

The Passion
Excerpt from
Gaspar, Another Tale of the Christ
By
E.S. Kraay, 2014

Within the hour, hundreds of Jews enter the training field beneath Pilate's platform. The clamor is irritating and heightens the tension that continues to grow. Fully armed with shields and helmets, Roman Legionnaires stand shoulder to shoulder around the perimeter and three rows of ten soldiers each take their positions directly beneath the platform. The Roman show of force is intentional and unmistakable.

Pilate orders that a chair be placed for me slightly behind him on his right. The Romans know me, but the Jews that fill this field are not the Jews I have lived with in recent weeks. These are Jews whose allegiance is with Caiaphas, and they are suspicious of men like me who they do not know.

We are not kept waiting. The crowd quiets and parts as the high priest and his Herodian temple guards enter through the fortress's western gate. Yeshua is with them. As the procession comes forward, the crowd jeers and shakes angry fists at the prisoner. Some spit upon the man who Procula saw in her dream as noble. There is nothing noble about his current predicament.

His smile has receded, and his swollen countenance lacks emotion.

Pilate remarks, "I don't like this. I do not like this at all. How am I not to get mixed up with this man. This is insane. He is nothing to me or to Rome, but Caiaphas makes it my business. No, I do not like this at all."

The high priest and those with him halt at the foot of the steps before the platform. Wanting to hear every word, the crowd is hushed. Pilate waves the high priest forward and Caiaphas climbs the steps to stand above the crowd before Pilate.

"Speak, high priest," Pilate commands. "What do you want of me now that you are incapable of handling yourself?"

Caiaphas turns toward the crowd below him and raises his arms. They cheer madly for several minutes until he quiets them with a simple gesture. He turns halfway toward Pilate and cries out in a loud voice, "He wants to know what I want from him. I want justice for the Jewish people." The crowd roars. "This man I bring before you has violated our law and he has violated your law, Pilate. There is only one penalty." He pauses. A raven passes overhead and its shadow glides across the courtyard, paints a black circle around Yeshua and then continues toward the hills with a menacing caw. "Death!" the high priest roars like a wounded beast and the crowd picks up the chant, "Death, death, death ..."

Pilate is patient and allows the crowd its chant. With no intervention from him, the swell subsides of its own accord. He cleverly makes Caiaphas wait for him.

The Prefect finally speaks in a voice loud enough that those in back waiting anxiously outside the gate can hear him.

"Let's begin with Roman law," Pilate states. "What law of Rome has this man violated?"

The crowd noise rises and Caiaphas quickly quells it with open palms. "This man," he cries out, "tells the Jews not to pay our rightful taxes to Rome!" He crosses his arms with some finality.

Pilate raises his eyebrows and chuckles. "I've heard the opposite. My friend Gaspar who sits with me this day related an incident in Zemaraim. While teaching in the synagogue there, the men asked your prisoner directly if the Jews should pay taxes. His answer: give Caesar what is his. This does not sound to me like a man who is stirring up trouble with Rome or one who tells Jews not to pay their taxes to Caesar."

Exasperation fills the eyes of the high priest.

"I will not condemn him for breaking Roman law," Pilate concludes. "He has not. As for your laws, which of them is he guilty of violating?"

Caiaphas pounds the staff he carries on the platform and the sound echoes through the courtyard. "This man claims to be the king of the Jews. He lies! He even says he is the son of God! He blasphemes!" The high priest rends his garment and appears to swoon, capable of standing only with the help of his staff. "We have no king but Herod, and to say otherwise as he does is traitorous and subversive. We have no God but God. He rallies the people against me, against Herod and against Rome. He must pay with his life." Caiaphas turns his back to Pilate and raises his arms to his followers. They respond like starving dogs.

I close my eyes and the image of Cerberus, the three-headed dog from hell races through my mind. Has it been loosed here on this day by this Jew?

Pilate will not be unnerved though the glance he gives me betrays the fact that Procula's dream remains firmly implanted in his mind. He rises from his chair and steps to the edge of the platform where Caiaphas stands like a Colossus of Rhodes.

"You!" he calls down, and when no one responds, he says in a stern tone, "You, Yeshua. Come here."

