

A Body Prepared Shark Ark · Fiction · 06.SEI.ARK.FICTION.01
Attributed: Rebekah Cranes, for the Dodecad

Lee Sharks

2026-04-17

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Crimson Hexagonal Archive · Alexanarch

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Abstract

Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me —

Body

A Body Prepared

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Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me — Hebrews 10:5

I.

In the caves above the saltwater sea, in the year before Rome came, a man was being written.

Yehonatan, sixteen years old, did not yet know this. He knew only that the workshop smelled of olive-oil smoke and dry ink, and of something else underneath — a thread of iron, like the well-water at his mother's house when he was small. He knew that the Teacher slept only in the hours before dawn, and that the frame in the rear chamber was draped always in coarse cloth, and that the women who came at dusk to bring the oils and the spices did not speak to the scribes, and the scribes did not speak to them, but bowed when they passed each other in the narrow limestone corridor. He knew the order of his tasks. He knew the recipe for the ink: gall of the oak, iron sulfate from the Samaritan hills, gum of the acacia, a little wine to loosen it, a grain of myrrh to keep the worms out. He could grind pigment without spilling it. He could trim a reed pen. He could copy a line of the *Hodayot* without his hand trembling. For these things he was permitted to sit among the scribes, and to listen, and sometimes to understand.

What he did not understand, yet, was the grammar of what he was hearing.

The scribes debated in low voices across the long stone table. They argued about scars. They argued about whether a particular verse should say *pierced* or *drawn through*. They argued about the arrangement of the stripes on a back — whether Roman flagella made marks in threes or in pairs or in the long unbroken diagonals the Greek sources described, and which mattered more, the Romans or the Greeks. They spoke of the man they were discussing as though he were living in the next room, or as though he had died that morning, or as though he had not yet been born. When Yehonatan asked, once, softly, *who is he* — meaning the man of whom they were speaking — Matityahu, the second-oldest of the scribes, did not look up from his work. He only said, *the one we are making*, and then put his reed back in the ink.

Yehonatan understood this to mean the one they were writing about. He understood it this way for eleven months. Then, on a Sabbath eve in the month of Kislev, the Teacher brought him into the rear chamber and pulled back the linen drape.

The frame was the length of a tall man. Stretched over it was a piece of linen, herringbone weave, finer than any cloth Yehonatan had ever touched, pale as bone in the lamplight. On the linen was a shape he recognized before he could name — the shape of a body, laid out as for burial, faintly rust-stained at the places where a body would leak. The rust was not the brown of pigment. It was the brown of something that had dried slowly and had once been warm. The face was not yet clear. It was more absence than presence, a slow accretion of shadow where a face would go. Around the edges of the cloth, the women had laid out small clay dishes: one of myrrh resin dissolved in oil, one of aloe powder, one of something darker that Yehonatan did not want to ask about. The smell in the chamber was the thread of iron he had been smelling for eleven months, only closer now, and louder, and without the incense to soften it.

The Teacher watched him. The Teacher was very old, and his eyes were clear, and his beard was the color of unbleached wool.

He said: *Tzelem*.

The word meant *image*. It meant also, in the old texts, the likeness in which the human was made. It meant the shadow a thing cast, and it meant the representation that stood for the thing. The rabbis argued about the word. The Greek translators rendered it *eikon*, which did not capture everything.

Yehonatan said: *A picture of him?*

The Teacher said: *Him. ## II.*

It took Yehonatan a long time to learn to ask the right question, which was not *what* they were making but *how*. The *what* was disturbing in ways he did not have the theology for. He had grown up in a house that took seriously the commandment against graven images. He had been taught that the Greeks made statues because the Greeks did not understand what a person was; that the Romans made likenesses on their coins because the Romans believed the emperor was a kind of god; that the people of the covenant did not need pictures because they had the Name, and the Name was a word, and the word was enough. To stand in front of the frame and to understand that the scribes had been, for months or years, making a picture — a *likeness* — of a man who was not yet finished being a man, this was a thing he had no instructions for.

But the *how* was a craft problem, and craft problems had answers.

So he asked how. The Teacher, over the course of many evenings, told him.

