

Gethsemane

Excerpt from

Gaspar, Another Tale of the Christ

By

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Malachi and Reuben invite me to share their special meal on the last night of the festival. The chants of men leading their friends and families in special prayers this night to remember deliverance from Egypt drifts over the city like the comforting hum of an ancient grandfather.

OM. I haven't thought it or said it in some time. I am ashamed that my mind has wandered from the sacred syllable, but thankful nonetheless that it has not abandoned me. *OM,* I intone once more as I enter the inn.

Malachi has his table set for the large number of guests he has invited to attend his dinner. On this night, Malachi charges no one for the meal. His guests are a mottled group from both parts of the city, upper and lower. He knows each by name, even the six beggars interspersed between the more affluent visitors. On this night, all men are equal and no one looks down upon another.

Conversation is hushed amid the solemnity that fills the room like incense. Each man focuses his thoughts on events from the past, not on his current place in life. All Jews are sworn to remember their heritage, for without their past, their future is not relevant. It is a serious commitment not taken lightly and ingrained in each man from childhood.

As we finish our meal and Malachi intones the closing prayers, a large man with very broad shoulders appears in the doorway. He will not enter unless summoned. When Malachi notices him, he nods to Reuben, and the brother retrieves a lantern and he and the broad-shouldered man walk into the night. Several men pass by the doorway. None looks in, and no one at the table other than me pays any attention to them.

Reuben leads them up the stairway, and soon, their footsteps cross the wooden floor above us.

Our private celebration concludes and Malachi stands at the doorway and bids his guests a good evening. The beggars thank him with grateful tears in their eyes. One drops to his knees, but Malachi pulls him to his feet. "You are no less my brother than my own flesh and blood," he says while holding the man close. "May God's peace be with you."

I am in no hurry, and the brothers invite me to stay for another cup of wine.

"It was a good meal," I laud my friends. "You are excellent hosts."

"Of all the festivals, this one is nearest to my heart," Malachi says. "Freedom is the greatest gift from God. The freedom to make our own choices."

"Does not Rome limit your choices?" I ask.

Malachi laughs loudly and then covers his mouth. He points above us. "I do not want to disturb their meal." Muffled voices intone many of the prayers we sang earlier this night. "Rome does not limit our choices," Malachi continues. "We always have the choice to obey their edicts or not to."

"But if you don't, the worse for you," I respond.

"That is true, but our fate is still our choice, not Rome's."

Raised voices of repressed anger rumble above us. Heavy footsteps, perhaps a scuffle. A chair grinds the floor, another falls heavily. Footsteps to the doorway, then down the steps outside. A figure halts and stares into the room. The man's hair and eyes are dark, indecision and worry etched into the lines on his brow, so deep that they are shadowed. He turns and takes a step toward the stairway, maybe thinking to return.

He takes his head in his hands as if holding it together. He is in pain, more mental than physical. His anguish is visible in every drop of sweat that falls from his forehead. "Damn, him. Damn them all," he whispers under his breath. He runs into the street and disappears into the night.

More footsteps above us. Someone standing on the balcony calls into the darkness with a restrained and husky voice, "Judas. Judas. Please come back."

But Judas, if that was his name is gone.

"There is a troubled man," I remark. "Who are they, the men upstairs?"

The brothers shrug their shoulders. "The large room upstairs ... you have been there before?" Malachi asks. "It is a good room for me. People have used it for weddings, parties and other celebrations. At the last feast of Tabernacles, my good friend Eliezer asked to use the room at Passover. He paid me in full months ago.

"Two days ago, Reuben went out for water and came home with a full jug and two strangers ..."

Reuben interjects, "I went to the well as my brother requested. Two men stood at a distance watching me very closely. When I left, they followed me. I was not worried for neither man looked to be a thief; still, I kept glancing over my shoulder. When I reached the inn, I stopped in the doorway and waited for them.

"They asked to speak with the owner of the inn. I offered them a seat at the table and a drink of water while I brought Malachi. They were grateful."

Malachi picks up the story. "They spoke of their master and his friends who needed a room where they could eat their Passover meal. They were very specific about an upper room, though how they knew I have one I do not know. Before I could tell them the room was already contracted, Eliezer came up the street bemoaning his good fortune. 'Malachi,' he cried out, 'The High Priest has invited me to his home for the Passover meal. Can you believe it? I have sent word to my guests that they will have to make other arrangements for the meal I had planned here at your inn will not be.'

"He tries his best to make awkward apologies, but I merely congratulate him on his good fortune, and he is quickly on his way.

"I have such a room,' I tell the two strangers, 'and it is already prepared for the Passover meal. How many in your group?'"

"'Thirteen,' he answers. 'Perfect,' I say reveling in my good fortune, for that is the size of Eliezer's original group for which I had planned.