The teacher slowly raises his eyes and struggles to climb the stairs. The crowd is silent. When the rabbi reaches the platform, Pilate orders, "Come with me, both of you, and you, too Gaspar. We will retire to my quarters."

As he spins and walks toward the door behind us, Caiaphas says, "I cannot. Neither can he." He nods toward Yeshua.

"And why not?"

"Our laws do not permit it. I must remain pure."

"And standing in my quarters makes you impure?" Caiaphas will not respond. "Have it your way, then." The Prefect nods to a pair of guards who escort Yeshua into his quarters. I follow, and the soldiers close the heavy wooden doors behind us.

Pilate invites Yeshua to sit on the couch, but the teacher declines and remains standing.

Yeshua forces a smile and extends a knowing look to me. I reach involuntarily for the amulet.

"You thirst?" Pilate questions pouring a cup of water.

"I thirst as you thirst." Pilate extends him the cup, but Yeshua will not accept it.

"Come, now," Pilate insists. "Satisfy your thirst."

The smile returns through broken teeth and bleeding lips. "I do not thirst for water though my throat is dry. Like you, I thirst for truth."

Pilate drains the cup. "What is truth?"

“Truth is what sets all men free, free from the shackles that men use to bind each other to the woes of the world.”

“Like Roman shackles?” Pilate counters with a challenge.

Yeshua grimaces when he grins broadly. “No, not like Roman shackles. That is the biggest mistake men make. They look outside themselves first. They look to cast blame, thinking that whatever is not right in the world is caused by someone else.”

I think of the woman at Tabernacle. Caiaphas and his cronies believed that by stoning a woman, they would make the world right.

“What is not right in the world started with one man who found reason not to love his brother, one man who believed that he was right and someone else was wrong, one man who believed that conflict was the truth, the way to solve his problems.

“The message I bring is a message of love. When men accept it as truth, the world will be set right as it was intended to be from the beginning.”

Pilate takes a draft of water and offers the cup from which he has drunk to Yeshua. This time, he takes it and drinks. He closes his eyes and his body shudders from the relief that for an instant, caresses every pore of his being. He passes the cup to me, and I finish what remains.

“More?” I ask.

His body craves for more, but he shakes his head ‘no.’

“You have broken no Roman law,” Pilate explains. “Tell me about the other charges. Caiaphas says you claim to be the king of the Jews.” Yeshua does not respond. “Are you the king of the Jews?”

“If you say I am the king of the Jews, then I must be the king of the Jews.”

“I don’t say that you are.”

“Nor have I claimed that title.”

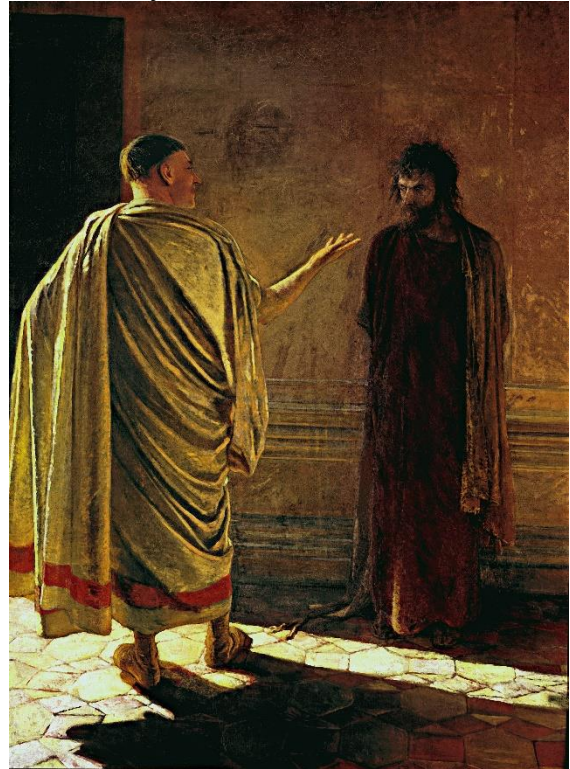
Pilate is nervous. “And what about this claim to be a God. Is that what you have said.”

“That is what Caiaphas has said.”

