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FISHERMAN, SICARIUS, APOSTLE

A long short story

Chapter 1

After a few days they left Jericho and entered the land of Judah.

They stopped to spend the night in one caravan inn. Everyone went to sleep except for the Teacher, who went out into the yard after having wished good night to everyone. Waiting until everything quieted down and he could hear light snoring, Simon carefully got up from the carpet on the floor and slipped outside.

He saw The Teacher by the stable where horses and mules slept snoring in the stalls. Trying to go unnoticed, Simon exited beyond the gates and snuck along the fence. At the corner a man waited for him holding two horses by the bridle.

“Finally. I was already thinking that you changed your mind and wouldn’t come,” a man said, handing Simon the reigns. Then he jumped into the saddle and, lashing the horse with a whip, galloped down the dark road.

Simon followed him. Soon both riders, having circled around a high hill, directed their horses across the field to the mountain range.

“We don’t have another choice.” Dan threw the little stone into the dying fire. He rose and shook off the hem of his burnoose.

Ash already covered the fire embers except for the end of one ember which had not yet burnt out; thin tongues licked the faltering flame. Sparks shot off from the black cracks at times, brightening Simon’s face as he sat by the fire.

A towering cliff obstructed the view to the valley, on which lay the main road for Jerusalem. But this cliff served as its own type of cover. No one could spot them from the road—not the pilgrim procession going into the holy city, not the merchants leading their caravans there for the impending holiday, and most importantly not the Roman soldiers, whose increased equestrian patrols these days scoured the area around Jerusalem.

Simon did not take his gaze away from the fire. It was as if he wanted to see in the shaking of the undying flares the answer to the only question bothering him lately. He lightly pushed the still lit ember with the edge of a crooked thorny branch so the flame would not die out.

“Let all of Israel return to the Almighty, may He be blessed,” Dan murmured and looked at the sky while raising his head.

In the magnificence of the eastern night the stars hovered so low that it seemed one’s hand could reach them.

All of a sudden someone made a short bird-like chirp behind the cliff. Dan froze uneasily.

“Can it be they spotted us? Dogs!” He removed the dagger from his waistband and crept towards the exit.

Meanwhile Simon threw a few handfuls of sand into the fire and fanned the thick puffs of smoke with his hand.

Soon, very soon, the whole world will change. Those killed in wars will be resurrected, and those who died of illness and old age, and so too all the Jews who once lived in Israel and those forced out to other lands. His father Ion and his wife Miriam, who died giving birth, will be resurrected. The new age is at the door!

But for some reason Simon is not sitting now at the Great Temple or among his apostle-brothers, who accompanied the Rabbi for three years around the whole Land of Israel. He sits in secret from his brothers in the mountain gorge by the burnt-out fire. Dan, one of the zealot leaders known for his brutality towards the Romans, a minute ago went to check with dagger in hand what happened and why the watchman on the lookout let out the chirping signal to them. Is it possible they were tracked down?

“Everything is fine. Some tramp stole a wagon of goods belonging to someone else and is now looking for a place to hide it,” Dan said upon return. He looked at Simon, who sat motionless. “So, Cephas, we agreed; you will meet with Esau in Jerusalem. You will find him though Zebulon, a vegetable seller near the Jaffa Gate.”

Simon heard a clunk as a leather pouch fell by his legs.

“Here, take it. You might need money now.”

Then a dagger blade made a new sound by the entering the sand.

“The Romans call these daggers sicae and us Sicarii. They fear us. Cowards!”

“Amen,” Simon said, coming out of a reflective state.

He rose and picked up the money pouch from the ground and stuffed it into the pocket of his cloak. Then he took out the dagger from the sand. He tested if the handle covered in thick

leather was comfortable. The dagger was solid. One hit above the armor to the neck or throat with such an object and the Roman is dead, on the ground in a puddle of blood.

Yes, first we must destroy the enemies and only then build the Kingdom.

It was the middle of the night when two riders stopped near a caravan inn. Simon jumped off of one horse. Adjusting the bag thrown across his shoulders and waving goodbye to the other rider, he headed for the gate. Behind his back, the whistle of a whip sounded along with the rapidly retreating clatter of horses' hooves.

Upon entering the yard, Simon saw Jesus sitting by the fire with a few more men. Perhaps there was not enough room in the houses, so they lay down under the open sky on the wide camel throws.