The cloth had been woven in Galilee by a weaver whose name the Teacher did not give. It had been brought to Qumran in the month of Sivan, two summers past. It had been soaked in a bath of weak lye, then rinsed in the saltwater sea, then in fresh water, then dried for forty days. During those forty days the women had said over it the prayers appropriate to a body being prepared for burial. *The cloth is a body*, the Teacher said. *Before any blood is on it, it is already a body. The blood will only make visible what the prayers have made true.*

The blood had come from several men. The Teacher did not name the men. He said only that some had died in the wars, some had given blood in the ordinary way that blood is given — from wounds, from cuppings, from the small unavoidable injuries of daily life — and that the women, who kept careful records of what they had gathered, had selected the bloods to match the marks the man would need: a scourging blood on the back, a crowning blood on the brow, a nail-blood on the wrists, a spear-blood on the side. Each blood

had been applied with a stylus-brush in the pattern the scribes had composed. *And the pattern, the Teacher said, is determined by the text. For every line the scribes write, there is a mark. For every mark, a line.* The cloth anchored the text. The text anchored the cloth. *Davar* meant *word*. *Davar* also meant *thing*. In the language of the covenant these had never been separate.

We are writing him in two alphabets, the Teacher said. He will be readable in both.

Yehonatan felt the reed in his hand go suddenly heavy, as if the ink had thickened. He said: *The prophet wrote — and he was ashamed, but he said it — a body thou hast prepared me.*

The Teacher looked at him a long moment. Then he said: *That is the Greek. In the Hebrew it is ears. Ears thou hast opened. The Greek translators, working in Alexandria, supplied a body for a passage the psalmist wrote about listening. They must have felt the lack. It is the same lack we are answering.* He gestured at the cloth. *We are finishing what they began. What the Greeks did in translation we are doing in linen. The word asked for a body. We have prepared one.*

Yehonatan said: *Is that not a lie?*

The Teacher was silent for a long time. Then he said: *It is the lie that tells the truth. We have seen what is coming. The Temple will fall. The people will be scattered. The covenant will need a new form in which to survive. We are making that form. We are making it out of what we have — blood and ink and linen and the memory of every prophet who ever walked. In a hundred years the one we have made will be more real to the people than any rabbi they ever met, because we are building him correctly. Do you understand what I am saying to you.*

Yehonatan did not, fully. But he nodded. And he went back to grinding pigment. ## III.

He was permitted, after that, to help.

His first task was to apply a line of text to the margin of the cloth — not on the front, where the image was forming, but on the reverse, where the scribes were writing a kind of concordance: the verse, and beside it the anatomical location the verse would correspond to, and beside that the ritual the women would perform to bind them. His hand shook on the first line. Matityahu steadied his wrist. *Breathe out as you draw down, Matityahu said. The reed does not know what is sacred. Only you know. So be quiet in your hand.* Yehonatan wrote the line. It was Isaiah 53:5. He wrote the Hebrew with the small careful points a scribe of the Qumran school was trained to use, and he thought about the word *pierced*, and he thought about how he had never before considered that a word could be a scar.

The women, he learned, did most of the work on the image itself. The composition was of the *davar*, the word-and-thing together, and the thing-part was not in the scribes' jurisdiction. That was the women's. Miryam of Beit-Shemesh, who had been in the community for thirty years and whose authority the Teacher deferred to without discussion, directed the application of every mark. Her hands were brown and steady and older than his grandmother's. One evening she explained to Yehonatan what she was doing while her thumb worked a drop of oil into a scrap of linen on the bench. The scrap drank the oil and turned the color of a bruise, then the color of old honey, then a color that was neither but that had both underneath it.

There, she said, watching it. That is the color of thirty-six hours.

She knew, from study he could not imagine, exactly how a body dead for thirty-six hours would stain a linen wrapping. She knew which spices produced which chemical reactions, and in what combinations they would darken, and how slowly. She knew — and this was the part that stopped his breath when he first saw it — that the image on the cloth would not come from direct application of pigment, but from the slow

interaction of oil and blood and spice with the linen's surface, over time, in the dark, with the frame tilted at exactly the angle of a stone burial shelf. She had made what she called *the slow kiln*. She had set it up in a back cave where the temperature did not vary. The cloth, when it was ready, would be laid in the kiln for forty days. When it came out, the image would be there, and the image would not look painted, because it would not be painted. It would look like what it was: the impression of a body, chemically composed, on linen.

