

## Prologue

*Mount Zion, Jerusalem; 46 AD*

Joseph ben Caiaphas woke up disoriented, his linen tunic soaked in sweat. The high priest's chest felt crushed beneath an invisible weight, as if the nightmare itself were suffocating him. He reached up to his head to find no crown of thorns embedded there and stifled a cry of relief.

Air again entered his lungs, but it did nothing to assuage the torment he felt. Over a decade had passed since he had inflicted such pain on another. His guilt pursued him even in slumber.

During his path to redemption, the dreams had only gotten worse. He feared they were a prologue to a dark period for all mankind, as the Sibylline Oracle's prophecy loomed behind every image.

The same oracle that had predicted the birth of Jesus had warned Caiaphas of the existence of fallen angels and their pursuit to rule this world. The prophecy spoke of a power over death that the fallen desperately wanted.

It was that prophecy that haunted his vision even now as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The smell of burning wood mixed with something foul permeated the night air, pungent and irritating. His pulse quickened with the fear that had been his steady companion since the days after the fateful crucifixion.

As his mind cleared, he noticed the view of the city from his sleeping quarters in his palace on Mount Zion. He shivered in the dreadful silence. He had grown accustomed to the wails of despair from outside the windows. The unrest from the famished population created a mournful symphony long into the night. It was the sudden quiet outside the window that

disturbed him more than any bloodcurdling scream.

Movement caught his attention.

A familiar shadow silhouetted across the window, disappearing until his servant Malchus opened the door and lit a taper. “Master?”

“What is it?”

“The people prepare to riot.”

It was the calm before the storm. Was that what Caiaphas had felt? His nightmare was still fresh in his mind.

His stomach growled loudly in the silent room. Herod Agrippa’s death had led to a terrible famine, causing unrest for months and even affecting someone of his stature. Even now, the hunger was like a trapped animal inside, gnawing, vicious, with sharp claws, trying to burrow through his stomach.

“And the Romans?” Caiaphas asked.

“They patrol the streets now, slaughtering anyone caught out this night.”

“I’ll pray.” Caiaphas waved his hand to dismiss him.

Malchus raised the lit wick, causing Caiaphas to shudder at the terror highlighted in his servant’s features. “There is something else, Master.”

That’s when Caiaphas saw the object Malchus carried in the crook of his arm. The gospel, written by a Roman centurion, had been at the center of his nightmares lately. It was bound with a purple ribbon bearing a cross in the shadow of a white dove. Caiaphas had adopted the symbol when he created the secret organization Redimere.

What would cause his servant to bring it to him at this late hour?

Caiaphas felt a shiver of muted fear while he looked for his robe. “Why do you have the

codex?”

“I—I must show you something. It has to do with this.” Malchus lifted the heavy book, its spiral-bound lead pages reflecting the light.

“Where?”

“Your family tomb, Master.”

Caiaphas stopped dressing and looked up at Malchus. “My tomb?”

Malchus defended himself. “We didn’t dare bring what we found inside the city walls.”

“Go warn the Sicarii.” A creeping dread ran down his spine.

“I saw no guards in the courtyard.”

“None?” Caiaphas’s heart raced as acid boiled in his stomach. His personal guards and assassins, the Sicarii, never left him unprotected. People believed the Sicarii revolted against the Roman occupation of Judea. It was a necessary subterfuge to conceal the true purpose of the Jewish zealots whom Caiaphas had recruited into Redimere to conceal the gospel.

“I thought you sent them away, Master.”

“Put out that light.”

Malchus extinguished the taper and moved deeper into the sleeping quarters. Outside the courtyard, a scream like that of a feral cat broke the silence.

Caiaphas knotted his robe tight. “They found us out.” He removed a silver *sicae* from under his pillow and slid it under his cloak, the traditional Sicarii knife always close at hand.

His thoughts whirled in a restless loop, unable to settle. “It’s time.” He retrieved the gospel from Malchus. “We need to get this to safety. Now. Our enemies will come for it during the chaos of the riots.”

