

7.

It was a much quieter time for Rebecca and the other women, who had spent nearly three of the winter months in Ephraim in comparative seclusion after the miraculous raising of Lazarus. At first, the crowds who had always been attracted to the Master, still followed, but as the winter months grew colder, especially in the exposed hill position of the city, they dwindled away, and the need to regulate the newcomers who sought the aid of Jesus grew less.

At the end of the first day out of Bethany, Rebecca had been alarmed to see two men she knew among the crowd who still followed. She ran quickly to Joanna, instinctively looking for protection.

"I tell you, Joanna, it's Saul and Eli - Joseph must have sent them after me!"

"Calm down, Rebecca - they won't take you away from us by force - that I promise you. I'll make sure Micah will stay close to you - You DO remember Micah?"

Her eyes gleamed in mischief. Rebecca forced a smile and nodded,

Micah was a tongue-tied youth who always blushed a fiery red if she so much as looked at him. He was also brawny and while not a match for Saul and Eli, he would give a good account of himself. Joanna moved quickly and propelled him in front of Rebecca.

"You remember the Lady Rebecca, Micah? She needs your help!"

Then she was gone and Rebecca found herself staring into the brick red face of her protector.

"Micah - thank you for helping me."

The flush intensified, it wasn't a good start. She battled on.

"Two men, who used to be my protectors, have been sent by my brother. I don't know what they have been told to do, but until I find out, I want you to look after me."

Micah found his voice.

“I’ll make sure they don’t harm you, my Lady.”

Considering that it was Micah, it was almost a pretty speech.

“They won’t harm me, I’m sure - but they might try to force me to go back to my brother.”

Micah nodded, clearly he was a man of few words, but strong emotions. Rebecca waited for Saul and Eli to approach her, but they didn’t do so until they were nearly at Ephraim. It was Saul who came alone. Micah tensed, ready for battle when he approached. The seasoned guard, glanced at Micah with fleeting interest, it was clear he didn’t consider him much opposition.

“My Lady Rebecca.”

“Saul - greetings - what news from Arimathea?”

“I came from Jerusalem, my lady - I’m with Eli.”

“I saw you both - why are you here?”

It was a direct challenge.

“The Lord Joseph has told us to stay close to you because of the dangers facing the prophet.”

Rebecca stared into his eyes. They didn’t shift away.

“I suppose he told you to bring me back to him?”

Saul shook his head.

“No, my lady, just to stay close to you, and if there is serious trouble, to get you away.”

Rebecca responded confidently.

“There will be no trouble, Saul - we have the Master with us!”

Saul held her gaze.

“There is talk in Jerusalem, that the High Priest has called for the death of the prophet.”

Rebecca’s smile wavered.

“Why would they want to hurt that good man?”

Saul shrugged.

"It's only talk, my lady - I don't know."

Rebecca recovered her smile.

"If you must stay, you must stay - I won't go with you back to my brother. Remember, I choose to stay here and Micah - this is Micah - he will make sure that no one tries to force me to go with them - is that understood?"

Saul flickered another look at Micah, who stood, legs astride, ready for combat. The two locked glances for a moment. Saul responded politely.

"I understand, my lady."

He retreated back to where Eli was waiting. Rebecca released her breath slowly, she felt suddenly sapped of energy. In the ensuing days, Saul and Eli made no attempt to approach her. They would bow respectfully if she passed close by, but that was all. The crowds dwindled away, and soon there was only the hard core left, those who always followed the Master.

It was at this time that Nathan arrived in the city. When Rebecca saw him, she took fright again and hid herself within the tent she shared with Joanna. Micah stood guard at the entrance, he was the only barrier between her and the priest who had been a part of the household of Arimathea for as long as she could remember.

Nathan, Saul and Eli coalesced into a conference.

"We are watching over her, Rabbi."

Nathan nodded.

"So I have been assured by the Lord Joseph - tell me, what is her mood?"

"One of determination to stay here - with the prophet."

Nathan nodded.

"This prophet, where can I find him?"

"He's in the city, Rabbi - but he lives quietly."

"No doubt, he's heard of the lengths to which Caiaphas and the other priests are prepared to go."

“Perhaps, that’s so, Rabbi. There are still some who come out from Jerusalem to talk to him - they know where he is.”

“But so far, they have made no move against him?”

Saul shook his head.

“It’s very quiet - and cold!”

Nathan nodded and looked at the grey, bleak sky.

“Not a place of warmth in many ways.”

“If you wish to talk to the Lady Rebecca, she lives in that tent - with the army standing guard!”

Saul laughed quietly and pointed to the lonely figure of Micah. Nathan smiled.

“Later, perhaps - first, I will hear the prophet.”