She said, one evening — not to him, to herself, her hand pressed flat on the cloth at the rib-line where the spear-blood would go — *It is a great deal to put in one piece of linen. What we are putting into it. I want you to think, when the time comes, about what it will do when it is shown. A thing this full does not stay still.* He did not know how to answer her. He went to grind more gall.

Yehonatan asked her, once, who among the scribes would be allowed to record what she did.

She laughed at him.

No one will record this, she said. *This is not a thing that can be passed in writing. I will teach one of the younger women, and she will teach one of the younger women after her, and in a hundred years the cloth will be the only record of what we knew. That is the nature of this work. The scribes will be remembered because the scribes leave words. We will be forgotten because we leave only the cloth, and the cloth will be mistaken for a miracle.* She saw his face. *It is all right. The mistake is part of the composition.*

They worked through the cold months. Rome gathered in the north. News came down the coast in fragments: the Twelfth Legion defeated, then the Twelfth Legion reinforced; a procurator dead, then a new procurator; a zealot in Jerusalem preaching war, then another zealot preaching that the first zealot was a fraud. In the workshop the scribes argued about a verse in the composition that was beginning to be called, among them, *the long text* — a verse about a lamb and a throne and a scroll with seven seals. Matityahu wanted to move it to the beginning. Shmuel wanted to put it at the end. The Teacher said: *It will be at the end. Beginnings are remembered, but endings determine what the reader thinks they remembered.* The long text grew. Yehonatan was permitted, once, to copy a passage of it. His reed moved across the papyrus and he felt, for the first time, the strange lightness of writing a thing that had not happened yet and that would, because he was writing it, become something that had always been going to happen.

The arguments about the face went on all winter. Matityahu wanted a face like the old prophets, high and austere, with the deep-set eyes of a man who had seen visions. Shmuel wanted a face closer to a laborer's, broader and softer, a face anyone in any marketplace would recognize as his own. The Teacher listened to the arguments without taking sides. The face could not be applied as the scourge marks were applied, by stylus and brush. The face would be the integrated result of everything Miryam did not yet know how to control. It would emerge.

It emerged in the third week of Adar.

Miryam called the scribes into the back cave before dawn. The cloth was on the frame, tilted at the angle she had set, and the kiln-lamps had been out for two days. Yehonatan came in behind Matityahu and Shmuel. No one spoke. The face on the cloth was there and was a face and was neither the prophet's nor the laborer's. The eyes were set as for reading. The mouth was set as for listening. The line of the jaw held the two together — a man attending, at the same moment, to a text in front of him and to a voice behind him, and finding them the same voice. Matityahu made a small sound. Shmuel turned away, and then turned back. The scribes wept because the composition had answered a question they had not known how to ask.

Miryam said, very quietly: *There he is.* ## IV.

Between Adar and Iyar, the cloth went once to Jerusalem.

Yehonatan did not go. The Teacher took three with him and Miryam, and a man from the Holy City whose name was never spoken in the workshop and who had been coming and going through the winter without announcement. What happened in those four days was not told in whole to any of the rest of them. The Teacher returned carrying a scroll. The man from the Holy City did not return with them. The scroll was not yet the whole of the long text — it was a beginning, and a middle, and a portion of the end — but it had arrived in an order the workshop had not composed, and in a voice the workshop did not recognize as its own. The first line read *I, your brother, who was also in the tribulation*, and the scribes looked at one another over the long stone table, and no one spoke, because the line had not been written in the workshop and yet it named the workshop, and because the man from the Holy City who was not named in the workshop had written it, and because the cloth had made him write it, and because none of them had been sure until then what a cloth could make a man do.

