

THE THIRTEENTH DISCIPLE
- Roman Centurion Gaius Cassius
by
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St. Longinus
Basilica Rome

CENTURIO DEPUTATUS
GAIUS CASSIUS
(LONGINUS - The Spear Carrier)

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CHAPTER 1

Gaius stared at the landscape with the experienced, if somewhat jaundiced eye, of an old campaigner; one eye because the other was cruelly scarred in a battle in Northern Germany under Germanicus.

Muttering in the ranks of the dusty, footsore legionaries caused him to turn resignedly, "Alright, I know, it's not home, but we are here to do a job and by Zeus we are damned well going to do it."

"How much further, Centurion sir?"

"Half a day, so save your breath."

"Great Mars! I hate this stinking country!"

Gaius chuckled, "You had better not let the Zealots hear you say that or you will end up with your head on a pole."

The legionary fingered his throat and nervously swallowed, "What in the name of all the gods makes them want this forsaken bit of waste land."

Gaius shook his head dolefully, "I do not know, but I do know they have been here for a few hundred years and our turning up and telling them they have got to pay taxes to us is not the best way to make friends."

"Friends!" snorted another old campaigner, "A nest of vipers more like."

"No, quarrelsome, stubborn, single minded perhaps, but vipers no. We are the intruders and it would serve us well to remember that."

"My feet hurt," grumbled yet another legionary.

There was a chorus "Oh, shut up!" from the others whose feet probably hurt just as much.

The soldiers were on detachment from Caesarea, the Roman army's Auxiliary headquarters, to the garrison in Jerusalem. One hundred soldiers led by the veteran Centurion, Gaius Cassius.

The air was heavy, hot and dusty. Sand seemed to creep into every crevice and the cast iron cuirasses, for which their Legion was named Legio VI 'Ferrata', hung hot and heavy from their shoulders, the sun seeming to turn them white hot and reflected up at their burning throats with malicious intent. More than one legionary licked his dry, cracked lips and dreamed of icy water fountains.

The attack, when it came was just that, an icy douche that drove the heat and tiredness from the soldier's bodies. Centurion Gaius Cassius, veteran of many battles reacted instinctively and despite having only one eye assessed the situation in a flash, "Testudo!" he roared and the legionaries shields came upright and others closed the gap overhead just as the first spears clanked against the wall of shields, behind which the soldiers, some grinning with anticipation, waited.

Following the shower of spears came the charge of wild swordsmen screaming loudly. Stoically the legionaries waited for the first blows to thud upon their shields and before the Zealots could start probing for gaps out flickered the long Roman Pilum (spear) and at close range the short sword, the gladius, from behind and between the shields. The howling screams of the attackers turned to screams of pain as the very sharp blades bit through cloth and into flesh. The line of closed shields broke as the disciplined soldiers moved forward to turn the attack into a rout.

Not a single soldier was even slightly injured, but ten zealots paid with their lives and at least another half dozen limped and staggered after their fleeing companions.

Some of the men would have given pursuit, but were peremptorily ordered back by the Centurion.

"That is what they want!" he roared, "Back in rank, now!

They have friends in the hills. If you used your eyes you would see their spears glinting in the sun and they would cut you to pieces."

Now that the dangers had been pointed out to them they too could see the glisten of sun on metal in the hills.

Gaius smiled to himself as he caught the sounds of muttering in the ranks and knowing just what they were saying; 'How does he manage to see so much more with one eye than us with two hundred eyes?'

That, he thought to himself, was 'experience' in seeing the enemy before they saw you. Which some of them might learn, if they lived long enough. Aloud he called out, "Column advance."

Entering Jerusalem was an experience unfamiliar to all the soldiers, a wall of undisguised hostility, some even spitting on the ground as they trudged past. The walled city was crowded with people for the festival of Passover and market stalls were doing a busy trade in food, clothing and domestic artefacts, but none smiled at the passing soldiers, most simply looked away.

"Ever get the feeling you're not welcome," muttered one soldier to another.

"Why do they hate us?" Muttered another.

“Because we’re Romans and rule the world,” offered another soldier bitterly.

“Quiet in the ranks,” called out their Centurion and the column fell silent. Heads held up, glancing neither left nor right the column wound its way into the courtyard of Pontius Pilate’s palace and came to a halt just at the foot of the steps leading up to the main building. Putting the men at ease, Gaius Cassius marched up the steps just as the Governor; Pontius Pilate himself emerged to meet him. Fist on chest Gaius saluted the Governor. “Gaius Cassius of the VI Legio Ferrata in Caesarea reporting for duty, sir.”

“Any trouble, Centurion?” asked Pontius quietly.

“Just a skirmish with some Zealots, sir. But no trouble.”

Pontius smiled thinly, “Good. We had two Zealot leaders under arrest, but had to let one go by the choice of the people, hence your presence. There may yet be trouble. Get your men quartered, fed and rested, tomorrow we all do our duty by the people. Be back here in the courtyard by 10 am. My servant will show you your quarters. Dismiss Centurion.”

Without another word Pontius Pilate turned and re-entered the Palace.

Gaius marched back down the steps with Pilate’s servant, a man of elderly status, just behind him.

The quarters allocated were just behind the Governor’s Palace, but within its walls. They were comfortable and well appointed with their own bathhouse that the Centurion’s men took to with eager delight. Before Gaius could take advantage of the cooling waters he was summoned to the office of the garrison’s Tribune, Claudius Treblinni. The main garrison’s quarters are

situated on either side of the Palace thus providing maximum protection for the Governor.

