The Second Thief

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1566 Words

Brutal Roman hands lashed the thief with cruelty to a crushing timber of wood perched on his shoulders. Forced to carry this beam, the thief's muscles began to twitch in a failing state as he struggled along the grimy road.

The packet caught him straight in the face, a stinging shock to the corner of his quivering mouth. The projectile arrived as a clayish congealing mass, warm and malodorous. He was powerless to clean himself as the debris ran down his face. The liquifying mixture covered him helplessly, a bitter taste reminding him of his unforgivable crimes.

As he began his turbulent journey, rotting fruit, dirt, and rocks pelted the thief. Vulgar shouts of hate vividly demonstrated the crowd's overwhelming disgust. However, that first putrid dung packet left no doubt about the mob's poisoned spirits.

"Thief! Murderer!" The accusations burned in his ringing ears as the crowd's roar engulfed him. He stumbled and fell on his face, the heavy load crashing and ripping the skin of his blistered neck. The whip rang out with a jolt of pain like an electric bolt, stinging through his battered body. His back twisted, and he struggled again to his feet. He forced his mind away from the agony. Memories began to appear in his tortured mind, their dream-like narrative granting a brief reprieve to the grueling journey of Gestas.

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The wooden falcon would be Gestas' only proper toy. Carved from a single piece of olivewood, the beak, and the wings, were all mighty, powerful, and glorious. The uncle was his only friend, his solitary gift surprising him on another ignored Hannukah, his fifth in this world. He was so excited as he laid his head down for the night. Before sleep fell over him, Gestas opened an untrusting eye to confirm the gift's presence at his bedside.

He woke in a dreaded panic. Before he saw it, he knew; his treasured bird now destroyed. Gestas jumped to his feet and ran, trembling, into the next room. The man was naked and ghoulishly laughing, his empty wine bota bag in his outstretched hand. The boy stood sobbing alongside his drunken father. Tossed carelessly aside was the mighty bird, its magnificent beak broken off and buried in the dirt floor.

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The whip crashed across his back, returning Gestas to his tortured predicament. The roar of the hating crowd was at its apex as they spat and flung rocks to demonstrate their disgust, weakening his soul. As he reached the rocky hill's summit, he realized he was not alone. Across the way, two others struggled, carrying their crosses and grappling alongside him.

A woman's sad, darkened silhouette crossed his vision for a haunting moment. Gestas was certain; she was a mother in mourning. For a moment, he saw deep into her eyes; sorrow and tears devastated her image, reinforcing the overwhelming tragic events of her day.

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The dream of Gestas' past behavior flashed upon his tortured mind. It was a calmer time, that burgeoning fall season, when Tamar left him. The jewel's possessor was obvious, the letter H engraved on the beautiful golden necklace. He was drunk as usual, and in his affected state, he ironically took the jewelry for his wife. He would have hidden it from her more securely, but he just tossed the stolen stash carelessly under his cot.

"I toil for her. I knew I should not trust you in her chamber! What else did you make your own? They are Hadassah's. Could you not demean me any clearer?" The furious woman, Tamar, cast a bowl of murky water over his head.

Her centurion brother woke with the chaos, chasing Gestas away with his violent presence and threatening Gladius sword. Tamar was the only decent thing in the thief's life, gone for good now because of a long history of needless betrayals.

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A jarring shock returned Gestas' sickened mind to the mayhem. A shove pushed the thief backward onto the ground. The wooden post lashed to his arms, twisted and broke the sinew of his shoulder with a loud pop and a stab of unendurable pain. The soldiers were on him with the whip, thrashing and laying open his loins and chest. Bloody serum sprayed over his tissues. They pierced his limbs with roughened spikes. With a ferocious crushing sound, a massive, rusty mallet drove the nails through the bones. Overwhelming, agonizing pain racked his failing body.

