

14.

Nebet maintained a close watch on Judah on the day following his secretive visit to the Temple. Judah had almost fled from the city on the previous evening, and Nebet had no trouble in trailing him back to the camp at Bethany. Jesus and the Twelve followed their usual practice of going to the Temple early in the morning. Nebet joined with the second group which accompanied them. Judah of Kerioth went about his usual tasks, but it appeared to Nebet that his actions were mechanical. It was very clear that his mind was on other matters. There was another curious thing, he stayed much closer to the other eleven, as if to avoid any possibility of contact with the arguing lawyers pressing around the Master. The day passed uneventfully, except for the usual attempts to entrap Jesus by the priestly lawyers. Close to sunset, they all made their way back to the camp on Olivet, but Nebet didn't relax his watchfulness. As usual, he was joined by Jonah, this time, he was without his friend Marcus.

At the evening fire, after they had eaten a simple supper, Jesus suddenly said to the Twelve.

"In two days it will be Passover. The Son of Man will then be handed over for crucifixion!"

The story-teller and Jonah were close enough to hear it and saw the exchange of looks between the Twelve - but no one seemed ready to make a protest, or to question him. Nebet watched Judah closely, and it seemed to him, that he shrank away from contact with the others, although he stayed within the circle around the fire.

It was much later in the evening, when most of them had drifted away to their beds on the hard ground, that the Judah repeated the pattern of the previous night. He slipped away into the darkness of the hillside, and Nebet followed him stealthily as he returned

to the city, entering through the east gate, and then making his way to the Temple.

What Nebet didn't realise at the time was, that he in turn, he was also being followed. It was only when he was safely hidden in the deep shadow of a house wall, and watching an animated conversation between Judah and the three Pharisees of the previous evening, that he was suddenly asked.

"What are you doing, Nebet?"

The story-teller afterwards supposed he rose about half his height into the air with the shock of the sudden challenge. He whirled around and clapped his hand over the mouth of his questioner. Jonah's eyes grew wide and eloquent above the restraining hand. Nebet glared at him and mouthed.

"Be silent! Understand?"

Jonah stared at him for a long moment, blinked and nodded. Nebet cautiously removed his hand from over the boy's mouth, ready to clamp it back at the slightest sound. He looked quickly at the four men who were deep in conversation, but they didn't appear to have heard - in fact, they were already moving to enter through the eastern door of the temple. Nebet eyed them in frustration - it was impossible to follow without being challenged.

There were Temple Guards everywhere. Jonah mouthed.

"What are you doing?"

Nebet hissed an angry response.

"More to the point - what do you mean by trailing me!?"

"I saw you sneak off after Judah."

"And that gave you the right to sneak off after me!?"

"I wanted to see where you were going."

"So - now you know!"

Jonah persisted.

"Why are you following Judah?"

Nebet looked at the entrance through which the quartet had entered.

"I'd like to know what they're hatching."

"Hatching?"

"Judah's up to no good - but I couldn't get close enough to hear."

"Why don't you ask him outright - instead of sneaking behind walls!?"

"That's the second time you've accused me of sneaking around - I'll

wash out your mouth if you're not careful! - I told you, Judah's up to no good - do you expect he'll tell me the truth if I challenge him?"

Jonah was silenced at last. Nebet sighed and looked longingly at the guarded gate.

Jehuda, Nemuel and Zerah escorted Judah into the depths of the Temple complex.

They crossed the bridge which linked it to the palace of the High Priest. They walked in silence through richly decorated passages and rooms, but Judah was given little chance to admire the opulence with which Caiaphas was surrounded.

Abruptly, the man from Kerioth found himself confronted by an assembly of people, who had fallen silent on his arrival. They were richly dressed and seated at a table loaded with food. Judah looked at it with longing, but then focused his eyes on the High Priest, who had risen from his seat at the head of the long table.

Caiaphas was a man in his fifties, his hair already iron grey, as was his full beard. He was richly robed in the traditional dress of a Pharisee, his fringed outer tunic trailing the floor. He was an imposing man, a little corpulent, but well aware of his impact on lesser men. Those at the table with him were similarly dressed, and Judah assessed them to be the senior priests of the Temple, together with some of the more influential men of the city. He saw no one he knew - and he was glad - he wanted no news of his excursion into the nest of the enemy, to reach the Master and his brothers of the Twelve.

