

“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?!”

Judas lie prostrate, his face in the dirt, his body writhing in desperation. Taking the dust into his nostrils he snorted ferociously, like a ram with the blade in sight, splaying the soil like a fan. His brown hands, white-knuckled, clasped tightly to one another, as if grasping the throat of a tormentor. He hammered them against the ground, creating a fog that blossomed up around him like incense encircling the temple altar. His saliva, sweat, and tears, as they fell from his face, left diamonds in the dirt.

“Father, Father, why have you forsaken me?!” he wailed.

His fingers broke apart. Trembling, they dug into the ground, tore, clawed, pushed and pulled, attempted to turn the Earth on its axis, away from what he had sworn to do for his lord. To his lord. He bit into the soil, sunk his teeth into the clay, chewed towards the mantle. The dirt blackened his hands, rusted his face, pried his nails up from their beds. “Answer me, Yahweh! Please! Answer me!” he cried, vomitous in his distress. Same as Job before him, the Lord’s favor had made a wretch of a once dignified, virtuous man. Now, like a beast, he kicked and stamped, swallowed the dust of his inception.

A hunter or tracker, should they have come across the markings, would have concluded some sizable creature, perhaps a serpent, had tangled with its prey. Incapable of deciphering the impressions, they might have determined that here in the garden, beneath the olive trees, some official had taken his concubine, or a debutante of Jerusalem, weary of her virtue but eager to be alone with her suitor. Or perhaps an innocent and unfortunate peasant girl, alone and unchaperoned, who hadn’t. But something, *something* had wrestled with a power greater than itself. Something had struggled. Something had been consumed.

Once more, kneading his hands together, Judas prayed.

“Eloi, I am your slave! Your right hand! It is not out of concern for my own life that I hesitate—for what value has a life not devoted to you, Lord?—but my desire to be a more perfect servant! See now! I await your command! I will go where you lead! If it be your will, Father, I will betray him! But if I am mistaken! If, as Abraham had Isaac beneath him, astride the altar, trembling under the knife, you would intercede...” he sobbed. “...Oh, Yahweh! Would that you would only speak to me!”

He paused. Had he heard the crackling of leaves? His eyes searched the garden, cloaking itself in the gloaming. Hearing nothing more, he resumed his plea, “Answer me, Yahweh, Father of Creation! Let me know your perfect will! Proclaim once more what you would have me do—or not! Show me that this was a test and, until the end of my days, I will pronounce your glory, your unending mercy! There will be no better apostle than Judas Iscariot! No servant more worthy of the title! If only you should intervene and stop me from this wretched deed! This sin of sins! Spare me, your slave! Spare your *son!*”

He pulled the sack of silver from his tunic and held it up. “Take back this miserable pittance!” Shaking it, he begged, “Speak now and proclaim my path, Eloi! Or let this cup pass from my lips!”

A wind blew through the garden, clearing the air of Judas’s prayer, and steeped it in heavy silence. This was the very place he was to deliver up his Rabbi, in only a few hours. With a kiss, he told the officers and elders, he would indicate which of the slovenly vagabonds was his Lord, Jesus of Nazareth. This was the task with which the Lord had taxed him.

From above his head, perched on a bare branch, a vulture squawked, splitting the stillness. With a scythe-like beak it picked at its wing and resettled itself. Raising his eyes to the bird, then shielding them from the setting sun, Judas smudged a cross upon his brow. Certain he heard footsteps approaching, with a curse he retreated.

He was to meet the others for the Passover meal in the upper chamber of a home before his rendezvous with the council. As the sun disappeared in the East behind the Mount of Olives, Judas stopped at a well in a square to wash.

Once he reached the house, before entering the room, he stood hiding behind a curtain, steadying his nerves. Another test, he concluded; to look into the eyes of his lord, the all-knowing, and attempt to deceive him. But surely the Messiah would know his own Father’s will! And the one betrothed to him in betrayal! Could he also see that Judas took no pleasure in the act?! That, in fact, he was being tormented himself—as if it was his own flesh that would suffer under their Heavenly Father’s decree! Two sides to the same coin, he thought, fingering the silver in his pocket. As he turned the coins over in his hand he could feel his resolve souring.

“Judas! Is that you?” someone called from the room. “Come in here! Sit with us! Eat!”

Slowly, he entered.

“Judas!” said James. “Now we are all here! Come, let us sup! And *drink!*” he cried, already quite stoned.

With a gentle look, Jesus implored his followers to move down, so that Judas could be seated to his left. “Here,” Jesus said. “Sit here, with me.”

His eyes to the ground, Judas took his place next to the Lord.

“Where have you been this night, brother?” asked John, watching the master’s face.

Looking to Jesus, Judas mumbled something unintelligible.

“Who cares, John?! We’re all here now! Let’s have a cup!” said Matthew, reaching for the wine.

