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Dawn came as a pale brush of pink across the eastern sky. It came without flourish, giving dimension to the featureless landscape and color to the somber collection of grays left over from the night. Jerusalem caught something of that pink in the stone walls that surrounded the city, in the walls of the Temple, and in the walls of the Fortress of Antonia that adjoined it.

In a room of that fortress, a centurion dressed for the day's duties, his statuesque features looking as if they had been chiseled from the quarries of Cararra. His skin was smooth, as if polished by finely gritted abrasives. It bore no pits, no scars, no imperfections at all. Over his red woolen tunic he pulled a fitted leather jacket with short shoulder pieces and long overlapping straps extending mid-thigh.

He buckled his belt on which hung two scabbards: one sheathing a two-foot sword; the other, a dagger.

He sat on a chair and put on a pair of sandals, their soles layered with leather and inset with short, metal studs.

He stood to put on a bronze helmet, fitted inside with an iron casing and lined with heavy cloth. A crest of crimson plumage ran across the helmet, the color matching the cape he draped over his shoulders and fastened with a clasp.

Finally, he picked up a rod made from a sapling, the characteristic emblem of authority for centurions.

Wood, metal, leather, muscle—together they represented the strength of the military, which, over the centuries, had turned a mere village into the mightiest empire the world had ever seen.

His first name was followed by those of his clan and of his family: Lucius Alexander Titus.

Lucius had grown up in Alexandria, Egypt, his father a librarian there. His mother had died when he was too young to remember, and his father, in a compensatory gesture, took him to work and let the boy have free rein. At his fingertips in that library lay the greatness of three cultures: Egyptian, Greek, and Roman. The Egyptians were better farmers, better breeders of animals, and more awe-inspiring builders. The Greeks were better thinkers, better writers, better at almost everything. But the Romans, they were better soldiers. The Romans were, in fact, the best warriors the world had ever seen. As a young boy, Lucius stood in awe of the soldiers he had read about in Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, aspiring one day to stand in their ranks.

Though not more original builders than the Greeks, the Romans were more prolific, especially with aqueducts and roads, both essential if they were to realize their destiny to rule the world.

Under the weight of Augustus' leadership, the Republic had crumbled. Out of its rubble, he had built an empire. "I found Rome a city of bricks," he once said, "and left it a city of marble." The reign of Augustus had ushered in a period of rest from the civil wars that had plagued the Republic since its inception. Though skirmishes flared up on the Frontier, like

sudden but containable wildfires, most of the Empire enjoyed an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity.

A web-work of roads connected the Empire, facilitating trade and the exchange of ideas. For the first time in history, Syrians and Italians were using the same weights and measures. Britons and Africans spoke the same language. And all followed the same laws, swearing allegiance to the same emperor. Under the shelter of this peace, the *Pax Romana*, Lucius was born, raised, and educated.

Few soldiers could read or write. Only those born to patrians, the elite class in Roman society, could usually claim such learning. But Lucius could do both, and he read voraciously. The stories about soldiers fighting on the Frontier led to his curiosity in maps. The very sight of a map would send the boy he once was to dreaming of distant lands and uncharted seas crashing against their misty coastlines, of daring adventures awaiting him, of decisive victories, all of which would bring honor to him and glory to Rome.

Because of his physical prowess, intelligence, and natural leadership qualities, Lucius had risen through the ranks from infantryman to centurion. The major unit within the Roman army was the legion, comprising forty to sixty centuries of eighty to a hundred men each. Because the chief centurion oversaw all the centuries within the legion, he had a place of prominence at the war council, a position of honor where distinguished service was richly rewarded.

It was to such a position that Lucius aspired. If promoted, he would be sent to Caesarea for training; from Caesarea to the Frontier; and from the Frontier to Rome, where he hoped to finish his career.

For now, he served in Jerusalem, neither a place of adventure like the Frontier, nor a place of appetite like Caesarea, but

rather merely a place where a Roman soldier was stationed while waiting to be stationed somewhere else.

As the sun rose, it turned Jerusalem's weathered limestone white and chased away the morning chill from the city streets. Visitors from Judea, Samaria, and beyond had made pilgrimages to celebrate Passover, the second holiest day in the Jewish nation's calendar. The city was abrim with people from far-off lands, a confluence of foreign tongues and regional accents. The distinctive scent of wool and the incessant bleating of sheep filled the air, along with the smell of foreign sweat and unwashed clothes.

