

Stand Up and Be Counted!

by
John Kitchen

His handkerchief was soaked through with crimson stains. The coughing came hard and continued inescapably. "Please, let me call a doctor!" Floriana begged, exhausted from the long vigil at her husband's side. Breaths were difficult to come by, so, reluctantly, he consented, bobbing his head in a sign of surrender.

An hour later a neighbor reported, "I was unable to locate your doctor, but I happened upon a certain Dr. Luke who is temporarily detained in town while on an East-West journey with companions. He promised to come as soon as he is able." The news was met with another barrage of hacking gasps for air.

During a respite in their vigil a distinct rap came at the door. As Floriana threw open the door her eyes fell on a tallish, middle-aged man with dark features and curly black hair. "Peace," he greeted her as he deferentially bowed his head. "My name is Luke. Did someone here call for a doctor?"

Ushered into the humble home, Dr. Luke was led to a back room where the patient by then had been caught in the grip of another violent attack. He settled in at the side of the bed and waited for a retreat of the spasms. Finally able to address the patient he introduced himself and asked about his needs.

The form before him was clearly in a desperate way. Despite advancing age, there remained, under sallow skin the fading frame of a once powerful warrior. A cursory physical exam exposed several long scars, hints at tales of battle waiting to be told.

The ravaged form seemed to momentarily rise in strength as he announced, "I am Manius Galerius Justinus, a proud soldier of Caesar's Legions." As quickly as his strength had risen it faded again under a hail of racking coughs. The handkerchief again went to his mouth. The rustle of a crow fleeing its perch outside the window caught the trio's attention. The black specter escaping into the sky seemed somehow ominous.

With a clearing of her throat Floriana broke the silence, quietly correcting the introduction, "*Retired*, but still proud, soldier of Caesar's Legions."

Luke looked down upon the broken form before him. The hints of a once well-developed frame were being bested by the irresistible approach of death. Upon inquiry Luke learned that Justin, as he conceded to be called, had, after his service, settled here in Troas, a Roman *Colonia*, home to many a retired soldier. A small plot of land and a pittance of a pension was his reward for tramping the breadth of the Empire, facing privations of staggering dimension, and taking his life in his hands time and again in defense of Caesar and the glorious Rome over which he reigned.

"How many years did you serve? The standard twenty-five?" the doctor asked, continuing his assessment.

“Yes, twenty-five, and then seven more just for good measure.”

Trying to appear clinical and unaffected, Dr. Luke asked, “What has your personal physician told you of your condition?”

Justin cast a glance at Floriana. When their eyes met, hers fell to the floor. Luke followed their non-verbal exchange and then his eyes met again with Justin’s just as he burst into another spasm.

Again mopping his mouth dry, Justin said, “A tumor. Somewhere in the lungs.”

Now it was Dr. Luke’s eyes that fell to the floor. “And his prognosis?”

Silence. All eyes on the floor. Floriana was the one finally to break the awkward silence. In a soft voice she whispered, “Incurable.”

“A time-frame?”

Justin took up the question, “Impossible to be certain, but less than three months; perhaps one.”

Dr. Luke absorbed the news. The cold chill of despair that had settled upon the home now threatened to rush down his spine.

“I have some herbs here that I have found helpful against an otherwise uncontrollable cough.” Turning to Floriana he asked, “Could you boil some water? I’ll make a tea that I think will settle the worst of this for the time being.”

Floriana spun and set off to her task.

As Luke searched through his bag, Justin turned the conversation. “So why are you in town? Something about an East-West journey being delayed?”

Luke quickly tried to assess just how much of this story the patient would be interested in, and, for that matter, ready for. He started slowly, “Yes, I am a part of a team that has traveled the breadth of Asia and are awaiting word about our next steps.”

“Awaiting word from whom?”

Again Luke surveyed Justin, trying to decide how to navigate this conversation. Not confident of the timing, he spun the conversation back upon the once-mighty warrior. Ignoring the question just put to him, he asked, “So tell me about your service of Rome. Where has it taken you?”

Always ready to unload a story, Justin’s face brightened a bit and he seemed not to care that his question had gone unanswered.

“Everywhere just about! From Gaul to Judea and everywhere in between.”

“What made you sign up?”

“Since I was a boy in Lanuvium that is all I’d ever wanted.”

“Lanuvium? Isn’t that near Rome?”