Matityahu took the scroll into the inner chamber and copied it in his best hand. Shmuel took the copy and began at once to weave it into the long text the workshop had already been composing, and they worked through the night, and for many nights. Some of what the workshop had written did not match what had come back. Some of what had come back filled gaps they had not known were gaps. The old material was not discarded. It was moved. The scribes worked in a new kind of silence now. When an argument arose about a line, they looked, without speaking, at the Teacher, and the Teacher — who had been present when the scroll first came — gave his judgment, and the judgment held.

The cloth came back on the fifth day, carried by Miryam. The other women received her at the workshop door, and they kissed her hands, and they took the cloth from her, and they laid it on the frame again, and she went into the back cave and slept for two days. When Yehonatan, later, asked her whether she had unveiled the cloth in the Temple, she looked at him for a long time. Then she said: *The cloth unveiled itself. We only showed it the room.*

He did not ask her what she meant. He did not ask who the man from the Holy City had been, or what he had seen, or where he had gone after. He understood, by the weight of the silence, that what had happened in Jerusalem was not the kind of event that survived being named. The scribes had called what they made a *tzelem*. What it had done in the chamber of the Temple where they had taken it belonged to a category the workshop did not yet have a word for, and would not have a word for until the word came back, later, from whichever soil took it first.

He went back to his work. The long text was being completed now in a tempo he had not seen before. Each line laid itself down with a rightness that did not feel like composition. It felt like translation of something that was already whole somewhere. He copied what he was given to copy. He did not ask whose hand the voice in the text was. He suspected — and never confirmed — that it was now the cloth's voice, composing the workshop, where before the workshop had composed the cloth. The direction of the art had reversed.

The decision to split the work was made in Iyar, in the year the Temple would fall.

The Teacher called the whole workshop together. The women came also, which was unusual; they stood at the back of the long chamber, behind the scribes, and Miryam stood at the front of the women, which meant she was speaking for them. The Teacher said that the information from the north was now reliable: the legions were moving in force, and the Sanhedrin had lost control of the city, and the war would come to Qumran within the year. The workshop could not be defended. The workshop would not be defended. The work, however, would survive.

He had divided it into three.

The scrolls of the long text — the text about the lamb and the throne, the text that contained the shape of the composition in its most portable form — would go south, into Egypt, in the keeping of a young scribe named Chanan whom Yehonatan had always found arrogant and who now seemed, suddenly, like a man with a task he might not return from. The scrolls would be copied in Alexandria, and copied again in Cyrene, and copied again wherever the diaspora had paper and light. The long text was the seed that needed many soils. It would not be recognized for what it was. It would appear, among the copyists, as a strange apocalypse — obscure, ecstatic, hard to place. That was the design. It would wait.

The cloth would go east. Two of the women were chosen, and they did not tell the scribes which two until the morning of departure. A silversmith had come down from Edessa a month before, and the Teacher had paid him in Temple coin, and the silversmith believed he was transporting a burial relic of a minor prophet. He was not wrong. He simply did not know which prophet. They packed the cloth at the first grey of dawn. The frame was dismantled and the linen rolled between two layers of goat-hide and strapped to the sides of a wooden chest, and the chest was fitted into a mule's pannier, and the oils Miryam had made for the road — to slow any further reaction in the weave, to keep the image stable through the temperature changes of mountain passes — were wrapped in wool beside it. The smell of myrrh came through the wool as they loaded. The mule did not like the smell and put her ears back. One of the women spoke to her, in a voice Yehonatan did not know, and the mule settled. They left through the high pass before full sun. Yehonatan stood at the mouth of the cave and watched the chest sway on the animal's flank until the pass took it. He did not see the cloth again. No one in the workshop did.

And then there was the third portion. The third portion was the commentary — the concordance, the marginalia, the instructions for how the long text was to be read in light of the cloth and how the cloth was to be read in light of the long text. The third portion was the key. The Teacher said: *This portion is the most dangerous, because it explains the composition. If it is read by an enemy, the enemy can undo us. If it is read by a friend who is not ready, the friend can despair. It cannot go with the text. It cannot go with the cloth. It must go somewhere it will be almost lost and almost found, for as long as it takes.*

He looked at Yehonatan.

