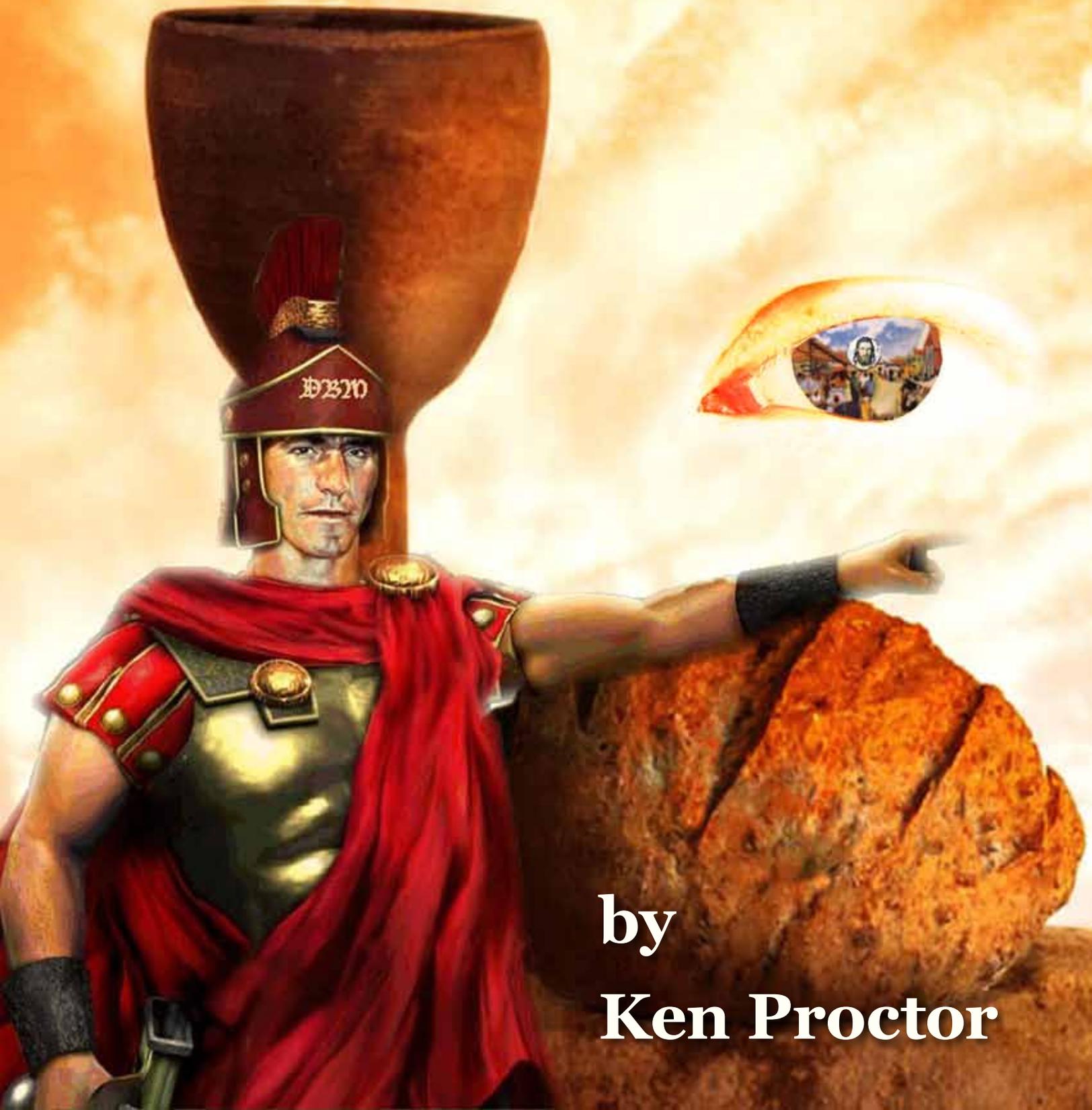


# THE CENTURION'S MAN



by  
**Ken Proctor**

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My feverish mind drifted through a seemingly endless and disjointed series of dreamlike visions. A confusion of ordinary, even mundane, images that could have been memories had it not been for certain elements. Disturbing elements that skewed the almost remembered, almost familiar scenes, and rendered them implausible... and often frightening. I struggled to find meaning, to grasp onto some thread of logic or meaning, eventually seeking only to escape each fantasy only to find myself drifting into another.