The Tribune wasted no time on formalities and quickly put Gaius at his ease with a goblet of rich, red wine. “Welcome, Centurion, sorry about the haste and informality, but our esteemed Governor has arrested the Son of God and intends to crucify him, we are supposed to make sure it all goes smoothly.”

Gaius nearly choked on a mouthful of the rich wine as he was about to swallow. “The... the what!”

Treblinni smiled, but without humour, “The Son of God. At least that’s what the Jews call him.”

“Does he say that?”

“Yes, he does. He is also called the King of the Jews.”

“And he’s to be crucified for that?”

“It would appear, Centurion, that our Governor has taken the coward’s way out, washed his hands of the whole business and threw him on the mercy of the crowd.”

“But... but I thought they wanted him free?”

Treblinni smiled bleakly, “They did, but Pilate presented them with two prisoners and asked them to choose which of the two to set free, one was a very popular figure Pilate called Barabbas¹ who in reality was James, brother to the one called Jesus, but more importantly leader of the Nazoraeans, the

¹ *Barabbas is a title as well as a name: **bar** – meaning son and **abba** –meaning father. Thus, in Hebrew, meaning son of the father. Abba was also the sacred name for God, i.e., **Son of God**. Thus when people called for the release of **Barabbas** they could well have meant Jesus. But Jesus wanted to die as a sacrifice to the bringing about of the Kingdom of Israel, to which end he was totally focused.*

strict Jewish sect who side with the Zealots. It was no contest. The man calling himself Jesus Christ was, despite his friends, the loser and no blame could be attached to Pilate.”

“Except he’s done nothing wrong?”

Treblinni shrugged, “He’s upset Pilate and the Sanhedrin that’s enough.

“So what now?” asked Gaius.

“In the morning he will be flogged and then with two other robbers he will carry his cross to Golgotha and be crucified, end of story. Provided there is no trouble afterwards you can take your men back to Caesarea with my blessing.”

Gaius drained the last of his wine and rose to his feet, “My men would like that Tribune. We will do our duty of that you can be sure.”

The two soldiers grasped arms and Gaius departed.

Refreshed by the bath and a little food, Gaius fell into bed and gave thought to the strange story his Tribune had related; this man called Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God, nothing more, hardly worthy of a flogging and crucifixion Gaius thought. An obvious madman, so why the reluctance of Pilate to become involved? Even whilst falling asleep Gaius found himself wanting to meet this man Jesus Christ.

The courtyard baked in the hot sun and the soldiers surrounding the courtyard baked along with the ground. In the centre stood a post to which was chained the slim figure of a man. On the steps stood the governor, Pontius Pilate, his Tribune Treblinni, Caiaphas the leader of the Sanhedrin and a few of the Jewish priests that formed the Jewish religious council.

Without ceremony the stained cloak was ripped from the prisoner's back and the flogging began. Despite the heavy blows and rivulets of blood running down his back the prisoner uttered no sound. Gaius thought the scenario unreal, like a bad dream and the man's silence utterly alien to reality.

The flogging eventually ended and the prisoner was released and supported from the post, but only to receive the humiliation of being crowned by one of his tormentors, on Pilate's orders, with a wreathed crown of thorns, causing more blood to flow down his drawn features. "A crown fit for a King," cried Pilate. "Escort him away."

The prisoner was escorted by two lines of soldiers through the gates to where the two other prisoners waited and each prisoner was then made to shoulder their wooden cross, each cross made of heavy timbers, their shoulders under the crosspiece and the upright dragging on the ground.

Thus burdened and Jesus in the lead, they staggered out towards the east gate opposite the Fortress of Antonia and leading to the hill known as Golgotha. The procession to the gate was slow and the man known as Jesus stumbled many times². The crowds lining the route gasped at each faltering movement and many tears were shed. On at least one occasion Gaius himself helped the bleeding figure to his feet as the weight of the cross became too much to bear. He was rewarded by a dazed look that struck deep into his soul and made him recoil as if in fear.

After that brief face-to-face contact Gaius kept well in the background, even allowing men from the crowd to help the stumbling figure and to take the

² *It is generally accepted by most historians that the Via Doloroso, much hyped by Roman Catholicism is in fact a fabrication and the actual route unknown.*

weight of the cross. His own feelings were a maelstrom of emotions ranging from fear, of what he could not say, to compassion for a seemingly deranged man who had done nothing more than express his delusions. As an old soldier there was always an indisputable logic to killing those who attacked you, but killing for no reason was alien to his experience and he was finding it difficult to cope with.

Arriving at Golgotha hill, small groups were already waiting, both men and women, most kneeling, but all praying tearfully.

Post-holes for the crosses were already dug and swiftly and efficiently the crosses were laid on the ground and each prisoner laid on them. Nails were hammered into flesh and whereas the two robbers cried out in pain the man called Jesus cried out aloud, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

The cry was like a blow to Gaius, 'How could anyone forgive men nailing you to a cross?' The words echoed in his head again and again as he attempted to supervise his men surrounding the area at intervals to prevent any hindrance to the proceedings.

"What did he say?" asked one soldier. Gaius shook his head, "I don't know." He lied without knowing why and he was embarrassed by his answer.

The final indignity to the prisoner Jesus was when they nailed a notice to the top of the cross, 'The King of the Jews' it read. Then they hoisted the crosses upright to drop them with a sickening thud into the prepared holes. Wedges were driven in to hold the crosses steady and then the prison workers departed.

