

THE BLOOD GOSPEL

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PROLOGUE

Spring, AD 73
Masada, Israel

The dead continued to sing.

Three hundred feet above Eleazar's head, the chorus of nine hundred Jewish rebels rang out in defiance of the Roman legion at their gates. The defenders had sworn to take their own lives rather than be captured. Those final prayers, chanted to Heaven on high, echoed down to the tunnels below, carved out of the heart of the mountain of Masada.

Abandoning the doomed men to their bitter sunlight, Eleazar tore his gaze from the roof of the limestone passageway. He wished that he could chant beside them, that he could give up his own life in a final battle. But his destiny lay elsewhere.

Another path.

He gathered the precious block into his arms. The sun-warmed stone stretched from his hand to his elbow, the length of a newborn baby. Cradling the stone block against his chest, he forced himself to enter the rough-hewn passage that sliced into the heart of the mountain. Masons sealed the way behind him. No living man could follow.

The seven soldiers who accompanied him forged ahead with torches. Their thoughts must still be with their brothers, the nine hundred above on the sun-scoured plateau. The stronghold had been under siege for months. Ten thousand Roman soldiers, split into enormous camps, surrounded the mesa, ensuring no one could leave or enter. The rebels had vowed, when their chant was complete, to take the lives

of their families and then their own, before the Romans overran their walls. They prayed and readied themselves to kill the innocent.

As must I.

Eleazar's task weighed upon him as heavily as the stone in his arms. His thoughts turned to what awaited below. The tomb. He had spent hours praying in that subterranean temple, knees pressed against stone blocks fitted so close together that not even an ant might escape. He had studied its smooth walls and high, arched ceiling. He had admired the careful handiwork of the craftsmen who had labored to make the space sacred.

Even then, he had not dared to look upon the sarcophagus in the temple.

That *unholy* crypt that would hold the most *holy* word of God.

He hugged the stone tighter to his chest.

Please, God, take this burden from me.

This last prayer, like the thousands before it, remained unanswered. The sacrifices of the rebels above must be honored. Their cursed lifeblood must serve a higher purpose.

When he reached the arched doorway to the temple, he could not step through. Others jostled past to their posts. He rested his forehead against the cold wall, praying for solace.

None came.

His gaze swept inside. Torchlight flickered, dancing shadows across the stone bricks that formed an arched roof overhead. Smoke swirled above, seeking escape, but there would be none.

Not for any of them.

At last, his eyes settled on the small girl, on her knees, held down by soldiers. His heart ached at the piteous sight of her, but he would not forsake the task that had been asked of him. He hoped that she would shut her eyes so that he might not have to look into them at the end.

Eyes of water . . .

That was how his long-dead sister had described those innocent eyes, her daughter's eyes, her little Azubah.

Eleazar stared now at his niece's eyes.

A child's eyes still—but it was not a child who glared back at him. She had seen what a child should never see. And soon would see no more.

Forgive me, Azubah.

With one last murmured prayer, he stepped into the torchlit tomb. Guttering flames reflected off the haunted eyes of the seven soldiers who were waiting for him. They had fought the Romans for days, knowing that the battle would end with their own deaths, but not like this. He nodded to them, and to the robed man in their midst. Nine grown men gathered to sacrifice a child.

The men bowed their heads to Eleazar, as if he were holy. In truth, they did not know how unclean he was. Only he and the one he served knew that.

Every man bore bloody wounds, some inflicted by the Romans, others by the small girl they held captive.

The purple robes she'd been forced to wear were too large, making her appear even smaller. Her dirty hands clutched a tattered doll, sewn from leather, tanned the color of the Judean desert, one button eye missing.

How many years ago had he given it to her? He remembered the delight bursting from that tiny face when he knelt and offered it to her. He recalled thinking how much sunlight could be trapped in such a little body, that it could shine so brilliantly, fuel such simple joy at a gift of leather and cloth.

He searched her face now, looking for that sunshine.

But only darkness stared back at him.

She hissed, showing teeth.

"Azubah," he pleaded.

Eyes, once as calm and beautiful as a fawn's, glared at him with feral hatred. She drew in a deep breath and spat hot blood in his face.

He staggered, dazed by the silken feel, the iron smell of the blood. With one shaking hand, he wiped his face. He knelt before her and used a cloth to gently brush blood from her chin, then flung the soiled rag far away.

Then he heard it.

So did she.

Eleazar and Azubah both jerked their heads. In the tomb, they alone heard screams from atop the mountain. They alone knew that the Romans had broken through the stronghold's defenses.

The slaughter above had begun.

The robed one noted their movement and knew what it meant. "We have no more time."

