

Joseph, Saul and Eli remained with Simon-Peter for a number of days. The emotion and elation felt by Joseph when Simon had - he searched for the word - 'commissioned' him, had been swiftly replaced by a sense of his own inadequacy. The prospect of proclaiming the Master's message openly before huge crowds filled him with a kind of panic. To negotiate with his trading peers, or to drive a fair bargain, even in the face of intense opposition, had never been difficult for him, for his father had ensured that he had been exposed to every facet of their trading empire before his death. Joseph had been able to take up the responsibility and quickly learned that he had a natural ability to face even the most daunting and experienced opposition. At first, there had been serious attempts to take advantage of the young man who now managed a substantial empire, but this had quickly evaporated into a healthy respect when it was seen that he more than capable of holding his own.

To proclaim the Master's doctrine was a totally different prospect. To allow himself to give utterance as the Spirit directed, was an unknown and terrifying concept. Simon had given him further commissions - to baptise, to bless, to break bread and drink wine in remembrance of the Master - even to heal the sick if it was so ordained. Joseph shrank from the responsibility, from a commitment so final, that there could be no return once started. On the night which followed his commission, he could find no sleep. The ground was more hard than he could ever imagine and every rock appeared to have worked to the surface to ram a sharp edge against his shoulder blades.

On the following day, he had made up his mind to go to Simon to withdraw, but Simon was too quick for him - as he approached, the big fisherman broke off from his sermon and gestured towards him, even before he came within speaking distance.

"Here is a man I would like you to meet! This is Joseph - he is a brave man, unafraid even of the Roman Procurator!"

He paused and Joseph could have sworn that there was a glimmer of humour in his eyes.

Simon continued.

"This is THE Joseph, who went to Pilate and begged to be allowed to take down the body of the Master from the cross - with his own hands, he anointed him and laid him in his own tomb - and from that tomb, the Master arose on the third day to be seen by many - but let Joseph tell you some of the story for himself."

Against his will and inclination, Joseph found himself the centre of hundreds of eyes, many were sympathetic, others were cautious, watchful - while others were hostile. He hesitated and then, because he was obliged to speak, he told them the story as simply as he could.

"Like many of you here today, I was not always a believer in the Master's sending. One who should stand before you today - my sister, Rebecca - is far away. The story starts with her, she came to believe in the Master and joined those who followed him, in company with other women - she helped in the ministrations of the sick and the troubled, and led them to the Master when they had no strength to take the last steps.

On the day the Master died, she came to me and told me that he was standing before the High Council and that it was their intention to put him to death. I hurried to the temple and tried to put a stop to what was happening, but already, the Master had been handed over to the Romans. I was forced to go home again, there was nothing more I could do. News was brought to us that Jesus was condemned and that his life was to be taken on the cross. Once again, there was nothing I could do, for I had no influence with the Roman Procurator. Soon after three in the day, the word was brought to us that Jesus had died on the cross. Rebecca begged me to go to Pilate to ask for his body - she couldn't bear the thought that the crows would come to devour his flesh - or to

peck out his eyes. At first, I hesitated - I was unwilling - I admit, I was afraid - but she pleaded with me to go to Pilate and in the end I was able to do so, and to gain admittance to speak to him.

I asked him for the body of Jesus, I told him that it was not proper to leave it hanging on the cross over the Passover, and that, in any case, it might become an object of curiosity - it might even cause unrest. In the end he agreed, having confirmed with the centurion who had performed the execution that Jesus had indeed died. The centurion swore to it, saying; 'The man was dead, I ordered a lance to be thrust up into his side under the heart - the blood had separated, there was blood and water.'

Pilate wrote me the order - by this time it was fast approaching the Sabbath, with the sun already low in the sky. I sent - a friend - to find a man who was sympathetic to the Master, asking him to bring spices and oils for anointing the dead. I took some other helpers and showed the order to the soldiers guarding the Place of the Skull. We quickly lowered the Master to the ground and took out the terrible nails from his wrists and his feet, then we put him on a litter and carried him to a tomb I had purchased only a few weeks before - never believing that it would be put into use so quickly.