Why was Megosh, the fisherman, casting his net into the sea and drawing it out again filled with sparrows, which he then released? "Two for a penny," he called to me and laughed. The sea lapped at my bare feet. He re-gathered his now empty casting net, draped it over his right shoulder and waded into the sea for another cast. A small boy brushed by my hand and I stood in the market, a tin smith's daughter offering cups, plates and oil lamps. But my master has a fine cup and needs no lamp. I turn to the sound of bleating, a ewe crying for her lamb. The butcher's servant, holds a very fine yearling lamb securely between his knees while the butcher, Ephod, thrusts a keen knife and drains the lamb's blood into my master's cup. I see myself recoil, but cannot move. "Not the master's cup," I cry out, but the cup is full. "It is enough," laughs the butcher. "Enough for all."

In my dream, I flee around a corner and see myself in my master's house, preparing a meal for his return. I have come to the pantry and from the shelf select a muslin bag of finely ground flour, olive oil from the first pressing, a pinch of sea salt out of the box entrusted to me. Moving these into the kitchen, I mix them in my large, shallow stoneware bowl to form a loose, moist crumble. To this I add just a little clear water from the pitcher, just enough that the mix would form a ball. All that remains is to knead in the leaven and bake the small loaves.

I can feel myself relax, watching myself perform these familiar steps with care. The master has been fair and often kind to me, and although I serve as a bondservant in his home, he grants me many of the privileges of a freeman, a paid employee. In his home I find provision, security and a measure of comfort I had not known before. And trust. Into my hand he has placed his keys, his coin and his cup: the keys that secure his spices and wealth, the coins for the shopping and provisioning of his home, and his fine silver cup, which I return to him full. In the day that my bond is paid, my bondage served, I hope to stay and serve still in my master's house, if he will have me.

With this in mind, I watch myself prepare the bread as a master baker might fuss over an apprentice. Returning to the pantry, I am reaching for the leaven in its loosely covered masonry jar, but even as I reach for it, it seems to draw away from my hand. On tiptoe I try again, straining toward the jar but still not grasping it. I must have the leaven for the master's bread, or it would not rise to make the fine, light loaves for my master's table. Drawing the bench from the hall

into the pantry, I stretch myself and extend my hand once again for the leaven, but the shelf has become impossibly high and the leaven far out of reach. I try to shout encouragement to myself. "Reach! Stretch!" I call, but no sound comes out, and my shouts fade to weeping as my vision clouds further with tears of frustration. Again my dream is bereft of normality and my fears, which had receded for a time, now clutch at my chest.

What shall I do? My master, the commander, will return soon and I must be ready with his meal and his cup.

"Sesame." The answer comes softly. It is my mother's voice calling gently, "Use the sesame."

Of course! I see myself turn again to the pantry, to the secure spice cabinet, and taking a dark key from its hiding place above the door lintel, I open the cabinet and select the small, tightly woven purse of sesame seeds. Locking the cabinet, and returning the key to its place, I scurry back to the bowl on the table. Quickly I separate the dough into seven smaller portions, though the last one is a bit smaller yet. Patting each one in my palm, I form them into round, flat disks, what my people would call "way bread" or teff, for it is the quick, unleavened bread common to travelers. But now I press the sesame seeds into the surface of each, to add its distinct, nutty aroma and flavor.

