

After Peter and John had left him to return to Jerusalem, Philip continued his activity in Samaria. Simon the Magician continued to follow him around, despite the admonition he had received from Peter. Philip sensed a change, whether it was for the better or not, only time could tell. He tried hard to read if any resentment had grown up in the man after his rejection by Peter. Simon had nothing to say about it, he was watchful and outwardly as enthusiastic as before.

Some days later, Philip was resting in the midday heat. He was half asleep, but became abruptly awake when he was approached by a man, who stood silently in front of him. Philip got to his feet, and for some reason, his heart started to hammer as he stared at the newcomer. The man announced without preamble.

“Start out now and go south to the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza.”

Philip stared at him - the road was one which ran through the desert. He opened his mouth to question, but quite abruptly, the man was gone. Philip's knees started to shake, without any doubt, it had been no man but an angel of the Lord!

He broke off what he was doing and began his journey right away, knowing that it was several days walk, and he had no clear directions of where on the road he was supposed to go, nor did he know what he could expect when he arrived. He was sure of one thing, he would recognise the place and the purpose for his journey at the right moment.

Some days later, he was walking down the dusty road, it was excessively hot, and he had to rely on water to drink from the small brooks which still trickled out of the dry country to the sea. He knew that a little further, there was a larger body of water, which he hoped was still flowing. When he drew close to it, he found that someone was there before him.

The man was small and wiry with sharp features, and was seated in a heavy chariot with a driver. The small man was pouring over a scroll, murmuring aloud as he read.

There was no one else in sight, and he was so engrossed that he didn't, at first, realise that Philip was there. From deep within him, the Spirit urged Philip.

"Go and join the carriage."

Philip ran up to the carriage, and heard the man was reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah.

He stopped abruptly and looked down at the dusty figure standing by his chariot. Philip wasn't an impressive sight, he was sweating from the heat, which had stained his robe in great wet patches, and which had streaked his hair and had trickled down his dust-caked cheeks.

"I am Philip - greetings - I have walked from Samaria. Tell me, do you understand what you're reading?"

The man pushed aside the scroll in irritation.

"Greetings, I am Balzar, I am from Ethiopia, where I serve the Kandake - you would call her the queen - I am the Eunuch in charge of all her treasure. I've been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem where the priests gave me this scroll without explaining it - AND I had to pay well enough for it!

To answer your question - how can I understand unless someone gives me a clue? If you can explain it, come and sit here with me."

Philip climbed up into the chariot and picked up the scroll. It contained the passage:

'He was led like a sheep to be slaughtered, and like a lamb that is dumb before the shearer, he does not open his mouth. He has been humiliated and has no redress. Who will be able to speak of his prosperity? For he is cut off from the world of living men.'

The man was watching Philip as he read.

"Now, tell me, please, who is it that the prophet is speaking about here: himself or someone else?"

Philip drew breath, using the passage as a starting point, he told the attentive man the good news of Jesus, of his death and of his resurrection, and of the baptism with water

and the spirit.

Balzar told his driver to move the carriage slowly as Philip talked, and they eventually came close to a flow of water which was still substantial. The man told his driver to halt the chariot.

“Look, here’s water - what’s to prevent me from being baptised?”

“Nothing! - Nothing, if you believe!”

The Ethiopian jumped to the ground and headed purposefully for the brook, Philip followed him and they both waded into the middle of the stream. The treasurer submitted to being plunged beneath the water, while Philip recited the words of baptism over him and prayed for his newly emerged faith. They climbed out of the water and Philip was suddenly gone, leaving the soaking wet man gaping, but filled with joy. He returned to his chariot and told his driver to continue the journey south towards Egypt - and beyond that, to Ethiopia.

In the meantime, Philip found himself at Azotus, which was several days travel distant from the place where he had met the new convert. He continued his tour around the villages and the towns in that area, until he reached his home city of Caesarea.

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Marcellus received the invitation to dine with Joseph of Arimathea and his fiery sister, with some astonishment - and with a greater measure of suspicion. He had already reported to Pilate a heavily edited version of what had taken place during his visit to Lucian. He had elected to leave out the more inflammatory remarks of his erstwhile friend, knowing that they could put him in serious jeopardy with the spiteful Procurator. Marcellus was no friend of Pilate and saw no reason to hand him a reason for vindictiveness. Putting that aside, the invitation from Joseph was a surprise. Princes of any province of the empire rarely associated with someone of such a lowly rank as a Centurion of the Legion.

