

*“There were also women looking on from afar...”*

–Mark 15:40

They moved on and the crowd gradually dispersed as people returned to what they had been doing. After giving me a look of contempt, the Pharisee huffed away to re-join his fellows.

I watched Miryam disappear around a corner. My heart ached for her.

Hadassah gave me a nudge. “Forget the spices, Imma. We must return home.”

“Not yet. There is still more to do.”

She shook her head and waved her hands. “No! None of this is our concern.”

“It is not far.” I slipped my arm around my daughter’s shoulder. “Walk with me and I will try to explain.”

We trailed at a distance, following the sad procession out the city gate and onto the road that passed through Emmaus on its way to Jaffa. The same road Shemu’el had walked years ago on his return from Antioch.

A hundred paces later we turned onto the path leading to Golgotha, the place of the skull. We passed it every time we brought sheep to the Temple. Even as a little girl I turned my face and averted my eyes. Unbelievably, here we were walking toward it.

Hadassah’s frightened eyes jerked from side to side with each step we took. “This is a place of infamy and death.” She pointed to a weathered scrap of cloth tangled in a thorn bush. “This place is unclean, we will be defiled for the *Shabbat*.”

“You worry too much.”

“And you worry too little. We should not be here. What if someone sees us?”

“If they do, they do,” I said with a shrug.

“That is easy enough for you to say. You can go home to your settlement. Hebel and I must live here in Jerusalem. What if people decide they do not wish to buy lamps from a man whose wife goes to crucifixions?”

I shot her a stern look. “Very well, I will go on alone. Return home without me.”

She made the same angry snort her father did whenever he became upset with me.

The death party reached the plateau and the soldiers set about their gruesome task. The women with Miryam walked her to the edge and turned their backs, huddling and praying with bowed heads.

We reached a wide spot in the path, a resting place. From there the trail rose sharply, curving around a small hillock on its final ascent to the top.

“This is close enough for now,” I said, catching Hadassah’s sleeve. I could not bear to watch them pierce Yeshau’s wrists and feet with nails.

We sat on a boulder to wait. I noticed fresh droplets of blood on the ground in front of me. Yeshua, too, had paused here. Moving my foot in tiny circles, I brushed dust over each spot.

Scattered stalks of fescue sprouted between the rocks above us, screening our view. Unfortunately the ear hears even when the eye cannot see. The clang of a heavy hammer rang out like a gong. A man's high-pitched shriek sent shivers racing up my spine.

My daughter turned to me with the look of a frightened lamb.

My arms closed around her. She buried her face in my shoulder and I placed a hand over her ear to block out the screams. I noticed one of the women doing the same for Miryam.

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At last the pounding stopped.

"It is time," I said, lifting my daughter's head.

She began to tremble. "Please do not make me go up there, Imma. I do not want to go."

"Neither do I, child." I took her hand in mine. "Come, we will help each other."

"What makes you seek out this awful place?"

"An inner voice summons me."

Hadassah pointed toward the summit. "We are not part of this. We could still leave."

"Perhaps you can, but I cannot," I said, taking my first steps. "I must see it through to the end for Miryam."

Hadassah stared at the mountains, blue in the distance. Her voice had a childlike quality. "Look, Imma," she said, pointing. "The sky."

From horizon to horizon the sky grew darker by the moment. True to Obadiah's words a terrible storm was surely on its way. As I watched the sky darken, the words of Amos the prophet came to me.

*"On that day, says the Lord God, "I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation;...I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day."*

As we crested the hill each step revealed a bit more of the three crosses planted in the rocky soil. First, the top of the upright *palus*, next the *titulus*, then, beneath the *patibulum* that formed the cross, the men's heads slumped in pain. I saw the full extent of Yeshua's injuries for the first time, and shivered in sympathy.

Throughout the afternoon we hovered nearby, always available, never intruding.

Hadassah grew increasingly impatient with me. Tomorrow was *Shabbat Chol HaMoed Pesach*—the Sabbath during the feast of Passover—the most sacred *Shabbat* of the year. Today was the day of preparation and Hadassah had not yet prepared.

It was too late to return to our settlement now. Ya'akov and I would have to stay over until the first day of the week. Shemu'el might worry, but he knew travel on the *Shabbat* was forbidden.

“We should have gone back to the house. It is unlawful to cook on the *Shabbat*. All of us will go hungry.” Hadassah said. “What will we do, eat Hebel’s pots?”

“God will provide. Our ancestors survived on his manna.”

She made an unpleasant face and turned aside.

“You told me Hebel always banks his fires early on the day of preparation. Seeing we are late, he will surely purchase a few items just in case.”

I scanned the darkening sky. It felt like night already. She was right; soon it would be the *Shabbat*.