Eleazar looked to the older man in the dusty brown robe, their leader, the one who had demanded that this child be baptized amid such horror. Age etched the leader's bearded face. Solemn, impenetrable eyes closed. His lips moved in silent prayer. His face shone with the surety of a man free of doubt.

Finally, those blessed eyes opened again and found Eleazar's face, as if searching for his soul. It made him recall another stare from another man, many, many years before.

Eleazar turned away in shame.

The soldiers gathered around the open stone sarcophagus in the center of the tomb. It had been carved out of a single block of limestone, large enough to hold three grown men.

But it would soon imprison only one small girl.

Pyres of myrrh and frankincense smoldered at each corner. Through their fragrance Eleazar smelled darker scents: bitter salts and acrid spices gathered according to an ancient Essene text.

All lay in terrible readiness.

Eleazar bowed his head one final time, praying for another way.

Take me, not her.

But the ritual called for them all to play their roles.

A Girl Corrupted of Innocence.

A Knight of Christ.

A Warrior of Man.

The robed leader spoke. His graveled voice did not waver. "What must be done is God's will. To protect her soul. And the souls of others. Take her!"

But not all had come here willingly.

Azubah yanked free of her captors' hands and sprang for the door, swift as a fallow doe.

Eleazar alone possessed the speed to catch her. He grabbed her thin wrist. She struggled against his grip, but he was stronger. Men closed in around them. She pulled the doll to her chest and sank to her knees. She looked so wretchedly small.

Their leader gestured to a nearby soldier. "It must be done."

The soldier stepped forward and snatched Azubah's arm, wrenching her doll away and tossing it aside.

"No!" she cried, her first word, forlorn, still sounding so much like a child, coming from her thin throat.

She tore free again and surged forth with furious strength. She leaped upon the offending soldier, locking her legs around his waist. Teeth and nails tore at his face as she knocked him hard to the stone floor.

Two soldiers rushed to his aid. They pulled the wild girl off and pinned her down.

“Take her to the sepulcher!” the leader commanded.

The two men holding her hesitated, plainly fearing to move. The child thrashed under them.

Eleazar saw that her panic was not directed toward her captors. Her gaze remained fixed on what had been stolen from her.

He retrieved the tattered figure of her doll and held it in front of her bloody face. It had quieted her many times when she was younger. He strove to block out memories of her playing in the clear sunshine with her laughing sisters and this doll. The toy trembled in his hand.

Her gaze softened into a plea. Her struggles calmed. She disentangled one arm from the men’s grasps and reached for the doll.

When her fingers touched it, her body sagged as she succumbed to her fate, accepting that escape was not possible. She sought her only solace, as she had as an innocent child, in the companionship of her doll. She did not want to go into the darkness alone. She lifted the figure to her face and pressed her small nose against its own, her shape a sigil of childlike comfort.

Waving his men away, he lifted the now-quiet girl. He cradled her cold form against his chest, and she nestled against him as she used to. He prayed for the strength to do what was right.

The block of stone gripped in his free hand reminded him of his oath.

To the side, their leader began the prayers binding the sacrifice above to the one below, using ancient incantations, holy words, and tossing pinches of incense into the small pyres. Atop the mountain, the rebels took their lives as the Romans broke their gates.

That tragic payment of blood would settle the debt here.

With the block clutched in his hand, Eleazar carried the girl the few steps to the open sarcophagus. It had already been filled, nearly to the rim, sloshing and shimmering. It was to act as a *mikveh*—a ritual immersion bath for those to be purified.

But rather than blessed water, *wine* filled this bath.

Empty clay jugs littered the floor.

Reaching the crypt, Eleazar peered into its dark depths. Torch-light turned wine to blood.

Azubah buried her face in his chest. He swallowed bitter grief.

“Now,” their leader ordered.

He held the girl’s small form against his own one last time and felt her release a single sob. He glanced at the dark doorway. He could still save her body, but only if he damned her soul, and his own. This terrible act was the only way to truly save her.

The highest-ranking soldier lifted the girl from Eleazar’s arms and held her over the open tomb. She clutched her doll to her chest, terror raw in her eyes as he lowered her to the surface of the wine. And stopped. Her eyes sought out Eleazar’s. He stretched a hand toward her, then pulled it back.

“Blessed be the Lord our God who art in Heaven,” the leader intoned.

Above them, all chanting stopped. She tilted her head as if she heard it, too. Eleazar pictured blood soaking the sand, seeping toward the mountain’s core. It must be done now. Those deaths marked the final dark act to seal this tomb.

“Eleazar,” the leader said. “It is time.”