If for no other reason than curiosity, Marcellus accepted. His suspicions about Joseph's association with the new cult and/or the Zealots hadn't diminished, and this was another factor. Joseph needed watching - and so did his firebrand of a sister - and what better place to do that than by sitting at a man's table and consuming his food and wine?

Lucian was far more eager to take up his invitation when it arrived. Not only would he be near his beloved, but he would also have the opportunity to push for a final agreement on the terms of his trading contract with Joseph. Demas - and to his surprise - Bezar were also included in the invitation.

The large Babylonian was almost comic in his desire to look his best. He appealed to Lucian for his expert advice on what was fitting and seemly for a humble merchant to dine with a Prince of Israel. Lucian offered his opinions, which were immediately rejected as being totally incorrect. Finally, in exasperation, Lucian told him.

"Go smelling like a camel - act natural!"

Bezar swung a heavy fist, which was easily avoided.

"Be glad I wasn't trying!"

On the evening in question, Bezar was dressed like a stuffed peacock, Lucian rolled his eyes in the direction of Demas, who smiled slightly - nothing was said - which was wise, for Bezar looked belligerent.

Lucian had intended to ride to Joseph's villa, but one look at the resplendent Bezar made this option untenable. They were forced to use chairs, which reminded him of his first visit to Joseph and the undignified litter placed at his disposal. To his relief, the ones provided were more masculine, although Bezar was in immediate difficulties trying to squeeze his ample frame into a confined space. Once again, there was a mutual decision to make no comment.

They were the first to arrive at Joseph's. Lucian was looking forward to an uninterrupted opportunity to pursue his two goals - the conclusion of his business contract - and his determination to bring his proposal of marriage to Rebecca to a head. His feeling of

wellbeing was quenched when Marcellus was announced. He looked sharply at Joseph and his sister, but they avoided his eye. He watched the entrance of Pilate's spy with undisguised hostility.

Marcellus had elected to dispense with his military dress, opting instead for a tunic and toga. He made an imposing figure, tall, elegant, the hardness of his military life still visible despite his choice of clothing. He looked equally startled to find Lucian and his party present, but was given no opportunity to retreat even if he had the inclination.

Joseph took his arm in the Roman greeting.

"You are welcome to my house, Marcellus."

The response was automatic.

"I thank you for your invitation, Lord Joseph."

It was Rebecca's turn, Lucian watched fascinated, well aware of her feelings for the man who had butchered her beloved Master. She was the unruffled hostess, greeting the man she despised with courtesy, and even a slight smile, but there was no warmth in it. Joseph gestured to Lucian and his party.

"You all know each other, I think - with the exception of Shamael ben Zerah."

Promptly on cue, the Babylonian moved forward and presented his arm in the exchange of greeting. He boomed.

"Bezar - call me Bezar! Everyone in Babylon knows Bezar the merchant."

Marcellus forced a smile.

"So - you come from Babylon. I've heard it's a great city."

"It is! It is - and Bezar is its greatest merchant!"

Marcellus nodded.

"You've come to Caesarea for trade?"

Bezar corrected him.

"I've come to the coast for trade. I make the journey two or three times a year - when I have got something of interest from the east - and there are always riches and unusual

things from out of India and beyond. I travel a great circle, usually through Damascus to Jerusalem and then to the coast, after that, I go home through Tyre and Sidon, and sometimes, Antioch.”

“You’re well travelled.”

“I gets monotonous after a while - I suppose you soldiers find it the same.”

Marcellus nodded his head in concession.

“It’s a hard life some times - you don’t get the chance to strike roots or make sound friends, before you move on somewhere else.”

He sounded bitter. Bezar didn’t relinquish his ear.

“I’ve always wanted to travel to Britannia - have you ever been that far?”

Marcellus shook his head.

“Only as far as Gaul - I had a tour of duty there before I came to Palestine.”

The use of the Roman term wasn’t challenged. Bezar rumbled on.

“Hispania, then - ever been to Hispania?”

Marcellus shook his head again.

“No - but there’s a branch of my family there - I’d like to go some time - perhaps, after I’ve finished my tour of duty here.”

Rebecca interjected.

“Are you on the move again, Marcellus?”

