if the Romans have to kill their enemies, I wish they could find a better way to do it. Nobody is mean enough to die on a cross.”

Phineas, the butcher, stepped from the cellar ramp, carrying a flaring torch in one hand. He thrust it into a jar of dirty water to quench it, and the odor filled the hall. Then he hung the torch on the wall by the cellar entrance. In the other hand he swung a flagon of vinegar on a leather strap and carried a pitcher of wine for his own use.

His green eyes glittered as he came near. “Why should you worry about the rebels? The quicker they are cleaned out, the better for the rest of us. What have they done with their protesting except turn the fury of Rome against peaceful people?”

Phineas had evidently heard what he had said to Nicolaus. It seemed to the boy that Phineas always knew what he and Nicolaus said to one another. The butcher seemed to have ears that could turn corners and climb walls.

Nicolaus answered for the boy. “Death is no less death if it comes swiftly and with mercy.”

Phineas laid back his lips in an ugly grin as he thrust the bottle of drugged wine at the boy. “The two

of you make a good pair. One is about as chicken-hearted as the other. You feel sorry for the rebels, but you give not a thought to the Romans who are left in the hills with their throats cut."

The steward's voice rose, round and rolling as one of his own beer kegs. "I do not condone murder and thievery, Phineas, but I understand a man's right to fight for his own freedom."

"Freedom!" The butcher spat the word. "Who wants freedom? I am eating twice as often and three times as well since the Romans came. And you—what is so precious about your freedom, Steward? You wear your freedman's cap as if it were the crown of Herod. But I am more free than you because I have not cared for freedom. With meat for the stomach and wine for the bowels, what else can a man desire?" Phineas lifted his wine pitcher and laughed. His big yellow teeth and the odor of the myrrh rising from the vinegar bottle made the boy half ill. The liquid in the leather flagon squirmed under his hand. The mouth was stoppered with a plug of wood wrapped in an oiled cloth. He slipped the strap of the bottle over his shoulder.

"You are a reprobate, Phineas," Nicolaus said. "Somewhere at some time you were put through a press that squeezed all the compassion out of you."

"Because I think thieves should earn their own bread? If the rebels enjoy slitting throats, let them not squawk when their own throats are threatened."

The boy put his hand on the bottle. "There are three men, Phineas. Did you put in enough wine for three?"

"I put in what was ordered and not a drop more."

Nicolaus said, "There is enough, boy."

"And the myrrh?"

"I put the drug in the bottle myself."

The smell of the myrrh was still rising, and the boy pushed the stopper in tighter. The drug would help the pain, and later, as the men were tormented with thirst, a sponge would be soaked in the sour wine and lifted for them to suck on.

“I need a sponge,” he reminded Nicolaus.

Phineas growled, “There are some old ones by the draining trough in the slaughter shed.”

The thought of the blood-heavy sponges, the flies, and the odor made the boy’s stomach turn. Nicolaus gave the butcher a warning look.

“Don’t let him worry you, son. You’ll have a clean sponge.”

The butcher brushed past the boy on his way to the wall where the day’s requirements for meat and poultry were posted. As he went, he spoke under his breath. “Get out of my way, Liver Face.”

Vinegar Boy had not realized that Nicolaus had ears as sharp as the butcher’s. But Nicolaus had heard him, and his blue eyes blazed with anger under the bushy brows. His short body with its heavy shoulders, and fists that could crack the head of a cask with one blow, moved swiftly behind Phineas, His hand swung the butcher about, and the big fist gathered up garment and flesh indiscriminately.

“Phineas, I am telling you for the last time. As long as I am steward of this commissary these rooms are my own household. In my house this boy is to be treated as my son. Is that clear?”

His voice did not rise, but the knuckles of his hand were white. The butcher’s face burned with anger, but fear leaped in his green eyes.