A hush fell on the scene only the muted sobbing of a few women and the moans of the two robbers could be heard. The sky was getting dark despite the midday hour and a faint rumble of thunder could be heard in the distance. It was, thought Gaius, surreal and somehow threatening, but for no other reason than his own misgivings about the whole affair.

A few soldiers not needed, except to relieve the others, sat beneath and behind the crosses playing dice for the abandoned clothing of the victims.

Tribune Claudius Treblinni appeared at the rise of the hill behind the dice playing soldiers and Gaius quickly intervened before the Tribune could say anything to his men. "Sir?" he questioned. The Tribune acknowledged Gaius, "It's alright Centurion Cassius, a message from Pilate. Apparently tomorrow is the day of Passover throughout Judea and the Governor doesn't want these prisoners still alive then, so he has ordered their legs to be broken." He hesitated as if unsure of himself, "Apparently this increases the pressure and strain on the heart and hastens the process." He sounded apologetic, "Sorry Gaius, but it has to be done."

Gaius shook his head in bewilderment, "This will not make the followers of the one called Jesus happy." Tribune Treblinni placed a hand on Gaius's shoulder, "We are soldiers, Gaius and we must carry out our orders regardless."

"I have never made war upon crucified men before," said Gaius

"This is not war, this is punishment," answered Treblinni.

"For what?" replied Gaius sharply, his words underscored by a sudden flash and roar of lightning that struck somewhere within the city. Treblinni

smiled his bleak smile, "Two for robbery and one for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Come, let us be done with it."

Gaius turned to his men, "Two of you take the hammers and break their legs, at the knees should do it." He turned away and then turned back again, "Wait, just the two robbers, the other I will deal with. Go."

The Tribune stared at Gaius in alarm, "Centurion..." "Yes I know, but he will die my way. Cleanly and with dignity."³

Still puzzled by his own reactions, Gaius picked up his pilum, a long, metal bladed spear, and strode to the front of the crucifixes where he paused whilst his men went about their work with deadly efficiency. The crowd cried aloud and wept, fearing for their beloved Jesus. Gaius wasn't to know it but the mother of Jesus was one of the women present. When his men had finished and the robbers slumped on their crosses, Gaius faced the central figure just as Jesus raised his head to the dark sky and cried, "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?"

At that moment Gaius knew that this man wanted to die and without hesitation he hefted the pilum and drove it deep into Jesus's side. Blood instantly spurted out and hit Gaius in the face. Gaius wrenched the pilum out and wiped his face with the back of his hand. A figure from the crowd came forward holding a chalice. "Forgive me Centurion, may I?" the man indicated the figure on the cross with blood running down his side. Gaius stared at the man and just nodded trying to come to terms with the heart stopping awareness that he could see the man as perfectly as he could the figure and the surroundings. He closed one eye and then the other, but there was no

³ *"He keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken."* The Book of Psalms 34:20

difference, he could see perfectly with both eyes. He looked up at Jesus to see a serene face looking down at him. Aloud, but to himself he said, "Surely this must be son of God."⁴

Tears streaming from his new eyes, Gaius stumbled as the very earth shook, lightning lit up the crosses in frequent flashes against the black sky and the earth around them was torn asunder by tremblings of earthquake proportions. The crosses stood out starkly against the vivid flashes and Gaius's head hurt with the kaleidoscopic thoughts that chased each other through his head; a man from nowhere had called himself the son of God, he had been flogged and crucified for nothing more than that, he, Gaius, had thrust a spear into his side and been splashed by the blood, and now he could see clearly with both eyes, why? why? why?

Gaius became aware of some of his men regarding him with something akin to awe mingled with fear.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"Your..." began one, but another man cut in, "Your eye, sir, it..." "It's not scarred, sir," added the first man. "Please, sir," quavered a young soldier, "What's going on, sir?"

Gaius shook his head, "I do not know, I honestly do not know. All I do know is that we have crucified someone who called himself the Son of God, his blood splashed in my face and now I can see clearly with both eyes. You tell me."

⁴ Mark 15:39 - *"And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard His cry and saw how He died, he said, 'Surely this was the Son of God!'"*

“Excuse me, Centurion.” Gaius turned to the speaker who turned out to be the man who had collected the blood in a chalice. “My name is Joseph of Arimathea and we, his friends, would like to take his body down and prepare it for his tomb. I interceded with Pilate before the execution and he agreed.”

“He has a tomb?” queried Gaius, knowing that only the very rich had tombs. Joseph nodded, “Yes. It was to be mine, but it is a small sacrifice to make for our Lord.”

Will not the Sanhedrin punish you for giving aid to one they condemned.”

Joseph nodded, “They will, because I am a member of the Sanhedrin and I opposed their decision. But this is the eve of the Passover and the Sanhedrin does not meet during festivals.”

Gaius shook his head slowly, “You are a brave man, Joseph of Arimathea. May your God go with you.”

Joseph peered sharply at this man, this Roman Centurion, who spoke so out of character, “Tell me, my friend, why did you pierce our Lord’s flesh with your spear?”

Gaius spoke haltingly, as if answering himself, “Our orders... were to break the prisoner’s legs... to hasten their death before the Passover began, but... but I could not do it and yet he seemed to want to die. My... thrust helped him without breaking his bones.”

Joseph nodded, “Only through death can he be resurrected.”

“Resurrected!” Gaius exclaimed. “You cannot believe that?”

“You have not told me the whole story,” said Joseph shrewdly.

Gaius shook his head in a bewildered fashion, "I am only now beginning to believe what happened." He took a deep breath, "I lost the sight of one eye in Germania with Germanicus and the other eye sees only little. His blood, the blood of the man on the cross, splashed into my face. Now... Zeus knows how... I see clearly with both eyes."