In the silence which accompanied his entry, he had time to think of the foolishness of what he was doing - but it was now too late to retreat. Nemuel, in particular, had done

his task well. His persuasiveness had convinced Judah that the plan to confront Jesus with his own undoubted power, and to compel him to use it in the presence of Caiaphas, would be the ultimate proof to convince the High Priest that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

Nemuel spoke from behind him.

“Judah of Kerioth - my Lord - a follower of Jesus of Nazareth - he requests an audience with your Excellency.”

Caiaphas continued to stare speculatively at Judah.

“So you are a follower of the false prophet! I am hardly surprised to find that the Galilean sends an emissary, rather than to show his face to us!”

It wasn't an auspicious start. Judah cleared his throat.

“I haven't come as an emissary, Lord Caiaphas.”

Caiaphas again took his time to respond.

“That being the case, I am intrigued - I have been informed that you, together with eleven others, are one of his closest followers!”

Judah faltered.

“I'm astonished that your Excellency is aware of that.”

“I am aware of everything pertaining to the man you call the Master - tell me, does he still claim to be the Messiah!?”

It was a sudden attack. Judah blinked.

“He is the Messiah, Lord Caiaphas!”

The High Priest turned to those gathered at the table.

“You see, my brothers, what confronts us! - The whole people are being carried away with this wild talk! Where can it lead us - except to disaster!”

Nemuel interposed quietly.

“Judah has a solution to the problem, Lord Caiaphas.”

Caiaphas turned again - he slowly resumed his seat and then stared at Judah, who

was left standing in isolation with the eyes of the group fixed on him. Caiaphas responded softly.

“So - you claim to have a solution? How can you have a solution, when we, the most learned and powerful in the land, have found no solution!?”

Judah hesitated again - this was the crux of the plan.

“I have become concerned with the way the Master is leading us - I want to put an end to it!”

There was a murmur of interest from those at the table. Caiaphas waited for it to die away - he said nothing, but continued to stare at him steadily. Judah drew breath.

“I am prepared to hand him over to you - for a consideration!”

He waited, conscious that his heart was pounding rapidly - he was sure, quite loud enough to be heard. Caiaphas echoed softly.

“A consideration?”

Judah licked his lips.

“Fifty silver shekels!”

Caiaphas smiled and leaned back, he eyed Judah with contempt.

“A truly healthy consideration, I think you would agree, brothers!?”

He leaned forward again.

“Out of the question! There are others ways to secure this man - I might consider ten shekels - but, even that would be an extravagance.”

Judah drew himself up.

“I can deliver him to you without the possibility of a disturbance - and you will be free of him and his influence!”

Caiaphas nodded slowly. There was another thoughtful pause.

“I will offer you twenty - no more!”

Judah became eloquent.

“This is Jesus of Nazareth - who calls himself the Messiah - he’s not simply a rabble-

raiser like some of the prophets from Galilee. You know yourselves the influence he has with the people - enough, in time, to cause great damage to the temple - and to the priests! - I will accept forty shekels!"

Caiaphas shook his head in apparent wonderment.

"You are truly a contemptible creature! You are prepared to bargain away the freedom of a man you call your friend and Master, for a bagful of silver? I feel myself made unclean by this dirty trading with you! Very well! Let's have an end to this repulsive bargaining! - I will give you thirty pieces of silver for him - take it - or leave!"

Judah licked his lips once more, and stared into the derisive face of the High Priest. He fortified himself with the thought that the sneer of contempt would quickly be replaced when the Master was forced to show his undoubted power.

"I'll take it!

Caiaphas' sneer of contempt increased. He gestured to Jehuda.

"Weigh out thirty pieces of silver in his presence! Remember this, Judah of Kerioth - our arrangement is as follows: It must be done quickly and it must not be done during the festival, otherwise we might be faced with rioting. You will receive your payment when you've delivered him - not before. The silver will be weighed out, but kept within the treasury - that's my final offer."

Judah nodded mutely.

"Now go - when you come again, it will be to hand him to us!"

Judah bowed, turned and was led away by the trio who had brought him to Caiaphas.

Behind him, there was an animated discussion at the table. Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, congratulated him.

"Masterfully handled, Caiaphas - now, I think, we have the troublemaker!"

Caiaphas was a little flushed with success. His eyes glinted in the light of the torches.

"Our eloquent students, Jehuda, Nemuel and Zerah did well! I agree, now we have him!