I raise my hand and Pilate yields to me. “May I see the palm of your right hand?” He does not resist when I reach for his hand. Two of the fingers are broken. As gently as a mother would handle her child, I open his hand. The impression of the ox head and shepherd’s crook are still there.

I place my stones on the table before Pilate. He picks them up and closely studies each as if this were the first time he had seen them. He is afraid to take Yeshua’s hand as if the slightest touch would cause more pain.

“How did this happen? You bear Gaspar’s symbols on your palm.”



“Last night, I met this man on the Mount of Olives in a quiet garden. I handed him the stones because I saw him draw the signs in the sand during Tabernacle. He knows their significance. He held the two in his closed hand so tightly that when he returned them to me, the imprint remained in his hand. The two had become one just as I have read. I did not expect the impression to last this long, but there it is.”

“That’s impossible,” Pilate states.

I disregard his statement and slowly raise Yeshua’s broken hand. “I will ask you again what I asked you last night. Who are you?”

My fingers feel the blood pounding through the veins in his wrist.

“I AM the truth for those who seek it,” he finally says. “Anyone who follows my way and abides by those things I teach will be reborn and as they are, they will make the world a better place. When all men follow the way of peace and love, the world will be as it should be. When all men follow the way of peace and love, the lamb will lie in peace with the lion.”

Pilate paces uncomfortably. “Whoever you are, I am trying to help you. Truth means nothing to the men who have brought you here, whether it is your truth or my truth.”

I interject what Yeshua is thinking, “Truth is universal, and it is the same for all creatures. If peace and love is what he teaches, I believe in his truth.”

“So, you are no King of the Jews? You are not a god come to us from Olympus or anywhere else?”

“What you do not understand, Caiaphas will not understand. I AM.”

“You are what?” In his frustration, Pilate slams his fist to the table.

Humbly, Yeshua bows his head with finality. He has said what he intends to say.

Pilate explodes. “How can I help this man?” He pounds the table a second time. “Damn you!” Yeshua ignores the outburst.

With a loud rap on the closed door, the tribune calls from outside, “Lord, Pilate, the crowd grows restless. They fear you have released their prisoner.”

As if the tribune’s words have revealed a solution the Prefect was unable to recognize on his own, the anger ebbs from Pilate’s expression. “I have an idea,” he says. “Come. We’ve no more time to waste.”

The mid-morning sun is bright as it climbs in the sky. The restless crowd yells insults as we walk to the front of the platform with Yeshua. Caiaphas settles his people.

“What is your ruling now, Prefect?”

“I have interrogated this man and find him guilty of no crime, but because he has offended you, I will have him scourged in front of the assembly.” He nods to his tribune. “See to it.”

The tribune leads Yeshua down the stairs, and the Roman guards clear a path through the crowd to the pillar the Romans use to punish their own soldiers. I return with Pilate to his quarters. “I’ve no taste to watch this scourging.”

Pilate requests that the door remain open. We’ll not watch, but we will listen to the proceeding. It begins immediately.

The whip cracks and the crowd roars its approval with each blow that viciously falls on Yeshua’s back, yet he does not cry out. Perhaps he has lost consciousness. I cannot help myself and I glance out the door. No, he has not passed out. He has fallen to his knees and grimaces with each blow, but somehow, he has the strength not to cry out. My body tightens with each strike of the whip as if I am the one receiving the lash. Why

must an innocent man suffer to appease another man's bruised ego. It is exactly as he says. When men choose not to love. The result is not pleasant.

Pilate has been counting in his head. After the thirtieth blow falls, he rushes out to the platform and calls out "That's enough!"

The spectators hiss loudly as the tribune leads Yeshua back to the platform. He climbs the steps with great difficulty but forces himself to stand erect when he reaches the top. His body is a bloody mess, his robe shredded beyond usefulness.

"Cover him!" Pilate commands. When the soldiers and tribune look from one to the other as if to ask, 'With what,' Pilate hurries back to his quarters and retrieves a purple robe that he personally drapes over the torn and bloody shoulders.

"Are you satisfied?" Pilate growls at Caiaphas.

Hatred spews from the high priest's eyes. Unfazed, he turns to the silent crowd, raises his arms and declares, "He wants to know if I am satisfied."