Joseph smiled, "Not Zeus, but God through His son."

"Do you believe that?"

"That Jesus is the son of God? Of that there can be no doubt."

"How can you know that?"

"Your miracle is only one of many that he has performed, including the resurrection of the daughter of Jairus, the widow's son and Lazarus. I'm afraid my friend there can be no room for doubt."

At that moment Nicodemus, Joseph's friend and helper, interrupted the conversation, "His body is down, Joseph and we are ready."

Joseph nodded, "I will be right with you Nicodemus." Turning back to Gaius he said, "Wait until the Passover is done with and I will introduce you to Peter, he can tell you more than I."

CHAPTER 2

Having spent two days simply carrying out his military duties and making sure the guards were regularly changed at the tomb, Gaius relaxed into his new found vision and the many thoughts that now crowded his mind.

On the morning of the third day his morning routine was rudely interrupted by the arrival of the two soldiers who had been guarding the tomb.

“What the hell are you two doing here and why have you left your post?”

The older of the two grimaced, “You’re not going to believe this, but there isn’t a body to guard anymore.”

“What do you mean there isn’t a body?”

“Somebody pinched it,” blurted the other.

“Pinched it! From right under your noses! What the hell were you doing? Sleeping?”

The older man shook his head, “No, sir. We never closed our eyes and yet someone rolled the stone away and took the body. Two ladies were there, but they could never have done it.”

“Tell him what they said,” urged the other soldier.

Well?” demanded Gaius.

“It... it isn’t possible, sir.”

“What isn’t possible – now, before I bang your heads together.”

The younger one took over, “The one lady, I think she was called Mary, said that an angel had rolled the rock away, the man we crucified had risen and walked out. She looked extremely happy, sir.”

“Walked out, to where?”

“He talked to the two ladies,” answered the older man, “and said that he had to go to his Father, but they would see him again in Galilee.”

To the astonishment of the two soldiers, Gaius smiled.

“Alright, go and get something to eat.”

Fully expecting to earn some punishment hardship the two soldiers rapidly excused themselves before this unquestionably disturbed Centurion could change his mind.

But this Centurion was totally unaware of his errant soldiers; his mind now dwelt on Joseph’s words ‘Only through death can he be resurrected.’ Could it be true? His thoughts ran the whole gamut of recent experiences; the silence during the flogging, the glance whilst helping with the cross, the forgiveness of his tormentors, the cry of fear that his father had forsaken him, the look of gratitude when pierced by the spear, most of all his new sight and now... now this, resurrection.

Gaius shook himself out of his reverie and taking his cloak left for the appointment with Joseph and the man called Peter.

When he arrived at the tomb Gaius appeared to be alone and he regarded the heavy stone that had sealed the entrance, a massive stone that had, when the tomb was sealed, taken several men to move it. Gaius wondered about this and how his men had failed to see anything. He did not believe they had been asleep because they were obviously as bemused by their experience as he himself.

Figures emerged stooping out through the small entrance to the tomb and blinking in the sunlight. Gaius recognised Joseph of Arimathea right away, but the other he did not know; a man not tall, but thickset, with brown

curly hair and a beard. His features were tanned and weather beaten and his hands rough and calloused, but he radiated energy.

Joseph wasted no time, "Peter, I would like you to meet Gaius Cassius. Gaius, my friend Peter."

The two men regarded each other tentatively before formally shaking hands. To Gaius's surprise Peter held on to his hand and held it up and forward to give it close scrutiny, "Is this," he asked gently "the hand that held the spear?" Gaius reacted instantly, pulling his hand away and hiding it with his other hand as though ashamed.

Joseph smiled encouragingly, "It's alright Gaius, I told Peter your story and like myself he was intrigued. "It is true, my friend," added Peter. "There was no criticism implied in my question. What you did was an act of compassion. If anyone is to be criticised it is myself."

"You!" exploded Gaius despite himself.

Peter nodded, "Yes, me. I have many shortcomings, I tried to follow Jesus, even to walk on water as he did, but I lost faith and sank. Finally I denied him to the crowd and to your soldiers, not once or twice, but three times, just as he said I would."

"He told you that?" queried a now intrigued Gaius.

Joseph intervened, "He also told Peter that he was the rock on which he would build his church. Is that not right also Peter?"

Peter nodded, "He told us many things and showed us more and even now he is teaching us that death is not the end, only another beginning. We will meet with him in Galilee in a few days hence for one more time before sending us out into the world to teach his word."

“And that is?” queried Gaius, thoroughly intrigued by this man who so humbly admitted his shortcomings with no trace of guile only regret.

Peter smiled, “Simply that the Kingdom of God is nearer than we think. And that love conquers all.”

Gaius, the old soldier of many campaigns, shook his head positively, “Not so my friend. In Germania it took the sword, the spear and fire to conquer the barbarians.”

Peter nodded sadly, “We will be tested many times by all the forces of evil, but in the end we are not out to conquer, it is love that will open our eyes.”

Gaius was speechless at this pointed remark aimed directly at him; for was it not love that had done the impossible and ‘opened his eyes’.

Joseph smiled, “God moves in mysterious ways, Gaius. Listen to Peter and you will hear His voice.”

“I would know more of this man, Jesus,” answered Gaius quietly. “And perhaps of this God who has no name.”

“You mean like Zeus or Mithras?” asked Peter.

“Exactly,” cried Gaius.

