



Second-hand Cross

'Put it over there against the wall.' Julius barked at Rakim. *'Not on the stack with the others. We won't use that one again for a while.'*

'It frightens you?' Rakim asked. In the comparative quiet of the Antonia fortress underground stores this trusted man from the ranks could be familiar with his centurion. They had been through many campaigns together, but nothing quite as disturbing as today's duties. Rakim, a muscular Syrian conscript, lifted the weight from his weary shoulder, cast the crossbeam into a corner and rubbed his hands in the floor sand to clean them. The beam had been carried on other shoulders during this strange, long day and for some eight hours a whole body stretched across its span. He cleaned his hands again. The stickiness of blood mingled with his own sweat was clinging.

'No.' Julius replied. *'It doesn't frighten me.'* No Centurion confessed to fear in front of his men. *'But it troubles me. Something bigger than I can understand happened out there today under cover of that uncanny darkness.'*

'That a God died?' Rakim challenged him. *'It's just that you acted strangely today. I heard you say you believe he was the Son of God! Did you really mean that?'*

'I didn't not mean it. In fact, I think you believe it too.'

Rakim evaded the question. *'Can a god die?'* he asked. He had received a good education before his village was subjugated and he conscripted to serve the Legion. It was not unusual for him to enter into deep discussion with Julius.

'He was dead when the Rabbi and his servants collected him.' Julius spoke to reassure himself.

'His body was certainly dead. I made sure of that.' Rakim wanted to pursue their thoughts. *'There's more to gods than their physical bodies. The Nazarene said that himself.'*

'You heard him say that?'

'I spoke with that young lad, Mark. He and his mother entertain the man's followers when they're in the city.'

'She was there the whole time today.' Julius had been impressed at how they had stood their ground, watching, waiting, blinded by their tears. *'Those women had more courage than his men.'* he said.

Rakim slumped down to rest in the underground gloom. Somehow this cool store seemed a good place to stop to think. *'Mark said Jesus told them he knew he would die but he would come back to life again.'*

Julius felt a cool shudder pass through his body like the momentary panic before a campaign battle. Rakim noticed and continued *'I don't think it's over. There are too many out there who believe him.'*

'And you are one of them?' Julius shot the question like a startled bowman. Again Rakim was non-committal. *'Whoever he was or is, what he said was the Truth. Truth the whole world needs to hear. Do you remember how we went out to spy on him? I was enthralled, standing at the back of that crowd. In the quiet of those fields above Capernaum and the hills mirrored in the calm of Galilee I could believe it ...Peace in place of war. Love for hatred. Forgiveness. Healing. Sharing in place of competition....'*

Julius went over to the wall where the crossbeam now rested. He stood staring at the bloodstained rough wood. Rakim stepped back, rubbing his hands again as though they would not come clean.

'Bloodstains never worry me.' Julius spoke softly to himself. *'They are the emblem of fighting men, but these are different. This isn't the fresh blood of a fighting man or petty thief. Could they be the bloodstains of a Son of God? I shall not be surprised if they do not haunt me for the rest of my life. What do you think Rakim?'*

Rakim was taken aback. They were virtually master and free slave. They had become close but Rakim was more often asked for his obedience than for his opinion.'

'It is strange,' he ventured. *'I was thinking similar thoughts in that awesome gloom while we waited for his end. I was back in Galilee. I think it was the women and the one disciple, John they call him, brought it to mind. All those things he said. The crowd's excitement. Such a variety of people, of thoughts and needs, hopes and visions ... And I was aware of his blood, staining this wood. I wanted to be the one to carry this beam back. I wanted to touch it. I don't know why but there's something about it makes me fearful, excited, hopeful ... then I think ... Have I touched the blood of .. of ... the Son of God!'*

Rakim turned away, not wanting his centurion to see him restraining his tears.

'Go on!' Urged Julius, roused by the young man's heartfelt words. 'What else did you feel?'

There was a long pause before Julius' stare urged Rakim to go on. 'It's more what I've been thinking while carrying the wood.' he said. He joined Julius looking at the crossbeam. 'The bloodstains. Jesus' blood stains are fresh - the lighter ones - but look at all the darker one's from past crucifixions A lot of people have died nailed or tied to this beam. I've been wondering who they may have been. Their blood mingled with his - maybe with God's!'

'I've seen plenty of lawbreakers and criminals leave their lifeblood on a beam,' said Julius defending his military role. 'They deserved to be there!'

'Did they all?' asked Rakim. 'Didn't this King, Jesus just say to a thief, 'Today you'll be with me in paradise?' Rakim drew back and looked straight into Julius' eyes. Their equal physical stature gave him confidence to speak. *I was thinking of all those whose blood was mingled with this God's Son: all those aspiring dreamers, religious and political enthusiasts - all those who share Jesus' dream of setting the oppressed free ..*

'You're thinking of what he said out in the fields in Galilee?'

'Yes,' replied Rakim. He said he had come to set the prisoners free. All those cheats and money-lovers whose blood stains that length of timber there, but so many of them like those folk we passed in the streets just now. All those beggars and poverty-stricken debtors who left their bloodstain on that wood because they couldn't pay.'

Julius nodded his head in agreement. 'Good news for the poor', he said. 'Isn't that what he promised.'

'And maybe that's just the beginning,' Rakim's voice rose with excitement. He cast around to be sure they were still alone. 'He saw a whole new kingdom coming A kingdom of justice and truth and peace' The young man's face glowed and his voice rose again. 'If that was all true, where is the kingdom. The dreamers are still in hiding, the poor living with their debts, prisoners rattling their cages.' He paused and quietly continued, *'No. If Jesus's Kingdom is to come there has to be more. There has to be something more beyond his dying out there. Too many believed and still believe. There's got to be more.'*

'You can't mean he'll come back to life?' Julius had seen too many deaths. Surely there is nothing more final?

'That's what Mark says he promised. Just think of all the miracles they claim he performed'.

'That Rabbi Lazarus!' Julius almost whispered the name. 'Back to life!'

'Why not? Sir, I don't think it's all over. I believe it may have just begun. We were witnesses to what could be the most momentous event in our world's history. What you said is true. I think the words were given to you and it really was a Son of God who we nailed to that crossbeam today.'

Agitated, Julius paced around the cellar, deep in thought, restless. *'Rakim. Put that crossbeam over in the far corner. Don't let anyone touch it.'*

'Maybe everyone should touch it,' whispered Rakim. *'If in some way his death was to bring about that wonderful kingdom he spoke of, everyone should want to mingle their blood with his. That's what his men believed, and it makes sense of something else Mark told me. I met him in the street late last night after the arrest. He told me how earlier, all Jesus' men shared the Supper together. After the supper he invited them to all drink wine together from the same cup. He told them they were sharing in his blood. It was what we call sacramental - binding themselves to him and his Kingdom. He wanted everyone to share his dying... '*

'And his living again?' murmured Julius.

'You watch. He'll be back.' said Rakim

Julius felt that cold shiver pass through him again. He was back on the hill, part of an amazing, world shattering moment. He felt sure that nothing would be the same again. For him, for Rakim or for the whole world...