One helmeted soldier urinated on him before they lifted him to the sky, and the warm acidy fluid burned his torn flesh. An acrid stench bubbled up from the rising steam. He could see out of only one torn eye as he rose on the cross. The crowd at his foot laughed, cajoled, and called for his death.

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Again, his consciousness dwindled to a prior time. In her marriage dress, Tamar was fresh, white, innocent, and beautiful. A sprig of green and red decorated her hair. She looked lovely and happy; this visage would never be seen again. His matrimonial betrayal began that day, his forceful violation of a young bridesmaid exposed and secret to no one. It was an unforgivable act, one that he would wonder why later, once the alcohol was gone from his system.

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The sun beat down upon his withering being. The rusty spikes tortured him, pinning him to his wooden snare in agony. Another scene played out in his tormented mind. It told the story of his ultimate crime, his final mistake.

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Gestas thought the night's black murky sky would be his trusted ally, hiding him from his target. The magistrate would not be in residence. The local gathering led this rich man away on the night of the assembly. Gestas planned to grab the jewels and gold as they lay within the stone dwelling, then escape without opposition, a deadly sheathed knife hanging from his waist. After all, his victim's corruption was the motive for Gestas' presence, his twisted mind reasoned.

The plan went quickly awry. The man had quietly returned and was on him like a crazed jackal, jumping from the shadows as he entered. Their struggle was deadly, the thief making an ultimate, fateful decision with his knife. Confused and struggling, he dragged the dying man to the window. The moonlight revealed the horrible truth. Here lay the magistrate, his throat mortally slashed and bleeding.

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The Romans lifted the second thief on the cross upward. He reached the apex and returned to the moment's horror with a violent, agonizing jolt. At the zenith, dry wind blew, and dirt billowed up, scratching his watering eyes.

The crowd hurled insults at Jesus. "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." The chief priests and scribes berated him. "He saved others; he cannot save himself."

Gestas, the second thief hanging on the Savior's left, repeated the indictment suddenly, without thought or control. It was like evil life energy forced the accusation from him. "Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" The first thief, the thief hanging on Jesus' right, rebuked Gestas. And then Gestas felt overwhelming sorrow and shame.

Suddenly, in a mysterious way, a wonderful peace overcame the second thief. The man on an identical cross to his right looked out over the crowd. On his head was a crown of twisted thorns. His ripped beard hung from his face. Blood flowed down over his tattered limbs. Tissues of his body were thrashed, bleeding, and weeping, yet an overwhelming love emanated from the brutalized man known as Jesus. Gestas felt refreshed in a life-changing manner.

And then it happened. Jesus turned his torn, shredded face to Gestas' side. He made eye contact with him with great difficulty, his silent stare beginning a supernatural transformation in the thief. The gaze penetrated Gestas' tattered soul. Its disapproval hurt worse than his wounds but was eventually replaced with an all-understanding peace. He knew at that moment that here hung the Messiah, the King of the Jews.

Breathing now was a tortured process. As Gestas struggled to lift himself for air, he grew weaker and weaker, his breathing suffocating and gurgling with blood. Coughing was ineffective at clearing his airways. He bubbled and spat, gasping for every ounce of air. His whole body was burning with horrific frantic pain.

Jesus would not leave him alone. His attention burned the evil soul of Gestas like fire to paper. Passion emanated from the Messiah. Love, adoration, and tenderness were overwhelmingly draped over his being. Gestas felt forgiveness, acceptance, admiration, and respect, unlike he had ever felt in his entire life. He was finally at peace with himself and the world.

Suddenly, dense darkness came across the land.

"Eli, Eli, lan'ma sabach-tha'ni?" That is, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" And with that, the Savior breathed his last.

The battered thief felt an emptiness beyond description. Gone was the light of the world. Gone was a powerful sense of forgiveness. He struggled for air one last painful time and then was catapulted into eternity.

Author's Note:

Dialogue in italics is scripture from Matthew and Luke's gospels in the Holy Bible's revised standard version.