There we quickly anointed the Master and wrapped him in linen swathes, and placed him in the tomb, and then rolled a great stone over the entrance. It was done before the three stars appeared to signal the Sabbath, and we went home to eat the bread of sorrow."

Joseph came to an end, there was a profound silence, he looked again into the faces of the listeners. Those who were in sympathy were now weeping quietly, others who were cautious seemed less so - and those who were hostile, were hostile still. Simon-Peter stepped forward.

"This, my brethren was the man whose courage saved the Master's body from suffering the ravages of the birds of the air, or the corruption which comes upon all flesh when it dies. In a time when the mood of the Roman governor was unknown, he confronted

Pilate to ask for the body. Into his own grave he laid him - and it was to that grave, with its huge stone rolled over the entrance, that I hurried on the third morning - together with another of the Twelve, our brother John - to find the stone rolled back and the tomb empty!

Jesus the Master had risen! His body had not suffered corruption! He was alive again and was seen by many of us - as many as five hundred at one time! Jesus died - but Jesus lives for you and for me - and has gone to prepare a place for us so that we can be where he is!"

This time there was a murmur from the crowd - the waverers looked almost convinced - then a thin, sterile voice spoke from the front ranks.

"I ask Joseph - how can he be sure that the man he took down from the cross was truly Jesus of Nazareth and if so, how can he be sure that he simply had not fainted and that he recovered after you placed him in the tomb?"

Joseph eyed him quietly. It was this sort who had asked the trick questions of Jesus, when he had given his teaching. He had no doubt that this was a lawyer from Jerusalem and that Simon attracted them wherever he told the Master's story.

"To answer your first question - yes, it was Jesus of Nazareth, the Roman soldier who had been part one of this executors, read Pilate's order and pointed to him - also, I knew Jesus personally - it was the Master!

To answer your second question - the wounds on the body had stopped bleeding. The wound under the heart was large and deep, one from which blood would have gushed had he still been alive. I handled the body of a dead man - I anointed a corpse, not one who had simply fainted. My heartfelt wish was that I could have helped him to recover. I looked for signs of life and there were none. I laid him in a tomb which was covered with a huge rock, needing three men to put it in place. The tomb was cut in the rock face and there was no other entrance. If, as you suggest, Jesus had simply fainted and had then recovered, he would not have had the strength to move aside the rock himself -

especially after the ordeal of crucifixion and the wounds he had suffered."

The man tried sarcasm.

"But we all know that Jesus was a miracle worker! Perhaps he used special powers to move the rock and free himself - even to appear dead to you - or perhaps he had friends who came and stole his body after you were gone!"

Joseph leaned forward.

"Friend - you can't have it both ways - you and your fellow lawyers have always declared Jesus to be an impostor! Now, you want him to have special powers with which he released himself. Make up your mind! Either Jesus was an impostor - or he was a man with powers not given to other men - which do you prefer? As for friends releasing him - you must know yourself that Caiaphas asked for Roman soldiers to guard the tomb - so that Jesus' followers couldn't come to steal the body. Do you know the testimony of these soldiers - you should!?"

They declared that an angel of God came down and moved the stone - and then, Caiaphas, your master, tried to bribe them to say that they were paid money to tell that story. Do you know that even Pilate the Procurator was persuaded by reports that Jesus walked the fields and hills? So much so, that he questioned the centurion time and time again, to ensure that he was telling the truth about Jesus' death.

Go back to your masters in Jerusalem and make them tell you the story - before you try to make us out to be liars!"

Joseph's voice had risen in strength, he glared into the eyes of the lawyer, who quickly turned aside and pushed out of the crowd. Several others followed him, he hadn't come alone. The rest of the crowd came forward and wanted to hear more. This time, Simon-Peter took up the story, telling them of what had followed after the Resurrection, he ended it simply.