He inclined his head and walked away towards the city. They watched him go, Nathan had been a part of their existence at Arimathea for as long as they had been in Joseph’s service. He walked slowly now, the fringes of his robe almost sweeping the ground. Neither Saul nor Eli had much time for Pharisees, but Nathan was a different version of the breed - much more tolerant and approachable.

Nathan found Jesus talking to a small group in the market place. He recognised some of the priests of the temple among the group. Most of the others were the inner circle of disciples, although there were a few petitioners, some obviously ill, while others supported them. He watched the Galilean in action, as he quietly moved among them, touching them - and obviously obtaining results. Nathan’s spine prickled, it was impressive - the quietness, the obvious compassion, the healing touch - and then, the prophet sat on a stool and talked to them. Nathan listened to the message, it was simple direct and positive - there was nothing with which he could disagree - but he had to be sure. He moved forward through the crowd and stood in front of him.

Jesus looked up and stared into his eyes and Nathan felt his soul stripped bare, he stared back, locked by the impelling eyes - this had been what Joseph had meant - the

attraction - almost a compulsion! Nathan found his voice.

“Tell me, Master, which commandment is the first of all?”

Jesus answered quietly.

“The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel; the Lord your God is the only God; love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Nathan was impressed despite his determination not to be carried away.

“Well said, Master! You are right in saying that God is one and beside him there is no other. And to love him with all your heart, all your understanding, and all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself - that is far more than burnt offerings or sacrifices.”

Jesus saw his honesty and smiled.

“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Nathan turned away and walked back through the crowd. He had to admit that he was more shaken by the encounter than he had expected. He walked to the tent which Saul had pointed out. Micah stood his ground militantly.

“Before I leave for Jerusalem, I will speak with the Lady Rebecca.”

The old Pharisee and the young follower of the new prophet, stared at each other.

Micah folded his arms across his chest and stood his ground.

“The Lady Rebecca doesn’t want to talk to you!”

Nathan raised his voice a little.

“I will hear that from her - not from you, young man!”

There was a long silence, before the tent-flap was lifted. Rebecca faced him uncertainly. Nathan murmured.

“Greetings, daughter. I hope it is well with you?”

She whispered.

“Greeting’s, Nathan - thank-you, yes, it is well with me.”

He looked her up and down. The fine clothing had been put aside, and now she was dressed in a simple peasant garment, her feet were bare and her head was uncovered. The long tresses were gone, but her hair was beginning to grow back, and someone had tried to do something with it.

“I am returning to Jerusalem, my child - is there nothing you wish to say to your brother?”

Her lip trembled.

“Tell him I love him.”

Nathan inclined his head.

“I will gladly do that - but, wouldn’t it be better if you said that to him yourself?”

Rebecca shook her head.

“My place is here - I renounce all I once was!”

Nathan stared at her.

“Then you renounce the brother you say you love.”

“I love God more!”

Nathan didn’t take his eyes from her.

“You can love God in your brother’s house - in fact, I was sure you did!”

“I love him when I follow the one he has sent.”

Nathan paused.

“You believe that this new prophet is sent by God?”

Rebecca nodded emphatically.

“He is the Messiah - the Holy One of God - sent to save the world.”

Nathan echoed.

“The world! A great undertaking for such a humble man.”

“A great undertaking for God’s Son.”

Nathan’s mouth sagged open, his expression was almost frightened.

He whispered.

“Does he say he is God’s Son!?”

Rebecca nodded.

“He is the Son of Man - and he is the Son of God!”

Nathan recovered his mental balance.

“I must return to Jerusalem, my child - come with me!”

Rebecca shook her head.

“My place is here, Rabbi - tell my brother that I love him.”

Nathan inclined his head.

“Remember, Saul and Eli will stay with you - if needed, they can protect you.”

Rebecca smiled and glanced at Micah.

“I have another protector.”

Nathan glanced at the lad, whose face was once more a fiery red.

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Jonah had remained with the group, for the simple reason that he had nowhere else to go - and now that he had been baptised by Simon-Peter, he had no particular desire to go elsewhere. The winter had followed the usual pattern, it had been cold and there had been downfalls of snow. Ephraim was a hill city, and the additional elevation above that of Jerusalem, meant that it was far from comfortable for those spending the winter in the open.

The Master had continued his teaching, but now it was more for the benefit of the few who remained, and particularly, for the Twelve. Jonah and Nebet, the story-teller, had struck up an unlikely friendship. There was quite a disparity in their ages, but this didn't seem to matter. Jonah saw less of Matthias, who was often included in the circle which received special tuition, together with others of the Seventy, and Jonah sensed that he needed the freedom of not having a youngster hanging around him, who was barely out

of childhood.