Peter smiled again, “Zeus is a Greek god, a figure to explain the work of man that man cannot explain, but Mithras⁵ is an interesting figure whose birth and life parallel that of the man called Jesus, but nearly three thousand years before. He too performed miracles, but the world then wasn’t ready for him and simply adopted him as a Roman god as befitted the growing Roman

⁵ Mithra: 2800 years BC. Virgin birth. Twelve followers. Killing and resurrection. Miracles. Birthdate on December 25. Morality. Mankind’s saviour. Known as the Light of the world

world. Now it is different; because Jesus died and was resurrected, the message of Jesus Christ will sweep the world,” he bowed his head, “with the help of his disciples.”

“Will not the gods of others be angry?” asked Gaius.

“There is only one God,” answered Peter, “whatever name you might give Him, God, Jehova, Allah, they are all the same God. And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. Jesus is the Son of God and the Spirit of God lives throughout the world, thus we have the trinity, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.”

Gaius felt overwhelmed by the sincerity and conviction of this man who now stared challengingly at him.

“I... I am a Roman soldier with allegiance to my military oath.”

“And I”, answered Peter quietly, “was a fisherman, but now I am a fisher of men. You must decide what you are, Gaius. No-one other can do this.”

Gaius nodded sadly, “ Already my uniform has become an unbearable burden and I am much troubled in my mind. Bear with me my friends, as you rightly say the decisions I have to make can only be made by me.”

Joseph laid a comforting hand on Gaius’s shoulder, “Take all the time you need Gaius, just remember that we are here to help if we can.”

“Joseph speaks true, Gaius,” put in Peter, “the one true God awaits us all, but is ever patient. Be assured that just as you take on a new life you may also take on a new name, Longinus, the spear carrier.”

Gaius clasped hands with each of his new friends before turning and heavily trudging back towards the city. He was a man much troubled about himself and the new beginning that he felt sure he should make. He had few friends in the Legion, many comrades, but few friends such as the two he had so recently met and who had turned his life around.

CHAPTER 3

Gaius's first intimation of the trials he was going to have to face was when the normally easy going Tribune Treblinni exploded in a rage at the first mention of Gaius activating his retirement.

"You're mad!" he burst out. "You're bewitched by these terrorists, these rebels against Rome. Are you getting senile? Request denied. Rome cannot afford to lose experienced campaigners, you must think again Centurion, think of your retirement by all means, but think also of the benefits that you will throw away if you were to retire now."

Gaius stood his ground, "They are not terrorists, sir. They are men of peace who believe in a kingdom of God for all people."

"God?" Treblinni spat the word, "What God? Hasn't Rome enough gods to satisfy most people?"

"No, sir. One God and we crucified His son who has risen again to create one kingdom."

"Risen again? What nonsense is this, surely you don't believe their tale against the fact that the body was physically removed and probably hidden?"

"I'm sorry, sir. But Jesus was seen and conversed with and will show himself again shortly."

"Hah! Where?" barked Treblinni.

Gaius suddenly realised that to tell the Tribune would be to invite an armed party to investigate, "I... I don't know, sir."

Treblinni relaxed, "Thought so, they trusted you so much they didn't tell you. hah, just proves how gullible you are Centurion. Make no mistake, the

man you struck with your spear is dead, and possibly buried elsewhere whilst they stir up rebellion against Rome.”

Gaius realised he was going to get nowhere with his superior and quietly waited to be dismissed, which he was with the words, “Think again, Centurion, think again” ringing in his ears.

Back in the barracks Gaius found the two soldiers last to guard the tomb arguing fiercely with their comrades, they suddenly fell quiet when Gaius appeared. He smiled and sat down on one of the beds. “Right,” he said, “What’s the problem?” A dozen voices answered at once, but Gaius held his hands over his ears until they stopped, “Enough. It would seem to be an argument over whether Marcus and Gallus slept whilst the tomb was opened, right?” Again his ears were assailed with a dozen cries of “Of course they did.” to the two soldier’s quick denial, “No, we didn’t.”

Gaius waved down the noise until he could be heard, “Then let me resolve the problem, “In my opinion they did not fall asleep...” he had to pause as the gasps of astonishment punctuated by cries of “What! How then...”

Gaius sat quietly until the noise abated and then, feeling like a teacher, he began to explain the events of the previous day and night from the flogging up to the entombment including his doubts about the verdict. He spoke then about his meeting with Joseph and Peter that morning and repeated the story of the angel moving the stone, Jesus walking out, his conversation with the three women and his promise to return later. He was careful to avoid mentioning Galilee. “So you see,” he concluded, “they did not sleep as we know it, nor did they recognise that time had passed, they were quite simply taken out of themselves until it was all over. Now, whether you believe in any

of this is a matter for each individual, but I do and I will not rest until I know more.”

The silence was almost audible as his audience digested what he had told them.

It was Marcus who broke the silence with a tremulous voice, “It, it has to be true, I know I didn’t sleep.”

“Nor me,” Gallus was quick to add.

“But...” began many voices.

“Do you really believe in this Son of God nonsense, Centurion?” asked one very sceptical voice. Gaius stared at the speaker, “Look at my eyes and recall everything that I have said and then call it nonsense.”

“But...” the speaker began.

“No more buts, I’ve had my say, now I have to find out more about His friends.”

“Will you tell us what you find out?” asked Gallus anxiously.

“Assuredly,” replied Gaius much to the evident relief on several faces.

Shedding his uniform for plain civilian clothing, Gaius set out to find the disciples of the man called Jesus. But it wasn’t until a youngish man stepped up behind him and whispered, “Were I a Zealot you would, I’m afraid, be dead.”