“Yes, a short twenty miles to the southeast. It is hometown of the illustrious General Quirinius. I relished the stories that filtered home about his heroics. Round fires the old ones used to spin the tales of Quirinius’s desert campaign in Cyrene, of his peace mission in Pisidia, his conquering the famed mountaineers of the Taurus range, and of his rule in Crete. It was in those nights around the fire that the blood of Rome began to course through my veins and the command of Caesar became an obsession. As soon as I turned twenty I was at the recruiting station.”

“And you enjoyed it so much you stayed on for 32 years?”

“*Enjoyed* is perhaps not the right word.”

He erupted again into a fit. Several minutes later after his chest stopped heaving and he’d caught his breath, he repeated, “‘Enjoyed,’ as I said, is probably not the word. It was more like a call, I suppose.”

“A call?” Luke queried as he raised an eyebrow.

Just then Floriana returned, a steaming kettle in hand. Dr. Luke took it from her and set the herbs to steeping.

He turned back to study this proud legionnaire just as Justin said, “Yes, I suppose ‘call’ is the right word. It felt like what I was born to do. In the service of Rome I seemed to have found my niche. As if guided by an unseen hand I was where I was supposed to be, doing what I was born to do.”

“Not many men can say that.”

“No, I suppose not” Justin said as a reflective expression swept over his face.

He paused to assess what he’d just revealed, as if it had never quite occurred to him before. Perhaps half embarrassed by his contemplative mood, he turned the questions back to the doctor. “And you? How did you decide to become a physician?”

“I wanted to help people. I wanted to make a difference. I thought medicine would be the best way to do that.”

“And has it been?”

“I can’t say that I’ve felt about medicine what you’ve described about serving Rome. Maybe I

am a man with too many interests.”

“Such as?”

“History, for one. Medicine is wonderful, don’t get me wrong. It does provide an avenue for service, for which I am grateful. But I *love* history.”

“Oh! Then I’m your man!” Justine said, seeming to have tapped in to a subterranean stream of energy. “I can provide you details on some of the greatest battles of Rome’s past five decades.” And so he launched into dramatic expositions of the blood and guts of defending Rome’s glory, stopped only by intermittent rounds of coughing, held at bay a bit by sips of Dr. Luke’s tea.

Luke leaned back and decided to give this dying man the gift of listening. *Every life is a gift*, he told himself. And he decided to dignify this one with the grace of listening. And besides, his team wasn’t headed anywhere just yet.

Time slipped away and the lady of the house appeared again, this time with two bowls of meager soup and a loaf of crusty bread. With a brisk curtsey, she placed it on the roughhewn table at the side of the bed and darted out again.

Dr. Luke propped Justin up in bed and got his soup in hand. Then he gathered up his own and paused momentarily, bowing silently. Then he dug in.

“What was that?” the patient asked.

Luke gnawed on a hunk of bread with a quizzical expression.

“What was *that*?” Justin repeated, gesturing in the doctor’s direction.

“A prayer,” Luke mumbled through a mouthful of dough.

“Ah, a religious man,” the once-great soldier exclaimed, not sarcastically, but not sympathetically either.

The presence of the meal only paused Justin’s monologue. Between bites and coughs he launched in again.

Luke decided finally to jump in. “Was everyday as glorious as you describe?”

“Oh no! Tedium’s the norm in the army,” Justin explained. “You spend ninety-nine percent of your life bored stiff and one percent panic stricken, your life in your hand.”

“What’s the worst assignment you ever drew?” Luke asked.

“That’s an easy one,” Justin replied. “Judea.”

“Judea? Why Judea?”

“I was just twenty-three. I’d only been in the service of Rome for three years. I spent those three years putting in one transfer request after another. Finally, I’d been assigned to serve under my hometown hero, Quirinius himself.” He paused, “I suppose I thought it would all be like the stories I heard around the fires back home as a kid.”

“It was a disappointment?”

“*He* was no disappointment! But my first assignment under him certainly was.”

“What was so bad about it?”

“Census work. Counting heads. Absolute tedious monotony!”

At that Luke sat up so quickly that he choked on the bread in his mouth. Now he was the one fighting for air! A moment later he sent the first breath to return to his lungs back out in a startled question, “You were part of the census?”

“Y-e-s,” Justin muttered slowly, drawing out the word wondering what could be so exciting about a census, especially *that* census.

