

The Centurion

Cor struck his thigh with his rod, the *thwack* sounding across the compound, the pain enough to halt his tears. He was aware of the sudden silence. The clink of armor being stored, the scrape of blades sharpening, the thunks of pottery vessels stopped. Only the flies buzzed. When the centurion struck his vine rod, the one-hundred man company, his *century*, listened with fear.

He was a disciplinarian no worse than any other centurion—not like the “Gimme one more” officer in the Balkan wars who kept breaking his rod on his soldier’s backs. One strike to a legionnaire who deserved it trumped a thousand administered in anger or frustration. Besides, they were good men, and he needed them to love him as much as fear him, because, on the day of battle, his face would be to his enemy and his back to his men.

The faces that had just turned to him in apprehension now turned back to the tasks at hand. They understood the reason for the rod was this time not anger, but grief. He stood outside the medical tent, the image of his servant, Rufus, burning into his mind, a brave man lying on a bed of reeds and the best linens and wools available, still stinking of feces and urine, each attempt to move him resulting in screams of pain.

Rufus had whispered in his ear and begged with his eyes. *A soldier’s death. Do not leave me like this, Lord, please. A soldier’s death.*

Yet how could he? Rufus had been a gift from his father on his fourteenth birthday, a wealthy man’s kindness to a second son. First sons inherited the estate and needed the training of the father. Second sons inherited a military career and needed a servant to instruct him. In this way, for the past twenty years, Rufus had become his father more than his own distant flesh-and-blood father.

And now this. A stupid fall while constructing a new palisade to expand their camp had left him paralyzed and in anguish. On the battlefield, there would be no question. In an instant Cor, would slit his throat or put the point of his sword to his heart, an act of mercy. And an act of military necessity expediency, of course. To stop combat to help a soldier wounded beyond hope of recovery endangered them all.

But now, in this dusty new town with the pandering name, *Tiberius*, in the far reaches of the obscure province of Judea, mercy lacked the urgency of the battlefield, and Cor found himself lacking the necessary will to fulfill Rufus's wish.

He cursed himself in the name of Mars for his weakness. Death was no stranger. He had killed men in battle with no more thought than he gave to polishing his armor. He had ordered one of his own stoned by the man's own ten-man squad, his *contubernium*, for cowardice in battle. He had not yet resorted to *decimation*, in which each squad would draw lots to decide who among them would be executed by his comrades.

One hundred years ago, this is what Crassus had done to his troops after his first battle with the slave rebel Spartacus, and after that the Roman soldiers no longer ran away. The slave rebellion was finally put down.

So, Cor knew he wouldn't hesitate to decimate his troops if any unit showed cowardice. He would rather have at his back nine soldiers who had been terrified into acting brave than ten permitted to run. No, death was his stock in trade, a tool to be used on enemies and comrades alike.

Suffering was also no stranger. He had crucified dozens of criminals and enemies Rome. The screams were unpleasant, and the whole process went on much longer than he would have liked. He would prefer to just cut their throats and be done with it, but he understood a message

had to be given. These Jews didn't pay their taxes because they loved Rome; they paid because they were afraid.

So why could he not do to Rufus in the medical tent what he would have done in an instant on the battlefield?

Cor stalked to his tent and flopped on his cot. As centurion, he had his own quarters, shared only with his servant. Now he was alone. Anger rose as he contemplated the worthlessness of physicians. He had two: one from Greece, one from Rome. They did fine bandaging wounds and insisting on camp hygiene. But these were simple talents. Their best function was to tell him who would live and who would die.

Regarding Rufus, they both kept silent. They knew. But due to either love or fear (Cor was uncertain which) they would not speak. The fatal event would come soon enough without their words.

As he looked to the white cloth of the tent roof, a slight breeze blew through the open flaps, a blessing that cooled the sweat on his brow and dried the tears that now flowed down his cheeks. He knew what he had to do—as a Roman centurion, as a master of a beloved servant, as a friend. But he could wait until morning. This was not a battlefield, time was not a precarious commodity. He did not believe for a second that time could heal all wounds, but he did believe that sometimes it offered the resolution to do what needed to be done.

And time occasionally offered solutions to seemingly impossible problems. He felt the breeze stop and opened his eyes. A shadow blocked the late afternoon sun.

