

Set Free

By D.E. Sharp

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The man forced his heavy eyelids to open by the will of his curiosity. Piercing through the gloom of the dungeon prison he heard, shouting thundering through the small window slit, high up in the cold, wet, stone wall, above him.

He focused his attention to the crowd beyond his prison, shouting and calling for a public execution, of a prisoner. A black rat scurried across the unkept, straw covered floor and brushed under his bent knees; rushing to his half eaten meal platter and the few crumbs left over from his meager final meal. He watched dispassionately as the rat gnawed on the few lamb bones left.

“Crucify Him!” the crowd shouted, calling for an agonizing public death.

“They want you dead, my friend” a voice spoke calmly from the shadows beyond the door and lock of his cell. “You will soon receive what you most truly deserve.”

“True, for what I have done, death is the only price.” The man grumbled into the darkness, his tongue rubbing over his broken teeth and a few places in his mouth where the skin was bitten away and raw. “But you will miss me!” He coughed out trying not to laugh. He did not want another beating. The last one left him crippled for almost a week.

“Yes, but we will find another toy to play with, soon.” The voice from the shadows replied as a face leaned in and a rough smile spread across the rugged Roman guards features. “I hear that they are processing a new lot of prisoners this afternoon. At least one will have the death penalty. At least one will be a picture of filth like you.”

“You are welcome.” The prisoner quipped back, “May I set a standard that the next resident of these amazing accommodations will struggle to match.”

“For a murder, and a thief, a small part of me almost likes you.” The guard jested as his voice and footsteps faded down the long passage way.

“Crucify Him!” The crowd called out even louder than before.

“I deserved to die,” the prisoner whispered into the darkness of his cell, “if you can hear me, I do not beg, I do not plead, I am worthy of my sentence; but I am more afraid of facing you.”

“Who are you taking too?” The guard challenged. He had returned on silent feet, making the prisoner’s heart jump at the sudden words. “There is no God that will save you from your fate. We only now wait to see who will join you.”

“I call out for no mercy from man, only forgiveness from the one that can forgive my soul.” The prisoner shared bluntly, as a latch was unlocked and the prison door swung open on its rusted iron hinges.

“Crucify him! Crucify him!” The crowd wailed from beyond the walls.

“They call for you.” The guard said just above a whisper as he knelt down and inserted a key into the leg blocks to allow the prisoner to stand. “If I let you stand on your own, will you fight me or come peacefully?” He asked as two more guards entered to cramped cell with swords drawn.

“I will not fight my fate.” The prisoner exhaled, “I will come peacefully.” He lifted his hands gripped together, fingers interlaced, towards the guard. The other name nodded and took a leather strap and calmly bound the prisoner’s wrists together tightly. “The praetor sends for you. It must be time.”

The prisoner nodded and the small group left the cell together and headed for the end of the hall and the small beam of light far ahead. He could still hear the crowd calling for a crucifixion echoing along the walls of the prison, “I do hope this prisoner lasts a good long time. Some men can last days, others die too soon. The last man died too quickly.”

“I have ten shekels to bet this time. Last week I wanted that cloak so much.” One of the guards muttered to no one in particular.

As the prisoner was ushered into the daylight his eyes screamed in pain and he hung his head low. Strong hands guided him to stand beside another prisoner. “Stand here! Say nothing!” was commanded loudly into his ear.

The crowd before him was shouting in a deafening bellow; words could not be discerned. Men and woman faced the platform he stood upon and chanted, arms raised, faces distorted in rage,

“crucify him!” was all that he could understand. His heart began to beat uncontrollably. This was the end.

His eyes looked down at the feet of the prisoner beside him. Blood pooled on the stone floor encircling the man beside him. Open wounds were gashed, cut and crossed along his legs. So much blood! Was this why he was here? Was he next?

The prisoner dared to lift his eyes further, the man beside him stood swaying on unsteady legs. As if only by will power alone he remained standing. His clothing hung around his waist, draped to expose his upper body.

Every inch of his skin was lashed and bruised. They had used the cat of nine tails on him. The prisoner involuntarily shuttered. The man could not be recognized. His body was beaten beyond anything he had ever seen before. One eye was torn and the other swollen closed. The flesh upon his form was torn and shredded with the careful precision that only the Roman mercenaries were trained to accomplish.