“You were in Judea doing census work? Was it the census ordered by Caesar Augustus, say fifty-odd years ago?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my! Oh my! I can’t believe it! This is awesome!” Luke exclaimed, setting aside his bowl and spoon. “You can help me! *You* can help me!”

Justin clearly was lost and it showed. So Luke slowed down and tried to explain.

“I told you I love history.”

“Yes, we’ve covered that.”

“Well, I am actually writing a history right now. And I need eye witness testimony about some aspects of that census, and how it went down in Judea.”

“Ok,” Justin said, still uncertain of what could be so interesting about the dullest duty he’d ever pulled. “What do you need?”

“Where were you at, precisely?”

“Judea.”

“I know, but *where* in Judea?”

“Several places. Mostly backwater villages. Hardly even got to Jerusalem.”

“Ok, but *where*?”

“That was half a century ago! I don’t recall exactly. The names were strange to me anyway.”

Realizing he was going at this the wrong way, Luke changed his approach. “Were you ever in a place called Bethlehem?”

“Bethlehem?” Justin turned the name over in his mind, scouring the landscape of his memory. After a moment his eyes brightened a bit and he asked slowly, “Not too far from Jerusalem?”

“Yes,” Luke said nodding excitedly.

Justin’s eyes brightened even further, “A shepherding community, mostly?”

“Y-e-s,” Luke said, drawing out the word with rising intensity in his voice.

“Nope,” Justin said; his face flat and expressionless. “Nope. No, I don’t recall a thing,” he said abruptly.

Luke screwed up his face, his hopes clearly dashed. “No? Nothing at all?” he sputtered.

The corner of Justin’s mouth slowly curled upward in a wry expression. Then the other corner joined in the fun, until a broad, impish grin exposing the few teeth that remained. “Yes, of course I remember! I was just playing with you!”

What started as a chuckle, erupted instead into another lung-wrenching fit.

Luke grabbed for the tea. After a few sips Justin settled back, smiling through the pain and gasps for air.

“Had you going, didn’t I doc?”

“Yes. Yes, you did,” Luke replied sheepishly.

“So tell me about it,” Luke begged.

“Not much to tell. People. Everywhere people. I don’t know what’s with those people. Unlike every other citizen of the Empire they insisted they could only register in their ancestral hometowns instead of where they actually resided. What a nightmare! The entire province was like an anthill.”

He paused, shook his head almost imperceptibly and took another sip of his tea.

“That’s the only reason I was there.”

“What d’ya mean?” Luke asked.

“The Jews have always been a pain in the Emperor’s backside. There was always something fomenting somewhere in those hills. That’s why Augustus asked personally for Quirinius to oversee the census in Judea. After his success in making and keeping peace in Pisidia, he was the Emperor’s go-to man.”

Luke brushed off the stereotypes, “There is someone in particular that I’m interested in.”

“We counted thousands! Everyone in the entire Empire had to stand up and be counted. How am I supposed to remember one person?”

“It was actually a man and a pregnant woman. They traveled down to Bethlehem from Galilee, a place called Nazareth.” Luke paused; studying the soldier’s face, he looked for any sign of recognition. Seeing none, he added another hint, “Shortly after they arrived she went into labor. They lodged them with the animals.”

“Animals! Why?”

“Like you said, there were people everywhere! There was no room anywhere for them.” Luke kept fishing, “The night of the baby’s birth there was a commotion.”

“What kind of commotion?”

“Shepherds; middle of the night. They came telling a tale of angels announcing the baby’s birth.”

Justin leaned his head back and thought deeply. He chased a ghost of a recollection, but the apparition darted away just as he recognized it as a sliver of something real. He shook his head in frustration. He looked up to give Luke his full attention as he broke the bad news, but then, as quickly as it has disappeared that whisper of a memory danced again on the fringes of his conscious thoughts. His hand went to his mouth again, not this time to stifle a cough, but in concentration as he began putting bits and pieces together into a coherent mental picture.

Slowly, softly he said, “Yes! Yes! I do remember something.”

Luke leaned in. “What? What is it?”

“There was some confusion because while they were ‘betrothed’ . . . isn’t that what the Jews call it? Engaged to be married, basically?”

“Yes,” Luke tersely replied so as not to break Justin’s flow of memory.