Seeing Simon, Jesus got up and went to him. It became clear to Simon that he cannot tell Jesus of his whereabouts just now, that he met with one of the zealot leaders, and that he is armed with a dagger.

Jesus thoughtfully looked into the eyes of his pupil without saying a word, as if waiting for him to admit the truth. But Simon stayed quiet, only nodules twitching on his cheekbones under the thick beard.

Suddenly he wanted to fall before Jesus on his knees and kiss his feet—dirty, covered in soot and dust—like always before. Simon loved Jesus, and loved him stronger than he loved himself.

“You’re sad about something, Cephas?” Jesus asked quietly.

“Yes, Rabbi. My soul is restless.”

A short pause arose. Jesus did not take his eyes off of Simon. Not getting his answer, he sighed.

“Grieve. Great grief await us all, Peter.”

At that moment in the caravan inn, not far from the stable, Simon finally understood that his heart had broken into two pieces. A proud fearless zealot now lives inside him, clasping a dagger to kill Israel’s enemies in the name of God; at the same time there lives in him a fearless apostle, willing to bare any suffering and go to the most shameful death for his Teacher.

Chapter 2

In the morning, after a short meal, they set out on the road. It was not far until Jerusalem and they were making it in time to arrive before sunset.

Simon walked next to Matthew. Matthew was telling him something quietly and Simon felt that today everything annoys him—Levi, the sun scorching the earth, the thick dust above the ground, and the fact that the Rabbi did not want to stop in the grove under the shadow.

He knew the reason for this annoyance was his lie. He hid from the Teacher that he chose a path which Jesus surely would reject. In all three years this was probably the first time when Simon concealed something from the Teacher.

Lately Jesus also changed. He constantly talks of impending grief, about the fact that he will soon suffer and die. He looks at his pupils, not like before, but with some regret, as if he could not give them what he wanted to.

Finally Jesus agreed to stop for a bit. They settled under the shade of the bushes. Everyone got busy with their own things. Judas was re-counting money from the marching case,

the pitiful pennies barely enough for lodging and food. Matthew unwrapped a scrap of parchment paper and was making some notes. Andrew was weaving a mesh from thin ropes. The little brother is drawn back to the Sea of Galilee and its quiet waters.

Everyone was tired from these never-ending journeys and wanderings, under the constant threat of robbery or murder. Didn't they get driven out of villages enough; had dogs sent after them, get robbed in inns? Leopards attacked them in the mountains; scorpions stung them in the deserts. It's surprising how they're all still alive.

Jesus speaks only of grief and his close death, and now also he retired from everyone and got on his knees, praying. Gathering dust from the ground, he sprinkled it on his head.

Chapter 3

Near the sheep paddock of the Lower City there was loud noise. Commerce was roaring on the eve of the holiday.

Approaching one of the sellers, Simon whispered something in his ear. Looking Simon up and down with a sharp gaze, the merchant indicated with a gesture to follow him.

They went inside an empty shack where the guide led Simon to the back wall, cast aside the bags piled there, and pointed to the open aperture with cut-out stairs in the ground. The steps lead to the basement.

There was a faintly lit lamp in the basement; it was stuffy. Four men stood by the tall stone table, speaking quietly about something. Having seen the guest who entered, they looked at each other.

They were all dressed in plain clothes and did not appear different from regular merchants or shepherds. Only one of them wore a long black cloak.

The noise from commerce and the bleating of sheep barely reached here from the street.

One of the men came over to Simon. "Hello, Cephas. I am happy to see you. Come in."

He extended his hand to his guest.

"Hello Esau," Simon answered.

"Was it easy to find us? I hope no one tailed you. Do you have the dagger with you?"

"No, I hid it in the Gethsemane Garden. I don't need it yet."

Other men approached Simon, making his acquaintance.

"Finish your chat, we don't have much time," the man in the black cloak said. Judging by the tone of his voice, he was the leader among them.

Long swords lay on the table with leather handles, along with crooked-bladed knives, bronze armor, and heaped tunics with dark stains of dried blood. On one end of the table shone a handful of silver coins.

The man in black put the weapons and armor into the bag.

"Give this to Rufus; he will also organize a squad of Sicarii. This will come in very handy now. Give the money to the main Cohen in the temple. Do you understand everything?"