Eleazar held out the precious stone block, its holy secret the only force strong enough to drive him forward. The stone block’s weight was nothing in his arms. It was his heart that held him trapped for a breath.

“It must be done,” the robed one said, softly now.

Eleazar did not trust his voice to answer. He moved toward the girl.

The commander released her into the wine. She writhed in the dark liquid, small fingers grasping the stone sides of her coffin. Red bled over its edges and spilled to the floor. Her eyes beseeched him as he placed the stone block atop her thin chest—and pushed. The stone’s weight and the shuddering strength of his arms forced the child deep into the wine bath.

She no longer fought, just held the doll tight against her chest. She lay as quiet as if she were already dead. Her mute lips moved, forming words that disappeared as her small face sank away.

What were those lost words?

He knew that question would haunt his everlasting days.

“Forgive me,” he choked out. “And forgive her.”

Wine soaked his tunic sleeves, scalding his skin. He held her inert form until the prayers of their leader ceased.

For what seemed an eternity.

Finally, he let go and stood. Azubah remained drowned at the bottom, forever pinned under the weight of the sacred stone, ever its cursed guardian. He prayed that this act would purify her soul, an ageless penance for the corruption inside her.

My little Azubah . . .

He collapsed against the sarcophagus.

“Seal it,” the leader ordered.

A limestone slab, lowered with ropes, ground into place. Men slathered the edges of the lid with a slurry of ash and lime to bind stone to stone.

Eleazar flattened his palms against the side of her prison as if his touch could comfort her. But she was beyond comfort now.

He rested his forehead against the unforgiving stone. It was the only way. It served a higher good. But these truths did not ease his pain. Or hers.

“Come,” their leader beckoned. “What must be done has been done.”

Eleazar drew in a rattling breath of foul air. The soldiers coughed and shuffled to the doorway. He stood alone with her in the dank tomb.

“You cannot stay,” the leader called from the doorway. “You must walk a different path.”

Eleazar stumbled toward the voice, blinded by tears.

Once they left, the tomb would be hidden, the passage sealed. No living being would remember it. Any who dared trespass would be doomed.

He found their leader’s gaze upon him.

“Do you regret your oath?” the man asked. His voice rang with pity, but it also held the hardness of the resolute.

That hardness was the reason why Christ named their leader *Petrus*, meaning “Rock.” He was the apostle who would be the foundation of the new Church.

Eleazar met that stony gaze. “No, Peter, I do not.”

1

*October 26, 10:33 A.M., Israel Standard Time
Caesarea, Israel*

Dr. Erin Granger stroked her softest brush across the ancient skull. As the dust cleared, she studied it with the eyes of a scientist, noting the tiny seams of bone, the open fontanel. Her gaze evaluated the amount of callusing, judging the skull to be that of a newborn, and from the angle of the pelvic bone, a boy.

Only days old when he died.

As she continued to draw the child out of the dirt and stone, she looked on also as a woman, picturing the infant boy lying on his side, knees drawn up against his chest, tiny hands still curled into fists. Had his parents counted his heartbeats, kissed his impossibly tender skin, watched as that tiny heartbeat stopped?

As she had once done with her baby sister.

She closed her eyes, brush poised.

Stop it.

Opening her eyes, she combed back an errant strand of blond hair that had escaped its efficient ponytail before turning her attention back to the bones. She would find out what happened here all those hundreds of years ago. Because, as with her sister, this child's death had been deliberate. Only this boy had succumbed to violence, not negligence.

She continued to work, seeing the tender position of the limbs. Someone had labored to restore the body to its proper order before

burying it, but the efforts could not disguise the cracked and missing bones, hinting at a past atrocity. Even two thousand years could not erase the crime.

She put down the wooden brush and took yet another photo. Time had colored the bones the same bleached sepia as the unforgiving ground, but her careful excavation had revealed their shape. Still, it would take hours to work the rest of the bones free.

She shifted from one aching knee to the other. At thirty-two, she was hardly old, but right now she felt that way. She had been in the trench for barely an hour, and already her knees complained. As a child, she had knelt in prayer for much longer, poised on the hard dirt floor of the compound's church. Back then, she could kneel for half a day without complaint, if her father demanded—but after so many years trying to forget her past, perhaps she misremembered it.

Wincing, she stood and stretched, lifting her head clear of the waist-high trench. A cooling sea breeze caressed her hot face, chasing away her memories. To the left, wind ruffled the flaps of the camp's tents and scattered sand across the excavation site.

Flying grit blinded her until she could blink it away. Sand invaded everything here. Each day her hair changed from blond to the grayish red of the Israeli desert. Her socks ground inside her Converse sneakers like sandpaper, her fingernails filled up with grit, even her mouth tasted of sand.