Y’shua pushed himself up and sucked in a deep breath,

Transfixed, Hadassah groped for my hand as we stood silently watching.

He turned his weary eyes heavenward and said, “Abba, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

How appropriate, I thought, brushing back tears. My precious Yeshua’s final words were the bedtime prayer every Jewish child learned at their mother’s knee.

A huge bolt of lightening split the sky followed almost immediately by a mighty clap of thunder that rocked the ground. A great loneliness wrapped itself around us.

Hadassah sobbed into my shoulder as Yeshua’s body slowly sank under its own weight.

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The soldier’s work was nearly complete. They had spent the afternoon drinking wine and, after three hours in the heat, they were drunk. They stood aside in a circle, laughing loudly as they emptied the last wineskin. Their commanding officer watched with a disgusted look on his face.

All afternoon a group of Pharisees stood afar off awaiting Yeshua’s death. Now they approached the Centurion insisting the men not be left hanging over the *Shabbat*.

A short while later two merchants appeared with burial cloths, spices and orders authorizing them to remove Yeshua’s body. The young man who had stood with the women joined the merchants in their work. The women helped by mixing the spices. Settling a ladder, the men lashed Y’shua’s arms to the beam to prevent the body from falling when they released the nails in his wrists.

Left alone, Miryam crumpled to the ground beside the cross.

“I must go to her,” I whispered.

“The Centurion will not allow it,” Hadassah said. “He ordered everyone away.”

“I will ask his permission.”

My daughter’s eyes grew wide. “No! Women do not approach men outside their own family.”

Today felt like a day when every rule of decent behavior had already been broken. I felt the cakes of pressed dates in my bag. Removing them, I took a step forward.

Hadassah could stand no more. “Stop, Imma.” She grabbed my cloak. “He is a Roman soldier, an indecent heathen, a barbarian.”

I spun around to face her. "Like your father? Have you forgotten the Romans offered him a commission? We are all made by the same God."

The Centurion did not seem like a bad man. I took a cautious step forward. "I have heard you called Petronius."

"Yes, that is how men address me."

I unwrapped the pressed dates and extended my hand. "You must be hungry. Would you care for some dates?" Keeping my eyes low, I bowed my head.

His eyes moved over me.

Fear rolled across my stomach. There was no one here to protect me if he chose to molest me.

"Why would a Jewish woman approach a Roman officer offering dates?"

"I bear you no animosity. When Quirinius governed Syria my husband served as assistant to Evodius Scipio, the *Medicus Cohortis* to *Legio XII Fulminata*. I understand you must do as you are ordered."

Hearing this changed his attitude. He took one of the cakes and ate several bites. "Your husband, he is a Roman?" he asked as he chewed.

"A Roman citizen...a freedman. Quirinius offered him a commission as *Medicus Ordinarii*."

I glanced over his head at the cross. They had already freed Y'shua's feet.

The Centurion finished the date cake, smiled his thanks and took the other. "What do you want from me?"

"I wish to go closer."

"Why now?"

"I knew the man and his mother when I was a child. She is alone. I would like to comfort her."

He glanced over his shoulder at Miryam slumped against the base of the cross then tilted his head, studying the sky. Dark thunderheads encircled Jerusalem like the sides of a cauldron. Random drops pelted us and the swirling wind raised dust about our ankles.

"Pilate spoke correctly," he said. "There was no crime in him." He sighed deeply. "Truly this man was the Son of God." He stepped aside to let me pass.

I knelt beside Miryam and rested an arm around her shoulder.

My touch startled her, causing her to jerk around. "Rivkah?"

Though she had seen me earlier, in her grief Miryam forgot I was there.

"Yes, here I am."

She gave a heaving sob. "They killed my son, Rivkah."

I pulled her close and held her tight.

"Years ago I relinquished my will to God not knowing it would lead to this." Miryam looked into my eyes. A shiver passed through her. "Over and over he warned me this was coming, but I never allowed myself to believe it could really happen."

Beside us the men continued working to free Yeshua's body.

Miryam ran the ball of her hand across her eyes, clearing tears, and sniffed. "Do you remember that night in the stable so long ago, my friend?"

"Always." In spite of the circumstances, the memory brought a slight smile to my lips.

“It was the first time I nursed him.” She swallowed hard and brushed back more tears. “He was such a beautiful baby.”

One of the merchants spread a burial cloth over Miryam’s lap. Releasing the ropes, they lowered Yeshua and placed him in her arms.

Miryam looked down at him and wept. Her arms quivered.

Already behind her, I slipped my arms beneath hers. “Here,” I whispered, “let me help you.”

And that was how the life I watched begin came to an end. The same invisible hands that led me to the stable many years before once again guided me to Miryam’s side.

But this time my arms helped her hold him.