

After the Sentence

[Aulus and Marcus are officers of the Praetorian Guard. They are resting after a busy day on duty, during which they have witnessed the trial of Jesus before Pilate. The baying of the mob for blood brought Marcus a surge of pre-battle adrenalin but Aulus has been disturbed by his contact with Jesus. A Greek slave, Taras, is attending them. He is the same young man who had waited on Pilate with a bowl and towel in the Judgement Hall.]

I'm glad I'm not on execution duty today. Marcus, fresh from the bath threw a towel round him and stretched out on a bench set into the bare stone wall. The rest room was just a small cellar. A shuttered opening near the ceiling let in a minimum of light and most of the smell of an overcrowded city. Oil lamps flickered around the walls.

Leave the door open, Aulus shouted as the servant came in with a fresh jug of wine and tray of fruit. *It's stifling in here.*

Taras poured wine for both men. Neither took notice of him. Slaves were all the same. Unless they were trusted companions you didn't look into their faces. Better not to see the sullen scowl and hate-filled eyes.

It's quietened down out there. They'll be getting on with it now, Aulus replied to Marcus' comment. He drained his cup and held it up to be re-filled. *Crucifixion's an awful way to go.*

But the crowd love the sport, Marcus growled. *That's where they'll all be now.* He laughed cruelly. *It's not every day a king gets crucified.*

What's the hurry anyway? asked Aulus. *A few more days in prison's no problem. The Governor may even have changed his mind.* Marcus gave his companion an 'are you serious?' look. *You're new to this. It's Passover, man, and there are laws - Jewish and Roman. Hopefully it's going to be a quieter Passover now this lad's out of the way. The High Priest likes the Holy Day to be just that - no mess - no trouble - so they can be right with their God. And as for Pilate changing his mind! He wouldn't dare go back on the people's wishes. He'd have a riot to beat all riots!* He paused to glance at his thoughtful colleague, re-lacing his boots. *Anyhow, are you suggesting the man shouldn't die? If you think he's a real king you'd better not say so in public!*

Aulus looked up. *He said he was a king. Pilate didn't give him a chance to explain. I don't think he wanted to hear what the man was saying. The man wasn't talking about kings and kingdoms as we know them. He's not a war-monger! He's in charge of a band of weapon-less villagers. I heard him speaking down by the Temple.*

You becoming a Jew? There was a knife-like coarseness in Marcus' voice. *No. I was on my way to that jeweller you told me about. This man is talking about a kingdom of peace and justice and love, made by words and truth, not swords and terror.*

And how do you think he's going to bring it about? Marcus was being more serious now. *Is he going to ask us to put down our weapons. If we do that we'll be dead men in minutes with that lot out there. Love and peace, he scoffed, You'll want a woman Governor next!*

Aulus ignored his scathing comment. *I've no idea how it would work, but if I had the choice I'd rather talk peace than kill. No war has ever brought a lasting peace. The slaughter just goes on and on.* He turned to Taras who had been standing silently waiting for orders. *Did you see Pilate's hands shaking when you gave him the towel.* He turned back to Marcus. *I think he was afraid of truth.*

Marcus roused himself to stand, a sign he had had enough of a dangerous conversation. The slave however, thought Aulus' words had been address to him. In a low soft voice, he said, *Your armies took my land and my people. Before you came we knew how to love. When your empire is gone we shall still be loving. Which is more powerful, war or love?*

Marcus was taken aback for a moment. He stared into a face, not sullen, but sad, and felt as though he had been stripped of his armour. *Come on Aulus. It's time we were back on duty.*