“The boy is going to have a name one of these days, but until such time you call him nothing but Boy, as I do.” Nicolaus shook the butcher now—side

to side, front to back. The butcher bleated weakly, and Nicolaus released him. He did not see the malevolent question that Phineas's eyes cast at the boy. But Vinegar Boy saw and read it as plainly as if Phineas had scrawled it on the wall.

What decent name can a bastard child have?

The look demanded an answer. "When I come back tonight I will have a good face. Then I will have a name—a name just as good as anybody's."

Phineas rolled back his lips. "So I have heard." The heavy door leading to the butchering sheds slammed behind him. The boy turned to the wide doorway leading to the yard. Nicolaus followed. The bricks of the barracks' ground were covered with a fine layer of dust that muffled the sound of his boots. Beyond the barracks, the gates opened to a large parade area where the troops held daily practice in defense formations, archery, and sword and spear skills as well as ordinary bodybuilding exercises.

Nicolaus laid a hand against the boy's cheek. "If He does not come to the Temple today, you may go as far as Bethany. Do not fear to ask the favor of Him. You are a good boy and deserve a good thing. He will know it. When it is done, tell Him that I, Nicolaus the freedman, stand ready to become His friend."

The steward's broad Gallic face was serious, his blue eyes grave.

"If for any reason you must keep the cheek as it is, we will still go before the judge. Marconius will arrange things for us as quickly as we give the word."

The boy's amber eyes warmed, but there was no smile on his face. "I am not afraid to ask Him, sir. He does not hold back His skirts as the Pharisees do. He will see my need, and He will know that I must have a new face." Then he said, "Get me the sponge right

away, will you, Nicolaus? I must come back quickly, for Sparrow may have told Him already that I am coming.”

“If I have to open a new crate it will take a few minutes. Why don’t you eat while you are waiting?”

Vinegar Boy shook his head. Eating could wait. It didn’t pay for him to go to the hill with a full stomach.

2

WHAT NAME?

Vinegar Boy waited impatiently on the bench outside the commissary door. If Nicolaus had to open a new crate of sponges, he would count each one and check the total against the shipping manifest. Nicolaus never did anything in a hurry or by guess. Not so much as a handful of animal salt left the store-rooms without an accounting. He would take time to jot down the entries concerning the amount of vinegar drawn for the execution detail. He would record the sponge and the weight of the myrrh.

Sometimes Vinegar Boy believed that Nicolaus revered honesty as much as freedom. In fact, Nicolaus had often said that a thief and liar knew nothing of freedom, regardless of what their manumission papers said. Nicolaus cherished his documents of freedom and kept them in a strong box in a chest in his sleeping quarters. The small freedman's cap with its conical top scarcely left his head while he worked. And he never set foot outside the fortress without it.

Nicolaus knew about slavery and freedom and understood the desire of the revolutionaries to be free of the Roman oppression—to drive them from their beloved Galilean plains and Judean hills. He did not approve of the outlaws' murdering and stealing, but he understood their hunger to be free. Although he did not condemn the rebels for being willing to fight for freedom, he himself had won the precious possession in an entirely different way.

Nicolaus had been a slave. He was a Gaul, the grandson of a Gallic soldier who had fought under the leadership of the mighty Vercingetorix. The wild, longhaired Gauls fought hard to preserve their land from the hordes of Roman legions invading it from the south. Vercingetorix and some of his men, after many days of ruthless siege, had been taken by Julius

Caesar. They were carried with other spoils of war into Rome, where they were loaded with chains and paraded in degradation during a victory celebration for Caesar. After the parade they were tortured and killed.

When Nicolaus told Vinegar Boy about it, he said, "My father was just about your age when they forced him to watch his own father being torn apart by four horsemen. From that moment on he hated the Romans with a hatred that was like a consuming disease."

As they had talked that night, Nicolaus had poured the evening milk and divided the cheese while the boy warmed dates in oil in a pan over the fire.

Then Nicolaus went to the heavy chest in the corner of his room and took out a parcel of old clothing. He spread the apparel over the end of the table: a short pair of work-worn trousers and a Gallic cap that had a peak almost like a freedman's cap.