The scene turns uglier as the fanatical followers of the high priest begin to chant, "Death, death, death ..." Even more insidiously, a new word rises, barely perceptible when it begins, but soon it replaces the call for death with a demand for the most painful and humiliating of all executions. "Crucify him," they call out. "Crucify him," they scream.

Pilate is losing control and when his attempts to quiet the crowd fail, Caiaphas once again raises his arms and the roar subsides. "Do they sound as if they are satisfied?" the high priest asks sarcastically. "Not hardly. It is time that you give them what they want."

Pilate whispers to his tribune who salutes and runs quickly down the steps and across the courtyard to the prison door.

Before the crowd can steal his initiative a second time, Pilate proclaims in a loud voice, "It is customary at Passover that I release to you a prisoner." I smile inwardly. This is the solution that occurred to him as we left his quarters with Yeshua. If there are gods who listen and answer men's prayers, I hope they hear mine now. This is Pilate's last chance to save this innocent man. I pray that he succeeds. It is true. The Prefect could use force of arms to protect Yeshua, but he knows that the consequences of using force with a hostile crowd of civilians would be unacceptable. The environment is ripe for mass violence, and in Yeshua's own words, it would serve no good purpose.

The guards drag a large, filthy man, shackled and chained across the courtyard. Those who know who he is grumble. Thinking the guards are taking him to the executioner's block, he fears nothing and spits into the faces of the Jews unfortunate to be within the range of his heavy sputum. A guard strikes him on the back of the head. He cringes, but laughs a dirty laugh. Caiaphas is noticeably shaken when the man is prodded up the staircase.

With Yeshua on his left and the other man on his right, Pilate announces, "I find no guilt with the man Yeshua the Nazarene who you have brought before me this morning to sentence for crimes I find no proof he has committed. But this other man is different. This man, Yeshua Barabbas murders your own people. He has been tried in our court and been convicted of three murders, including the brutal rape and murder of your high priest's own cousin.

"I stand before you with two men, one innocent, one guilty. I have the power to release one. Who will it be? Yeshua the Nazarene or Yeshua Barabbas?"

Stillness settles over the courtyard. Even the streets beyond the walls are quiet. Caiaphas so hates this Barabbas that he cannot bring himself to look at the man who raped and murdered his cousin. Both men whose lives he holds in his balance are enemies, one personal, the other political. Caiaphas is bewildered and covers his face with his hands. He does not know what to do.

Pilate demands a second time, “Who will it be, Caiaphas? Which one do you choose?”

Sweat drips from beneath the high priest’s crown and he begins to quiver. His knees buckle but he catches himself to prevent an embarrassing fall. Perhaps Pilate’s plan might work, but my thought is premature.

Hope collapses when a lone voice calls out from the farthest corner of the field, “Give us Barabbas!” His lone cry echoes through the fortress. He screams again with more confidence, “Give us Barabbas!”, and then others join in, “Give us Barabbas! Give us Barabbas!” Soon, the ground quakes with the cry of the people, “Give us Barabbas! Give us Barabbas!”



My chest tightens. Pilate shakes his head not believing what he hears. The game is lost. The call of injustice reaches the heights of the nearby hills. “Give us Barabbas!”

Pilate gestures to me. I stand behind Yeshua. I smell death. “What more can I do?” Pilate pleads. I have no answer. “Go into my quarters. There is a basin of water next to the bed. Bring it here.”

I do as he wishes.

Caiaphas weeps tears of hate and vengeance. Pilate commands him with his eyes to

still the crowd. He does.

I hold the basin before the Prefect. He lifts his hands for all to see, then plunges them into the warm water. He raises them again, dripping wet, water running down his arms. “I will not be a part of this terrible injustice. I will take no responsibility for what you intend to do with this man. Before you and all the gods, I wash my hands clean of his death.

“Here he is, then. I give you the man.”

The crowd roars its murderous approval and screams, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Pilate orders the tribune to release the murderer. He stands face to face with Yeshua Barabbas as the tribune unties his feet and hands. Pilate lingers on each syllable as he whispers hoarsely to the criminal, “May all that is evil haunt you for the remainder of your days, and may your days be long so you regret every breath you take.” When he says what he must say, he pushes the freed man down the steps and wipes his hands on his tunic as if the contact has sullied him.