Now that the twelve were assembled, Jesus took a loaf of unleavened bread. He broke it and said to them, “This is my body.” They were to eat of it, he instructed, in remembrance of him, until he returned. “For, before we feast together again, I will be betrayed by one of you here, at this table.”

“No!” they protested.

“Never, Master!” said Simon. “We would never!”

“Not I!” exclaimed Andrew.

“Nor I!” shouted Thomas.

“Who will it be?” they asked. “Surely not me!” each declared with the confidence of a tested allegiance and a belly full of wine. Feeling slighted by their Lord’s prediction, they looked around the room, considering the others with suspicion.

Careful not to move in a way that might rattle the coins, Judas asked timidly, “Is it I, Rabbi?”

In a voice for only his betrayer to hear, Jesus replied, “So you have said.”

Aggrieved, again they beseeched him. “Who among us could betray you, Lord? We have abandoned our families, left our children and wives, our homes and possessions to follow in your path!”

“Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil,” Jesus answered with a calmness they had come to expect from the one they called the Son of Man.

Dismayed by this prophecy, Judas thought to himself: *Devil?! It is your own Father who has yoked me with this burden! We are the same, Master, can't you see?! Bound by this cursed deed! Yet you slander me to my brothers!*

Then, turning his concern to Yahweh, he asked, *How am I to complete my task if your own son cannot see the greater good in this treachery?!* His eyes burned, his fists clenched tight around the thirty pieces.

Amid whispers and murmurs the men ate.

Once they had finished, Jesus took a chalice of wine. Holding it before them he proclaimed, “This is my blood, shed for you and for all people. This is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.”

As they passed the cup, Jesus filled a bowl full of water which had been warming in an urn by the fire. Then, one by one, beginning at the far end of the table with Simon Peter, with the tender consideration of a mother for her child, he washed their feet. Worn and chewed by the rough roads they had trudged following him across the barren terrain, from city to city, desert to village, mountain to seaside—their heels cracking, callouses sloughing, sores and blisters rupturing against the scrub, shale and stone—he caressed their wounds, massaged their soles. Each in his turn was confounded by this show of servility. Had he not just declared that before the dawn he would be led to his death? Crushed like a serpent under heel? Betrayed by one of these, his beloved disciples? And now he was acting beggarly and servile! Baptizing their filthy feet like a peasant! Hadn't he claimed to come not with peace but a sword?! To turn brother against brother, husband against wife, parent against child?! Why, he should rise! Storm the temple as he once had! Shatter their cheap wares! Overturn their tables! Scatter the moneychangers and hypocrites like vermin! Reclaim his Father's house for his holy reign as the one true God!

When he finally came to Judas, as Jesus washed the mud from his feet, the disciple looked down upon the head of the Messiah; bent, bowed before him. How could he place this crown upon the King of Kings? He would be cursed! Despised by humanity, for all eternity! The name Judas

would be synonymous with treason! With betrayal! Infidelity, apostasy! Ruthless avarice! Brutal greed! Judas, the fallen angel! The treasonous apostle! The Great Betrayer! No! No, he was a servant! An ally! Instrumental in the Lord's triumph over suffering! Complicit in the deliverance of mankind from ignorance and selfish pride! From *damnation*! Surely Yahweh would not let his sacrifice go unheralded! His betrayal would be the ember that ignited the flame of salvation! A stepping stone for the Son of God! The descendant of Elijah, Abraham and David! A lineage that had seen its own share of betrayal, sin and strife, but had led to the Christ! The Messiah! The Savior of the living and the dead! Upon his return, Judas would be seated at his right hand! His Lord could never forget him! He would restore him! Cherish him! Exalt him!

While taking Judas's foot to his breast and drying it with his robe, Jesus said, "What you must do, do it quickly."

Judas wrenched his foot from the Master's grasp and ran from the room.

To the temple he flew; to let the Sanhedrin know of Jesus's whereabouts. As he hurried, he cried out loud, "Father! See! See how I hasten to your will! Surely I have passed your test! If it is a test of my faith—like Job, his children dead in piles, his wealth depleted, scraping with glass at the boils scouring his flesh, cursing his mother for his very life, yet never breaking from you—I have proven myself, have I not?! Surely you can deliver your son to the throne without shedding a drop of his blood?! You who are all-powerful! This would be no great task for you! As for me, haven't I proven my loyalty?! Won't you slip this noose from my neck?! From the neck of your only son?! Speak now, Abba, for the temple I near, where the serpents lie in wait, poised to strike!"

As he ran through the streets, calling to his lord, seemingly possessed, all who crossed his path—the late-night revelers, the Gentiles and the impious, unobservant of Passover, the tavern dwellers, innkeepers, prostitutes and adulterers—turned to scoff and grumble amongst themselves. They chattered spitefully, gossiped, scorned and scandalized Judas, the disciples and their leader. They hurled mockeries, insults and vulgarities.