The small oven is hot and the flat bread will cook quickly. I place each one sesame side down on the flat stone slab that is the floor of the oven, so that the seeds will toast and release their fragrant oil to season the loaves. As they bake, I go to prepare the Commander's cup, and remember that I had seen Ephod, the butcher, catch the lamb's blood in it. And yet, there it is, safe in its place. I watch myself cross the small room, lift the cup down and look inside. Relief, like a cool drink, refreshes me... the cup is empty.

With both hands I carry my master's cup to the laver and rinse it with fresh water... just to be sure. An amphora of good wine was cradled in its gimbaled wood frame, and I tip a half measure of the rich red vintage into the cup, followed by a half measure of the fresh water. It would be sweet but not strong... cleanse the pallet without intoxicating. The cup was ready.

Now for the bread. I drift down to look over my own shoulder into the small brick oven and discover that the teff has browned nicely. And as the flat bread baked the small amount of water in the dough has turned to steam, causing the bread to puff perfectly. Quickly I snatch the seven flat breads from the heat and let them rest a moment on the tabletop to cool. The toasted sesame seeds have indeed imparted their essence to the bread, and the whole room smells so good that, with a bit of butter, I could eat the pantry door.

Three loaves I will serve him on his return, three I will set aside for the evening, and the smaller one will be my portion. Taking a shallow serving platter of woven reeds, I break the three best loaves into it. The master may then dip the fragrant bread into either the oil or the wine, though being fresh baked it will need neither to soften it. It will be a good meal to refresh my master. He

will be pleased with my work.

A cloudiness passed over my thoughts and I drifted upward into pain. Tried to twist away from a cart. Can't move, the market is full and the people press about me. Can't move. "Halt the cart!" I cry out, but the words are lost in the din. "To many people." A small shabby man snatches at the parcels I bare. "Thief, Thief!" But the press all about that pins me also prevents his escape, and the cart still comes. The carter cracks a small whip about the beast who draws the cart, forcing a way through the busy market. The thief falls beneath a wheel, scattering my goods. His cry is cut short.

Again, I am a spectator, watching myself grasping at strangers who can neither help themselves or me. A small boy nimbly rolls under the cart, to the small safe lane between the axles, then wails in anguish as his mother falls before the heavy wheel. She clutches my belt for aid and in her panic seals my fate as well. Mercifully, as the cart passes over my hip and thigh, I strike my head on the cobbles and know no more.

"Misha? Can you hear me? Misha," someone is calling from far away... far above me. But the pain is above and I shrink away from the pain. Deep, crushing pain. And the rasping of broken bones that grate and stab with each tiny movement. But worst of all, the dry cough that shakes my frame and shifts the bone's and twists my broken flesh.

"Let me go," I beg. But the words form only briefly, in a moment of rare clarity in my fever addled mind. Trapped between the painful reality above, and the frightening dementia of my tortured dreams below, I choose the dreams. "Let me go." And I drift again downward, ever downward, welcoming now the lesser of two onerous states. Embracing the chaos... awaiting oblivion.

Sesame. The sweet, nutty aroma is still strong in the kitchen where the loaves lie broken. I watch my hands arrange the pieces... but there is blood on the bread. The rusty iron smell of fresh blood rises from the platter and taints the scent of fresh bread. Before my stricken eyes, the bread slowly turns from broken loaves to broken flesh.

How could this be? I watched every step as I carefully prepared and baked the way bread. Every ingredient was perfect, the best that could be had in the market.

The master is coming soon, though I do not know exactly when. I cannot serve these broken loaves. Near panic, I begin to hastily prepare new loaves, when I remember the four remaining from this batch.

"Quickly, Misha!" I shout at myself from the corner of the kitchen. "Fetch the other loaves quickly" I run to the pantry, but the four remaining loaves are missing. In fact, the pantry is bare... no more flour, no oil, the salt box is gone and the spice locker is gone from the wall. I fall to my knees and beat the pantry floor with my open hand as the tears come again.

And I hear my name.

“Mishu?” Only my master, the commander, calls me Mishu. My real name is Mishael, meaning “Who is like god?”. The other staff took to calling me Misha but from my first day of service in his household, he has mispronounced it. At first, I lacked the courage to correct him, and later, I didn’t care.