This time, he won't escape us! - But brothers, what a contemptible creature we have to

deal with. I didn't exaggerate when I said I felt unclean!"

Nemuel and Zerah escorted Judah to the outer gate and before they parted, Nemuel clapped him on the shoulder.

"You played your part exceptionally well, Judah! I think you completely convinced the Lord Caiaphas. He thinks you're prepared to deliver the Messiah to him - and has no idea that it will force the issue in his presence. You can be extremely proud of your night's work!"

They parted and Judah left the Temple, totally unaware that two pairs of eyes were witnessing his every step. Nebet restrained Jonah until there was a comfortable distance between them. The streets of the city were still busy, and Judah was easy to observe until he left the east gate. There was a change in him on this occasion, unlike the previous night, when he had almost fled from the lighted torches in the streets. Whatever had happened within the temple, had brought the subject of his visit to a head.

Nebet debated what he should do. He had no doubt that his former friend and companion was up to no good - but of what could he accuse him? Was it a crime to talk to three Pharisees, or to go with them into the Temple, or to return an hour later? It wasn't something he could bring to the Master - there was always the remote possibility that this was some commission he had received from Jesus - perhaps, with strict instructions to keep the matter secret - even from the rest of the Twelve.

Jonah padded along beside him, and for a short while respected his silence - but it wasn't to last for long.

"What do you think he was doing?"

"I don't know."

"You said he was up to no good."

"Perhaps."

"You said he would tell you a lie if you asked him what he was doing."

“So I did.”

“So - what are you going to do?”

Nebet considered it.

“Watch and wait - what else can I do.”

Jonah danced in front of him.

“Tell the Master - or Simon!”

Nebet came to an abrupt halt.

“Tell them what exactly? Accuse Judah of what?”

Jonah glared at him.

“Talking to the enemy!”

“Not every Pharisee is our enemy - some are our friends - the younger ones in particular
Perhaps, the three young men we saw with him, wanted him to talk to others - I don't
know! There are a dozen different reasons why he met with them, and went off with
them!”

“So - why did you sneak after him!?”

Nebet eyed him steadily.

“When we get back to camp, I'll do as I promised, young Jonah!”

Jonah responded eagerly.

“Tell the Master?”

“Wash out your mouth with strong soap!”

It was at this point that Jonah elected to return to his lodgings.

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It was late afternoon on the first day of the festival of Unleavened
Bread, which is the day when the Passover lambs are slaughtered. Peter took John to
one side.

“Has the Master told you where he wants to spend the Passover.”

John shook his head.

“He’s said nothing to me - I thought maybe with Lazarus and his sisters.”

“I don’t think so - the Master told me he doesn’t want to put them in any greater danger - that’s why we’re camping on Olivet instead of staying at the house. The priests hate Lazarus as much as they hate Jesus. If they could have found a way of killing both of them without causing a riot, they would have done so by now!”

“I suppose the only thing to do is to ask him.”

“If we want an answer, I suppose we must!”

They found Jesus sitting under a tree with some of the others. John sat down beside him.

“Peter and I where wondering where you would you like us to prepare for the Passover supper?”

Jesus smiled.

“And Peter told you, if you want an answer, you’d better ask the question! Very well! We’ll eat the Passover supper in Jerusalem - but we’ll do it in a place apart from our other friends. You and Peter must go into the city, and you’ll straight away find a man carrying a jar of water. Follow him, and when he enters a house you’ll ask the householder - in my name - to show you the room which has been prepared for me to eat the Passover with my disciples. He’ll show you a large room upstairs, and it’ll be laid out ready for the feast. Make the preparations for us there.”

Peter and John looked at each other, and immediately set out for the city, back over the Mount of Olives. They entered through the east gate without being challenged. At first, there was no sign of a man carrying water.

Peter muttered to John.

“Carrying water isn’t a man’s job! A woman carrying water - yes - a man - no!”

“If he said a man, he meant a man!”

Peter growled.

"I suppose he did!

John pointed to the road which led up from the Pool of Siloam. Along it, climbing slowly under the load of a huge water jar, was a man. Peter stepped forward to talk to him and found himself restrained by the arm. John said insistently.

"Jesus said follow - not talk!"

Peter shrugged.

"You're right - we follow!"

They kept a reasonable distance from the toiling figure, who had paid them no attention when he passed. Before long, they came to the door of a tall house, which reared up from the narrow confines of an alley. The man entered through the open arch and into a courtyard. Peter muttered.