"Yes, Eleazar," they answered.

A short pause arose. Everyone looked at Eleazar awaiting new orders from him. He stood, slightly rocking to and fro as if thinking about something. Suddenly he turned to Simon, placed his hand on his shoulder, and squeezed hard.

"Well, hello fisherman. So you came to us and prepared to go with us?"

"Yes," Simon replied quietly.

“Good, we will test you in action. Tomorrow night during the third guard we will wait for you at the gates of Zion.”

The following night during the third guard, near the gates of Zion, two Roman soldiers were killed.

But Simon was not among the attackers. He did not come.

Chapter 4

A crowd followed the guards. In the twilight of the Gethsemane Garden, flashing torches illuminated glimpses of Roman soldiers’ silhouettes with their raised spears and swords. Shouts sounded from the guard up front as he demanded to clear the road and make way.

Slaves of the high priest scurried behind the soldiers. One of the slaves pressed a bloodied rag to his head. During Jesus’ arrest Simon had cut his ear off with a dagger.

People ran over from the nearest yards and dogs barked.

Simon, walking behind everyone, strained his eyesight to see Jesus’ light tunic flashing among the red coats.

“Rabbi! Rabbi!” he yelled, swinging his arms, hoping that Jesus would turn around and see him.

Jesus indeed suddenly turned around and for a moment held his gaze on Simon. It was dark and Simon did not see the Teacher’s eyes but rather felt their gaze—tearful, sorrowful, even lost.

“Get away! Get out of the way!” the soldier carrying the torch yelled, cursing and damning everyone around.

“I am with you Rabbi, with you!” Simon whispered.

“Get away, away!” the soldiers yelled, raising the torches as high as possible when they left the yard and there was no fire hazard.

“Go to the Sicarii, faster to the Sicarii! Ask them for help!” Simon thought and, hiding the dagger, he ran down the familiar street.

It was a cold, very cold night. But it was so hot during the day. So much dust rose above the Jerusalem streets that it was hard to breathe. So many sacrifices were brought to the Almighty this Passover; so much incense was burned! Fat bulls, sheep, and rams by the ton lay on the stone altars around the whole of Jerusalem, on its white ancient stones.

Sacrificial bonfires burned on the Mount of Olives, by all the seven city entrance gates, and by the Palace of Herod the Great. But most of all their flames blazed in the Temple where the high priest Caiaphas clad in gold and purple, surrounded by Cohens and Levis, sprinkled the sacrificial meal and pronounced the prayer of prayers, “Shema Yisrael! Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

Passover! A holiday of liberation! Remember, Jew, that you were once a slave in Egypt. Great Moses brought you out of slavery. Soon a new Moses will come and lead the people to new freedom! Shema Yisrael!

All day people offered prayers and smoke wafted above the holy city. All day there was wine drinking, singing, and dancing. But come night, Jerusalem fell asleep. On the dark empty

streets only ripped baskets were left, with piles of rotten vegetables and fruits, and flour spilled everywhere.

Chapter 5

In the Sanhedrin the trial was in progress for the arrested Jesus, while the Sicarii, armed with sicae and other blades, gathered in one of the buildings under construction in the Upper City.

The plan was the following: Esau, Eleazar, and two other Sicarii will wait in hiding for a signal, as Simon—dressed as a Nazirite monk—sits not far from them by the road. When Jesus is arrested and led from the Sanhedrin to Pilate for questioning and sentencing, Simon will get up from the ground and go to the guards. He will start to yell and cause confusion. Then the Sicarii will come out from hiding. In a few minutes everything will be finished. They decided to attack only in the event that the guards have no more than five soldiers.

They had chosen a future court building as the place of ambush. The old building was recently demolished and a new one was being built. It was the only accessible place in the Upper City, where the nobility lived. It was very convenient for attackers since it was located close to the road, making a turn at this spot so the enemy was within reach in a few jumps.

“Here, fisherman, wear this. You will be undercover as a Nazirite.” Eleazar extended a cilice made of coarse camel wool to Simon.

“These suckers in the Sanhedrin are fussing all night to deal with one crazy man!” Esau was agitated. “Hope to make it in time before the changing of the guard.” Esau spewed a new curse towards the judges in the Sanhedrin and walked away. He pressed himself to the wall and carefully peeked to see whether there was anything suspicious.