But now I lack the courage to answer. “Mishu! First my cup, and then something to eat.” I can hear the master in the front hall where he reclines at table. The new boy, Nehum, would be removing the master’s sandals and preparing to wash the dust from his feet. A bowl of scented water and towel would be presented for washing his hands and perhaps his face, too. And then I must present the cup and the bread. But only the cup is ready.

I reach hastily for the cup and in my haste a bit of the wine escapes over the rim to the kitchen floor... and I freeze in horror. While I watch myself lean forward for a better look, I instinctively step back, for I know what it is. It is the blood from the butchered lamb; that blood that the butcher, Ephod, had caught in the master’s fine cup. The blood that will now cost me my life.

I rest the cup on the table and slump onto the bench. I have failed in my duties and deserve whatever fate or punishment the master declares. But worse still, knowing that he has been good to me, and patient, and kind... and now when he needs me I have failed to return his goodness with thoroughness, his patience with diligence, and his kindness with due service. With my face in my hands, I resign myself to face the master with empty hands.

“Misha,” I hear the new boy hiss, “What is wrong with you? I will take this to the master.” The boy snatches the cup and the platter from the table and rushes to serve in my stead.

“NO-O-O!”, I scream and lurch from the bench, but my voice is a croak and my legs fail me, too. Like pressing through a crowded room, I struggle to reach the front hall before the cup and the platter are presented, but unseen hands clutch at me and clinging vines ensnare my feet. “Stop, boy! Please stop!”

As if through a window, I see with dismay that the Commander has the cup and the platter in hand, and I am planted on my face before him. “I am sorry,” I whisper to myself. “I am sorry, Master,” I hear myself whisper from the floor. “So very sorry.”

My master rises from his customary place at table, leaving the cup and meal behind. Then, doffing his cloak of office and all semblance of rank or privilege, he gathers the cup and, lifting me up, offers it to me. “Did you taste the new wine, the wine you served me?”

“No, Master. I have failed you.” My knees were failing me, and I began to sink to the floor, but he steadied me with his strong hand.

"Take it, Mishu, and drink." A direct command. Again the master offered me the cup. With eyes closed, I took the first tentative sip... and was stunned to find the cup contained only the fine, sweet vintage I had prepared earlier. A glorious, quenching, refreshingly light drink unlike any I had known before. I offered it back to him, but with his palm he pressed it back toward me. "You should drink fully," he said.

As I took a single large swallow from the cup, I both felt and saw the tension and uncertainty falling away from myself like tares and brambles shorn away from the young vine by the vinedressers.

"Mishu, did you prepare this meal, also?" The master turned away from me and took the woven platter in hand. But when he turns to face me, it is not the commander...a stranger stands before me. "Take. Eat." he says.

My eyes dart down to the platter to confirm that, once again, it contains only the seeded loaves. But to my astonishment, not only are all seven loaves now on the platter, but the three that I had broken into pieces have been restored and made whole again.

"Take, eat," he commands, but gently, and over his shoulder I see my master nod his approval and encouragement. I reach for the small, imperfect loaf that I had set aside for myself, but the gentle stranger turns the platter so that my hand falls on one of the loaves that I had broken and he had restored.

This time there is no hesitation. I raise the flat seeded loaf to my face and, after inhaling the sweet, fresh, aromatic scent of it, I take a huge bite....

And Leap Out of Bed!

Oh, will this haunting saga of shadows and unrelenting chaos not cease? I have leapt from one unreality to another! Questions flood my mind as I strain to untangle fact from fantasy... and yet this vision has a more tangible feel. The touch of the floor under my bare feet, the sounds of the neighbors through the open window, even the smell of the city that invades the master's house when the wind is contrary, all hold an authenticity that belie what I am seeing.

I stand in the master's chamber, having just sprung from his bed. What was I doing on the master's bed? And what is that smell?