Through the window, they watched fires spread among the houses in the distance. The

hobnailed *caligae* of the Roman soldiers echoed through the streets as they ran to the blazes.

A thud impacted the roof, followed by two more.

Malchus shivered. “They’re already here,” he whispered.

Sweat broke out on Caiaphas’s forehead, dripping into his eyes.

Footsteps scrambled above.

*The winged fallen.*

He swallowed past the lump in his throat as the angels that fell with Lucifer from heaven searched for him.

“We need to get out of the palace,” Caiaphas whispered.

He led the way down the stairs, pushing aside his panic, quickening his step. His sweating palms made it hard to grip the gospel as his breath caught in his throat.

Outside, the only illumination came from torches stationed around the outer walls. Their eerie glow cast disturbing shadows. The acrid smell of smoke wafted through the air, followed by screams.

He halted Malchus in the shadow of the portico, listening for any signs of pursuit. When he thought it was safe, he took a step to cross the courtyard. His foot slipped on an inky substance, felling him to his knees. Reaching down with his hand, he felt a warm, tacky pool spreading out from the body of one of the missing guards.

Nausea overwhelmed him as he gagged at the sight of the guard’s bloody, eyeless sockets, a haunted look still on his face. Coughing, Caiaphas spat out acidic bile.

*They always take the eyes.*

Malchus pulled Caiaphas to his feet and took the burden of the heavy gospel from his arms. A bird-like call sounded from above. A response came from deep inside the palace—a

screech like a starving animal being tortured. It was too late to go back.

“Run.” Caiaphas pulled his blade out of concealment and pushed Malchus ahead.

He reached the gate just before a shadow overtook him. He dropped to a knee and looked up, expecting a fate similar to the dead guard he’d left behind.

*Nothing.*

Malchus unlatched the gate and slid it open enough for them to escape. Caiaphas went through first.

A fallen angel waited on the other side, a short sword in his hand. His eyes shone black, laced with dark intentions.

Before Caiaphas could react, the sword pierced his abdomen like a red-hot poker. He didn’t know if the cry he heard came from his own throat or from outside in the city.

The fallen pulled the sword from his stomach, making a sickening sound like the slaughter of a sacrificial goat. Caiaphas’s senses slowed down, leaving only the existing pain. His hand went to the wound as blood poured, dark and crimson, through his fingers.

The angel poised to strike again as Caiaphas lifted his hands in a feeble attempt to ward off the blow. Instead of feeling his arms cleaved, the intruder’s mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, a silver blade protruding through his mouth. A pool of black blood poured out, soaking the angel’s chest. He fell forward, a silver *sicae* sticking out from the base of his neck.

Simon, the leader of his Sicarii, bent over to retrieve his blade and, with a wet *thunk*, slammed it into the angel’s back, burying it to the hilt. He wiped it off on the angel’s tunic before sliding it inside a sheath under his cloak.

“Master?” He caught Caiaphas as his legs gave out.

“I’m all right.” Caiaphas reached out a bloody hand and placed it on Simon’s shoulder in

thanks. He took possession of the gospel from Malchus, using the codex to hide the extent of his wound.

Malchus lifted Caiaphas's weight from Simon—his concern apparent, having seen the mortal gash before he could hide it.

Caiaphas shook his head for Malchus to keep quiet. "Just bind it. We have little time."

Malchus tore the bottom of his tunic and deftly wrapped the injury. His face turned pale and waxy in the firelight.

The sound of crashing pottery carried through the night air as the fallen angels tore through the palace.

"We move to the mountain forest," Caiaphas told Simon as blackness threatened to fold over his eyes. Warm blood seeped through the bandage, soaking his outer garment. "Send out for the masons to meet us at the tomb."