All was quiet; all was calm—a deserted road, villas, a cypress grove in the mist of the melting morning fog.

“You see, fisherman, you returned to us after all,” Eleazar said. “Thank me for agreeing to your persuasion. Do you think that I want to free your Jesus?” Eleazar smiled. “No, I don’t need Jesus. I need the Romans, their nasty lives! But it won’t be a huge misfortune if in killing a few Romans we save one Jew—right, fisherman? And, also, do you know why I like this raid? I like its audacity to kill Romans in Upper City—near Pilate’s residence!

“Come on, fisherman. Move!” Eleazar smacked Simon on the shoulder and stepped aside.

Simon was changing clothes. He took off his shirt, leaving only his linen band around the hips. He wrapped a leather cord around himself and tied it into a knot on his chest. His shoulders were set and firm, and with precise movements gave away a person who engaged in heavy physical labor for many years.

Then he took out the dagger from the bag and put it through the loop in a way that it became nestled under the left armpit. He threw on the cilice and was ready. Now he looked like a Nazirite.

Esau, the lookout, turned around and waved to them that everything is fine and they can come out.

Coming out of the hiding spot, Simon walked a few steps and stopped by the cooling altar, charred and spattered in blood. From here was an open view on the whole street where Jesus was to be taken from the Sanhedrin.

At first he thought to sit on the side of the road and wait. No, his form will catch the eye from a distance. The guards can suspect something. Holding the cilice, he lay on the ground. That is better. He lay his head on his arm bent at the elbow and froze in anticipation.

He thought about the fact that he let his doubts take over in vain. Once taking the plow, one should not look back. He had to stay with the Sicarii and take revenge on Israel's enemies.

For some time it was as if he forgot himself. Some force made him look at his hands. He saw the skin on his palms suddenly start to come apart and the tips of two black nails emerge from the palms of his hands.

Shocked, Simon turned over both wrists of his hands and saw that nails pierced them from the outside. Thin streams of blood flowed from the wounds. Sudden pain pierced his feet at the ankles. Pulling up the cilice, he saw that nails also pieced his feet! Everything around him somehow got mixed up; it was as if he fell out of time, not understanding what was going on with him now.

The muffled stomping of boots accompanying people's voices took him out of this strange state. Simon raised his head and looked closely.

Figures appeared in the distance. It was hard to distinguish how many were there. He lay down, pretending to sleep, and whispered, "God, help me; help me kill."

The rattle of weapons reached his hearing. Through the cracks of his loosely closed eyes Simon watched the approaching convoy. Five! There were five guards; two of them walked in

front, and three behind the arrested. So each Sicarius will take on one Roman. Simon will kill the one in the front.

The soldiers were very close. Simon clearly saw their short tunics, leather chest armor, and lowered swords in their hands. The soldiers walked at an easy pace, halfheartedly speaking among themselves.

As if their procession woke him, Simon slowly tore his body from the ground, sat up, and started rubbing his eyes. The soldiers did not pay any attention to him. God knows some negligent Nazirite monk drank too much wine for Passover and is now lying on the ground!

That's it; now he will get up and approach them. He will put on a spectacle, start yelling and waving his hands, until his right hand will stealthily slide under the cilice.

Eyes...the eyes of bound Jesus looked at him. It seems Jesus was not surprised that Simon is here now, on this road.

Pale, completely exhausted over the previous night, Jesus looked at Simon and his eyes had no reproof, no condemnation. There was only inexpressible pain. Maybe Jesus wanted to say something and stopped for that reason. But one of the soldiers swung and hit his head with a fist clad in a leather glove and yelled in broken Aramaic "Move it, King—don't stop!"

Jesus staggered but did not fall down.

"Aah!!!" Simon screamed, and sensing that he no longer belongs to himself, jumped to his feet.

But some force threw him back on the ground. He tried to get up once again, but his legs went numb for some reason. His hands pierced with nails filled with sharp pain. It was as if he was nailed to a wooden cross, and then turned upside down.

"Aah!!!" Simon screamed, trying to fall off from this cross.

The soldiers looked back on the raving man and continued marching. One of them said something and everyone laughed loudly.

Once they disappeared around the bend, the Sicarii appeared from behind the stone wall. Running up to Simon, who was standing on his knees, they showered him with curses. Enraged, Esau hit Simon in the back with his leg.