"These belonged to my father," Nicolaus said as he lifted the garments gently. "The Romans laughed at his trousers and his cap. They called his dress barbarian, though they were glad enough to adopt the trousers for their own winter wear. They laughed at his long yellow hair—the pride of the Gauls. But my father never ceased to wear the trousers or the long hair. He wore them in rebellion. He was a slave, but he never surrendered to the Romans. He wanted me to hate them as he did, but I could not. The man who bought me was a kind man—a young patrician who later became an army officer. I had no reason to hate him. My desire to be free was strong—as is all men's—but I could not hate a good man. My father never understood."

Vinegar Boy spooned out the portions of fried dates. "If you had hated him you would not be free

now, would you?"

Nicolaus shook his big, bald head. "No. And worse, I might have murder on my conscience."

Nicolaus had won his freedom as a gift from the Roman who owned him. They had been traveling in the mountains of Galatia during a light snowstorm. The Roman's horse slipped, and horse and rider toppled over the cliff out of sight. Nicolaus heard the plummeting horse hit with a thud far below. But close at hand he caught the wind-whipped cries of the Roman. He crawled to the edge of the mountain trail and saw the Roman swinging over space, his hands clutching an outcropping rock. One stomp of Nicolaus's boots on the Roman's hands would have crushed the fingers and sent the dangling form into the chasm below. Or he could have walked away from the man, who was begging for help. No one would ever know that the horse had not carried his rider with him to the rocks below.

But Nicolaus had not stomped or turned away in the rising blizzard. He made a long, strong loop with his cloak and, swinging it beneath the dangling feet of the helpless Roman, he pulled him to safety. The Roman had taken Nicolaus before a judge and given him his freedom papers as an act of gratitude.

While Vinegar Boy had been thinking of the cold mountain cliff and the old clothing that Nicolaus had shown him, the day had begun in earnest at the barracks. Squawks from the fowl pens told him that Phineas was making the selections for the day. Commissary servants and slaves scuttled about the yard, carrying kindling and coke for the fires to be built beneath the scalding tubs where the meat would be dipped and dressed.

The doors of the barracks opened behind the high

arches of the colonnades, and the men came out, stretching and yawning in the fresh air. They called ribald jests to one another and to the sentries on the balconies and in the towers above them. Some of the jests made the boy's ears burn. Nicolaus had taught him to avoid the rude and the vulgar, to hate the ugly word or nasty deed. He tried to shut his mind against the rough language as he had tried to learn to shut out the hateful remarks and curious glances concerning his cheek.

He moved his boots restlessly and wished he had gone to the warehouse with Nicolaus. Usually the steward let him count the sponges in the new crates. The lid would snap open, and the sponges would leap out and roll on the floor as if they were alive.

Marconius, his centurion friend, had told him that a Greek scholar named Aristotle had decided that sponges *were* alive—that they were little animals. Vinegar Boy accused Marconius of teasing him because sponges were not like animals at all. They had no ribs, no backbones, no skin.

But he had since learned to believe all things that the Roman centurion said, and now he did believe that sponges lived and breathed on the floor of the ocean. Men's lungs were like the sponges, Marconius had explained. The air squeezed in and out, and the air kept men alive. When breathing stopped, life stopped.

Vinegar Boy shivered. The butcher had explained it in his own cruel way. Phineas had grabbed him one day and slapped his greasy hands over his mouth and nose. He couldn't breathe, and terror and panic filled him. His head swelled, and his chest hurt. When Phineas released him, he stumbled into the open air, gasping and incoherent.

He had learned about asphyxiation that day. He knew then why the Romans considered the death thrust of the spear during a crucifixion an act of mercy. For the death thrust was used only on the crucified men whose leg bones had been broken and who could no longer lift themselves to fill their lungs with air.

