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### The Witness

As was my custom, I rose early that day to pay homage to the gods by prayers and burnt offerings. To which I vowed my obedience on that fateful morning, I cannot now remember. There were so many.

Leaving the place of worship, I endeavored to sit quietly and read the creeds of Rome as written by the emperor himself. Not only was it my duty as a centurion, but as a Roman citizen, to understand the purpose of almighty Caesar and Rome. However, just as I began pouring over the open scroll, a nameless messenger came panting with word from Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea, ordering my garrison to his palace immediately.

I arrived with three hundred men as if by flight. The sun had hardly risen, and the air held an unseen weight, as if to distinguish this day from all others. The men, all clad in leather and metal with swords swaying from their belts and spears stabbing at the sky in protest of their unusually early arousal, wobbled restlessly in rigid formation, awaiting my command. The sound of spiked sandals scraping the stone palace floor echoed down the long, stone hallway adding tension to mystery. They undoubtedly supposed that I knew the reason for it all. But I didn't. Until another messenger came with another scroll describing our purpose exactly. Jerusalem was a place known for its concentrated reserve of mindless zealots. And I had experience in stamping out the feeble efforts of disorderly vagrants and disorganized militias meant to unshackle the Jews from Rome's iron grip. One in particular came to mind as I read the final sentence of that day's orders. It was the most recent and pathetic uprising. A small army of poorly armed religious rebels managed to assassinate an insignificant gate keeper in the governor's palace. The idea that a handful of superstitious peasants could overthrow Rome was as ridiculous and if it weren't so sad, it would be laughable. Their leader had been a thin, sweaty man with hardly any beard, balding head and shifting eyes. A Jew. A brainless dreamer suffering from resentment. His name was Barabbas. He was hardly a match for Rome. I caught him in the streets attempting to hide beneath a vendor's blankets after his pitiful militia had been butchered and left for the dogs. I was his judge and jury. And since only Romans have the right to a trial, I stuffed him in a smaller-than-usual cell after the garrison had their day's exercise of beating him with rods and slapping him with gloved fists.

That day had another experience for me altogether. As we pushed our way into the Praetorium hauling the scourged offender to the platform, the mob sang out in a chorus of hatred, "Crucify Him!" The governor addressed the riotous masses with careful words, offering them a choice between the bloodied and uncondemned Man now occupying the platform with him, or the pathetic zealot, Barabbas, who had failed in attempt to destroy Rome. Immediately they sent out blood-curdling screams consenting to the murder of the One and the release of the other. It was apparent, by their screams, that this Man had not offended Rome. He had offended the Jews.

A messenger interrupted the procedure; which was doubtlessly an urgent matter, after which I was signaled to bring Him into the governor's inner court. The conversation that took place proved this man's character. He spoke only when questioned and claimed that the governor's authority was given to him by the Offender's Father, which made little sense to me at the time. When He said He was a King, I wondered whether Barabbas, the sweaty zealot had similar thoughts. But, all in all, this man had authority incomparable to any I had seen before. This fact was startling considering I had seen the Caesar and all his delegates more often than Pontius himself.

What seemed like moments later, my garrison had elbowed their way through the riotous crowds to the place of execution, hauling two offenders of Rome and One offender of the Jews.

His head had been crowned with thorns, no doubt a torturous invention of the guiltless soldiers in my garrison. His beard replaced with bleeding flesh. His back opened wide by a Roman scourge to an infectious environment full of illness bred in the hearts of vehement enemies. Yet, it seemed that these

were the slightest of His pains judging by the weight of grief He bore on His countenance. His visage carried an eternal load of unfamiliar burdens.

As was my custom, I drove the first nail into the left wrist of each offender inaugurating their torturous departure from this world and instructing my garrison how to proceed with the crucifixion. The two vagrants wrestled pathetically against the soldier's grip that held their filthy arms against the knotted wood, spitting out blasphemies against the gods of Rome and sprinkling our faces with bloody specs of mucus. But they could do little more than wiggle their palms and claw at my wrists with their broken nails until the iron spike impaled the wrist and its owner's arm was pinned against the wood, twitching like a wounded animal. I often delighted in the sound of their ear-splitting screams and hellish moans that filled the air and the sight of their epileptic convulsions of agony as their crosses were set upright. I became somewhat of a drama to which I looked forward with secret pleasure, even more than the gladiators and the chariot races where countless men had lost their lives to entertain Rome. I could hardly keep from smiling, at times.

But this Man, although He was innocent, displayed no reluctance in placing His arm against the wood. His eyes fastened on the soldier holding His arm and on me, His sadistic executioner. I expected the typical reaction as the iron penetrated His skin. But this man was not typical in any sense of the word. Instead of spraying my face with spittle, He groaned and looked away, scrapping His thorny crown against the lumber behind His head. Unlike the other two, this Man did not moan in melodies of agony as the cross sat upright, disjuncting its resident. Tears ran down His scabbed face as He viewed the masses streaming past the foot of His cross. Their venomous words struck the air like frothy waves pounding some seaside cliff. And, unlike the other two, who's hoarse-voiced cursing baptized each passerby with vulgar threats and swollen words of every sort, He spoke kindly to a few standing at the foot of His cross. Had He not been a Jew, I would have been compelled to defend His dying reputation for sheer sympathy's sake.

At the instant before He died, the sky blackened as if it had been split open like a carcass and all its guilt bled out onto the clouds. The earth convulsed shaking and tossing my men and I like mere toys. At that instant I knew this Man was no mere Man.

He wielded an exclusive power. The image of Rome, as if it were a colossal statue carved of iron, lay in heaps beneath His cross as a mound of chaff vulnerable to the slightest breath of wind. The sight of His emaciated corpse stabbed at my conscience. Had I done wrong? If not, then why such agony of heart? I was bleeding now and my zeal for Rome poured from the bowels of my heart like the streamlets coursing from His side and brow. He had slain me not I Him. His naked body reduced to shards of stinking flesh hanging lifelessly on the cross, seemed more alive than I did standing with my hand-polished helmet and Roman embroidery hanging like empirical curtains from my shoulders. I was ashamed of myself. I turned away to prevent my tears from being noticed. Regret welled up in my soul and poured out onto my cheeks with burning tears. I tried desperately to compose myself to no avail. Once more, I turned to look at Him, and my knees betrayed me to the ground beneath. My forehead kissed the ground in an unguarded slump. I grit my teeth and formed the words, "Truly, this was the Son of God!"

I have never been the same since.

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