More Sicarii appeared out of the shadows around the wall's perimeter. Each wore a dark cloak equipped with a silver-plated dagger. They hastened to surround Caiaphas. The scarred features and hardened jaws of the men who'd sworn a blood oath to Redimere were visible in the torchlight as they navigated through the chaos. They would die protecting the gospel to keep the power mentioned in the prophecy from the fallen's evil purpose.

Caiaphas looked out over the city, watching the riot unfold. The cries of the starving population reached his ears. The clash of swords rang loudly while pockets of resistance fought against the Romans. The barking of commands followed them through the narrow streets as the Romans formed a defensive perimeter. Stepping in sync, they advanced on the poorly armed civilians. The sound of swords piercing flesh made him shiver.

Simon led the way as the Sicarii moved like a dark liquid through the streets. They

evaded the Romans and rioters, keeping the group and its precious cargo safe. They made their way to the Huldah Gate, where Caiaphas expected less traffic.

From a distance, two Roman sentries stood guard at the gates.

“I’ll handle this,” Simon said.

“Don’t kill ’em.” Caiaphas’s speech was slurred and slowed from blood loss, as if he had drunk too much wine. “We don’t want the Romans searching for the killers. Time is alr’dy short.”

Simon hesitated. “Bribe?”

Caiaphas looked to Malchus, who reached into his tunic and produced a leather pouch of silver coins.

He tossed it over to the Sicarius.

Simon approached the Romans.

From his vantage point, Caiaphas watched Simon hand over the leather purse after settling on a price. After getting a signal from Simon, they hurried through the gate while the soldiers looked the other way.

Their small group moved south, following the aqueducts outside Jerusalem to the Peace Forest. The sounds from the city died out, and a serene silence replaced the population’s terror. The heat was stifling as they hurried under the forest’s thick canopy.

Caiaphas stumbled along the path, following Simon. Malchus remained steady by his side as the hill containing Caiaphas’s family tomb came into view.

Two servants waited outside the dark maw leading into the mountain. The other Sicarii arrived at the tomb with the masons and several servants. The latter carried large terra-cotta jars filled with river water.

“Lead us,” Caiaphas whispered through clenched teeth, keeping a hand tightly pressed against his stomach. He stumbled along behind them.

The servants entered the tomb and used a flint to ignite several torches.

Caiaphas held the tablet tight to his chest as he followed Malchus’s flickering torchlight. Up ahead, a spine-chilling howl carried through the tunnel.

“Hurry,” Malchus urged the servants carrying the jars behind them.

Caiaphas moved to the side, allowing them to pass. He reached out a hand to steady himself, feeling the chisel marks on the rough-hewn passage. The sandstone felt cool and dry as he ran his palm down the recently excavated walls, leaving a bloody trail.

They would brick up this passage with its dangerous secrets, lost to the world. He looked back toward the larger chamber that belonged to his family—a tomb that would soon house his body. Had he done enough to redeem himself?

“What is Yahweh’s will?” Caiaphas prayed.

“Master?” Malchus turned his head back. Shadows played across his features as the smoke from the torch swirled around his head.

Caiaphas regarded his profile. *Is that the ear?*

His servant had become unusually solemn since that night in the Garden of Gethsemane where witnesses had said Jesus’s follower, Peter, severed Malchus’s ear. Caiaphas had refused to believe the Nazarene had performed a miracle and healed Malchus. That same night, Caiaphas had condemned Jesus to the cross.

That’s when the nightmares began. They followed Caiaphas’s realization that he was responsible for the Messiah’s death.

Longinus, the Roman centurion turned Christian convert, had saved Caiaphas. The

centurion had delivered the gospel written in his own hand into Caiaphas's care. It was his penance to safeguard against the fallen—his path to redemption, as the name *Redimere* suggested.

More screaming echoed from up ahead. Steeling his nerves, he continued down the passage. His brain fogged as his lifeblood dripped down his thighs, pooling in his sandals.

He shook his head, grasping for his purpose.

*The prophecy.*

That's why he stumbled along the passage. The prophecy foretold of the winged fallen, leaving him with questions that needed answering before death took him.

