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Leonard Huish

THE WATER SKIN

JOHAB LIFTED the water skin, to see whether he might have been mistaken the first time. One lonely drop trickled down his beard. He pointed a finger at the hillside opposite the wall, where gay crowds were shouting in the heat. "There must be lots of water sellers there," he said. "They get rich at a crucifixion." There were three crosses now, and dark birds were gathering in the trees.

"It isn't worth watching, not in all this heat," said Eleazar irritably.

"It would be almost worth it to get a drink of water." Johab lifted his robe and fanned his body with it. He shaded his eyes and looked across at the hill. "There are three of them this time. Wonder what they did?"

Eleazar shrugged. "It never matters," he said. "If they had a good arena they wouldn't have to stand around in this sun watching crucifixions. It's a stupid town."

There was a ring of soldiers on the other hill. Eleazar could see the sun flashing off their spears and shields. Their horses pawed at the earth, obscuring the crowd with puffs of dust. It was too far to see anything clearly. Eleazar turned at a sound nearby.

In the shadow of the wall a skinny hen pecked at the dirt. Behind her a rooster made a dash, and she squatted expectantly in the dust. A bug dropped from the wall, and the rooster changed his course. With one accurate peck he snatched the bug, then looked hopefully at the wall. The hen stood up and continued to peck at the dry earth. Johab watched, grinning.

"Even the damned roosters are stupid here," said Eleazar. "I'll be glad to get home."

A gate creaked in the wall, and the two men turned. In a mo-

ment a woman came out. She wore a black robe. Her feet were bare, flat, and dirty. She carried a jug balanced on her head.

"Woman," said Johab, rising. The woman stopped, and turned slowly towards the men. "Woman, we are thirsty. Is there water in the jug?" She regarded him for a moment, then set the jug down. Sweat, or tears, had ridged the dust in her face. She had a small mouth, and her smile showed full rows of teeth. She was still young.

She handed the jug to Johab. "Don't drink it all," she said. "I have to take it over there." She gestured towards the hill where the soldiers were gathered in a ring around one of the crosses. "They say he stole something," she said. "Maybe he did."

Johab lifted the jug. Eleazar watched his throat pulsate as he drank.

"Leave me some," he grumbled. Johab kept the jug high until he was breathless, then handed it to Eleazar.

"That was good," Johab addressed the woman, smiling. "Our skin is empty and we are strangers here." He stared at her frankly.

The woman observed him without comment for a moment. "You should have asked me to fill it," she said then. "The well is not yet dry." She did not lower her eyes.

Eleazar sighed as he handed the jug to the woman. "I'm afraid I emptied it," he said, "but so long as your well is not dry, it doesn't matter, does it?" He saw Johab looking at her, and felt strangely annoyed.

She looked into the empty jug, then turned to peer toward the other hill, shading her eyes against the light. "He must be thirsty," she said. "It's so hot. I'll get more." She walked back through the gate.

The hen pecked industriously.

"Here," laughed Johab, scratching at his armpit. He brought out an insect and threw it toward the hen. Her head jerked as she sought it in the dust.

"Make friends with the hen," suggested Eleazar. "I am hungry."

"Then we should make friends with the woman," said Johab.

"I don't want the woman," answered Eleazar. Johab stared at him, but said nothing.

Johab turned to watch the gate. There were shouts from across the valley. Eleazar gazed at the other hill, but could see nothing of interest. The people were all standing back, behind the ring of soldiers.

"Stupid business," said Eleazar, plucking at his robe. "Why did we pick a festival day to buy camels?" He thought of the empty water skin, then stretched his hand toward it.

Johab grabbed the skin and scrambled to his feet.

"I'll go in and fill it," he said, grinning.

Eleazar scowled and flung himself back against the wall. "Don't dry up the well," he said, his voice as irritable as he could make it.

The afternoon grew hotter as the shadows lengthened. Eleazar rubbed back and forth against the wall, angry now at everything he could see. He leaned back after a moment and closed his eyes.

There was a shout from the people on the other hill. He looked, and saw a man walking up the trail toward the high road.

The man was tall, with long dark hair that framed his bearded face. Eleazar watched him approach, and soon the man was close enough so that he could see his features clearly. His eyes were small, with a clever, quick look to them, and his mouth was wide and humorous. His body was lean, but not thin. He wore nothing whatever, and although he had been walking in the dust, his bare feet were clean.

Eleazar forced his voice to be pleasant. "Hello," he said. "It's a hot afternoon."

The man tipped back his head and laughed, showing rows of teeth almost complete. Eleazar smiled back at him. There was something infectious about the man's good will. Eleazar wondered why the stranger, who was not skinny as a poor man should be, could not afford to cover his nakedness.

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The man sat down effortlessly and leaned back against the stones. "I feel good," he said. "I don't mind the heat now."

"My friend will bring some water soon," said Eleazar.

The man shook his head. "I wanted some, before. God, how I needed a drink!" He nodded towards the house behind the wall. "She was going to bring me water, but she didn't."

"I drank it," said Eleazar. "I'm sorry."

The man shook his head, his eyes twinkling. "It doesn't matter," he said, rising. "I will go in now."

"No," said Eleazar quickly, raising a hand to stay him. "Don't go in yet. Wait a few minutes. You should rest."

"All right," said the man, sitting down, "although I am not tired. I feel wonderful." He flexed his muscles. What a beautiful body it is, Eleazar thought.

"What's it like, over there?" asked Eleazar, to delay the man further.

"Hot," said the man. "God, but it's hot! And the people! You'd think they never saw a crucifixion before. They loved it." He chuckled. "I was worried for a while, but it doesn't last long, and now I feel good." He pointed proudly to the other hill. "You can't really see from here. I'm on the far side, next to a sad man with nails. He talked a lot, and the other one yelled, but I spit in a soldier's face and kicked him in the groin."

Eleazar nodded. "I understand," he said, wondering whether he really did. "That's why you're here so soon, I guess?"

The man laughed again. "I hadn't thought of it, but that kick saved me a lot of unpleasantness."

Two crows cawed in a tree, then dropped down and flew toward the other hill. The naked man shuddered. "That's the worst, those birds," he said. He stood again. "I have to go now."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. But I feel good. First I'll say goodbye to her, though."

"No," said Eleazar quickly, not looking at the man's eyes. "Just go. You can't really say goodbye again, anyway. You know that."

The man looked at him searchingly for a minute, as the sun coming over the wall shone on his long hair and beard. He nodded, slowly. "I guess you're right," he said. "And I'm not thirsty any more."

Eleazar watched the firm muscles of the man's buttocks disappear along the dusty road, then turned to look at the crowd again. It was thinning out, now, as the sun sent longer shadows across the hillside. The gate creaked, and Johab came out, whistling, with the water skin tight and fat under his arm.

⁴ Eleazar stood up quickly, his irritation at Johab gone. "Let's go," he said. "We have camels to buy."