The Fortress of Antonia adjoined the Temple on the northwest wall, strategically placed to cast its imperial shadow over all who assembled there. During holy days, especially a holy day like this one, soldiers stood sentry on those walls, overlooking the Temple courtyard to quell any stir of hostilities before these could froth to insurrection.

The centrality of the Fortress to the religious life of the city was strategic. Pilate's alliance with the religious authorities was one he needed. But it was one they needed, too. Pilate had arranged for the ceremonial vestments used at Passover to be kept under armed guard in a locked room in the Fortress so that the High Priest had to come to *him* for permission to get them. It was an uneasy but an expedient alliance. Both parties knew it and accepted it for what it was. Both had gone out of their way to cultivate it.

In his palatial quarters within the Fortress, Pilate was going over his schedule for the day as his dresser fussed over a new toga. The fabric was a large circle of white wool, finely combed and woven, luxurious to the touch. But it was heavy and cumbersome, and the dresser was struggling to drape it just right so

it would cascade from Pilate's shoulders in elegant folds.

It had been a restless night for Pilate, a lot on his mind, a lot on his schedule, and his wife's tossing and turning had not helped. Receiving a note requesting an earlier-than-normal appointment, Pilate pushed aside his dresser who was trying to position a laurelled wreath on his head.

"Forget the laurel; get the sandals!"

The dresser dropped to his knees, fitted the sandals onto Pilate's feet, and twined the leather straps around his calves. The ruler gathered his toga to keep it from sweeping the marble stairway and walked with his entourage of legal counselors and administrative attendants who briefed him on the urgency of the case before him.

Lucius, meanwhile, left his quarters, descending the stairs where his first stop was the carpentry shop on the lower floor. Two criminals were scheduled for execution, the paraphernalia for the ordeal already loaded on a small wagon—mallets, nails, ropes, and a ladder, along with supplies for the day. He knelt, picked up a handful of sawdust, and brought it to his nose. He loved the smell of freshly milled wood, its sweetness reminding him of home.

Lucius turned his attention to his steed, still in its stall. A beautiful animal. Regal in every way, especially how he held his head, as if he knew it were in service of the greatest empire in history. Lucius patted his neck. The horse turned to nuzzle him and snorted.

At the Temple, priests prepared for their day's work with their ceremonial washings. Dressers covered the priests with sacred vestments, one layer after another, slowly and methodically, brushing off any foreign matter, smoothing out wrinkles. Some of the priests started sharpening knives. Others stoked

the fire in the altar. All readied themselves for a long and arduous day.

At the Fortress, a chorus of chants came from the Praetorium. Lucius stopped to listen.

“Crucify! Crucify!”

He dipped a ladle into a nearby bucket and drew water, filled his mouth but did not swallow.

“Crucify! Crucify! Crucify!”

Lucius gave the helper in the shop an inquisitive look. The man shrugged his shoulders. Lucius swallowed his water and replaced the ladle on its hook.

At the Temple, long before the priests were ready to receive them, men stood in line to offer their sacrifices. Soon smoke ascended from the altar, curled into the early morning sky, sweetened with the aroma of cypress and carried away to the Fortress, where a scribe rushed into the stables with a scrolled page of papyrus, an addendum to the centurion’s orders. Lucius was used to this. He often had his orders altered, even rescinded, especially when visiting dignitaries were in town, and most especially when that dignitary was Pilate. He read the scroll and called to the carpenter.

“Wood for one more.” He pointed to the wording on the scroll. “Write his name, his crime.”

By midmorning the smell of charred fat and gristle hung over the city like a thick, low cloud.

Priests stood at various stations around the altar, each with his assigned duty to perform in the ritual of sacrifice. The line of men with lambs on their shoulders threaded through the Temple, tangled itself in the courtyard, and unraveled out the main gate.

Teams of priests worked in shifts to keep up the pace. Each took his respective post, executing his assigned duty with precision. The killing was routine. A simple ritual, one lamb after another after another. By midafternoon the work would mostly be done, time enough for the animals to be roasted and brought home.

The killing was swift. The lamb was held down by a layman. A priest pulled the blade of his knife across the exposed throat. Another priest caught the blood in a golden cup. He then handed the cup to the next priest, who gave him an empty one in return. The cup was passed through a line of priests until it reached the one closest to the altar. That priest splashed the blood on the side of the altar, where it dripped down the base and was caught by a gutter with two holes in it that channeled the blood to underground viaducts.