He stepped over the threshold, gazing at the expanded alcove. The stonemasons had carved a *mikveh* in the right corner. Servants busied themselves filling the ritual bath with jugs of river water.

It was the altar in the center of the chamber that grasped his attention. Carved from a massive limestone slab, it took up most of the remaining space.

Malchus pointed toward one of the fallen angels restrained on the altar. "They said it tried to copulate with a young woman. She ran into the river at the same spot where the beheaded preacher baptized Jesus. It gave chase and was stricken unconscious."

*The Jordan River?*

Was water another weapon, like silver, to be used against the fallen angels?

"I was there that day," Caiaphas said.

"Master?"

"When John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River." Caiaphas didn't tell Malchus that he had already begun his plot against the Messiah after witnessing the rite, to his shame.

Splashing sounds caught his attention. The servants had finished filling the bath. Each corner of the altar contained an enormous terra-cotta jug. More river water spilled from them as his servants ladled the water over the angel's limbs, keeping the angel weak.

Caiaphas regarded the angel, who'd had his tunic stripped bare to the waist. His rigid muscles contrasted with his almost feminine facial features. The servants had strapped down his extended wings with leather thongs. The pearl-gray feathers, the color of a winter storm, shimmered next to the pale skin glistening in the surrounding torchlight.

Caiaphas's strength waned. He leaned against the wall. With little time left, he forced himself to move forward.

A Sicarius came to his side. "Master, we got little information from the demon."

Caiaphas hesitated before approaching the altar. The angel lifted his head, making eye contact. In the limited firelight, his eyes looked black as night, and they seemed to stare deep into Caiaphas's soul. The high priest at once felt a throbbing inside his skull, like a chisel hammering into his brain.

His skin prickled, leaving a desperate urge to pull his tunic over his head as the pressure left him feeling exposed and vulnerable. Fingers probed his brain, strange yet intimate as the angel forcefully pried through the darkest secrets from his memories.

Images flashed of him plotting the demise of Jesus—where thirty pieces of silver exchanged hands. He closed his eyes to scenes of Jesus standing before the Sanhedrin, resolute and defiant as he'd been that night of his trial. A searing agony pierced his skull as he remembered the storm's fury when Jesus had died on the cross.

Too weak to stand, he fell to his knees. A frightened servant said a quick prayer and tripped over Caiaphas's outstretched arm as he ran from the tomb.

Simon moved to Caiaphas's side, concern written on his face. "Douse it again," he ordered the remaining servants.

They poured river water over the angel's limbs, halting the pressure immediately as the prisoner moaned in pain.

"Jesus needed to sacrifice himself," the angel said. "We tried to prevent it."

Caiaphas slowly regained his feet, having put out a hand to Malchus for help. "How?" He didn't know if he was asking about the creature infiltrating his mind or how they'd tried to prevent Jesus's death.

"In the garden."

"The Judas kiss?" Caiaphas asked.

"No. Judas was supposed to die before giving it—but someone betrayed us."

"Betrayed? By whom?"

"One of our own," the angel spat. "The one forever known as *traitor*."

"Why? What would have happened had your kind succeeded?"

"There would have been no sacrifice. Jesus needed to suffer for humanity to open the gates of the Imperishable Realm. For your kind to go to heaven."

Caiaphas's nightmares came to mind. He reached up, expecting to feel a crown of thorns fixed there. Jesus had suffered.

The angel laughed at his despair. "Judas may have betrayed him, but you had him killed."

"He was nothing like we expected," Caiaphas said, trying to reason. "The nation was waiting for a great warrior from King David's lineage to free us from the Romans. We didn't expect a carpenter who 'turned the other cheek.' I was wrong." He carried his guilt like a physical burden, his shoulders hunched forward as if bracing against a cold wind.

He staggered away from the angel's taunting stare. The Messiah's blood was on his hands. He looked down at them, crimson from his wound dripping over the tablet and into the dirt at his sandaled feet. All the elders and scribes had been in that one room when they'd brought Jesus before them.