“Centurion Cornelius. I am sorry to disturb you.” The voice came from the formal address of a subordinate, a man more accustomed to following orders than giving them.

His first *decanus*, leader of his best *contubernium*, stood at the tent door. Cor stood, and the legionnaire, already at attention, eyes fixed in the distance, struck his left chest with his right arm, a Roman salute.

Cor returned the salute.

“There is a man to see you. A man named Abbas.” His face showed no emotion, but his voice contained disdain. “A Jew. He has come a long way, but I can send him away.”

Yes, Abbas. From Capernaum. One of the village elders. Cor had taken his century there last year for a week to help them build their temple—a synagogue, he believed they called it. A fool’s errand—bringing them cut stone and logs to create a building the Romans would never be welcomed into. Part of his campaign for the hearts and minds of the conquered, a campaign that wasn’t going well. But, maybe now, their labors had brought some fruit.

“No, bring him here,” Cor said.

The decanus hesitated.

His soldiers never hesitated. “What?” Cor asked.

“It’s not me, you understand, sir. But this Abbas says he can’t come into the town. He says you can meet him at the gate. He’ll stay as long as necessary. Do you want me to force him?”

Cor sighed. These Jews. Because their puppet king, Herod Antipas, had built this city on a cemetery, the place was “unclean” to them. They couldn’t enter. They had to import slaves from Syria to build the place.

He sighed. Hearts and minds would not be won by dragging the neighboring mayor through the cemetery. “No. I will see him. Buckle my sword on me and follow.”

The decanus did as instructed. Cor picked up his vine rod and they walked the one *stadium*, an eighth of a mile, to the city gate. There, squatting under the oak tree outside the gate, he recognized Abbas and strode across the dusty crossroads to meet him.

Abbas rose from his squat and bowed from his waist. "Master," he said, "I have heard of the suffering of your servant. I am sorry, and my people offer their condolences."

"Thank you, Abbas. You do me great honor to make this journey with this message. Can I offer you food and a place to stay the night?"

Abbas frowned. "I am your poor servant, and not worthy to come under your roof."

Cor was not surprised. If Abbas walked another hundred feet into Tiberius, he would be a pariah to his own people. "The sun is low. I do not wish you spend the night on the roads. There are bandits about, and though they fear our soldiers, and they will not fear you."

Abbas smiled now, the smile one gives to another who clearly is beyond understanding. "I am a poor man," he said. "The bandits will know not to waste their time with me. A drought of water would be hospitality enough."

Cor motioned for his decanus to hand over his water skin. Abbas drank the skin flat and handed it back. "There is one thing more, master," Abbas said.

"Yes?"

"There is a young rabbi, a man from Nazareth who has come come to live with us in Capernaum. We bring him our sick, and he heals them. Perhaps he can help your servant."

Cor turned to the setting sun, an excuse to squint, an excuse for tears. He turned back to Abbas. The man had walked eight miles to tell him this, and would walk eight miles back in the dark. Because the journey was a gift, Cor couldn't tell Abbas what complete nonsense he had just suggested.

He nodded. “Thank you. Tomorrow perhaps.” He stepped back, threw his arm across his chest, the Roman salute ending the interview. Abbas bowed, turned, picked up his staff, and started walking the now deserted road around the lake these people called the Sea of Galilee.

As Cor walked back to his tent, he considered Abbas’ suggestion. To do this, he would need to take a squad of eight legionnaires and two servants on a long day’s march. They could take donkeys to carry food, water, and shields, but legionnaires walked as a point of pride. They would need to be armored, at least lightly, and carry javelins and short swords. Leaving at daybreak, they could be there by noon. If the meeting was short, they would be back by sunset.

But these were the mere practicalities. These Jews, with the exception of Herod Antipas and a few tax collectors, didn’t seem to understand their role as a conquered people. They enjoyed Roman roads and buildings, and the security of Roman protection from invaders. But they refused to go into the house of a Roman, even a tent, nor did they invite any Roman into theirs. Meals would not be shared. To touch a foreigner, any foreigner, was like touching a leper—totally abhorrent.

