

Herod's Eyes

Excerpt 1

It was my duty to see the Judeans buried, as is our custom, as soon as possible after death. It was my duty to prepare them, since these men, my servants, had died far away from their families in the Land.

I also took it upon myself to bury the enemy dead, those that were circumcised at any rate. Many, as it turned out, but by no means all, were indeed Jewish. Like the others, they were washed, purified, and wrapped. The remainder, gentile and unwanted, were hauled away to oblivion.

Carts laden with the caskets were driven east off the Palatine, then south to the extreme southeast end of the Circus Maximus. Here, breaching the Servian Walls, was the Porta Capena, its arches marking the beginning of the Appian Way that ranged to the southeast, eventually reaching the Port of Brundisium on Mare Adriaticum. The wagons, pulled by placid oxen, rumbled through the gates amid a throng of the Jewish residents of Rome, for the gate was in the old Jewish settlement. The crowd was quiet, a very un-Jewish thing, but as we continued on, there came a swell of voices, men and women repeating these words:

Baruch atah Adonai Elokeinu melekh ha'olam dayan ha'emet.

I had said the same at the end of our terrible night.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of all, the true judge.

The traffic on the Appian Way was light and pedestrian. A few horsemen passed, mostly post riders carrying messages that tied the lands of the Campagne to the desires of Rome. Our procession held together in its solemn pace for two miles, as our carts creaked and bumped on the paving stones of the old highway. My men, some wounded worse than me, paced alongside, escorting the dead whenever they had room in the oncoming traffic. We passed the tombs of the wealthy and powerful Romans that lined the road. My servants were not destined for these.

We turned off the highway where a stone bridge crossed the drainage ditch, leading to a dirt road heading south. This road proceeded through fields of high barley to an enclosure with a low stone wall. We passed through the open wooden gate to the

cemetery. There, amidst the flat and carved gravestones, we handed down the coffins of my servants, and placed them side-by-side in a pre-dug common grave. The enemy would go into another, on the far side of the cemetery, away from those who died fighting them. My servants lay there, ready for my final words, the fall of burial earth, and the common grave marker. And, I hoped beyond all measure, for a seat in Paradise.

I praised the courage and dedication of my servants and broke custom:

I recited the name of each.

My eulogy was short. My mourning would be longer, and my anger everlasting.