

St Michaels Studio City, Ash Wednesday 2011

Ashes

The man wiped the smoke and ashes from his eyes and shivered. The cold was bone-deep and the small fire made from old dried planks did little to help. Yet it was all he had. The cold was inside as well as outside. What he had gone through in the past three days chilled his heart more than the wind cooled his skin.

Rufus had been born and grown up in the hardscrabble slums of Rome. Never knowing his father, abandoned by his mother, he had lived a life rough and not always completely lawful. But he was strong and brash and had made a place for himself on the streets. He was known to be tough but fair and had become a natural leader in the street hierarchy. They had made their own rules, not exactly the laws of the Roman Senate, but fair for the street. He had been cold there, too, but not like this cold, this mountain wind in a desert land, wind that cut like a knife. He pulled his cloak closer around himself and inched closer to the fire, in spite of the ashes and smoke blown about by wind which came from who knows where off the desert wastes.

He had been a natural for the legions, when the recruiter had come through the slums of Rome. Promised a piece of land of his own after twenty years of service, he was a natural for the life of a soldier, his strength and cunning assets in a rough and tumble world. He'd always been proud of being one of Rome's legionnaires. The legions stood for order and strength and the rough fairness that men doled out among themselves.

But this godforsaken desert outpost had changed all that. These people were stubborn and troublesome, fanatics in the worship of their fierce desert God and fanatics in their daily religious rituals. They had not appreciated the peace and order that Rome had brought. They plotted and rebelled, sometimes openly, sometimes only through the silent slip of a knife into a Roman heart when least expected. One of the three crucified two days ago had been such a murderer. The one next had been only a common thief. It was one of Rufus' least favorite duties, the guarding of the crucified, the insurance that the criminals paid their debts to society to the last breath and heartbeat. The fire's ashes settled on Rufus, stinging his eyes as just return for the meager warmth.

It was the third crucified Jew who haunted Rufus. He hadn't murdered, stolen, or plotted. He had just been one of the troublemakers that this strange religion threw out like stones on a rough seashore. He had crossed the Jewish authorities, true enough, but he had done nothing according to Roman law that demanded crucifixion. Yet the governor had given in to their fanatic demands, because of the unrest in the crowded city. Pilate seemed afraid of the people's leaders, and Rufus was old enough to know the political expedience that sought calm above all else. Such calm brought the best tax-collecting, and Rome was an insatiable sink for money. Rufus shook his cloak to clear the ashes from the fire and shivered as the cold slipped like a knife into his skin.

Rufus had been one of the guards through the trial, had seen the strength and dignity of the man. He had seemed almost like a soldier in some unknown, unseen conflict. Rufus recognized courage and strength, knew what they cost, admired those virtues wherever he encountered them. This man was calm in the face of injustice, strong in the midst of torture. But there was more. He had fallen carrying the planks of his cross on the way to the hill. As Rufus reached down to pull him to his feet, the man had looked into his eyes and, it seemed, into his soul. For a moment, the swirling crowds and the other guards, the noise and the carnival, all disappeared. For a moment, there were only the two of them, this Galilean carpenter and this Roman soldier. What the soldier saw in those eyes was not anger and condemnation but compassion and understanding, a strength of soul that seemed to come from some unknown abyss. The moment passed and the man staggered on. Rufus was staggered for his own part, even more so as the man endured his tortured crucifixion with dignity and grace – died, it seemed, with an openness that was in marked contrast to the rage and fear of the other two.

Rufus thought he was through with the business that night. Back in the barracks, he fingered the soft warm cloth of the cloak he had won dicing at the foot of the cross of the strange man. But then the centurion had stormed in, grabbed Rufus and another, and led them to this sealed cave and posted them on watch. They were to make sure no one disturbed this tomb, which Rufus was startled to learn was the tomb of the Jewish carpenter with the all-knowing eyes. They had been at it for two nights, four hours on watch, four hours off to sleep by the meager fire. They had been lucky with the fire. The centurion had allowed them to take the planks of the cross of the man, much battered by countless nails driven through quivering flesh. The wood was so ragged it could no longer serve. A new cross would have to be made. So Rufus and his cohorts had the wood of this old rugged cross to burn to keep them warm. It had burned reluctantly, it seemed, perhaps because the wood was soaked with so much blood. But it had made more ashes than Rufus would have expected, enough ashes for centuries, thought Rufus in an uncharacteristic turn of mind. It seemed as if he would be marked by these ashes forever.

Now it was the morning of the second night. The cold wind blew the ashes and smoke into his eyes and hair and cloak. Rufus was glad that it was almost time for relief from the watch. He wanted to go back to the barracks, to wash, to rest, to sleep. He could hardly wait. And then the stone over the mouth of the cave began to move.