Gaius smiled as he turned, “And you my friend, had you been a Fox rather than a clumsy Elephant, might have done just that., but...” he nodded to a nearby stall selling polished metal mirrors in which their reflections could clearly be seen, “I saw and heard you coming. Now, what is this all about?”

The young man glanced at the mirrors and had the grace to flush, “Peter sent me to find you, but it would seem you found me. My name is Andrew.”

Gaius extended his hand in friendship, “Any friend of Peter is a friend of mine. Why do you seek me?”

Andrew shook the old soldier’s hand warmly, “Peter says that you are looking for the followers of Jesus, but before I take you I must know why?”

Gaius shook his head, “I honestly do not know, simply that I must know more about this man.”

“You are a Roman soldier, one of our Lord’s many enemies.”

Gaius again shook his head, “It is true, but not an enemy. Far from it, before I knew this man I was blind in one eye and partially sighted in the other. The blood of Jesus splashed into my eyes and now I see clearly. Would you not want to know more?”

Andrew smiled, “Indeed I would and it is as Peter told me, you are an honest seeker of His truth. I am one of His disciples.”

Gaius smiled, “Then I am truly glad to meet you, Andrew. Can we go somewhere to talk?”

Andrew smiled, nodded and led the way through a maze of streets that eventually led to a baked clay brick, lime washed house tight against the eastern city wall.

Upon entering, Gaius found himself in the presence of five men and one woman.

Andrew introduced him as “Gaius Cassius, the one Peter calls Longinus.”

The tallest man, a lean saturnine man with dark, piercing eyes stepped forward hand outstretched, "I am glad to meet the spear carrier who curtailed my brother's life so compassionately."

"James," Andrew interjected, adding, "The one Jesus called boanerge."

James laughed at Gaius's raised eyebrow, "It means Son of Thunder, a firebrand or hothead."

Gaius stared straight into the piercing eyes, "And are you?" he asked quietly.

James regarded this Roman soldier who showed no fear intently, "We here are all Sons of Thunder when it concerns our people and our country, but we are also followers of my brother's teaching of love conquering all."

"A contradiction surely?" queried Gaius.

James nodded, sadly Gaius thought, "It is, but I am not my brother. His way is for the entire world, mine for Judea. Just as His was once." He added almost wistfully.

"I do not understand," said Gaius truthfully.

At this point Andrew intervened, "Come, sit with us and break bread and I will introduce the others."

The slightly tense atmosphere relaxed as they sat around a cedarwood table and Andrew introduced him to the other disciples.

Just like Peter, Andrew and James, John proved to be a former Galilean fisherman, Matthew had been a Tax Collector, Barabbas Gaius recognised as having been at the crucifixion, but not, he was informed, one of the disciples and Mathias, a follower from the very beginning. The seventh

person present was the woman, Joanna, self-appointed carer for the entire group and receiver of healing from Jesus.

Long into the evening the disciples related their own experiences of their time with Jesus and the wondrous events they had seen until Gaius's brain was activated by the sort of vibrant anticipation he had only ever experienced just before a battle.

James shrewdly read the sparkling eyes of their Roman guest and ventured, "I think we have a convert my friends."

Gaius shook his head bemusedly, "This may be true and yet everything I have heard and experienced makes my long life seem wasted, pointless, all for nothing."

"Not so, my friend," voiced Matthew. "You bring your experience of discipline and war simply to a new battleground. Your fearlessness and honesty will be tested as never before, believe me."

"I believe you," answered Gaius, "But did not all this happen once before, three thousand years ago with a man called Mithra?"

James snorted angrily, but conceded that Gaius had done his homework, "It is true, unfortunately your rulers were clever enough to see him adopted as a Roman God and his message subtly altered to suit their needs. This resulted in condemning him to obscurity."

Gaius nodded, "And will this not happen again?"

There was an explosive "NO!" from James and the others shook their heads emphatically.

Mathew interceded, "The Romans think they have put an end to the threat of Jesus, they think they've killed Him, only we know different, only we

know that His message will spread throughout the world, because we are the messengers. If, in two to three thousand years from now, regimes like Rome, attempt to alter the message to suit their own ends such will be the revolt that they will be swept into the sea.”

“Amen,” murmured the others.

Gaius took the unleavened bread offered by Joanna and solemnly broke it in half taking a bite from one piece, thus acknowledging his commitment to their cause.

Instant relaxation was the result and seemingly everyone talked at once.

Andrew embraced the older man and welcomed him into the brotherhood of Christ. James voiced his own welcome, adding, “We meet again here one week from now to discuss the various paths we must take. Will this give you time to take your goodbyes?”

Gaius nodded, “It will and I will look forward to our meeting again.”

Gaius left the modest house with his head a maelstrom of thoughts on what he had seen and heard, but mostly on his own status as a messenger for the Kingdom of God. Doubts assailed his consciousness, but his determination to follow the path he had stepped out upon brushed them aside. Like the soldier he had been his mind was now totally focused upon his objective.

Unfortunately his Tribune, Claudius Treblinni, did not appreciate the urgency of Gaius’s retirement, “You’re mad! You still have to get your Century back to Caesarea. I will not hear of it.”

Gaius just shrugged his shoulders and took his leave of a very angry Tribune who was convinced of his own authority. But Gaius had no intention of obeying his superior, much as it went against everything he had profoundly believed in prior to the recent cataclysmic events in his life.

In the barracks his men, particularly Marcus and Gallus, immediately besieged him. “What happened?” “What did you find out?” “Who are they?” “Is it true what they say?”