Furthermore, they were a stiff-necked lot. The eyes of the people betrayed a resentment bordering on hatred. They only tolerated occupation by Rome while they waited for freedom. Cor did not worry about the few rebel bandits that roamed the hills at night. These were not a threat to even a *century* like his, much less a Roman legion.

But the Jews, though with few exceptions were outwardly compliant enough, waited a leader, someone like Spartacus. Then they would become dangerous. He had heard the whispers and muttering. They even had a name for the mythical leader to come: the Messiah.

His spies had already told him about this Jesus, who some were calling the Messiah already. His name apparently means “one who saves,” a derivative of the name Joshua, their

legendary general who once conquered this rocky, dusty, god-forsaken corner of the world. If this Jesus became their Messiah, their Spartacus, he would become Cor's mortal enemy.

He tried to imagine what this local mystic and possible enemy could do for Rufus. Most likely, nothing. But even to compel the man to come see him would be a problem with the "unclean" superstition, and Rufus would be better off crucified than taken eight miles over the rocky road to Capernaum. Cor could certainly arrest this Jesus and bring him under guard to do his magic, but even to a Roman that did not seem a likely way to entice a miracle.

No, he must make a request, not a command, as an equal, ridiculous as that seemed. He imagined standing bare-headed, eye-to-eye with this Jewish mystic, asking for a favor. Then he would have to count on three unlikely things to happen.

First, the rabbi would have to say *yes*. If he refused to try, the locals would sneer, perhaps laugh, and the power of Rome would be eroded. Herod Antipas, and worse, Pontius Pilate, the governor, would not be pleased.

Second, the rabbi would have to show compassion to a foreigner, and a Roman at that. Surely this man had seen enough of his own countrymen crucified by now that compassion would be a hard sell.

Third, and this was the most unlikely, that this backcountry holy man actually had a mystical power and authority to heal.

He silently ate his evening meal with his first *contubernium*, the men who would march with him in the morning, then went to straight to his tent. By the light of a small oil lamp he scratched a short letter to his father in Italy. One day, he might retire there, perhaps own a small farm near his family estate. Centurions were well paid, and had little to spend it on. He only had to survive long enough to enjoy it. His father had not seen him in many years. Rome had little

use for centurions in Italy; their soldiers were needed most in the most distant lands. But still, maybe someday...

His thoughts were interrupted by a muffled scream. He leapt to his feet and reached for his sword before he realized that it was only Rufus. The doctors must have tried to move him again. Cor picked up his lamp, placing it in the palm of his hand, and made his way through the darkness to his servant. The screams stopped before he arrived, and he found Rufus drenched in sweat and panting. Cor squatted beside him.

“Master,” Rufus said through gritted teeth.

“We have been too long together for you to call me *master*.”

“I would call you my son, but I fear that would keep you from the duty you owe to your servant.”

“It is a hard request.”

“Then send a legionnaire, one who has been in battle, one who knows how to give the mortal blow.”

This Cor could not do. No soldier under his command would take the order easily, and for good reason. Cor would never look upon that man again without this memory, that he killed his friend and mentor. And only a man without honor would order another to kill his own slave. Rufus knew this; he had taught Cor. The fact that he suggested it only demonstrated his desperation.

“I will be marching to Capernaum at dawn with the first *contubernium*. When I return in the evening, I will visit you. You will not spend another night in pain.”

Rufus closed his eyes, took a breath, and grimaced. “There is a blade of mercy at your side. Does it need to travel to Capernaum and back before it travels the three feet to my heart?”

“Rufus, my mentor, my friend. Do not call me *master*, and with your last kindness give me twenty-four hours.”

“Let it be as you say,” Rufus said, gritted his teeth, and closed his tearing eyes.

At dawn Cor marched with his soldiers. He set the pace walking one step ahead on the right side of the road, closely followed by four pairs of legionnaires walking side by side, each carrying a javelin and short sword. Two servants and one donkey followed, carrying the shields, food, and extra water skins. The servants could fight if a soldier went down, but they functioned primarily as armor-bearers and messengers. They kept in close formation, the Roman way, to reduce their vulnerability on the open road. The chance of attack was slim, but it became even more slim if they went prepared.