"That's one of those heretics! A follower of the one who claims to be the Messiah!"

“Yes! Yes! He is one of the twelve!”

“That Jesus of Nazareth, the one who calls himself the King of the Jews! Yes, that’s one of his!”

“A friend of harlots and lepers—some savior, he is!”

“That filthy Jew! I’ve seen him with two young girls following him around! Hanging on by his robe strings! I’ll bet he—”

“Pompous hypocrites!”

“Crucify ‘em all, that’ll teach ‘em!”

“Throw ‘em into the sea!”

“Come, let’s see where he goes!”

“Follow that devil!”

Like flies to a tumbrel cart, the crowd swarmed the maniacal disciple as he stumbled through the torch-lit streets, wild-eyed, blathering, still entreating his Lord to intervene.

Without a word, Jesus gathered the remaining eleven. From the house they went to a place called Gethsemane, a garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Here he said to them, “Sit while I go over and pray.” With him he took Simon, James and John. As he went away to pray alone he asked the three to stand watch, for the hour of his betrayal was soon approaching.

Once Judas reached the temple, a parade armed with lanterns, torches, swords and clubs had amassed behind him. With the blessing of the chief priests and the teachers of the law Judas lead them to Gethsemane, where he knew his lord would be.

Jesus returned to Simon, James and John to find them sleeping. “Could you not stay awake for one hour? While I prayed to my Father?” he asked them. Once more he went away to be alone and pray.

As the parade passed through the streets, rousing the city with their shouts for blood and penance, the crowd swelled like a wound.

Arriving at the garden, Judas searched for his master. Not finding him, again he prayed, *The time has come, Yabweh, if it truly is your will, deliver him to me, so that I may crown the Son of God.*

Then, Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, “Whom do you seek?”

They answered him, “Jesus of Nazareth!”

Uncertain, like a flock of sheep to their shepherd the crowd looked to Judas, eager for his identification of the infidel. Hurrying to his master's side, Judas placed a hand upon his shoulder. Towards him Christ turned his cheek, for the kiss of his betrayer. Faltering, Judas looked away. Then, turning to his lord, once more he attempted to place a kiss upon the offered cheek, but found he could not. "I—I cannot do it, Rabbi," he said, his voice breaking.

Facing the crowd, Jesus then proclaimed, "I am he."

Before they could seize him, with a sweep of his hand Judas hurled the coins high into the air. Before the last one touched the ground he was gone. Seeing the silver flash in the light of their fires, the crowd descended upon the money scattered in the dirt. In the commotion, the remaining eleven grabbed Jesus and wrested him away.

Judas sprinted back to the city.

Headfirst he plunged into Jerusalem. Through alleyways and darkened streets he ran. Past a woman, naked, covered only in shadows. "Judas," she said in a silent, familiar voice. Only this time, terrified, he fled from the call. Stumbling, he fell to the ground. His head met the hard gravel, gashing his brow with a wound that dripped blood into his eyes. He righted himself with the clumsy speed of a prey fleeing a predator.

Into the dark, deeper still, he fled; the lanterns and torches having all been carried away by the mob. He rounded a corner and nearly trampled on something in his path. Something white and moving, almost imperceptibly, about the size of a loaf of bread. It cried out. A babe! An infant, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying alone in the street! *Will you even neglect the cries of this poor child?* he asked himself as his feet carried him away.

Seeing him flailing through the alley, one of a pair of soldiers waiting his turn outside of a brothel stuck out the butt-end of his spear, laughing cruelly as Judas tripped over it. As he scrambled to his feet, the soldier poked at him with the spear, not sure himself if he meant to help or harm the crazed fool. Slipping easily through the linen of his tunic, the blade sliced into Judas's side, simple and fine as a child's prayer. Prodded by the pain of the incision, he rose and staggered on.

As he neared the temple, an elderly, crippled beggar, tossing aside his crutches and straightening himself like a man a quarter of his age,

grabbed at Judas's arms, pressing his fingers into the underside of his wrists. With astounding strength the man drew him close. His long, splintered nails, hard as iron, punctured the soft flesh. Judas could smell wine on his breath—an amenity no beggar could afford, even on Passover. Ripping his hands from his grasp, leaving two thumb-sized holes that began to bleed profusely, still blinded, he lurched past the vestibule, bursting into the temple. Wiping at his eyes with his bloodied sleeve, his sight returned in a wall of purple. Dumbfounded he realized he was looking upon the silken veil that hung above the temple altar. Taking a corner of the curtain, he climbed onto the brass altar and drew it around his neck in a scarf of royal magenta. Tighter he cinched the veil around his throat. With a choked gasp he cried, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!" and let himself slip from the edge, the dirt and mire of his feet smudging the bronze—but not before they clipped the pointed horns of the altar's corners. Rivulets of crimson trickled from the wounds—his brow, side, wrists and soles—down his body, onto the temple floor, as he swung, into nothing.