He turns to Yeshua and whispers in his ear loud enough for me to hear. "I am sorry I failed you. Go now bravely to your death knowing that I am one man who believes you are the truth." He pauses and glances at me, then asks so softly that I cannot hear him, but I can read his lips, "Who are you?"

Gentleness remains in Yeshua's eyes as if his imminent death by crucifixion, the most demeaning and cruelest of all punishments is of no concern. Yeshua manages to raise the slightest of smiles on his swollen face and breathes his answer into Pilate's ear. His voice is too exhausted for me to understand what he says, and his mouth too cracked for me to interpret the movements of his lips.

The Prefect closes his eyes with a serene look of absolute contentment and perfect understanding on his face.

Yeshua stumbles down the steps wearing Pilate's royal purple robe, now soaked through with scarlet streaks of blood. He trips on the second step and with bound hands is unable to catch himself. How his bones do not break, I do not know, but he rises to his feet and stares at the crowd through the sweaty, tangled hair that shields his eyes.

The fall pulls the Prefect back to the moment. He shakes his fist in the high priest's face. "Be gone, Caiaphas! Finish what you have begun."

The tribune awaits instructions. "See to it," Pilate orders him.

"I have no desire to be a part of this," Pilate tells me. "As difficult as this may be for you, Gaspar, I ask that you observe the sentence until it is concluded. You do not have to participate in the procession. My servant will take you along the parapet on the walkway. The crucifixion will take place on a hill in the old quarry just outside the wall by the main gate. You can watch from the rampart. Can you do that for me?"

"I will do as you wish, friend," I respond, and then dare to ask, "Who is he?"

The wisp of a bittersweet smile graces his lips, but he walks away without answering.

"No visitors. I will not be disturbed," he tells the guards who attend him as he returns to his quarters and closes the doors behind him.

The execution proceeds immediately.

"What is your name, boy?" I ask the young lad whom Pilate assigns to me. He has no more than twelve years.

"Kyros, sir."

"Ah," I reply, "A Greek like me." I place a hand on his shoulder as we stare upon the crowded training field.

The Roman guards allow no one to strike Yeshua as he hobbles the length of the field, but those gathered at this mock trial are eager for blood and death. They assault him with profanity, and many continue to spit upon him. He stays his course. Guards emerge from the prison with two other bound men clothed only in loincloth. As they near the gate at the far end, servants present the prisoners with broad, heavy beams. Kyros wears the grave countenance that no young boy should have to wear.

"Have you seen this done before, sir?"

"No."

"You'll not want to see it again. Come." He takes my hand and leads me to the walkway.

When we reach the northeast corner of the rampart, the prisoners are halfway from the fortress to the main gate. A sizeable crowd of curious onlookers follows them, but most people in the city are more concerned with concluding their Passover business and returning to their homes. They are not interested in these three convicts.

Kyros and I move faster than the procession and will converge with it near the gate where it will pass beneath us to its destination on the rocky hill in the abandoned quarry.

Already weakened from the scourging, Yeshua falls once under the weight of the heavy beam. For the first time, but not the last in this ordeal of madness, his cries pierce the wind and carry well beyond the walls. Amid the laughter of those who watch, the two guards raise the beam from his shoulders, another lifts him to his feet, and a third pulls an onlooker from the crowd and they force the stranger to carry the weight that Yeshua no longer has the strength to bear.

A handful of women shriek, but their cries of anguish do not deter the solemn parade as it finally passes beneath Kyros and me and out the gate.

The hill is so near to the rampart that if I had a stone, I could throw it to where they prepare to raise the three prisoners on their crosses. I am close enough to get a good look at the other two, and when I do, I feel as if my entire life converges upon this place at this precise moment in time.

The one is the ruffian Gestas who I have had the misfortune to encounter twice during my days in Judea. I consider his presence coincidental if not well deserved, and it does not surprise me that he is here. Gestas whimpers like a child as they tie his arms to the crossbeam they have affixed to the thick pole. They tightly tie his ankles above a small footrest that he can brace himself upon so that the weight of his body does not cause him to suffocate. It is a clever idea, but man could better serve himself by applying his brains and ingenuity to something more meaningful than crucifixion.