Still, when she looked across the plastic yellow tape that cordoned off her archaeological dig, she allowed a ghost of a smile to shine, happy to have her sneakers planted in ancient history. Her excavation occupied the center of an ancient hippodrome, a chariot course. It faced the ageless Mediterranean Sea. The water shone indigo, beaten by the sun into a surreal, metallic hue. Behind her, a long stretch of ancient stone seats, sectioned into tiers, stood as a two-thousand-year-old testament to a long-dead king, the architect of the city of Caesarea: the infamous King Herod, that monstrous slayer of innocents.

A horse's whinny floated across the track, echoing not from the past, but from a makeshift stable that had been thrown together on the far end of the hippodrome. A local group was preparing an invitational race. Soon this hippodrome would be resurrected, coming to life once again, if only for a few days.

She could hardly wait.

But she and her students had a lot of work to finish before then.

With her hands on her hips, she stared down at the skull of the murdered baby. Perhaps later today she could jacket the tiny skeleton with plaster and begin the laborious process of excavating it from the ground. She longed to get it back to a lab, where it could be analyzed. The bones had more to tell her than she would ever discover in the field.

She dropped to her knees next to the infant. Something bothered her about the femur. It had unusual scallop-shaped dents along its length. As she bent close to see, a chill chased back the heat.

Were those teeth marks?

“Professor?” Nate Highsmith’s Texas twang broke the air and her concentration.

She jumped, cracking her elbow against the wooden slats bracing the walls from the relentless sand.

“Sorry.” Her graduate student ducked his head.

She had given strict instructions that she was not to be disturbed this morning, and here he was bothering her already. To keep from snapping at him, she picked up her battered canteen and took a long sip of tepid water. It tasted like stainless steel.

“No harm done,” she said stiffly.

She shielded her eyes with her free hand and squinted up at him. Standing on the edge of the trench, he was silhouetted against the scathing sun. He wore a straw Stetson pulled low, a pair of battered jeans, and a faded plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up to expose well-muscled arms. She suspected that he had rolled them up just to impress her. It wouldn’t work, of course. For the past several years, fully focused on her work, she acknowledged that the only guys she found fascinating had been dead for several centuries.

She glanced meaningfully over to an unremarkable patch of sand and rock. The team’s ground-penetrating radar unit sat abandoned, looking more like a sandblasted lawn mower than a high-tech tool for peering under dirt and rock.

“Why aren’t you over there mapping that quadrant?”

“I was, Doc.” His drawl got thicker, as it always did when he got excited. He hiked an eyebrow, too.

He’s found something.

“What?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Nate bounced on the balls of his feet, ready to dash off and show her.

She smiled, because he was *right*. Whatever it was, she wouldn’t believe it until she saw it herself. That was the mantra she hammered into her students: *It’s not real until you can dig it out of the ground and hold it in your hands.*

To protect her work site and out of respect for the child’s bones, she gently pulled a tarp over the skeleton. Once she was done, Nate reached down and helped her out of the deep trench. As expected, his hand lingered on hers a second too long.

Trying not to scowl, she retrieved her hand and dusted off the knees of her jeans. Nate took a step back, glancing away, perhaps knowing he had overstepped a line. She didn’t scold him. What would be the use? She wasn’t oblivious to the advances of men, but she rarely encouraged them, and never out in the field. Here she wore dirt like other women wore makeup and avoided romantic involvement. Though of average height, she’d been told that she carried herself as if she were a foot taller. She had to in this profession, especially as a young woman.

Back home, she’d had her share of relationships, but none of them seemed to stick. In the end, most men found her intimidating—which was off-putting to many, but oddly attractive to others.

Like Nate.

Still, he was a good field man with great potential as a geophysicist. He would grow out of his interest in her, and things would uncomplicate themselves on their own.

“Show me.” She turned toward the khaki-colored equipment tent. If nothing else, it would be good to get out of the baking sun.

“Amy’s got the information up on the laptop.” He headed across the site. “It’s a jackpot, Professor. We hit a bona fide *bone* jackpot.”

She suppressed a grin at his enthusiasm and hurried to keep pace with his long-legged stride. She admired his passion, but, like life, archaeology didn’t hand out jackpots after a single morning’s work. Sometimes not even after decades.

She ducked past the tent flap and held it open for Nate, who took off his hat as he stepped inside. Out of the sun’s glare, the tent’s interior felt several degrees cooler than the site outside.