“They were betrothed, but she was pregnant. So there was talk about that and some confusion on

exactly how to enroll them for the census.” His eyes darted back and forth without fixing upon anything in particular, his mind grinding out the shards of memory. “And, yes, I do recall something about those shepherds. Said something about the child being a savior and they called him Lord. I warned them to watch that talk. Those are titles that belong only to Caesar and if he or one of his loyalists caught wind of it, it would be the end of the baby. As I recall, his parents named Him Jesus.”

“Isn’t that weird,” Justin said shaking his head with a smile on his face.

“What?” asked Luke.

“Oh, that I’d remember *that* . . . them. After half a century, after thousands of miles, after multiplied thousands of people, I remember *them*.” There was lightness in Justin’s voice. Tapping his index finger against his temple he said, “I guess the old thinkers not as far gone as some other parts of me.”

Turning back to his tea he asked just before taking another draw on the cup, “So what’s this history about? Why are you writing it? And what’s this baby got to do with it?”

Now it was Luke’s turn to momentarily disappear into his thoughts. When he resurfaced he said, “It’s the history of another kingdom; of a king unlike any other.”

“Humph,” Justin grunted unimpressed. “So why are *you* writing it?”

Luke considered his words before vocalizing them. “I guess you might say I’m taking a census of sorts.”

“A census?”

“Yes,” Luke said, growing more confident in his line of thought. “But I’m not so much looking for those who are already a part of the Kingdom, I’m going about telling people the story of this baby who became King and of his Kingdom. I’m inviting them to stand up and be counted as one of His subjects, as citizens of his kingdom.”

“Careful there, doc!” Those are dangerous words even today, *especially* today.

Luke was quite, clearly thinking about Justin’s words. “Let me ask you this question,” Luke finally said. “What do you think of Claudius?”

“Claudius is our Emperor!” Justin said with the snap of military readiness and utter devotion.

“Yes, of course he is,” Luke replied in an impassive tone. “But what I mean is, what do you think of the *man* Claudius?”

“I don’t understand the question,” Justin countered.

“As a man, as a human being, does he demand your loyalty? Does he inspire you? Does he capture your heart?”

“Why, yes, yes he does,” Justin said with a flat unconvincing air.

“The bribes?” Luke queried aloud.

“We don’t have independent verification of those,” Justin retorted.

“And the assigation of senators?”

“Well . . .” Justin muttered, his voice trailing off without further comment.

“And his treatment of the Jews?”

“What about the Jews!” Justin snapped with a bite in his voice.

“He’s forced them all out of Rome.”

“So?”

“So is he a king for all the people? For all Romans?”

“I don’t understand what you are trying to get at?”

Luke gathered himself and then asked, “Doesn’t your heart long for more? More from life? More from love? More than this world, this life, this . . . Empire can offer?”

Justin turned his eyes toward the window in silence.

Luke took the silence as an opening. “Justin, aren’t we all made for *more*?”

The line of inquiry was finding resonance in the heart of this man who had lived his dream and was now facing a soon and likely painful death. His silence was deafening.

Luke continued, “What about what comes next? What can Rome do for you when you are gripped in that final fit of coughing and gasping for a last breath that just won’t come to you?”

“Justin, I know a King who won’t abandon you, even then, *especially* then. In fact, he has faced and conquered death itself.”

Justin cast an annoyed expression at his doctor. “What is that supposed to mean? Who are you talking about?”

Luke gently replied, “Justin, you already know him.”

“I do?”

“His name is Jesus.”

“The baby!?”

“The same. Do you know what became of Him?”

“No, why would I?”

“He escaped a death plot by Herod, when just an infant.”

“You mean he was still in Bethlehem when Herod ordered the slaughter?”

“He was the reason Herod ordered the slaughter! But the God sent an angel to warn his father, and they escaped. They fled to Egypt and didn’t return until it was safe. Then they settled in a village named Nazareth.”

Justin pressed his lips together and shook his head, clearly still not seeing the point.

“There in Nazareth he grew up. At thirty years of age Jesus began to preach, announcing that a new kingdom—the Kingdom of *God*—was at hand. He invited everyone to enter that Kingdom and to bow to Him as King.”

“And how’d that go?”

“Well, actually quite well, outside of Jerusalem.”

“I suppose—I know anyone connected to Rome wouldn’t think much of that and I’d guess the Jewish leaders didn’t either.”

“Right,” acknowledged Luke. “In fact, they killed him for it.”

“What! How?”

“They crucified him.”

“When?”

“Almost twenty years ago.”