He looked a little surprised to be answering her.

“Not unless the Procurator has other ideas.”

The mention of Pilate was enough to quench the conversation. Bezar prattled on, apparently oblivious to the tension.

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“I met Lucian first on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem.”

He added slyly.

“He told me he was unhappy in love!”

Demas drawled in quiet amusement.

“I believe that’s been the situation ever since!”

Lucian’s embarrassment was saved by the arrival of Nathan. The elderly priest bowed his greetings to each of them. The number of invited guests was now complete, and Joseph led them to the feast.

The table was low and loaded with a variety of dishes. As a concession to their Gentile guests, the seating was in the Roman fashion - triple couches upon which the diners reclined.

There was a general shuffling around before the dining partners were accommodated. Whether by accident or design, Lucian found himself paired with Marcellus - he was inclined to accept the arrangement as some perverse stratagem of their hostess. He glared in the direction of Rebecca, who returned the look calmly. He muttered to Marcellus.

“This wasn’t my idea!”

“Nor mine!”

If there was any humour to be found in the situation, it was the sight of Bezar and Demas trying to sort themselves out. Bezar had taken first place and his flowing robes covered most of the remainder of the couch. Demas twitched aside enough to make himself remotely comfortable at the other end of the seat.

The tension gradually eased as they dined. Bezar tended to monopolise the conversation. Lucian noticed that Joseph paid him particular attention, interrupting the flow occasionally to clarify some point, which was usually of a commercial nature. As the feasting drew to a close, he looked across at Lucian.

“Perhaps, we could excuse ourselves for a moment, and talk a little business with Bezar?”

Lucian nodded, it was a welcome excuse to get away from the silent Marcellus. He glanced at Rebecca, who looked totally unruffled by the prospect of entertaining Demas

and her enemy the Centurion. Joseph led the way into another room - he turned to them

“I wanted to discuss our business arrangements without them being reported to Pilate.”

Lucian answered abruptly.

“I’m surprised you invited him, Joseph - especially considering how Rebecca dislikes him”

Bezar looked mystified.

“I thought I felt a tension.”

Lucian jibed.

“That was the buttons of your tunic straining!”

Joseph drew them back to business.

“Bezar - Lucian and I are on the point of entering into a mutually beneficial partnership - I’ve listened to you and I can see you might have something to offer us if you decide to join us. I haven’t spoken to Lucian about this, and I can’t expect him to answer immediately, but I believe we have the basis for discussion - what’s your reaction.”

Bezar looked lost for words, he managed to respond.

“I’d be honoured to discuss such matters with you both, Lord Joseph!”

“It’s settled then - tomorrow we go over the details and try to conclude the contract.”

They clasped hands in agreement. Joseph continued.

“Now - we’d better go and rescue Rebecca from her worst enemy!”

Bezar’s curiosity got the better of him.

“If it isn’t a secret - what does she have against the noble Centurion?”

Joseph’s face was set hard.

“The noble Centurion was the one who crucified the Master!”

Lucian eyed him sharply, it was the first time that Joseph had come out so positively in public. Bezar’s reaction was even more surprising. The mountainous Babylonian seemed to swell in size. He hissed.

“He was the one who murdered the Master?”

Joseph gripped his arm.

“Are you a follower, Bezar?”

The big man nodded.

“In Jerusalem - on the day of Pentecost, ten days after the Master ascended into heaven, there was a mighty sound of a rushing wind, and tongues of fire touched upon all those who were together in the storehouse of Joseph Bar Nabas. The Spirit of God touched upon them and they were filled with a power which spilled out over their lips. Peter preached a mighty sermon and three thousand souls were added to the community in that day - I was one of them. So it's been since - every day brings new followers and mighty wonders are performed by Peter and the others of the Twelve.”

Joseph said sharply.

“You mean Eleven, surely?”

Bezar shook his head.

“They are Twelve again, another man took the place of the traitor!”

Joseph subsided into a chair.

“Tell me more.”

Bezar quickly summarised what he knew. He had left Jerusalem soon after the first days and his information was by no means up-to-date, but it was the first that Joseph had heard of the activities which had sprung into life. Bezar concluded.