Judging by the light slanting in through the vented gable, it is late in the day, and I should be in the larder and pantry making final preparations for the evening meal. So why am I just waking... and why here?

"Misha?" I turn quickly to the door; horrified that Fallah has found me here.

Her huge eyes and sharp gasp attest to the severity of my offense. She drops a towel and a basin of water to the floor and stifles a scream, while pointing at my legs. It is then that I notice the filth and the stench that surround me... excrement and urine mixed with blood and puss cling to my right leg and thigh, soaking the simple cloth bound around my hips. My hair is caked with old sweat, and my face, stubbled by at least a weeks growth, crusty with sweat or tears or both.

I spin to inspect the master's bed and, as I suspected, it is a twisted heap of filth encrusted bedding on a ruined linen mattress. Nothing will be saved from that fetid, repulsive pile. All must be burned. What have I done? What happened to me? Why was I in this room at all?

Turning to Fattah for answers, I see only more questions in her eyes. The color has drained from her face, and she clutches at the doorframe for support. But as I stand beside the disheveled bed in my sodden and malodorous condition, she must read the same look of stricken bewilderment on my face. Quietly, she asks again, "Misha?"

But I do not know what she is asking, and I only have more questions. "How... what...?", I stammer unhelpfully. I take a tentative step toward her, but she halts me with a raised hand and guarded look. The small covering plastered to my groin begins to slip and, sorry as it is, I snatch it back.

"You are standing," she stammers. "Misha, how are you standing?" But again, I do not understand the question or its implications. I look down at my feet, my knees, my legs... other than the obvious need for bathing and a clean tunic, I am mystified by her reaction.

And then I don't care. It is not so important for now how all this happened. It is momentarily irrelevant. What is critical is that I do all I can to clean up this mess, including myself, and to arrange for a new bed and bedding for my master. At the same time, there is a meal to prepare, not flat bread, and this room to clean, bedding to burn, the floor to scrub... so much to do.

"Fallah, hurry, please, you must help me." I begin stripping the bed with one hand while pinning my covering to my hip with the other. Where did all this blood and excrement come from? Irrelevant! Focus on the task!

"Fallah, please." She is still anchored to the doorframe, but without taking her eyes off me, she fumbles about at her feet for the lost basin and towel. "Yes, wipe that water up. Quickly. And then fetch more to clean this floor." She looks relieved to have an excuse to flee.

I realize that while scrabbling around trying to clear the bedding, my feet are still leaving a trail of feces, old blood and indescribable goo. Tossing the unsalvagable loincloth in with the bundled bedding, I sit naked on the floor and wipe my feet with a clean corner of linen, only to realize that my sitting has left a filthy print, too.

Leaving the bundle behind, I dash through to the small back courtyard, where the laundry is hung to dry, and grabbing the leather bucket, I draw water to wash myself, scrubbing and scraping as

best I can with my hands. I draw a second bucket of water for my hair and face, and then a third to wash my stinking body again. It is only after pulling a fresh tunic over my head that I realize I am being watched. Fallah, joined by Nehum and Loma, the gardener, is watching me from the kitchen doorway. They are staring... and immobile at a time demanding action. "Don't just stand there like lumps! Help me clean the master's chamber. Loma, prepare a hot fire... no, there is no time for a fire... just take the bedding to the ravine where the trash is dumped. Nehum, take the mattress to the dump, too. And Fallah, clean the floor. I will bring this water." But no one was moving. "What is the matter with you three? Will you not help me? It is getting late and the master could arrive at any time." Nehum's mouth was hanging open but no sounds came out. At last, Fallah spoke, but little above a whisper.

"You should be dead by now," she said. Then, just a bit more bravely, "We thought you would be dead by now." Loma was nodding but added no clarity to the comment.

"If I do not get this house in order quickly, then surely the master will kill me, and your speculations will come true." I moved to press past them, but they scattered out of my way lest I touch them. "Do as I say. I will prepare the master's dinner, then Fallah and Nehum can distract him in the dining area while I finish cleaning his bed chamber."