Another priest took the slain lamb and put it on tenterhooks, where, with a few quick cuts and hard yanks on the wool, he skinned it. He then made a vertical stab that released a slippery mass of entrails, which were caught and washed. The fat, according to Levitical law, was carved from the body, placed in a ceremonial vessel, salted, then poured onto the altar, where it sizzled on a grate, relinquishing its savory aroma as its smoke curled heavenward.

On a hill outside the city walls, another ritual was being performed—the ritual of executions for crimes against the Empire.

2

Lucius was the centurion who oversaw executions. Once the crosses were erected, the rest of the day was spent guarding them, which mostly meant watching and waiting for death to come, sometimes taking days.

Death came from any number of causes—dehydration, fever, infection. But mostly it came from asphyxiation. The victim was positioned in such a way that the weight of his upper body slumped into his chest, folding the lungs. To get a full breath of air he had to push himself up from a small block of wood where his feet rested. When his legs were too weak, he would eventually pass out, then die. To hasten death, when necessary, the executioners would break their legs, making it too painful for the condemned to make the push.

Overhead, the midday sky held a few vultures that made patient circles above the skull-shaped rock, known as Golgotha. An unusually large number of people had gathered to witness today's executions. It was not the typical group of mourners. Mingled among them were religious leaders of one station or another—scribes, Pharisees, rabbis. Their attention was focused on the one hanging from the central cross, whom they mocked mercilessly.

“Let this *Messiah*, this *king* of Israel,” one of them shouted,

“come down from his cross that we may see and believe!” Others joined in the taunting.

Lucius removed his helmet and wiped sweat from his forehead. He ladled water from a bucket, swished it around in his mouth, spit it out. As he did, he caught a glimpse of a woman. He was drawn to her as to a dream upon waking. *I know her from somewhere*, he thought. *But where?* A veil covered the lower half of the woman’s face. Her olive skin glistened, and although her black hair hung in wet strands framing her lowered eyes, there was something about her, even in her despondent state, that drew him.

He did not know her from Jerusalem, he was sure of that. *Galilee, maybe?* Four years earlier he had sought leisure there with some men. *Or was she from Alexandria?* Perhaps a childhood friend, long forgotten.

A moment of recognition came over her—another time, another place, another life. Her face flushed, and she looked away. At that moment a gust of wind blew the covering from her head, and her long black hair came undone.

A memory flashed, the way that scales of a fish catch the sun as they approach the sea’s surface. But as quickly as the memory came to him, it slipped away. Try as he could, he could not summon it.

Lucius walked toward her and overheard her speaking. Her accent lifted the veil on the mystery of her identity, or at least part of it. She was Galilean. He had spent time in several towns along the Sea of Galilee—Capernaum, Korazin, Magdala.

Throughout Galilee were terraced villas and wealthy estates of those who had profited simply by the fortune of good geography. Because it was a large body of fresh water, the Sea of Galilee was not only lucrative for fishing but for trade. It was

also a haven for leisure. And many went there to find theirs, soldiers as well as foreigners.

Could she be one of the local prostitutes? he wondered. *No, she looks nothing like any of them, no hardness in her eyes, no cunning in her expression, nothing of their seductions in her clothes.* He tried dredging up a memory. *One of the many who were on the streets, begging alms?* But he dismissed that, too.

Lucius approached one of the soldiers, whose name was accented on the third syllable, giving it a lilt of authority.

“Antonius.”

“Sir.”

Lucius pointed to the woman. “She look familiar?”

Antonius studied her a moment, then nodded. “From Magdala, I think. When we were on leave there, a few years ago. A wild mare of a woman, as I recall. Troubled soul. Strange. Possessed by demons, or so the villagers said.”

“Looks like her,” said Lucius, “and yet . . .”

That is when Lucius noticed the sky behind her, a clotted darkness that tumbled toward the hill. It came not as the darkness of night, a welcomed end to the day’s work, but rather as a bruise inflicted by a sudden blow, first mottling the skin, then purpling it, finally blackening it.

Everyone on the hill saw it. The heckling stopped as eyes widened and fears gave way to sudden bursts of repentance. The moisture in the air began condensing on their skin, and it seemed as if an ominous presence were breathing over them with its clammy breath.