Today there would be the breaking of legs and the death thrust for those who were to die—for the rebels and the third man, whoever he might be. No bodies would hang outside the gates of Jerusalem over a holy holiday, and today was the preparation for the most important Jewish feast—the feast of the Passover.

Vinegar Boy swung the flagon of myrrh and sour wine slowly between his knees, thinking again of the day Phineas had grabbed him and suffocated him with his slimy hands. Sickness rose in him as he thought of it. He had never told Nicolaus what Phineas had done. The steward would have given the butcher a lasting taste of his own medicine.

The boy had learned a long time before that Phineas could be trusted to do the mean and hurtful thing at all times. It was Phineas who had told him the truth about himself. Not that Nicolaus had ever tried to keep the truth from him, but from the steward the truth did not hurt.

One day, almost eleven years before, the soldiers had found a discarded baby in the hills. They had carried him into the garrison as a joke, for one cheek was fair and the other a hideous purple-red, as if he had lain too long near hot coals.

The soldiers joked about the child being sired by Janus, the two-faced Roman god that often appeared over doorways and temples. The god's smiling visage was meant for good, and his scowling countenance meant war or misfortune.

When the novelty of the birthmark had worn off, the soldiers left the baby with Nicolaus and told him to dispose of him in any way he wished.

Nicolaus had kept him. He told the boy later that he could not resist the beauty of his amber eyes and the red-brown hair, like the shining back of the barley beetle. He had made a bed from blankets and a broken-down vinegar cask. From then on, as the men of the garrison inquired about the child, they began to speak of him as the vinegar boy. New recruits would come to see his face and go away exulting in their own good fortune.

The boy had never thought it such a terrible thing to be a *found* baby when Nicolaus told him about it, for the steward made it sound as if he considered him a gift from the gods.

But when Phineas explained it, his abandonment in the hills became a thing of dreadful shame.

“No wonder your mother gave you up and your father refused to accept you. Who could stand such a face day in and day out?”

Sitting on the bench now, tears filled the boy’s eyes. Smoke from the scalding tubs ascended the slaughterpen walls and drifted into the barracks’ grounds to smart his eyes. He rubbed at them and thought of the day Phineas had said those awful things to him. He had crawled behind a bin of turnips, hoping to die.

Nicolaus had found him and gathered him into his big arms. The steward had smelled of sweat and beer that day, and the boy found comfort in the odors. Later, Nicolaus talked with him.

“You cannot go through life with a heart like an unwalled city, boy. You must accept yourself for what you are—a fine lad. I could love you no more if you had proceeded from my own loins and had a face as

flawless as Apollo's."

Vinegar Boy turned his back to the smoke and blinked the burning from his eyes. Why was he thinking about such sad things?

Today was not a day for sadness. Today was *his* day—a day of gladness. Always, like weevils in the grain, a day had a portion of ugliness and labor and sorrow, but today he must remember that happiness would be measured to him in abundant portion.

He would ask his favor of the Nazarene, and then he would pick a name.

He leaned his head against the dried-brick wall of the commissary and closed his eyes against the growing brightness of the day. He could smell wet feathers and the scalded flesh of the fowls. The servants and slaves chattered like magpies on the balconies of the barracks and in the courts, as well as on the marble porches of Pilate's fortress-palace quarters. In the courts, the servants sounded like a gaggle of geese.

What name could he choose when he didn't know if he was Roman, Greek, or Jew? Had his mother wanted to call him David? That was a royal Hebrew name because it was the name of a mighty king. Or perhaps his father had decided on Julius or Augustus. But these the boy did not like. He wanted no Roman name. Perhaps he was Greek. Nicolaus often told him that he had the questioning mind of a Greek. He might call himself Timotheus or Philip.

Which would it be? Or did it matter? Even with a name and a good face, would he not continue to carry the shame of being dropped on a mule trail in the hills?

Would not the butcher, even then, be able to whisper the ugly name that meant he had sprung illegally from his father's loins—unwanted and undesired, fit