

## A Guard's Tale

I had a great career in the army really, over all. People think it's strange when I say that – they think I must be mad to look back fondly considering some of the terrible things I saw, and did, as a soldier; To consider a life that could have ended in bloody battle at any time was a life worth living. But it's not so strange really, it got me out of the tiny village where I was born – the only life I could've had there was working somebody else's fields from dawn until dusk every single day of the year until either the backbreaking work killed me or I had an accident and got hurt. That was my nightmare, that's what finally made me leave – I'd seen men toil for years just to survive and one day they couldn't work anymore and then they were reduced to begging for crumbs from people who were already dirt poor. I ran away and joined up, I was only 14.

I don't know what happened to the rest of my family - I never got the chance to visit them, even if I had wanted to. I got posted overseas pretty quickly once the basic training was complete. And, oh boy, it was *basic* training. If it hadn't been for my sergeant in the regiment I wouldn't have lasted a week in our first campaign. We were fighting rebels in the hills – it was dirty, hot and violent. There was no quarter asked or given. We lost a lot of men but somehow I always survived. That was twenty years ago and I've lost count of the number of friends who've died – I've also lost count of the number of enemies I've killed. Up close. Personal. When you're both slippery with sweat, you can smell the other man's breath; see the fear in his eyes. And you know that it's him or you. I used to thank the gods for my protection, but not anymore. Somewhere along the way something in me died. Everything stayed the same but was also totally different, like the colour had drained away and life became shades of grey.

Then about three years ago I got posted to another country with my regiment. It was supposed to be a fairly cushy posting. No real front-line fighting, more policing really. The locals were reasonably friendly, apart from the usual small minority of hot-heads who always hark back to independence. The rest of the regiment really seemed to be enjoying it, easy work, good wine, good climate – just bide your time for a few more years and then you get your honourable discharge. I should get a small plot of land and an even smaller pension if I make it to the end. Something I should have been looking forward to but the place was getting to me. I was having nightmares, nothing scary in itself just the faces of the terrified men I'd slaughtered over the years... it was horrible. I'd rather not talk about it too much.

Then suddenly our quiet life got all interesting. We ended up getting involved in some local political upheaval. Not normally something we'd care about but this was getting worse and spreading out of the city and once trouble really starts it's hard to stop. So we were sent to nip it in the bud. The local bigwigs and our lot decided to get rid of the ring-leader – that usually works well. Chop of the head and the body dies. We'd done it before dozens of times. Followers suddenly get forgetful when they see their guru die before their eyes.

Anyway he'd been executed and I was placed on guard duty outside the tomb where they'd buried him. They wanted experienced soldiers they said 'cos there was a chance some of the fanatics might steal the body and claim he'd escaped and was living in the hills. I saw the body they put in there. He was dead alright – I've seen enough dead bodies in my time. This guy was a mess. He'd have died from the torture wounds before too long even if they hadn't executed him.

It was all quiet – no sign of trouble - for the first day or two. His followers had done a runner as expected. We were expecting a change in the guard when we saw some women coming up the hill to the tomb. They seemed pretty distraught so I assumed they were relatives or friends. I was just about to send one of my men to see them off when the ground shook and a man just appeared – suddenly. He didn't step out from behind the bushes or anything – he just appeared out of nowhere. I say "man" but I'm not sure he was a man. He looked how lightning would look if it took human form. He didn't glow – he *burned* with white light. He put one hand on the rock sealing the tomb and just pushed it aside like it was made of sponge. It took four of us half an hour to get that rock into place and then seal it up. And he just rolled it one-handed! Twenty years of experience told me to charge him down with my sword but the look in his eyes told me it would be my end if I tried. Then I just started shaking – the others too. We dropped our swords and sagged to the ground trembling. I couldn't even run away let alone attack him.

He walked right past us and spoke to the women – who seemed afraid but didn't seem to be paralyzed or anything. I couldn't hear what he said to them but I could see into the tomb and there was **no-one** there. I don't know where the body was but it wasn't in the tomb. Just as suddenly as he arrived he disappeared and a few minutes later we stopped shaking and ran back to the city to report what happened. I really didn't think they'd believe us – I mean would you? It sounds pretty incredible doesn't it? I thought we were for the chop - it's not exactly difficult standing guard over a living prisoner and making sure he doesn't escape so letting one that's already dead escape should have got us a court martial on the spot. But the weird, no the *suspicious*, thing is they gave us a pretty hefty sum of money and our honourable discharges straight away and told us to keep our traps shut.

I caught a boat home a month or so later. I might have thought it no more than a strange experience in foreign lands except that just before I left the dead guy's followers suddenly re-appeared in the streets of the city and boy they weren't afraid of what anyone thought! They told me the whole story of the guy in the tomb – IN MY OWN LANGUAGE. Not the Latin I learnt in the army but my own native language! How could some ignorant fisherman from Galilee speak that? What they said and what I saw that day certainly convinced me and now the world is back in colour again – but even more so. So I'm going home – I'm going to find my family and tell them all about this Jesus of Nazareth. I think they'll be much more interested in life in all it's fullness than my old tales of battles, war and death.