“But here’s the thing . . .” Luke paused to consider how to proceed. “Here’s the thing. Justin, he didn’t stay dead.”

“What?” Justin asked incredulously.

“It’s true. There are hundreds of witnesses. None of the authorities could prove otherwise, though they did start some rumors trying to spin things to their advantage.”

“And Justin . . .”

“What?”

“Before he died he told them he would rise again.”

“He said that his death was necessary, as a substitution for ours.”

“You know what, doc, I’m sorry, I just don’t understand,” the soldier said with a weary voice.

“The prophets—Jewish prophets—foretold his coming, describing it and his life and his death in detail hundreds of years before it happened. Not just one or two generalities, but dozens of specific details.”

“You seem pretty sure about this.”

“I told you I am a historian. I’ve done the research. But you’ve got to add to that that hundreds of eye witnesses have reported seeing him alive after having been crucified and buried for three days . . . and He said that is what would happen!”

“Ok, so where is he now?” Justin asked.

“He, before the eyes of his followers, was taken up into the heavens alive . . . promising to return and establish everywhere the Kingdom He’d been telling everyone about.”

“So *you* are a part of this Kingdom?” Justin inquired.

“Yes, I am.”

There was a long pause as each man considered all that had just passed between them. The silence was broken finally by more eruptions, fresh blood and fitful gasps for air. Tortured convulsions wrenched Justin’s body.

Floriana appeared again in the doorway, tears in her eyes as she leaned her weight against the doorframe. Luke asked for more hot water as he searched his bag for a fresh batch of herbs.

This round was the worst yet. It left Justin pale, weakened, watery-eyed, and fearful. Luke tried to raise him enough to get some tea down between spasms.

The doctor’s left arm under the legionnaire’s broad shoulders and the cup in his right hand, the two men found themselves face to face. Terror gazed into compassion.

Without breaking their gaze, Luke begged, “Justin, wouldn’t you like to know my King?”

Wouldn't you like a share in his life, in a life that cannot die, a life that outlives this life?
Wouldn't you like to know that peace awaits you on the other side of this final battle?"

The powerful warrior was now a broken wreck; broken not only in body, but in soul. His whole life, his highest ideals, his faithful service to the Empire, none of it could stand up to the enemy that was stealing his breath from him. His greatest victories were meaningless here, now, against the enemy of death.

His lips quivered, nearly too weak to form the words, "Tell me more about this King, Jesus."

"He told us he is the Son of God. That he had come to earth to save us. That his death was the means by which he would secure this salvation. He promised to defeat death forever by rising from the dead. And, well, all the facts say he did just that. He offers this salvation not only to Jews, but to all, Gentiles included. It doesn't matter who you are or what you'd done, Jesus' death covers it all."

The battle-hardened soldier of Rome managed to croak out, "What's the catch?"

"No catch. Just humble yourself, confess Jesus as King and Lord and Savior. Give him your highest allegiance. Leave off your sin and pledge the rest of your life to him and to his kingdom. Do that and he writes your name down in the Book of Life, recording you as a citizen of his Kingdom."

"And that works? I mean, it has worked for *you*?"

"Justin, I can't even begin to tell you! But, yes, yes, a thousand times yes!"

Floriana had settled in on her knees on the opposite side of the bed and had heard every word. She looked with longing upon her dying husband.

Justin gathered himself and said, "Do you understand what this would mean for me?"

Luke nodded, "I think I do."

"I have lived my entire life wanting nothing but to serve Rome. I have given every ounce of my strength and devotion to this kingdom and to its Caesar. I have yearly renewed the Sacramentum, the soldier's oath, swearing that Caesar is my lord, my king, my savior."

He was quiet a moment as he collected his breath.

"I would have to utterly disavow all that I've lived for. And, if Rome finds out, it will mean my death."

Luke didn't answer quickly, but he never broke his eye contact with Justin. Finally, he said, "I know." And then he asked, "Will you, even now, at the last hour of your life, bow to Jesus as your king? Will you ask him to forgive you and accept you into his kingdom?"

Justin was quiet.

“You’re going to die one way or the other; maybe tonight, maybe next week, maybe a month from now. But Justin, you’re going to die. We all are. But what then?”

Rome’s soldier took in the words without argument. There was no fight left in him. Rome had given him a lifetime of labor, a cause to believe in, a champion to defend. But other than a broken body, a parcel of land and a trifle of a pension, what did he have to show for it? Where was Rome now? Where was lord-Caesar now? Where was Claudius the savior in his darkest hour?