“Those who were in Jerusalem for Pentecost came from many different provinces - many were baptised with water, and the Twelve placed their hands on them to give them the Holy Spirit. They've gone back to their own cities and they'll spread the word, of that you can be sure. There's no going back now, the Master's word is spreading throughout Judaea and Samaria - and you can be sure - Galilee too. It's like a grass fire and thousands are flocking to hear the words of the Master.”

Joseph looked close to tears, he said unsteadily.

“Rebecca will be so happy to hear your news, Bezar - now I know that my instinct to talk to you was right.”

He turned to the silent Lucian who had been listening.

“It is right, Lucian - Bezar is a man we can trust.”

Lucian found his voice.

“I’m certain he is - although not for the same reasons.”

Bezar looked at him with interest.

“You don’t believe in the Master, Lucian?”

With some bitterness, the young Roman answered.

“How can I believe in your Messiah, Bezar - I’m only a Gentile!”

Joseph interjected softly.

“Yet, he saved you from death and healed a wound which was slowly killing you! How else do you explain a wound which heals overnight and the expulsion of poison from your body, which no medication could counter. You’re alive and you should be dead!”

Lucian shook his head.

“I don’t know - I haven’t got your faith, Joseph.”

“But you could have - if only you would allow it to enter into your heart - and if only you could learn to yield your stubborn will!”

Joseph’s vehemence was uncharacteristic. Lucian eyed him mutely and nodded.

“Perhaps you’re right, Joseph - perhaps in time - if Gentiles can be counted as men and not something inferior!”

Joseph continued the duel.

“Jesus healed you - a Gentile - does that make you less than a Jew?”

Lucian broke off the engagement.

“We ought to go back to Rebecca.”

Bezar growled.

“I don’t know if I can face him without spitting in his face!”

Joseph looked hard at him.

“If Rebecca can do it - so can you. Marcellus is here because I consider him less dangerous as a friend, than as an enemy. I ask you to respect my wishes and start no arguments with him under my roof!”

Bezar nodded.

“I’ll start no argument - and I’ll smile sweetly and talk softly - and spit into his face in my mind every time I look at him!”

Joseph said softly.

“John told me that Jesus forgave even Marcellus, when he was dying on the cross - can we do otherwise, Bezar!? Love your enemies and those who spitefully use you!”

They returned to Rebecca and the others. Demas had stepped into the breach and was holding forth on the glories of his ancient homeland, and the quality of life he enjoyed in the Greek colonies on the coast of his province. Joseph apologised.

“We were a little longer than I anticipated.”

Rebecca said a little tartly.

“Joseph tends to get carried away when it comes to business.”

Her brother countered.

“It keeps a roof over our heads and food on the table, sweet sister.”

Lucian attached himself to Marcellus’ shadow. The Centurion looked at him sharply.

“I’ve come to wave the flag of truce, Marcellus - I shouldn’t have tried to kill the messenger - I’m sorry.”

Marcellus’ mouth twitched into a smile.

“You have a big mouth that’ll get you into trouble some day, my friend. The messenger boy returned to his master, but he’d forgotten most of what you said! What Pilate does not know, can’t hurt him!”

Lucian gripped Marcellus arm.

“Thank you! I valued our friendship - but I think it got lost along the way somewhere.”

Marcellus nodded. He grinned.

“Perhaps we ought to get drunk and tell each other the story of our lives!”

Lucian nodded.

“I’ll bring the wine - you pick the place!”

They returned to the rest. Nathan was gone, he’d excused himself at the end of the meal.

Lucian tried desperately to separate Rebecca from her guests and finally succeeded.

He led her on to the balcony, took her hands and pleaded.

“When are we going to stop dancing around each other.”

For once she didn’t try to evade the issue, allowing him to keep her hands.

“We can stop dancing right now, Lucian. I will marry you!”

His eyes widened, the shock of her submission almost winded him. He seized her shoulders and then kissed her with an intensity which surprised even him. Eventually he released her lips and stared into her face, now so close to his.

“I can’t believe I heard you say it - you will marry me?”

She nodded.

“I will marry you - but we have to talk sensibly first.”

He cried out joyfully.

“I don’t want to be sensible! I won’t be sensible! I’ll shout it from the housetops!”

She put her finger on his lips and laughed shakily.

“You’ll be quiet - and you’ll listen to me!”

“I’ll obey - I’m your slave!”

“I don’t want a slave - I want a husband!”

He drew her close again and kissed her, this time not so forcefully. He released her.