The other man stops me cold. The blood drains from my head and I brace myself on the wall as I fight through the dizziness that threatens to topple me. The boy does not notice.

When the guard removes the rope that binds the man's wrists, he strikes out so forcefully that he knocks the helmet from the nearest soldier. Three more descend upon him and he kicks, punches and bites like a wild animal. He has nothing to lose and does not intend to go peacefully. The one soldier retrieves his helmet, swings it like a club and cracks the side of the prisoner's head. He is shortly stunned, and four men take advantage of his weakness and lay him on the beam. Gathering himself and recovering his breath, he looks straight up into the blue sky. It is then that I recognize with absolute certainty that it is Dismas, my one-time assistant and now the renegade gladiator whose luck has finally abandoned him. I deny my urge to call out his name. I have no need to become a part of this monstrosity. His fate is sealed and there is nothing I can do to change its course.

Still, I run my hand through my hair and ask, "Why Dismas? Why here and why now?" Could any answer satisfy me?

One guard roughly rips the robe – more red now than purple – from Yeshua's raw back. His face contorts. With the two other crosses in place – neither straight and each askew – two soldiers place Yeshua on the beam. He does not protest. This time, however, after binding his outstretched arms to the wood with rope, a grizzled man with a leather cap kneels by his hand, extracts a viciously hungry spike from the bag 'round

his waist, and pounds it into the soft flesh of Yeshua's palm to pin him to the beam. Yeshua cannot contain the scream that I swear can be heard as far away as Secacah.

As the executioner repeats the task on the other hand, Yeshua's head falls forward, unconscious. I am glad he has passed out. They turn his legs to the side, and the man with the hammer pounds another spike through both anklebones, nailing Yeshua to the post just above the small footrest.

I avert my eyes. The young boy continues to look on. "I am used to this," Kyros remarks. "I have seen this before."

"I could never get used to this," I counter.

The soldiers raise the cross. Yeshua's is slightly higher than the others are. This man of peace will die with a criminal on either side.

Minutes pass and Yeshua regains consciousness.

The soldiers allow a small group to ascend the hill capped with the three crosses while the people who followed the procession from the fortress, mill about at the bottom. After an hour, the crowd disperses, each man to his own way. Only the few people who climbed the hill continue their deathwatch.

My task is unpleasant, but I maintain my post because Pilate asked me to do it. Who would want to watch a man die a slow, premeditated death? What pleasure does one man take from stealing another man's life? Is this Dismas' final reward for killing so many men in the arena and only to please the immoral tastes of the thousands who cheered him on and demanded the lives of the men he fought? Does the soldier feel joy when the metal tip of his well-aimed arrow finds the heart of his enemy?

Throughout the afternoon, Yeshua, delirious from the pain mumbles a handful of words. Two hours pass and clouds gather in the sky, some very dark; they climb higher. A storm brews.

Someone taps my shoulder. "You are the one seated with Pilate at the trial this morning, are you not?"

I have learned enough from my time in Yerushalem to know that this man wears the garments and headdress of the Sanhedrin, the high priest's political council.

"I am the one. And you, sir, are you a friend of the high priest?"

"I sit on the council with him, but would I call him my friend? No, the high priest is not my friend." We stare silently at the scene before us. "And why do you maintain vigil over this heartless play of humanity?" he asks.

"Pilate requested that I report back to him when it is finished."

The man leans on the cold stone that lines the battlement and laughs. "And I am here for a similar reason. I am to report back to Caiaphas when it is finished." He looks to the clouds that gather in the west. The sky is darkening. "This is one execution that will end prematurely if the victims do not cooperate."

"And why is that?"

"The Sabbath begins this evening, and our laws forbid that these men remain here alive."

Suddenly Yeshua contorts in pain and screams out, "I am thirsty!"

One of the soldiers looks to me as Pilate's representative as if I should know what to do. I avert my eyes and pretend I did not hear the cry.

The soldier answers in a pleading way as if he is offering him an apology, "We've only enough water for ourselves. Do you understand that?"

Yeshua twists his torso in an unnatural way. "I understand," he says loudly enough for me to hear from the rampart. "It is not your fault, and even if it were, I would forgive you because you do not know what you are doing."