As he marched, Cor wondered about local customs. Would there be some kind of mumbo-jumbo ritual, or some Herculean task to perform before healing was promised? That seemed to be the case with these mystics everywhere. Could there really be someone who commanded unseen powers to heal with real authority? In any case, he had promised Rufus that he would not spend another night in pain. He slid his dagger in and out of its sheath, and tried not to think the return to Tiberius.

They arrived at Capernaum, the beachfront town without walls. Fishing boats lined the shore. Rough looking men mended nets. Cor caught occasional hostile glances from under heavy eyebrows. Others, as they hauled ragged bags of fish to the pitiful shacks these people called homes, worked hard to not look at the soldiers. The smell of rotting fish guts and the buzz of flies filled the air, and Cor thought himself a fool to be here.

A sullen fisherman directed him down the crossroad to a house belonging to a man called Simon. He walked the short distance alone while his soldiers refilled water skins and watered the

donkey. Cor sensed his men ease their guard as they assessed the fighting ability of the fishermen.

Simon's house stood back from the road, a low-walled courtyard surrounding the front. An olive tree grew in the middle of the yard, and a small stone bench sat under the tree. The house seemed deserted, but it was nearing the sixth hour, midday. Perhaps the occupants were sheltering from the heat.

He called out from the road and received no answer. He waited and called out again. Just as he weighed the merit of invading the property, a feverish-looking old woman stepped to the door and stared at him. He asked if she spoke Greek, giving her absolutely no chance of knowing Latin. She stared back, mute. He tried his shaky Aramaic. "Is Jesus here?"

She shook her head.

"When will he return?"

She shrugged.

He shook his head. She probably thought he had come to arrest him. What else would a Roman centurion be doing here? Word had probably already spread, and this Jesus and his band would have taken to the hills. He had wasted a day on a fool's errand. Idiocy. He looked up at the sun to judge to amount of daylight remaining. A quick march back to Tiberius would get them there at sunset if they left by the eighth hour.

"I will wait."

Her stooped body straightened slightly. Her face showed alarm. With bright, fevered eyes she looked to her right and left. She doesn't want her neighbors to see foreigners in her house.

He smiled to cover his irritation. "Outside. Here, under your tree," he said.

She nodded and waved vaguely toward the bench, then staggered back into the darkness of the house. He sat in the shade and took a long pull from his water skin. His soldiers and the donkey appeared a few minutes later.

“Rest,” he said. “We wait for the day to cool.”

They dared not directly question him, but he saw the uncertainty in their eyes. Not only did Tiberius have more shade trees, there were hot springs and bathes, and there they would not need to keep a hand on their sword and their head on a swivel. And some of their protection lay in their mobility. The longer they stayed in this courtyard, the longer they became the target of some local rebel band.

But the centurion was always right. They followed orders. They posted lookouts on the road, and sentries behind the house.

An hour later, the lookouts spotted rising dust on the road from Chorazin, and soon afterward they could hear the buzz of a small crowd, maybe two dozen people. His soldiers stood, secured their helmets, straightened breastplates, loosened their swords, put their hands on their javelins, and held their shields ready on their left arms. As they positioned themselves in a defensive perimeter around the courtyard, their faces took on the blank look of men ready for a fight, their eyes shifting quickly. The servants and the donkey took the scant shelter afforded by the olive tree.

The centurion waited until the apparent leader, the rabbi, approached the courtyard gate. Then he stood.

Another man, burly with a red hair and beard, glared at Cor from behind the young rabbi. The rabbi, a Jew appearing to be about Cor’s age, turned, put his hand on the glaring man’s chest

and said something. The big man calmed slightly, shoulders relaxing, but eyes still bright and hot. His own soldiers hands lifted their shields, ready for the attack.

Cor walked from the bench to the gate. “Are you Jesus?” he asked the rabbi.

“I am.”

Over Jesus’ shoulder the burly man’s face showed undisguised hostility. His fists opened and closed. Cor heard the faint clink of steel-on-steel as his soldiers shifted their weapons. They smelled a fight like dogs smell fresh meat, and they had no fear of country Jews with cudgels. This was not what he had planned.

Only the rabbi remained calm. His deep set, brown eyes held Cor’s gaze. His face showed no fear, no anxiety, only a mild curiosity.