“I’m listening!”

“Don’t kiss me again! I want to get my thoughts in order.”

“I’ll give you one minute, and then I won’t be bound not to kiss you!”

“Be quiet!”

“Yes, mistress.”

She giggled.

“You’re a fool!”

“Just now, I was a slave - in a few minutes, I’ll be your lover!”

She pulled out of his encircling arms and straightened her dress.

“Sit down, Lucian!”

He obeyed and she placed herself out of his reach.

“I want you to know that I’ve given your proposal of marriage a great deal of thought - and I’ve asked the advice of many people. You know well enough my objections about a Jew marrying a Gentile.”

He interrupted her seriously.

“And you know that I’m willing to undergo - circumcision!”

She flushed a little.

“Lucian - circumcision is only the outer sign of the Covenant with God. The true covenant occurs within the heart - even a Jew can have the outer sign, but he can be uncircumcised in his heart - do you understand me?”

He nodded.

“You want me to abandon my gods and follow your God. I know the difficulties I can expect if I do that - but I’m willing.”

“It’s not only a question of abandoning old gods and following a new one - its a question of surrendering to the One God, knowing that he is the Almighty One of Israel - knowing that he is the provider of all our blessings and that he is our supporter in all circumstances. To follow the One God, means so much more than a casual acceptance.”

“I’m willing to learn.”

Again she nodded and then went on softly.

“Now - there is the matter of the Master.”

Lucian moved restlessly and she noticed.

“You see! You’re uncomfortable, even when I mention his name.”

He shook his head.

“You’re wrong - already this evening I’ve had a conversation with Joseph on this very subject - did you know that Bezar is a follower of the Master as well - he brought news from Jerusalem.”

Her eyes had widened.

“What news!?”

“You can ask him yourself - when we’re finished here.”

She nodded.

“I intend to devote my life to the Master. I believe he’s the Son of the Living God and that his teaching comes from the Father, who is our God. I know that I can live in no other way - but now I have to ask you if you’re willing to live with a wife who will sometimes be forced to put her God before you? Are you prepared to accept that I will not bow my knee to Roman gods, even if it means my life! Are you prepared to allow your sons and daughters to be given to the Master, to be baptised with water in the name of Jesus. Will there ever come a time when you will demand that I no longer follow my God, or that you refuse to allow your children to be reared in the ways of the Master, perhaps, because some high official in Rome tells you that you will suffer unless you bring me into line! Tell me, Lucian, are you prepared to accept me under those conditions - will there ever come a time when your love for me turns to hatred because of the Master I follow. If that were to be the case, I would rather die now than then - for, have no doubts, I’ll submit to death if that’s forced upon me in the future.”

He cried out uneasily.

“Don’t talk of death, my darling. I vow to you, I’ll live with you according to your rules. I’ll allow you to rear my children in the way of the Master. If you’re forced to face death beca

use of what you believe - I'll face death with you! I love you and I want you - and all other things will take their place because of that love. Perhaps I'll learn to understand the teaching of the Master too - and follow as you do."

She surrendered to his embrace and wept against him. She could feel that he was crying too. She drew back and sniffed and told him.

"Wipe your nose, it's running!"

"A nagging wife already!"

They returned to the others. Marcellus was in animated conversation with Demas. Joseph and Bezar were in another corner, the Babylonian's arms waving as he emphasised a point.

The conversations lapsed as Lucian and Rebecca came in from the balcony. Joseph's eyes grew watchful. Lucian stepped towards him.

"Joseph, I ask your permission to marry Rebecca. I'll care for her and love her. I'll never impose my will on her when it comes to her faith and her following. Our children will be reared in accordance with her faith and desires. This I swear before you and before these witnesses!"

Joseph stared at him steadily without smiling. There was a long pause.

"Is this also your desire and understanding, sister?"

Rebecca answered firmly.

"It is, brother."

Joseph raised his hands above them.

"May God bless your covenant with love and grace! I gladly surrender my sister into your hands, Lucian!"

He embraced him. Lucian stepped back, he looked a little dazed. There were congratulations from the others. Demas, quietly smiling and deferential. Bezar, looking as if he always cried at weddings. Marcellus reserved, but sincere enough.

So it was, that Lucian achieved his evening's objectives - a contract with Joseph - but

above all, he had won the heart of the woman he had once thought unattainable.