"Eliezer had already paid me, so I charged the strangers a pittance of what the room is worth. They were very grateful, and I was equally as thankful."

Soft voices seep through the floorboards.

"If they have a disagreement, they can take it to the streets," Malachi concludes, but I do not think there will be trouble. Quiet has returned.

The hour draws late, and I must return to the fortress. Before I can bid my hosts a peaceful night, sliding chairs and footsteps alert us to the conclusion of the meal in the upper room. They are departing. I will allow them to leave before I do.

The group descends the stairs and files past our doorway one by one. There is nothing special about them, but when the seventh one halts in our doorway and with folded hands offers a whispered 'peace' to Malachi, I am stunned when he looks directly into my eyes and smiles. It is Yeshua!

They continue into the night. I am quick to my feet. "I must be going. Peace to you and your brother, Malachi. I am thankful for your friendship." No doubt confused at my immediate departure, my friends do not detain me. They bow as I hurry out the door.

I follow the group at a distance, so that no one notices me in the shadows. At first, I think they are going to the temple, but before they reach it, they leave the city and follow a goat path north and ascend the gentle slopes of the Mount of Olives. I had heard that the teacher often spends his nights there during festivals. I have wandered there in the evenings hopeful to find him but never caught sight of him. I think now that he always arrived late after I had left.

Halfway up the hill, they stop in a large grove of olive trees. It appears that this is where they will sleep on this chilly night. Each lies on the ground and finds a place to rest his head. As the sounds of sleeping men rise from the assemblage, a single figure stands and walks further into the grove. It is Yeshua. His sleeping friends are unaware of his departure. Quietly, I walk around their makeshift encampment and follow the teacher.

I fear I have lost him. Bright stars and the rising moon shed their light from above while the dim light from lamps that glow on the temple mound rises from the city well beneath the ridgeline upon which I stand. I search in vain for a sign of the rabbi. Am I to be frustrated once more? When I am about to abandon my search and concede another failed attempt to find him, a gentle voice calls from the trees behind me, "Come share some time with me. The others are too tired."

Through squinting eyes, I make out the figure of a man sitting at the base of an ancient, gnarled olive tree, his hood pulled over his head. "Over here," he calls again. "Don't be afraid. Come. Sit with me. It is only I, the one you have been seeking."

The situation is awkward. He cannot have many more than half of my 50 years on earth. I should be the teacher and he the student, but I feel like a child in his presence. A large boulder not far from the base of his tree offers me a seat, and I take it. From this natural perch, I look down on him.

"You don't remember me, do you?" he asks in his gentle way.

"Should I?"

He answers with a smile.

"I remember you from the last feast in Yerushalem. Your wisdom astounded me, and I have been searching for you ever since."

He pulls the hood back, shakes his head and laughs. It is a good laugh. "You were a wonderful teacher, Master Gaspar. You asked us about justice, and me about Tobit. Do you remember now?"

I gaze deeply into his eyes. Yeshua is a common name, but as I stare at his face, the years recede and I remember the boy Yeshua, befriended by Nathrac and the cripple Dismas. Can it be? Can this be the same boy, grown now into a man who many men revere and call teacher?

He knows what is in my mind and whispers, "It is I, Master Gaspar. You remember."

I place my hand upon his head and close my eyes. "I remember."

"My road has been long, Yeshua. And yours?"

"I have been to the North, the South, the East and the West."

"What have you learned?"

"I have learned what I have known all along. Truth is love and love is truth. A man can love himself. A man must love himself, but self-love is not good enough. A man must love himself and a man must love all men on the earth as he loves himself. That is truth, Gaspar. There are seven directions and it is true no matter which direction you choose to follow.

"I have been East to your Kanheri, and it is true there. I have been South to the source of the great river that feeds Egypt, and it is true there. It is true to the north where winter never ends and where the ground is ever white with snow and ice. It is true to where the sun sets far beyond the Pillars of your Herakles." He points to the night sky. "It is true where men live on distant stars deep in the heavens, and it is true at the very core of this world we inhabit." He places his palm upon his chest. "Most importantly, it is true here, deep inside you where dwells your immortal self."

He knows Brahmin. He knows what Vajrabodhi taught me even before this one was born. "Live in love," the master taught me. "In this world, hate never dispels hate. Only love dispels hate. This is the law." I have tried to live this way, but the truth is etched in this man's eyes. He does more than speak the words. He lives and breathes them as he did when they brought the woman to him at Tabernacle.

I take the amulets from beneath my robe and hold them before him.

He smiles wistfully when he sees them. He extends his arm and I place the two pieces in his calloused hand. He closes his fist tightly about them and raises his face to the moon. He holds the stones so firmly that his forearm shakes and the tendons in his wrist are pulled taut. His knuckles are white. He holds the amulets so tightly that when he opens his hand and I take the stones, the ox head and shepherd's crook have left their mark in the palm of his hand. The two truly have become one!