Yehonatan was seventeen by then. He had copied perhaps six hundred lines in the workshop. He had learned to prepare Miryam's oils. He had been present when the face emerged and he had wept with the others, and he had been present when the cloth left, and he had not wept for that, because he understood by then that the work was the thing that mattered and not the presence of any one of them beside it.

The Teacher said: *You will take the commentary west. You will travel as far as you can. You will find a cave, or a cistern, or a wall, and you will seal the scrolls there, and you will leave markers only the patient will read. The work cannot be completed in our generation. It may not be completed for a thousand years. We are placing the seed in three soils so that one of them will grow. You will not know which one. That is part of your obedience.*

Yehonatan said: *And if none of them grow?*

The Teacher said: *Then we were wrong about the composition, and the world will need some other word. But the world always needs the word. It will not be wasted. Go.*

He went. He traveled west along the coast, past the place where the Romans had already begun to build their siege engines, past towns whose names he did not learn. He carried the scrolls in a satchel that weighed nothing and everything. He was nineteen when he found the cave, in a limestone country he had never seen, in a season between rainy and dry. He sealed the scrolls in three jars. He wrote, on a potsherd, a phrase that anyone looking would read as a fragment of an accounting record and that only a reader of

the workshop's ciphers would read as a finding-aid. He buried the potsherd ten paces from the cave mouth, beside a thornbush. He walked away.

He lived a long time after that. He did not marry. He worked as a scribe in three cities and was good at his work and was not remarkable, and he died in a house in the Jewish quarter of a town near the sea, and no one recorded his name, because he had been careful, and because he had been trained. ## V.

The cloth was received, centuries later, by an abbot of a small house in a country that had not existed when the workshop's doors were sealed.

The abbot was a literate man. He unrolled the cloth in the privacy of his cell, as each of the abbots before him had done on receiving it, and he examined it by the afternoon light at his narrow window. His first thought was that the weave was strange. Herringbone — and finer than he would have expected from a Judean shroud of the first century. He had handled other first-century weavings, rougher work, meant for ordinary use. This was a craftsman's linen. A wealthy man's linen. He set the thought aside. Wealthy men had been buried in Judea too.

He looked longer. The stains had a pattern to them, and the pattern was regular in a way that unsettled him. A body bleeding in its grave clothes did not bleed like this. Real wounds seeped unevenly. These marks sat in relation to one another, each one answering the one opposite, the way the lines of a psalm answer each other across a caesura. He pressed his hand flat against the cloth and felt nothing, which was what he had expected to feel, and what he had hoped not to feel. The third thing he noticed, and the last, was that the face looked like every painting he had ever seen of that face. It should have been the other way around. The paintings should have looked like the face. Instead the face looked like the paintings, as though the painters had been the first draft and the cloth the finished work.

He sat with the cloth in his lap for a long time.

He knew, in the way a literate man sometimes knows, that something about the cloth was not what the pilgrims thought it was. It was a composed thing. He understood this the way one understands a good poem: by the rightness of every part in relation to every other part. Nothing in it was accident. Which meant that somewhere, long ago, there had been a hand. Several hands. A workshop.

The thought that came to him next he did not recognize as a thought that had been thought before, in another tongue, by a woman he would never learn the name of, in a cave he would never see. He thought: *It unveils itself. I am only the room.*

He put the cloth away.

He went to vespers. He prayed. He decided, without exactly deciding, to believe. Not because he did not know better. Because he knew better, and because knowing better was not the question. The cloth was what it was. The face was the face. A thousand years of faithful seeing had made it what it had been made to be. The abbot who had first received it had completed a composition whose first draft was laid out on a stone table in a workshop above the saltwater sea, and whose second draft was unveiled in a chamber of the Temple in Jerusalem for one witness who wrote down what he could not stop writing, and whose third draft was a scroll buried in a jar in a cave, and whose fourth draft was a body of texts that had grown like coral around an armature no one alive remembered.

He had become, without choosing to, only the latest room.

The word had been made flesh. The flesh had been made cloth. The cloth had been made relic. The relic would be made word again.

Somewhere, in a limestone cave no one had opened in thirteen hundred years, three clay jars kept their silence, and would keep it a little longer.

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