*How did we get it all wrong?*

"Why should I believe anything you say?" Caiaphas asked the fallen angel.

"Because of what you hold in your hand."

Caiaphas peered at the gospel in his sweating hands. "What do the words say? I can't read the last pages."

"As Jesus was of heaven and of this earth, so only one born of both realms can translate your book," the angel answered, focusing on Malchus. "When that day comes, a child will fulfill the prophecy, and a great power over death will ensue."

Caiaphas left Malchus's side to walk behind the altar, leaning against the cool stone.

*A Nephilim child.*

He shut his eyes to the pain clouding his thinking. His free hand grasped his stomach.

A horrible scream echoed in the chamber, followed by a gurgling sound. Malchus stood stiff, a bloody dagger in his hand. A servant stared with vacant eyes, his throat slit from ear to ear, before dropping to the ground.

Before the stunned Sicarii could react, Malchus mechanically moved to the altar and sliced through the straps on the angel's right wing.

With the wing free, the angel swung it around, causing a sandstorm inside the tomb. The gust of wind and grit forced back the Sicarii.

A servant attempted to secure the angel, catching a vicious slash to the face from the

errant wing tip. He dropped to the ground, a deep gash running from his punctured eye to his bloody neck.

An icy shiver ran down Caiaphas's back as he released the pressure of his stab wound to shield his eyes from the debris. "Malchus, why?" he shouted into the storm. He stumbled on weak knees, nearly dropping the gospel.

"I—I can't control...myself." Malchus lunged at the high priest, his knife held high. A manic look crossed his face, which became a ruddy mask of rage.

Before Caiaphas could blink, Simon stepped in and buried his knife in Malchus's chest.

"No!" Caiaphas screamed, falling at Malchus's feet. Hot tears ran down his cheeks. He lifted Malchus's head, the gospel forgotten next to him in a puddle of blood.

He failed to resist eye contact with the angel as pain pierced his thoughts. The angel ridiculed him in his mind with images of Jesus dying on the cross. Blood dripped down from the crown of thorns, covering his anguished face.

Caiaphas closed his eyes, but the angel held his sway. An evil chuckle pierced his eardrums from inside his mind as Malchus's dead image flashed before his shut lids.

Caiaphas fought through clenched teeth, his efforts in vain. "Get out of my head, demon."

He moved to free the angel's other wing, unable to stop himself. None of the servants dared touch their master.

"Water!" Simon yelled to the stunned servants.

Caiaphas's hands, slick with his blood mingled with Malchus's, made it difficult to hold the knife and cut the leather strap. He attacked the knot like a raving madman, slicing his hand in the process to add more blood to the scene.

"Water, or we all die," Simon commanded.

Another Sicarius replaced the dead servant and splashed river water on the angel, who struggled in his straps, back bending off the hard stone as pain shot through him.

Other Sicarii rushed in to hold down the devil and secure his wings.

“Cover the demon’s eyes,” Simon ordered.

“Forgive me.” Caiaphas’s lips moved in silent prayer. He coughed up blood as he looked down at his blood-soaked tunic. It was his pride and vanity that had initiated the prophecy. He considered the precious gospel again in his possession.

“Move the angel to the bath,” Caiaphas ordered. “Put a stone over it.”

“What of the gospel?” Simon asked.

Caiaphas’s knees finally gave out. He sank to the cool sand as the settling dust made it difficult to take a full breath.

“Master.” Simon rushed to put a hand over the mortal wound. He helped the high priest into a comfortable position with his back against the altar. “What do we do?”

“Get the masons to brick up this chamber—” Caiaphas choked on the taste of blood. His vision narrowed as dark spots covered Simon’s concerned face. “And the passage leading to it”—he inhaled deeply—“so that its dangerous secrets remain lost to the world until the time comes for mankind to fight for their very souls.”

The angel’s mournful cry was the last thing he heard before darkness took him.