Nebet obviously knew his way around, and Jonah spent many a night huddled for warmth about the fires, listening to his fund of stories, which often were about the things Jesus had said and done before Jonah had joined the group, but also included other stories from the time when Nebet had wandered the country telling his tales to anyone prepared to toss him a coin.

Late one afternoon, they stood on the top of a hill looking out over the desert country. Jonah shivered, it was still a cold place even though there were signs of spring. Nebet glanced at him and grinned.

“You need to get some meat on your bones, young Jonah - you look like a starved sparrow!”

Jonah sniffed and cuffed his nose. Nebet rolled his eyes to heaven.

“... And learn a few airs and graces, while you’re at it!”

Jonah eyed him suspiciously. Nebet went on:

“I heard it said that we’re soon to be on the move.”

“On the move?”

Nebet turned to him in mock exasperation.

“You didn’t expect to stay the rest of your life in this bleak hole, did you!?”

Jonah grinned and shook his head. Nebet continued.

“It’s said that we’re going to Jerusalem for the Passover!”

Jonah’s smile faded and he swallowed.

“Won’t that be dangerous?”

“Very likely - but we’ve found our way out of trouble before - and we have the Master!”

It was true, there had been threatening situations during the months he had followed, but the Master had always found a way out of them.

“I’m telling you this - so be ready!”

“I’m ready now!”

Nebet grinned at him.

“I suppose you are!”

About twelve days before the feast, the news swept through the group that they were starting out for Jerusalem on the following day. On that evening, Matthias took Jonah aside and held his eyes seriously.

“Jonah, it might be better for you if you stayed here in Ephraim instead of coming with us tomorrow.”

Jonah’s excitement faded.

“Why? Why should I stay here? - I don’t like the place! It’s cold and miserable - and what would I do here!?”

Matthias responded quietly.

“It could be very dangerous for us in Jerusalem - we don’t know what we’re going to meet. It would be much safer for you to stay here in Ephraim.”

Jonah snorted indignantly.

“I’m not frightened of anything! I was the one who saw the Romans spying on us - remember? I nearly got caught too - but I wasn’t afraid!”

It wasn’t exactly true and Matthias knew it.

“Simon told you then that we weren’t playing a boy’s game - when we go to Jerusalem, it could be a matter of life and death - not a game of cat and mouse with Roman soldiers!”

Jonah retorted emphatically.

“We’ll have the Master with us - nothing can happen.”

Matthias didn’t respond as he expected.

“I’ll tell you something the Master has said to us all - and particularly the Twelve. He told them:

‘We’re now going to Jerusalem. All that’s been written by the prophets will come true for the Son of Man. He’ll be given up to the chief priests and the doctors of the law; and

they'll condemn him to death and hand him over to the foreign power to be mocked and spat upon, and flogged and crucified, and on the third day he'll be raised to life again.' I can tell you, Jonah, the Twelve were filled with dismay, he was so emphatic about it - and even Simon knew better than to argue with him - remembering what happened when he tried it once before. The rest of us are very worried. The Master doesn't say things like that unless he means them.

We can't understand what he means, but we're very concerned about him. This is the reason why I want you to stay here in Ephraim!"

Jonah looked close to tears.

"I don't want to stay, Matthias - I belong with you - you said that yourself before I was baptised. Simon even said that I was now part of the family of God - and that we were all waiting for the baptism of the Spirit. How can I be baptised with the Spirit if I'm not a part of the family anymore."

Matthias stared at him and nodded slowly.

"I hear you, Jonah - but I don't want you to walk into danger - we could all end up in prison - or worse - I don't want that for you! I can't order you not to come - I can't stop you - but you must think about it and come to your own decision!"

That evening, Jonah sat huddled close to the fire and listened to the excited chatter around him, but for once didn't join in. After a while, Nebet told some more of his stories, but he hardly listened. Afterwards, he was silent in the face of Nebet's conversation. The story-teller stared at him after a while.

"Now, tell me your story, little fish!"

Jonah jerked to attention and stared unhappily at his friend.

"Matthias wants me to stay behind - he says the Master knows he's going into danger - and Matthias thinks we could all end up in prison - or worse!"

Nebet nodded casually.

"I've heard that too."

“What are you going to do, Nebet?”

The answer was a little while coming.

“I’m going, I suppose - like Simon said once, where else can I go?”

“I was there when he said that.”

“So you were - it was soon after the Master stretched your loaves and fishes to feed five thousand - and said that he was the bread of life come down from heaven. I’ll tell you this, young Jonah - I’m going, because any man who can feed five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, and who can say that he’s the bread of life come down from heaven, he’s the one I follow.”

Jonah drew a deep breath.

“Then, I’m going too!”