A humming electric generator serviced a laptop and a dilapidated metal fan. The fan blew straight at Amy, a twenty-three-year-old grad student from Columbia. The dark-haired young woman spent more time inside the tent than out. Drops of water had condensed on a can of Diet Coke on her desk. Slightly overweight and out of shape, Amy hadn't had the years under the harsh sun to harden her to the rigors of archaeological fieldwork, but she still had a keen technological nose. Amy typed on the keyboard with one hand and waved Erin over with the other.

"Professor Granger, you're not going to believe this."

"That's what I keep hearing."

Her third student was also in the tent. Apparently *everyone* had decided to stop working to study Nate's findings. Heinrich hovered over Amy's shoulder. A stolid twenty-four-year-old student from the Freie Universität in Berlin, he was normally hard to distract. For him to have stepped away from his own work meant that the find was big.

Amy's brown eyes did not leave the screen. "The software is still working at enhancing the image, but I thought you'd want to see this right away."

Erin unsnapped the rag clipped to her belt and wiped grit and sweat off her face. "Amy, before I forget, that child's skeleton I've been excavating . . . I saw some unusual marks that I'd like you to photograph."

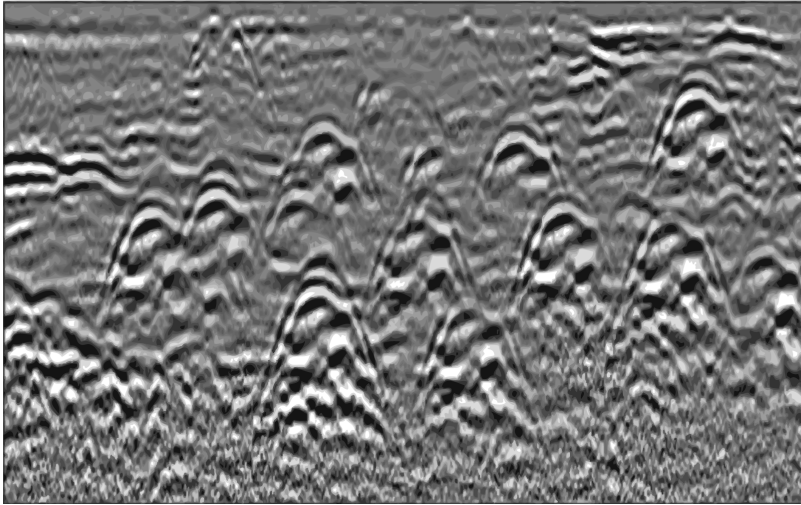
Amy nodded, but Erin suspected she hadn't heard a word she'd said.

Nate fidgeted with his Stetson.

What had they found?

Erin walked over and stood next to Heinrich. Amy leaned back in her metal folding chair so that Erin had a clear view of the screen.

The laptop displayed time-sliced images of the ground Nate had scanned that morning. Each showed a different layer of quadrant eight, sorted by depth. The pictures resembled square gray mud puddles marred by black lines that formed parabolas, like ripples in the puddle. The black lines represented solid material.



Erin's heart pounded in her throat. She leaned closer in disbelief. This mud puddle had far too many waves. In ten years of field-work she'd never seen anything like it. No one had.

This can't be right.

She traced a curve on the smooth screen, ignoring the way Amy tightened her lips. Amy hated it when someone smudged her laptop screen, but Erin had to prove that it was real—to *touch* it herself.

She spoke through the strain, through the hope. "Nate, how big an area did you scan?"

No hesitation. "Ten square meters."

She glanced sidelong at his serious face. "Only ten meters? You're sure?"

"You trained me on the GPR, remember?" He cocked his head to the side. "Painstakingly."

Amy laughed.

Erin kept going. "And you added gain to these results?"

"Yes, Professor," he sighed. "It's fully gained."

She sensed that she'd bruised his ego by questioning his skills, but she had to be certain. She trusted equipment, but not always the people running it.

"I did everything." Nate leaned forward. "And, before you ask, the signature is exactly the same as the skeleton you were just excavating."

Exactly the same? That made this stratum two thousand years old. She looked back at the tantalizing images. If the data were correct, and she would have to check again, but if they were, each parabola marked a human skull.

“I did a rough count.” Nate interrupted her thoughts. “More than five hundred. None larger than four inches in diameter.”

Four inches . . .

Not just skulls—skulls of *babies*.

Hundreds of babies.

She silently recited the relevant Bible passage: Matthew 2:16. *Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.*

The Massacre of the Innocents. Allegedly, Herod ordered it done to be certain, absolutely certain, that he had killed the child whom he feared would one day supplant him as the King of the Jews. But he had failed anyway. That baby had escaped to Egypt and grown into the man known as Jesus Christ.

Had her team just discovered tragic proof of Herod’s deed?