Taking a large stoneware basin from its place, I prepare to make fresh bread, but a nagging doubt halts me. Turning to the pantry, I gather the ingredients one by one, and place them on the kitchen table: flour, oil, salt, water, dried herbs. Then I look to the shelf where sits the jar with the loose fitting lid... where I store the leaven. Slowly, I reach for the jar and with both hands lift it down and set it with the other ingredients. Taking a small step back, I look at the jar, and after a moment, shake my head. "Nonsense," I tell myself. "It's just a jar."

Again, I get that creeping feeling of being watched. Fallah has returned. "The bedding is out of the house. Nehum will also go to the market for new bedding and have a fresh mattress delivered," she reports. "But it is unlikely that the master will return tonight" she adds. "He went to seek help in Capernaum."

At once I am both relieved and puzzled. "I do not understand," I say, turning away from dinner preparations. Surely the master would have discussed with me, the keeper of his household, if he thought we needed more helpers. Further, there was no need to go clear to Capernaum for help when bond servants and slaves were readily available right here. And thirdly, "Why did the master not tell me rather than you?"

Fallah's answer left me speechless and I gripped the table's edge for support.

The master tarried a day in Capernaum, and, escorted by the customary cohort, returned on the third day. With the help of the others, I used that precious time to restore order to the household, thoroughly cleanse and air out the master's chamber and, after applying a fresh coat of white lime wash to the walls and ceiling of that room, remade the master's bed. And, by the light of a

bright lamp, I personally inspected the floor on my hands and knees.

He did not return directly to his residence, first reporting in to his superiors and then taking report from those of his command that had not accompanied him to Capernaum. It was nearing the evening mealtime that he finally passed under his own lintel and into the tiled entry of his residence.

"Mishu," he called, "I am tired and I am thirsty and I am home." There was a note of humorous mischief in his voice. "What does a man have to do around here to get a decent meal."

We had been waiting in earnest all day for his return, not knowing how he would react when I walked in carrying his cup and a small basket of figs. Having washed myself again, three times from head to foot, and donned a fresh tunic for the occasion, I fully expected the master to be shocked and amazed by my miraculous recovery, and all of us anticipated a memorable outburst.

Yet here he was, showing neither the slightest reaction, nor the least intimation that anything had ever been wrong. In fact, he was grinning at what must have been a stupefied look on my face.

"Mishu, you are spilling the figs," he said and laughed out loud as I hastily plunked his cup onto the table and dropped to gather the figs that had tipped out of the basket.

And I knew everything would be all right.

The master had invited several guests to dine with him later that evening, but this was not uncommon, so we always kept sufficient stores to accommodate even a large impromptu gathering. With help from Fallah in the kitchen, and with Nehum serving at table, we quickly expanded the master's simple but hearty dinner for one, to a more genteel five-course meal that, interspersed with local entertainment and sampling local vintages, lasted into the evening.

It was mid morning of the next day before I had an opportunity to discuss the bewildering events of the last ten days. Other than vague and confusing impressions left from my delirious visions, I had no memory related to that time, and I desperately needed answers.

"What did Fallah tell you?", my master asked. We were standing just inside the front entry. Nehum, as usual, was assisting the Commander as he belted and buckled each aspect of his uniform in place, and I watched for any imperfection or blemish that might need attending or adjusting.

"Only that I was badly injured in the market. A panic in the crowd, a runaway cart. Someone recognized your servant and I was delivered to your gate." I made a small, unnecessary adjustment to a shoulder piece, just to have something to do with my hands.

"You were indeed badly hurt and unconscious. The cart was heavy and it passed over your right leg, your thigh and your hip. Each bone was broken and the hip was crushed. One leg bone, the large one, had broken through the skin of your thigh just below your hip and your tunic was ruined with your blood.

"I did not expect you to live out the day but sent for a doctor... and a priest. The doctor discovered the injury to the back of your head, but said it was the crushed flesh and broken bones that would kill you. The priest offered prayer... and another solution." The commander paused as Nehum brought the broad belt that held the sheathed short sword and buckled it into place.