“What do you think?” asked Massina, a Syrian conscript. He nodded toward the sky.

Valassio shook his head, his eyes peering into the darkness as if to pierce its mystery. “I don’t like it.”

As the darkness crept toward the hill, the crowd filled the

erie silence with nervous chatter. “What is happening?” “What could it mean?”

“What if we angered the gods?” Valassio asked. “You believe in the gods, don’t you?”

“Roman ones.”

“What if there’s others?” mused Massina, and you Romans, by giving homage to your own, make them jealous? Ever think of that?”

Antonius walked by himself to the brow of the hill, the foreboding sky luring him. Lucius was lured there, too.

“Does it not say somewhere: ‘the sun shall give you signs?’” the soldier asked.

Lucius searched his memory. “After the Caesar sank from sight . . . the sun wrapped his countenance in darkened gloom.” The two looked at each other. “The blotting of the sun,” Lucius said. “It is said to happen at the death of a divine ruler. According to Virgil.”

They turned to look at the man impaled on the middle cross.

The rest of the city stopped its business, people pointing, commenting, lamenting.

For three hours darkness shrouded the city.

After a while, though, the city returned to work, for much needed to be done before the first star in the evening sky heralded the Sabbath. The centurion’s household slave, Ashuk, who seemed carved from a block of obsidian, watched the sky as a street vendor pulled a roasted lamb, stretched across a pomegranate spit, from his earthen oven. Money changed hands, and the vendor passed him the lamb.

Those hours were a much-needed reprieve from the normally unrelenting glare of the sun, at least for the two crimi-

nals on either side of the man in the center. Lucius eyed him curiously. Over his head a wooden placard had been nailed, inscribed in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. His eyes rested on the Latin, giving the name of the accused, along with the crime of which he had been convicted:

IESUS NAZARENUS
REX IUDAEORUM

King of the Jews, thought Lucius. *He looks anything but a king.*

Below this unlikely king stood a few of his followers, women mostly, along with the condemned's mother, steadied by the only man among them. The soldiers were distracted with other things, except for Massina, who watched as one of the thieves turned his head to Jesus and proffered a plea.

"Remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

His words drew Lucius's attention.

Jesus turned his head, slowly, wearily, and something in the pools of the thief's eyes seemed to refresh him.

"Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

The thief started to speak, but a sudden spear of pain pierced Jesus from somewhere deep inside him, and he writhed in agony. His head jerked to one side as if struck by a fist. His stomach convulsed, spilling bile out his mouth and down his chest.

Lucius and Massina winced.

At the sound of a man sobbing at the edge of the crowd, Lucius turned. The man's head was cloaked, and he could not see his face, but he buckled to his knees and knelt there.

Hearing a painful cough from the cross, Lucius turned back to Jesus.

What little strength the man had left he summoned to his thighs, their muscles flexing, pushing down against the nail in his feet. Clenching his teeth, he pulled himself up, straining against the nails in his hands. Seeing the sudden movement, those gathered looked up. They watched as he sucked in a great gulp of air. And everyone listened as he cried out.

“Eli . . . Eli . . . lama sabachthani?”

After saying it, he collapsed against the wood.

“He is calling to Elijah,” one onlooker said.

“No,” said another. “He is calling to his god.”

Jesus pushed his weight against the wooden footrest. “It is finished,” he called out, almost triumphantly.

His body slumped, his head bowed, and a prayer escaped his lips. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

For a moment everything stilled. There was no sound, no movement. No one spoke, no one moved.

Lucius stared at the contours of the man’s body. It seemed to him a war-torn landscape in the aftermath of battle. The sunken muscles seemed like sloping hills, trodden under an enemy’s brutal heel, their soil stained with the blood of the fallen.

But a jolt shook free Lucius’s thoughts, followed by a groan within the earth, deep and low. A tremor shook his feet, then a violent quake. People all around him fell to the ground or ran away, screaming.

The quake struck the market. Merchandise fell from vendors’ wagons. Ashuk’s legs unsteadied him.

The quake sent fissures through the Temple. A few capstones on the walls fell to the courtyard below. The shaking ran through the foundation. Marble columns swayed back and forth. Inside, carved woodwork strained and cracked. In the Holy of Holies the gilded masonry shook violently. Then sud-

denly, as if two hands had grabbed the top of the expansive curtain, it was torn in two.