“Lord,” Cor said.

The burly man now seemed uncertain. His hands relaxed. From his own soldiers, he heard nothing, and imagined them frozen and puzzled. What Roman calls a Jew *Lord*?

Now the rabbi tilted his head in recognition of the unexpected honorific and smiled slightly. There seemed to be a question in his eyes.

Cor steeled himself for his own words. He would not do this for anyone except Rufus, maybe not for the Emperor himself. But if this Jesus could prevent Cor from slipping a dagger under Rufus’s ribs tonight, he would ask. “My servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.”

Cor felt Jesus read him. He saw Jesus recognize his pain, his desperation, his love for his suffering servant. Behind Jesus, the burly red-haired man and other followers stood motionless, like a tableau painted on a wall.

Jesus looked around, apparently assessing where this servant might be, and clearly not here. Then understanding that he could only be in Tiberius, Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?”

Jesus’ offer was sincere. Cor could see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice. No mumbo-jumbo, no Herculean tasks, no hesitation. He, a Jew, was willing to publicly give aid and comfort to the enemy, a Roman. He was willing to walk eight miles in the heat of the day and make himself unclean by entering Tiberius. And he seemed totally confident in his ability to heal.

Yes, Cor wanted to say. Come and heal him. Let’s see what you’ve got. I can’t stand to look my man’s pain one more day. Yes, heal him, or I will need to put him out of his misery myself.

The centurion looked this man over, this born leader followed by this devoted crowd. Was this the man they had been waiting for? Their Spartacus? Their Messiah? Did he have the power that people claimed he had? Would he soon be an enemy on the field of battle, or, more likely, a criminal to hunt down and crucify?

Or was he just a great fake? He acted confident, the same confidence that Cor had seen in many leaders. Confidence alone was a show. Add courage, and that was true leadership. Add power, and the man had authority. All these, Jesus seemed to have. But his words and his demeanor showed something else, something unexpected. The centurion tried to identify this.

Kindness. Yes, that was it. A man who understood the pain he felt for his suffering servant. Cor had never before met a leader who showed kindness. Kindness was an unnecessary luxury to a Roman soldier.

This seasoning of kindness, more than anything else, made Cor decide to trust this Jesus. If he were subsequently proved a fool, if Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate heard about this, if he

lost his commission and got sent home in disgrace, so be it. The situation was desperate, and, unbelievable as it seemed, Cor could not help but believe in Jesus.

He said, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

When Jesus heard this, he appeared amazed and said to those following him, “Truly I tell you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

The centurion didn’t know who Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob were, and he didn’t know about any feast. But, after a lifetime of war, he knew the subjects of most kingdoms spent most of their time in darkness, weeping and gnashing teeth, or worse.

Jesus had turned away to address the crowd, and now turned back. Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.”

Against all rational thought, the centurion believed the rabbi. He gave him a Roman salute and signaled his soldiers. The *contubernium* formed and they marched to Tiberius on the quick step. Four dusty hours later, they arrived in Tiberius.

Cor left them at the gate of the city. He stifled his urge to go directly to the hospital and headed toward his own tent. There he could drop his helmet and sword and carry only his vine rod and dagger when he went to Rufus. He hoped against all rational experience that he would have no need for the dagger, but the great confidence he had felt in the presence of Jesus had faded on the march home. His enthusiasm had turned into a critical self-examination of his own

sanity. As the sun sank behind the western hills, he fingered his dagger and walked up the hill to his tent.

But there, at the tent door, stood Rufus. Pale certainly, and thin. How could he have lost so much weight in three days? But fully dressed, holding a bowl of water and a towel, waiting to serve Cor as usual. Standing. He could not be standing.

“Master,” Rufus said.

“Do not call me *master*,” Cor said. He took the basin from Rufus and set it aside, then kissed him on both cheeks. “Call me your friend.”

They embraced, and shared their evening meal, and each told how they had experienced a miracle. They wondered aloud and together how they could possibly tell anybody who had not been a witness to what had happened. Then they wondered how they could not.

Finally, they went to their beds and fell asleep quickly and slept soundly. As Cor closed his eyes, he wondered if he had met the Messiah.

He hoped he would not be the one to crucify him.