Gaius held up his hands for silence, “Yes, it is all true, there is a new world coming, not of war, violence or aggression, but of peace and love...”

“Love?” echoed several soldiers derisively.

“Yes, love. Oh, not the sort of lust you call love, but genuine love for each other, respect, appreciation, and friendships without reservations.”

“Hah!” snorted one soldier, “See how far that gets you with a Zealot!”

Gaius smiled, “We’ll never know... until we try it.”

“Rather you than me!” retorted the soldier.

“The Tomb,” said Marcus, “I did not fall asleep.”

“No, you didn’t,” said Gaius quietly, “The stone was rolled aside and Jesus walked out and spoke to three women, one was his mother.”

His audience gasped.

Gaius continued quietly, “You were not asleep, but you were somehow disassociated from the events around you.”

“What happened to Him?” asked Gallus.

“From the Tomb gardens He went to His Father in Heaven, but He has since visited his friends in Galilee where one of the more sceptical of the disciples, a man called Thomas, was invited to put his fingers into the wound I

made in His side. There were no more doubters, this man Jesus is the Son of God.”

He looked around at the mixture of wondering and unbelieving faces before adding, “And I, along with the disciples, will carry the message of the coming of the Kingdom of God throughout the land.”

The silence that followed Gaius’s statement was almost audible. It was finally broken when Gallus stood up from the bed he was sitting on and said, “I will take the Century back to Caesarea and with your permission I will join you where ever you may be.”

“And I,” added Marcus quickly.

“That’s desertion!” cried a soldier.

“Aye,” cried another, “And punishable by death,”

“It is as they say,” agreed Gaius, “But I have served my twelve years and more therefore I am entitled to retire, despite what the Tribune here thinks. You two however have no such excuse; if you leave it will be desertion. You must think long and hard about this.”

Both Gallus and Markus looked so dismayed that Gaius sought to comfort them. “What you two have experienced can only be the beginning of your future lives. You have been privileged to be part of what could be the greatest story ever told. Stay with the Legion and seize every opportunity to tell that story until the world, our world, has changed enough for you to declare yourselves followers of the Christ.”

“What about you?” asked Gallus, obviously relieved by Gaius’s words.

Gaius hesitated, putting his own thoughts in order before replying, “I will leave with you for Caesarea on the morrow to get the Tribune off my back,

but we will part company outside the gates, I have a rendezvous with the disciples that will determine my next destination. “

It was a very subdued collection of legionnaires that settled down for the night next to the Pro Consul's palace.

In the morning those same soldiers went about their business of preparing to depart in a very low-key mood; the usual jokes and ribaldry were absent and any conversation was quietly spoken. It was silently noted that their centurion whilst fully accoutred in military style packed his civilian attire in his back-pack.

Inevitably Tribune Treblinni came out to see them off and couldn't resist a smirk at the sight of Gaius Cassius at their head, but his smirk might have slipped a bit had he seen Gaius halt the column beyond the city wall, hand over to Gallus with a firm handshake and stride off as Gallus marched the column off in the direction of Caesarea.

Nor would the smirk have stayed had he seen Gaius emerge from behind a group of palms now sans uniform and in civilian clothes with the hood of his cloak drawn over his head.

Gaius passed back through the gate by which he had so shortly exited the city and made his way to the lime washed house he had visited the night before.

Joanna was there to meet him and tell him that the disciples would be back in five days and that he could make this house his home for the next few days. Gaius relaxed and began to talk to this quiet and composed woman.

He discovered that she had been the wife of Chuza, one of Herod's stewards and had been healed of a crippled leg by Jesus and had, ever since,

looked after the disciples. During these conversations he was able to piece together her extraordinary story; she had been present at the beheading of John the Baptist, he who had baptised Jesus, she had rescued John's head from the rubbish tip, where it had been thrown, taken it to the Mount of Olives and buried it.⁶ She had been present at the crucifixion and the entombment and was one of the three women to witness the resurrection and carry the glad news to the disciples. Her quiet interpolation of these amazing facts into their conversation impressed Gaius with their matter of factness and unassuming simplicity.

That night, despite a comfortable bed, he slept little, his mind revolving endlessly around the events of the last few days that had so cataclysmically changed his life and Joanna's quiet, matter of fact manner despite her astounding experiences.

What, he wondered, would he ever say to strangers? "Hello, I bring you news of the coming of a new Kingdom of God."? They'd throw him in jail as a lunatic or worse, lynch him. Perhaps they might even stone him, it being the popular sport hereabouts. What was it Jesus told the mob about to stone Mary Magdalene, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." He must remember that, might help him in a tight corner. And so it went on, parables, sermons, miracles, even snatches of conversation half heard, half understood. Doubts crowded in, was he good enough for the job? Could he persuade other people of the truth?

In the morning Joanna took one look at his tired eyes and drawn features and promptly sat him down with a dish of honeyed bread and fresh

⁶ *The head was subsequently discovered during the reign of Constantine the Great.*

milk. "Eat, my friend and give thanks for His bounty. It was a long night for you and you have travelled a long way in a very short time, but rest now you are amongst friends, those who have travelled the same path and know of your doubts."

Gaius was surprised, "You, had doubts?"

Joanna smiled, "Oh, yes. Not for Him, but for myself. What could I, the wife of one of Herod's stewards do? I was trained for nothing, I knew nothing, except how to be a wife, cooking, cleaning, washing. I said as much to Jesus and He said, 'Then do that'. Gaius it was that simple, and ever since I have done just that, for Him and for the Disciples."

Joanna stared hard at Gaius, "You have a great story to tell, do just that."