The quake traveled through the Fortress of Antonia, shaking it and everyone in it. Horses in the stables whinnied and broke their tethers. Soldiers were in disarray. Pilate's wife screamed into the silk-covered pillows on her bed, her husband beside her, holding her.

Back at Golgotha, the crosses swayed to one side. Screams slashed the silence. A jolt, and several people stumbled into one another. Terror filled their eyes, their voices. A great lurching threw everyone to the ground. Flat on their faces, people clutched the earth, confessing their sins, crying out for mercy. The crosses pitched back and forth, tearing muscles, rasping bone, snapping tendons. Screams from the crosses intensified the terror.

Then, as suddenly as the earthquake started, it stopped.

Having been thrown to the ground, Lucius was on his knees before the cross of the young Jewish revolutionary. He looked up, his mind aswirl with questions. He wondered that if there were such a place as Paradise, might the ragged borders of this body be the terrain that led there?

Then these words, these very seditious words, stole past his lips.

"Surely this was the son of God."

Whatever battle had been fought on that hill, it was now over. In that abrupt armistice, Lucius stood dumbstruck, as soldiers sometimes are struck in the aftermath of combat. All was silent, hushed and still. Any movement was imperceptible, slow and uncertain. The only sound he heard was the pounding of his heart; the only movement, the coursing of his blood.

As a shaft of western light pierced the darkness, moans from the crosses shattered the silence.

Lucius jumped to his feet, gathered himself, and took charge. "To your tasks. Be quick."

The soldiers collected themselves and went about the routine of clearing the hill. Valassio was first to his task. Picking up a club, he approached the more hardened of the thieves. He took pleasure in ending the constant barrage of curses the thief had hurled at him throughout the day.

A crack of wood against shins. The splintering of his legs caused a scream . . . more curses . . . a watery cough . . . a low moan.

Then silence.

Massina approached the other thief. Pity was a contraband emotion for Roman soldiers. Yet, as though some pulled ligament of remorse were holding him back, he hesitated.

"I begrudge you not your duty," said the thief.

The soldier looked up at the lifeless body of Jesus, then back at the thief, and offered a benediction.

"God have mercy."

"His mercy is in your hand," the thief replied. "I am ready to receive it."

The soldier clutched the handle with uneasy hands and swung blindly, breaking both legs with a single blow. The thief took the pain into his lungs and held it, grimacing, then releasing it. When the soldiers came to Jesus, it was clear he was already dead. To make sure, though, Antonius took a spear and placed it on Jesus' chest, feeling for a fleshy spot between the ribs. Finding it, he thrust the spear into the heart.

At the Temple, the high priest signaled the other priests, and they lifted several amphorae of water to wash down the altar. Drains at the altar's base led to an underground pipe that shunted blood out the side of the city wall into the Kidron Valley. The water mingled with the blood as it flowed out the

shunt until it became mostly water with only a trace of blood. With the cleansing of the altar, the work within the walls of the Temple was finished.

So was the work outside the walls of the city. The soldiers began removing the bodies so they could dispose of them before sundown, in deference to Jewish law. As they went about the grim work, Lucius searched among the mourners for the woman he saw earlier. The once frayed crowd now looked like knots on a prayer shawl, strands of humanity drawn together by the quake.

The woman Lucius had recognized earlier wrapped an arm around the mother of Jesus, drew her close, and led her away.

Fearing the woman would disappear in the crowd, Lucius called to her. "You, there. I know you, from Magdala."

The woman looked over her shoulder. "I have known a lot of men."

"And *him*?" he asked, nodding to the cross in the middle. "How did you know *him*?"

"You would not understand." And she resumed walking.

"I understand the difference in who you were then and who you are now."

The woman whipped around, her eyes lit with anger, and stepped toward him. She stopped a sword's thrust away. "Have you no shame! Do you know what you have done here today? Do you have any idea what you have done?"

"I have done my duty."

"You say it as if you thought it noble."

He stood in the presence of her disgust, disarmed. It was as if she had unsheathed his sword and was pressing its tip to his throat, threatening to slash it if he uttered another word. He stood silent, at the mercy of her indignation.

But it was she who dropped the sword of words, she who

turned, she who walked away. He was left standing there, the place where the edge of her anger touched him, standing there, stinging from the encounter.