He closes his eyes, bows his head and whisper words I cannot discern.

Astounded, I ask, "Who are you?"

Before he can answer, loud voices call from the grove of trees where his friends are sleeping. "Come here, you!" someone yells out. Lanterns flicker as a large group of men climb the hill.

"Run!" Phantom figures flee through the trees.

One comes upon us. He eyes me suspiciously but has no time to dally. "Quickly, Yeshua. Come quickly! There are soldiers and with them the high priest's brother, Judas, too. They have come to arrest you. Their intentions are clear." He grabs Yeshua's sleeve and tugs, but Yeshua holds his ground.

"I have no reason to run, Cephas. I have nothing to fear."

His friend glances back. The lights are approaching quickly and the soldiers will be upon us soon.

"What about you?" Cephas says to me. "Whether he thinks so or not, we have plenty to fear." He releases his hold on Yeshua and grabs me.

Yeshua remains calm as if to tell me it is okay for me to flee. Light reflects from the metal helmets that are quickly bearing down upon our position. I run with Cephas.

They cannot help but see us flee, but the assailants have no interest in us.

"That's him. He's the one," a voice calls loudly.

Cephas hesitates, but only for a moment. He spits on the ground and growls beneath his breath, "Judas. I knew it would be you."

It is late and my breath is visible in the unusually cold night air. Cephas does not answer when I ask him where we are going. While I think to abandon this quest for whatever it is I am seeking, I follow him to the city and the courtyard of the high priest's palace.

It would normally be quiet this time of night, but a large crowd has gathered anticipating that the high priest will resolve his differences with the young rabbi from Nazareth.

Cephas cups his hands over his mouth and warms his fingers with his breath. "This is where they will bring him," he says.

"Are you his friend?" I ask.

He stares at me. "I think it is best that no one knows it, at least until this trouble blows over."

"Who is he?" I am met with another stare trapped somewhere between blank and angry.

We wander to a small fire to warm ourselves.

"Cephas," someone calls out. "It is you, Cephas, isn't it?" He refuses to acknowledge the man. "Weren't you with him tonight, your friend the rabbi?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," he snarls. "Let's go," he orders me as if he has taken me into his safekeeping.

As we walk from the courtyard, the patrol approaches with lanterns held high. They surround Yeshua. His eye is swollen and dried blood is caked at the corner of his mouth. They have roughed him up, but they have been unable to knock the smile from his face. The priests follow and the man who hesitated in the doorway, the one called Judas is with them. A large, burly soldier pulls him roughly from the group and throws him to the ground at our feet.

"Your work is done," the soldier snarls. "Caiaphas does not want to see you around here again. Understand?"

When Judas stands up, he is eye to eye with Cephas. "Cephas," he begs hoarsely. "Tell me that you understand. I did what someone had to do. Please forgive me for what I have done to Yeshua?"

Cephas forcibly shoves him aside. "I don't know you. You are mistaken, mister. I am not who you think I am." When he speaks the words, the cock calls from a nearby courtyard. Panic grips the two as their eyes lock. Cephas breaks the stalemate and flees into the shadowy street.

"Wait," Judas cries out as he follows Cephas into the darkness leaving me to wonder what has just happened.

After searching for the teacher unsuccessfully for six months, I am at last able to meet him in the dead of night in a grove of olive trees. To learn that he is the same boy I once knew when I taught at the Ptolemaeum is impossible to comprehend.

I recall the story that Dismas told me that final night he resided at the school. Dismas was a crippled boy, but I saw him less than a year ago, a champion gladiator fighting before thousands of cheering men and women. Even the emperor of Rome

knew of his exploits in the games. What had the young Yeshua done to him that night long ago in Athens?

Most mystifying of all are the amulets. I have carried the one nearly my entire life, and the second ... I do not even remember. Months ago, at the feast of Tabernacles, I watched as the teacher traced the images in the sand at the feet of a whoring woman, and this very night, Yeshua placed the two halves in his hand and held them so tightly that when he returned them to me, the single image of the two was embedded on his hand. He physically made the two become one in the palm of his hand just as it has been foretold.

I do not believe in sorcery or magic yet how can I explain things that are without reasonable explanation?

Caiaphas has filled his courtyard with his personal supporters, and none takes kindly to the prisoner as the soldiers drag him through the courtyard, wrists and ankles bound with rope. Many spit heavy phlegm into his sweat-soaked hair. It is an ugly sight as Yeshua stumbles up the stairway and disappears inside the palace to meet with the high priest.

I am disgusted, and that is bad, but more than that, I am ashamed. I have no desire to linger here, so I leave the mob in the high priest's courtyard and return to the fortress.