Gaius felt all his doubts fade into nothingness and his features mirrored the radiance that filled his whole being. He smiled at Joanna, "Who would have thought it could be so simple, Joanna Chuza you are much more than a mere carer to our friends, you are truly a miracle worker, Jesus would be proud of you, is proud of you."

"That story brought you, a Roman soldier, here didn't it?"

Gaius nodded smiling, "It did, good Joanna. I knocked on the door and you opened it and now you have shown me the way ahead."

Joanna nodded matter of factly, "Good. Now eat your breakfast and then help me wash up the dishes."

Joanna turned away from the table, hesitated and then turned to face Gaius again, "May I ask you a question?"

Gaius, still smiling, nodded, "Please Joanna."

Joanna dropped her gaze, “The Spear, what did you do with it?”

The smile faded from his face and he braced himself between the wall and the table, “Why do you ask, dear Joanna?”

Her eyes raised to meet his gaze and her voice had a slight tremble, “It has my Lord’s blood upon it and... and I would like to touch it.”

Gaius stood up, “I removed the haft and it is in my pack. I will bring it down.”

Joanna nodded dumbly and Gaius left the room.

When he returned carrying something wrapped in cloth Joanna was seated at the table. Reverentially he laid the bundle in front of her and unfolded the cloth.

Joanna gave a sharp intake of breath as the spear blade was revealed. Her hands shook as they reached out to touch the blood-stained blade and tears welled up in her eyes.

Gaius felt the room expand until only he, Joanna and the spear remained in the vastness of space. Lightning flashed across his vision as the crucifixion scenario unveiled itself before him. He saw the figure of Christ on the cross as his arm extended with the spear and plunged it into the side of Jesus. The silence was audible, only the sound of Joanna’s soft sobbing broke the surreal silence as the room came back into focus. Joanna’s hands lay on the table, her fingertips touching the blood stained metal blade. Her head was bowed.

Gaius heard his own voice, almost a whisper, “It was not to hurt, but to fulfil.”

“He told me that.”

Gaius shook his head as if to rid it of cobwebs, “What! When, Joanna?”

Joanna raised her head to Gaius and her tear filled eyes radiant with light made contact with his, “Just now,” she whispered.

Gaius fell to his knees and laid his head on her lap. “Thank you,” he managed to gasp, “Oh, thank you Lord.”

Joanna laid one hand on his head, “His forgiveness is infinite. We only have to remember that He died for all our sins. And Gaius, you helped Him to do that with your compassion, for that alone He gave you back your full sight.”

Gaius looked up into her shining eyes and just nodded dumbly.

Stumbling to his feet the old soldier stood erect and stared into space, “Now,” he began slowly, “for the first time in my life I know where I am going and why. My life has found its true purpose.”

Joanna stood and waved her hand at the table, “Sit, eat. Next week we save the world.”

“Yes. Joanna,” replied Gaius meekly before sitting down.

Washing the dishes with her back to Gaius, Joanna smiled serenely to herself.

The days followed quickly with Gaius venturing out only briefly and then heavily cloaked. Joanna taught him the kosher food habits of the Judeans and their religious and ethical beliefs, those of the zealots and their opposition to any foreign intrusion into what they regarded as their land. She stressed that this was not the general view and that the zealots were hot heads, Sons of Thunder, who were not regarded favourably by the Judean majority.

On the fifth day the disciples returned, still radiant with the joy of having seen Jesus on the shores of Galilee. This time they were accompanied by

Peter and Paul and once the excited talk had diminished the two senior disciples greeted Gaius warmly and made him feel part of whatever plans they were ready to propose.

But it was James, the Son of Thunder, who introduced the first discordant note, declaring that their message, the message of Jesus Himself, was to the Judeans alone, it was by and for the Jews. As a leader of the Nazoreans, as was Jesus Himself, it was solely a Jewish matter.

Quietly, Gaius asked a question, "I am a Roman, a soldier and a Gentile, where does that leave me?"

Paul intervened before James could answer, "God and His son are for the entire world and just as we welcome Gaius, so must we welcome everyone, whatever their native allegiance in this world."

Peter nodded vigorously, "It is just so, His message must be entirely catholic."⁷

"Hear, hear," echoed several voices.

"And you," said Peter, nodding towards James, "can carry the message to our people."

"Well said," added Paul, "Jesus was one of us, but He is the Son of God and His message that love conquers all should embrace the world, not just the Hebrews."

"And Jesus wanted that," added Joanna. "Even whilst Gaius was allowing me to see the spear, Jesus spoke to me and said that Gaius's action was not to hurt, but to fulfil and forgiveness for all begins here."

⁷ Prophetic words when you recall that Peter was the virtual founder of the Catholic Church in Rome. An organised religion that has come to dominate the Christian world.

“The spear is here?” demanded Peter.

Gaius stepped to the table and unwrapped the spear blade.

There was a concerted intake of breath as Peter picked up the blade by the haft and held it upright, “Then this must be a symbol of that forgiveness and the strength of all of us.”

Conclusion:

Cassius did meet Peter and the other disciples and as a result became a disciple himself. He travelled and preached the word of Christ in Cappadocia and eventually fell foul of the authorities in Caesarea who ripped out his tongue and teeth, but by a miracle he was still able to speak. He was beheaded after telling the governor, who had gone blind, that he would only regain his sight after his, Cassius's, death. The story is that Cassius's blood splashed into the governor's face and his sight was restored. The governor became a Christian as a result of this miracle. Gaius Cassius Longinus was sanctified by the Roman Catholic Church.