What evil could he have done? What crime deserved such abuse? Handfuls of the man’s beard were missing, as if they had been pulled out by the handfuls; his face was laced in blood.

The hair on his head was matted with sweat and blood. So much blood; but he stood silently and said nothing.

The praetor stepped up to the Dais raising one hand with the expectation of being obeyed. A slow wave of recognition flowed over the crowd, and one by one the shouting mob fell into compliance and the chanting, and calls for execution quieted.

The prisoner stood tall, averting his eyes but watched intently. The man beside him swayed beside him. Something deep inside of him felt compelled to help the man. To reach out and help him, in any way he could. It was a strange feeling, foreign to his core nature. Was this sudden feeling, the feeling of compassion? Was this what it felt like to consider another human being beside his own life.

“Today is the feast of unleavened bread. It is a week of sacred worship to the God of your covenant.” The praetor began, “Today, I offer you a choice.”

The praetor lifted his voice with determination, “Do you choose, this man whom you call Jesus? A man I find has committed no

crime, no offense, and no transgression against Rome, Caesar, or you his people. I find that he is as innocent as a new born child.”

The prisoner looked once more at the man beside him, INNOCENT? He was beat like this for committing no crimes? Not even a single sin? As he pondered this, a bead of sweat mixed with fresh blood flowed down the man’s wounded face.

“Today, you choose” the praetor spoke again, “this man you call King of the Jews!” Pontius Pilate shifted his gaze and pointed at the prisoner; or this man Barabbas, a murderer, a thief, and dissident. One I will release to you as an offering to your people. Whom do you choose?”

“Our King?,” The prisoner named Barabbas thought in his mind, as he was taken by surprise. “Isn’t Herod, that old windbag and pompous politician our king?”

“Speak up, man. Tell them that you’re innocent.” He begged of the man they called Jesus. “Save yourself! No one will mourn my death” he cleared his throat and said louder, “if you are our King, we need you more than ever!”

“What say ye?” praetor Pontus Pilate asked one last time.

“We choose Barabbas!” The crowd roared. “Crucify him!”

Pontus Pilate nodded and they led the man, Jesus slowly away to be crucified. The crowd led by the High Priest, and the Sanhedrin; followed chanting their joy of the events about to happen.

Barabbas sunk to his knees as the familiar Roman guard cautiously approached and loosened his bonds. “I guess, you are free my friend, your debt has been paid by an innocent man’s blood.”

“I am not worthy,” Barabbas cried as his hands gingerly touched the stain of blood left by Jesus’ feet. “What do I do now?” He asked cautiously.

The Roman guard spoke as he stood to leave the chamber, “Go now my friend,” then in a moment of revelation he said with a commanding tone in his voice, “Go and live worthy of being redeemed by the blood of your King.”

Barabbas placed his hands to his heart as he struggled to comprehend the price that was paid for his life.

His body recoiled as an unexpected gentle hand touched his face, “be still” a calm feminine voice spoke into his soul. Barabbas looked up into the face of a young woman, with eyes that had seen the pain and suffering of more than a single lifetime. Eyes that showed the redness of tears shed all night long. She pressed a cool cloth against his face and skin to wash his own blood away.

“He has given his life for yours,” she whispered.

“I am not worthy of his blood,” Barabbas begged, “I deserve to die, not him!”

“He knows; will you now return to your life of wickedness, or will you choose to live anew?” Her voice asked directly of his soul.

“He is the prophesied Messiah,” She proclaimed as she finished cleaning his face. She lowered her hands and placed them calmly in her lap. “He is the lamb of God! He goes to die for all our sins, as promised.”

Her deep brown eyes focused into his own, her hands had had the smell of Frankincense and Mir. She at so close to him, he could smell her hair. It was thick with the scent as well.

“There are two doors ahead of you, two paths.” She stood and pointed to the furthest exit of the building, “Go through that doorway and build a new life one maybe worthy of the innocent blood of the Son of God, shed for you.”

His eyes were locked on the face of this strange woman that smelled of the ointment of death. “Or, take the second door with me. Become a witness of the mercy and grace of the one true God.” She then stood to walk away, to follow after the crucifixion procession, “Only through HIS blood are we truly set free.”