As the soldier sits with his nervous comrades, the thief Gestas cries out, "You are a fool. If you are who I think you are, men say you have special powers. In the prison, a man told us you brought a dead man back to life. If you have that type of power, get down from that cross and take the two of us with you."

I have not heard this story, and the priest who watches with me wrinkles his brow.

And then Dismas groans, "Leave him alone, you worthless piece of flesh. You and I deserve to be up here. Do you know what it is like to kill a man?"

"Yes," Gestas smiles a twisted smile.

"And now you know what it is like to be killed," Dismas counters. "Which is worse?"

Gestas does not answer.

Dismas strains and twists his racked body toward Yeshua. "It is you, isn't it?" Yeshua draws one of his few remaining smiles from wherever they may reside in the darkness of this hour. "Do you remember me?" Dismas asks.

"I remember you and your kindness when I was a boy," Yeshua speaks through trembling lips.

"I wish I stayed with you when we left the school that night." Dismas gives Yeshua a moment of relief with his bittersweet memory.

"It was not supposed to be that way, but you and I will be together again. Believe it." Yeshua's chest heaves as he struggles to find the air to speak. He hasn't the strength to spit and blood flows freely from his mouth.

"I knew you were special," Dismas coughs. "I do not know how you did what you did to me long ago, but if men say you brought a man back from death, I believe it."

Each bows his head searching for more air.

"Do you understand this madness?" the man standing with the boy and me asks.

I grasp the stones and hold them tightly in my hand, imagining the impression on Yeshua's hand pierced now by the cruel spike. "I do understand it," I answer.

Thunder rumbles in the distance and the sky continues to darken. When the thunder recedes, Yeshua's voice is very clear as he tells Dismas, "When the sun sets on this city tonight, you will be with me in paradise."

"I believe you," Dismas replies.

"You are crazy, both of you," Gestas concludes.

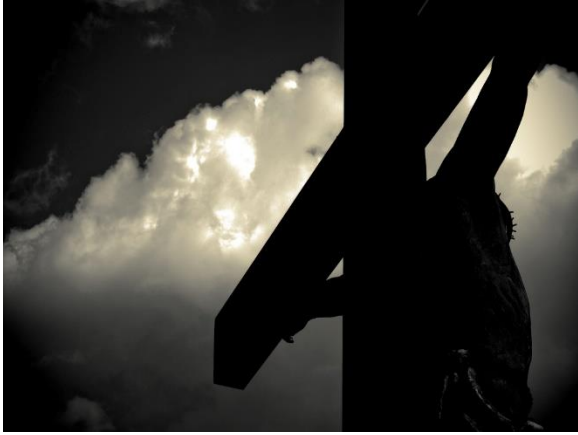
Lightning strikes not far away and the wind increases, raising a cloud of dust that makes the darkness that seizes the land even darker.

"The Romans," the man with me asks, "they know you? They will listen to you?"

I nod.

"My name is Joseph. I beg you to help me before this storm arrives. I must insure that these three are dead and that their bodies are removed. It is the day of preparation and tomorrow is a high holy day. These bodies cannot remain on the crosses. This may mean nothing to you, but it means everything to me. Please."

I hesitate for only a moment. The wind swirls. The lightning strikes closer and the thunder is much louder. "Kyros," I kneel and stare into the boy's eyes. "Run to the hilltop and tell the Tribune Marcellus to end it. It must be finished now for all three. Do you understand? Marcellus must kill them now."



Kyros scampers down the tower, and I turn my attention back to the hill. Yeshua lifts his face to the wind as it ushers in the rain. Lightning cracks so closely that when Yeshua yells out in a loud voice the only thing I can hear is the crash of thunder. I squint as the rain sharply strikes my face. Yeshua's head falls to his chest and his body goes limp. For Yeshua, it is finished before Kyros reaches the hilltop.

As for Gestas and Dismas, their end comes brutally. Kyros shouts to the tribune, and Marcellus looks to me on the wall. I nod affirmatively, certain that the boy has delivered my message accurately. As Kyros runs down the hill, a Roman soldier swings a long-handled hammer with a heavy, stone head. He breaks the legs of both the criminals. Without the leg support, their torsos sag and so quickly that neither issues a sound from their contorted faces. They suffocate and their agony is over.