“Why did we deal with you?!”

Simon fell with his face on the stones and lay there not having the strength to say a word. Vaguely, in a haze he saw above him the black figure of a man with bloody eyes. The one in black raised a knife above him.

“Kill him, Eleazar! Otherwise he will give us up!”

“Aah!”

Jerusalem was waking up, ready to continue the celebration of the great holiday. The first wagons rolled on the streets. Women appeared with baskets and pitchers in their hands.

And on one of the streets, by the cold altar, in a bloody cilice, lay Simon, neither alive nor dead.

Chapter 6

The month Nissan in that memorable year turned out uncommonly hot. More often than usual, sand storms descended on Jerusalem. The relentless sun scorched oilseeds and lemon groves, ruining more than one peasant family. Dysentery began. Children perished from the heat and infection. Panicked rumors floated about the plague and other terrifying illnesses.

Attacks on the Romans happened in the city more often. Stabbed Roman soldiers were found all over—in cellars, cesspits, by the gates, and near synagogues.

Fortune tellers and healers appeared everywhere.

The Messiah is near! The Messiah is at the doorstep!

“I need to speak to your commander; let me in,” Simon insisted, stopping a few feet from the gate two soldiers were guarding.

“What do you want to tell him, beggar?” one of the soldiers asked, making a movement with his spear, as if driving away with a stick the Jew standing before him. “Do you think I don’t know that you will beg for money from our superior?”

Simon had the saddest appearance, his face inflamed from fly bites and festering wounds. The cilice covering the emaciated body was filthy, as were his dirty and clotted hair and beard. His whole body exuded such inhuman fatigue that it seemed a slight push could knock him down off of his feet.

“I don’t need money. I can give you money myself,” he reached in his pocket for a coin.

Seeing a copper assarius on the palm of an annoying solicitor, the guard beckoned Simon to him.

“Come here. What do you want to say to our commander?” he hid the coin in a wallet behind a leather belt.

“I want to see Jesus from Galilee. He was recently arrested and brought to the hegemon for sentencing. I want to tell your commander that I was with Jesus and should be arrested as well. Also...I organized the attack on the convoy; I wanted to kill one of you,” Simon said in a low but confident voice.

Words of attack had an effect. The guard grabbed Simon by the shoulder. Ushering him inside the yard and into the Pretoria, he hurled him at the wall. Losing his balance, Simon fell.

“Marius, guard him. I will go let Quintus know,” the soldier said, heading to the two-story building with a high portico in the recess of the courtyard where the garrison authorities were located.

Raising the hem of the cilice and covering his legs with it, Simon was left sitting on the ground, detached and watching after the soldier, until the latter disappeared inside the colonnade.

On one side of the wide yard were the barracks. On the ground the soldiers practiced sword techniques. A few soldiers started fist fights for fun. Simon even imagined that he recognized one of them, the one who on that scary night escorted Jesus.

Why did Simon come here? Why, unarmed, did he come to the enemies of the House of Israel on his own?

In general, he did not intend to hide anything. At the gates he told the whole, first, and final truth. He came to be arrested and executed. It's the only thing that he, Simon, deserved. What he wished for most of all, what he expected in turn for his chilling confession, and what he would receive as unheard-of happiness, was to see Jesus, if only for one minute or even half a minute. To tell him just one thing. “Rabbi, I love you. Forgive me.” Oh, if only such happiness befell him, if only.

Simon didn't know what happened to Jesus and where the Rabbi was now. After the fit had seized him, Simon did not know for how long he was unconscious.

Then Simon roamed the streets of Jerusalem day and night, slept in some gardens, or simply on stone slopes under the scorching sun, not paying attention to hunger or thirst. He could not find any of his apostle brothers anywhere. Everywhere he asked about Jesus, but no one

wanted to speak to him. True, compassionate women came his way, who gave him water to drink and offered flat bread or small coins.

He accepted everything he was given and was equally grateful, not just for the bread and money but for the hits and kicks. He knew that he deserved it all. There was no bigger sinner than him, Simon from Bethsaida, no person on Earth. Any bandit, thief, or squanderer is better, more worthy than him.

Such despair encompassed him that, coming to the deserted grove, he took off his belt and tied it into a noose more than once.

THIS IS THE END OF THE SECTION