With his left hand he motioned for Floriana to go to the chest in the corner of the room. She rose and pulled it over. “Open it,” Justin demanded. As she lifted the lid, Luke beheld the trophies of Justin’s service. Medals of valor, a robe of honor, faded armor.

Justin turned his eyes to Luke, “With my blood I earned these things and the glories they represent.”

“With *his* blood Jesus bought you to be his very own, to free you from the one enemy you could not conquer—yourself.”

Justin nodded his head. “And he rose again,” he said, repeating what he’d heard Luke report earlier.

“Yes. Justin, please. Come to Jesus. He is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. The man I travel with love to repeat what the prophets said about Jesus long before he ever came, ‘Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.’ Justin, everyone, even Caesar will bow to Jesus one day when he comes again. The prophets said that his kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. Long after Rome is gone, Jesus’ kingdom will endure.”

Justin did not argue and he did not move. But his face betrayed a colossal battle being waged for the soul of a soldier who’d survived every battle he’d ever faced.

After some moments Justin turned to Floriana, pointed at the chest and ordered with an authority that still had the faint echo of a man who had commanded many—“Take it away! Take it into the street! Be gone with it!”

Floriana’s eyes widened.

“Take it!” Justin commanded.

She moved quickly, dragging it from the room.

Luke studied the soldier’s face, trying to discern which direction the battle would turn. But Justin needed several minutes to rally his strength. When Floriana had returned to her husband’s side, he

said to both of them, “Help me sit up.”

They lifted his upper body and managed to swing his legs over the side of the bed. They steadied him as he appeared faint. A cough erupted again, doubling him over and threatening to roll him onto the floor. They held him tight and Luke reached again for the tea. As the few sips he could get down had their effect, Justin slid off the side of the bed and onto his knees.

Neither Floriana or Luke understood what Justin was after. Finally settled in on his knees with his wife and doctor flanking him on either side, Justin said, “Ok, so what do I do?”

Luke and Floriana exchanged a bewildered glance. “About what?” Luke asked.

“About Jesus!” Justin said as if his intentions should have been clear to them both.

“You mean how do you surrender yourself to Jesus as your Savior and King?”

“Yes,” Justin said, “of course. What else?”

“Well,” Luke started, “the only way to stand up and be counted in Jesus’ kingdom is to bow your knee to him as Lord and King.”

“Ok, I’ve got the part about the knees down. Now what do I do? In Caesar’s army we swear the Sacramentum. Does Jesus have some kind of oath I have to swear?”

“Well, not exactly. I mean, there aren’t any magic words or prescribed formula. Jesus looks at the heart to see whether we mean it, but we do need to confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord.”

Luke thought a moment and then said, “Justin you’ve confessed thousands of times that Caesar is lord and you, as a sometimes census taker, have listened to many thousands of the citizens of his kingdom pledge their allegiance to him. I think if you just start speaking to Jesus, the words will come to you.”

With that Justin dropped his head and opened his lips, as if he hoped something worthy would emerge. He hesitated, then launched in, ‘God, this is Manius Galarus Justinus, a once proud soldier of Rome’s army and a servant of her lord, savior and king, the Emperor Caesar. I have often sworn him to be my king and his realm to be my kingdom. I know now that that is only partly true. I have heard—and I believe—that Jesus, your Son, is the true and only and ultimate king. I believe you, Jesus, died to pay for my wrongdoing. Please forgive me my sins. I have heard—and believe—that you have defeated death and are alive again, and that you offer eternal life to those who need it and ask for it. O, Jesus, I need this eternal life, for this one I have is about to run out. I now pledge my allegiance to you above all other gods and all other lords and all other saviors. I ask that you mark me down as a citizen of your kingdom, for the one I’ve served here is failing and cannot survive.’

Justin paused as if uncertain how to continue. He turned to look at Luke for some direction. He

met the doctor's watery eyes and tear-streamed cheeks. A quiet, but firm whisper arose from his other side as Floriana said, "Me too, Lord Jesus, me too!"

And the doctor added, "Amen."

At that the once-great soldier and the doctor-turned-historian-turned-census-taker embraced as brothers. Floriana dove into the side of her husband with both arms and Luke gathered them both up in a hug and said through tears, "Welcome to the Kingdom!"

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