"Similar place to Mary of Cyrene's"

The householder appeared. John didn't wait for Peter to speak.

"The Master has sent us to ask you to show us the room prepared for him to eat the Passover supper."

The man nodded and turned without a word, leading the way up a narrow flight of stairs to the upper floor. He said gruffly.

"This is the room."

It was a long room, quite large, with a centre table and a series of couches of the Roman style grouped around it.

John turned to Peter.

"Now we can make it ready."

The householder had disappeared. Peter shrugged.

"Not a talkative man."

John nodded.

"But he must be one of Jesus' friends, otherwise, why would the room be prepared for him and for us? It takes all sorts to be a follower."

They busied themselves setting the table for thirteen places, and buying the necessities for the feast. When they were finished they checked the result. Peter murmured.

“Mary is staying with the other women in the city - but he chooses to eat the supper with us and not his mother.”

“He must have his reasons.”

Peter flared.

“Of course he has his reasons! I wasn’t suggesting he had no thoughts for his mother!”

John saw the wisdom of keeping silent. Peter was becoming more and more tense as every day passed in the City of David. The ever present threat of the High Priests and those he could influence, was acting upon all their nerves. They left the house and reported back to Jesus.

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Other events took place on that day, which, on the surface, were totally unrelated to the Passover supper.

Rebecca had stayed by the bedside of the rambling Lucian, and had tried to reduce the raging fever. Eventually, exhausted, she had fallen asleep in her chair, and Naomi had firmly shaken her awake and led her away - returning with Joseph to their home.

Early on the next morning, Rebecca had insisted on going back to the Antonia - once there, she had demanded to see the surgeon. There was some delay before he arrived, which she spent by the bedside of the sick man. Praxtus paused in the doorway before entering, he had been informed that the lady had quite a temper.

“My lady, Rebecca - I am Praxtus.”

She stared at him imperiously.

“It is my intention to move Lucian to my house!”

Praxtus shrugged.

“If you do so, you may kill him! The poison could travel to the heart.

Only by laying undisturbed does he have a chance of recovery.”

“Not to do so, will certainly kill him! This is worse than a dungeon pit!”

Praxtus smiled tightly.

“I can assure you, my lady - the dungeon pit of the Antonia is considerably worse!”

Rebecca glared at him.

“I intend to have him moved!”

Praxtus bowed.

“That is your prerogative, my lady. I have given my opinion - but you are free to do as you suggest.”

She had expected a stronger fight - it looked as if the surgeon had lost interest in his patient. It made her more determined.

“It will be arranged within the hour!”

Praxtus bowed and left without another word. Tachius, who had been a silent witness, broke his silence.

“It’s always possible that he may go to Pilate.”

“Then, let him! He’s left Lucian to die! I shall have words to say to Pilate if he attempts to interfere!”

Demas interjected softly.

“I believe the lady Rebecca will rout the entire garrison single handed - from Pilate to the youngest cadet - unless we help her to remove Lucian!”

Rebecca produced a small purse of coins, and gave them to Tachius.

“We can buy help from the soldiers. Tell them there is more to come when we reach Joseph’s house!”

Tachius grinned a little - Lucian had made a good choice - this woman could burn down a city single-handed!

“This will be enough coin, my lady! I’ll wave it under their noses - and pay them when they deliver - If we pay them now, they’ll go to the nearest tavern, and leave you and

Lucian here to rot!”

Tachius departed. Demas murmured.

“An old soldier knows all the tricks - trust him!”

Within the hour, four robust troopers presented themselves, bearing a litter. They eyed Rebecca appreciatively, but were careful to watch their conduct under the militant eye of Tachius. Lucian was transferred from his trestle to the litter. Rebecca watched anxiously for any sign of deterioration in his condition.

The journey out of the Antonia was slow, but they weren’t hindered at the gate - apparently Tachius had seen to it that a few coins had changed hands - enough to oil the way. Lucian was carried through the streets to Joseph’s house and deposited in the inner court. The soldiers were paid off and departed contentedly for the nearest tavern to earn themselves thick heads, and a possible participation in a subsequent brawl.

Tachius shook his head - he knew the type - he had been one of them himself!

Lucian was received into the care of Joseph’s household, as was Demas, and Rebecca relaxed at last, content that everything now would be done to bring about his recovery - and blissfully unaware of the drama about to unfold only a few hundreds of yards distant.