"According to the priest," he continued, "there was a young teacher, a rabbi of sorts, who had recently appeared in this region. And as he was passing through he was teaching wherever the people gathered. Hundreds came to hear him teach, but thousands more followed him because he performed great deeds."

"What deeds, Master?" I asked softly, though I suspected the answer. Unconsciously, my right hand had moved slowly to my right thigh and then up to my hip. There was no pain, no scar, no blemish or disfigurement at all. But the blood had been mine.

"According to the priest, the young rabbi had been performing miracles. A sick woman's fever left her when he spoke, a leper was cleansed by his hand, an evil spirit was cast out and the man restored to his family." The master looked me in the eye. "We kept you here and watched you. I was skeptical of the priest's story."

"Fallah tried to clean you but every touch, every motion caused the bones to shift and you cried out but did not wake. After three days, the wounds were swollen with puss and your leg was turning gangrenous. You had messed yourself and wet yourself, but without rolling you over there was no way to keep you clean. I have seen men injured less grievously in combat or accidents who have not lived so long.

"By the fourth day, I determined to find this teacher and bring him here... just in case there was anything he could do. Your bed was destroyed by the filth so we moved you to mine. There is more space in my room, the bed is more comfortable and the ventilation is much better." He grinned at me, "You stank."

"Two days it took to find the teacher, and then, at first, I held back and just listened. In the army you learn quickly which commanders are good leaders and which are not; who the troops will follow willingly and who they will oblige reluctantly. This young man, this teacher, would have been a great commander. The crowds were silent and still in his presence. He spoke with great authority and reasoned with such clarity.

"Even the spirits listened and obeyed." The master turned to me and laid a hand on my shoulder. "I thought to myself, 'This man is able to heal, but my house is not worthy.' When I approached

him, he did not turn from me, though I was in uniform and obviously not of his faith. I explained my need and he offered to come to you. But I knew it was not necessary for him to make the journey. Without question, he was able to do all things. He praised my faith, but more importantly, he granted my request. Then He went His way, and I was swallowed by the crowd."

"But Master, why did you not hurry home to see... to be sure?" I asked.

"There was no need for haste. I knew all was well," he said. "I am a Centurion, a commander of many men. When I say come here, they come. When I say go there, they go. And I knew that when the Master spoke, His word would not be ignored. Whatever malady or affliction beset you would flee at His command. Whatever evil, or pain, or sorrow assailed your dreams would be cast away. A great commander, even a king, had spoken, and I knew all was well."

All was well. My master continued at his post, but despite that, was well regarded in the city. His charity and benevolence, among Jews and Gentiles alike, contributed greatly to the peace and health of the community. Likewise, the evenhanded administration of his duties lent stability and respect to his office and his command.

Within a year my indenturship was complete. I could strike out on my own, and I knew that my master would not send me away empty handed. But I had no family to speak of, no obligations left to meet, and nowhere in particular I wanted to go. So I stayed. My master hired me as a freeman to continue managing his household, stocking the kitchen, supervising meals and banquets... whatever needed attending to.

And I was content in my master's house.

Word of my miraculous recovery had spread quickly throughout the region. People came to see me and at first I was annoyed... it was inconvenient to stop in my duties and tell the tale over and over. Besides, I knew nothing of the teacher who had healed me from afar.

But my master instructed me not to turn them away. He said it was the least that we could do, and describing His gift to us brought honor to the Giver. And if my work suffered, he would promote Nehum to assist me in my duties and find a new boy to replace him. I assured my master that it would not come to that.

As the months passed, the Teacher's fame and renown grew among the people and across the land. His name was Yeshua, son of a Nazarene carpenter. But opinions regarding His teaching, His authority and His claims were divided at every level among the people. My master was concerned for His safety.

"Great men," he said, "often have great enemies." And he was right.

Within two years, powerful men arranged His execution.