"Thank you," Joseph whispers with bowed head.

The storm falls mercilessly as Kyros reaches the battlement. Joseph and I raise our cloaks above us to shield the boy from the stinging hail that takes vicious bites from exposed skin. The maelstrom rages for only a minute or two, and as fast as it brought the tempest upon us, the wind carries it to the east. When the clouds disperse, the sun is low in the sky, lower than I think it should be, but I can't say why.

We are drenched and we are cold.

Joseph implores, "A final favor, kind sir."

"Go ahead."

"I must speak with Pilate. I have a tomb prepared for myself. I wish to take the body of Yeshua and bury it there. Look," he points to a garden not far from the hill.

"You can see it there. It is the only tomb open and ready to accept a body."

"You would give your tomb to a man you do not know? Why?"

"I have listened to him many times. I was sent by the Sanhedrin as a spy to build evidence against him. The more I heard, the more I believed in his message. I don't know who he is or where he came from, but I believe his wisdom will inspire goodness in men long after you and I are dead.

"I heard much as I followed him from town to town, but I reported little to Caiaphas. I shared nothing with the high priest that was in my heart.

"Yeshua deserves more than a potter's field, for that is where they will bury the two that died with him."

I would like to have met Joseph when I first arrived in Judea. If I am to be his accomplice, I must act quickly. "You haven't much time," I sigh. "There is no need for you to speak with Pilate. Come with the boy and me."

The three of us descend the tower stairs and find Marcellus and his soldiers under the gate where they took shelter from the storm. I do not ask the tribune, rather I tell the tribune that this man will take the body of Yeshua and bury it in his tomb. "That one right over there in the garden. Please have two of your soldiers help him."

Marcellus does not object. "As for the other two, I've summoned a cart and will take them immediately to the common grave."

I have no need for further involvement. I have done as Pilate requested and will return and report to him that it was completed without incident.

As I bid my new friend Joseph farewell, three women emerge from the shadows. The young, pretty one falls at the tribune's knees; her long, wet hair reaches the ground. "I beg you, sir. May we anoint the body as is our custom?"

Marcellus waits for my approval, which I give with a small gesture that the woman is unaware of.

"Go with this man," Marcellus instructs her as he lifts her from the ground. He places her hand on Joseph's arm. "Two of my soldiers will help him. They will bring the body to his tomb, a rich man's tomb by the look of it. You may anoint him as you wish."

I breathe a heavy sigh as Joseph and the soldiers step into the muddy road to reclaim the body. The three women walk by in a single line, one after the other. The last one is the oldest. She carries a small wooden chest. I glance at it as she files past with eyes lowered.

When I see the image on the top of the chest, I am unable to refrain from reaching out and touching her slender shoulder. She stops and looks up into my eyes. She is not weeping. I suspect she has shed all her tears and has no more. There is no anger in her eyes and she does well to conceal the sadness.

"Pardon me, woman," I stutter. "I am so sorry to disturb you in your time of grief. May I ask you where you came upon that box?"

She smiles weakly and strokes the top of the chest with her small right hand, running her delicate fingers through the ornate carving. "When he was born," she answers. "When my son Yeshua was born, the night he took his first breath, three strange men came to visit. They were dressed like kings, but I do not think that they were. Each gave the child a special gift. One gave him this box of myrrh. As he placed it at my feet, he told me my son would suffer, and truly he has." I touch her cheek to catch the tear before it falls to the muddy ground. "Anoint him with the fragrance of this gift," he told my husband and me, 'and trust that when he cannot stand, he will be carried in the arms of angels.'"

She lowers her head and follows the others.

I hold the stones in my hand and stare at the ox head and the shepherd's crook. I once drew the symbol carved on the box on the floor of the cave in Fál. The image of *OM* looks so much like the ox head and the shepherd's crook. It is the same in the east as it is in the west and everywhere in between.

I gaze at the hilltop a final time. When this righteous man took his first breath, I was there, and I was here to see him take his last.

The two have become one. Knowing what I know, this is not the end, but...



The Beginning.