"I tell you all this - but to what purpose if you can't believe and follow the Master who wants to redeem your souls? I say to you, as I say to all - if you want to enter into the

kingdom of God, believe, repent, be baptised in Jesus name, and then receive the gift of the Holy Ghost - but it must be your intention to follow thereafter, and to strive to be worthy for the Master who died for you!"

There followed a movement in the crowd of those who came forward with their various petitions. The helpers organised them - those to be healed, those to receive the baptism of water and the subsequent dispensing of the Spirit of God, by the laying on of Simon-Peter's hands. Joseph saw the clear indication of the power the big fisherman had been given. Without any doubt, some of those sick and afflicted were immediately healed - others not so apparently. He witnessed the beginning of a new life by the dual baptisms - and that many of those who had been so cautious were now ready to commit themselves. He prayed that their faith would not evaporate away as swiftly as it had come.

So many of the Master's teachings swirled around in this thoughts. The parable of the sower and his seed and the variable outcomes - so it was with these souls, the seed was sown, but was the soil hard and dry, stony, or choked with weeds - or was it the good soil where a harvest could materialise?

Did those who had been healed bring a greater faith than those who apparently had not been? He remembered the words of Jesus: 'Your faith has made you whole.' By the time the end of the day came, he was exhausted, but Simon-Peter appeared untouched by fatigue. They ate together, close to the fire. Simon said softly.

"You did extremely well today, Joseph."

Joseph laughed equally softly.

"I tell you honestly, Simon, I had intended to tell you I wasn't prepared to do it!"

"I know! For that reason, I made sure you tried - and my confidence that you could do it wasn't misplaced!"

Joseph nodded.

"I thought as much - that you trapped me, I mean! - I found it much easier than I had

imagined - once I allowed myself to talk naturally - I hope I did talk naturally!?"

Simon's laugh was a low rumble.

"You were a river where the ice suddenly thawed and the water gushed free! You handled yourself exceptionally well with our spies from Jerusalem. I think you told them a few things they didn't know."

Joseph was silent for a moment, then:

"How do you keep your temper with them, Simon - I confess, there were times when I felt like taking them physically and throwing them out of the gathering!"

Simon leaned back and stared at him in amusement.

"I see we have another Son of Thunder!"

Joseph was perplexed.

"I don't know what you mean."

"The Master once told James and John that they were Sons of Thunder, when they wanted to call upon God to send down fire from heaven to devour a village where we had been refused shelter. Jesus simply told them to find another one!

You must learn patience, Joseph - don't allow your zeal to drive you into actions which will reflect badly on our doctrine of peace to all men. Always remember that Jesus had the power to strike down those who persecuted him - the ones who came to arrest him in the garden found that out, he threw them to the ground - but then he allowed them to take him and bind him. Jesus didn't have to die on the cross, he could have called down a legion of angels to free him at any time he chose - but he didn't choose - instead he allowed himself to die for us.

Remember, the men who came today and those who will come in the future, are sent by the Evil One to try to show you as a man of war, rather than a teacher of righteousness. They will come with their sly, trick questions and try to make you look a fool - and as it was today, you will find an answer by the Spirit, and you will send them on their way in discomfort. So it always was when the Master had dealings with them!"

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Apolonius loomed over Rebecca and told her the bad news.

"The passes are completely blocked, not even the Imperial Couriers can get through to the north!"

What he didn't add - because he was trying not to scare her - was that it would be a close thing for any party trapped in the mountains when the blizzard struck. She stared at him, not fully comprehending.

"But, Apolonius - we must go on! We can't simply wait here in Mediolanum - I must reach my husband without delay!"

He shook his head.

"It simply isn't possible, my lady - the passes are closed. There's no way through - no matter how determined you are!"

He added - more as a palliative for the bad news.

"It also means that your husband can't return - the passes are closed to him too - and the rest of his party."

She digested it, once again, seeing her vulnerability - her smallness, he had the insane desire to hold her in his arms and tell her that everything would be all right. He wondered what was the matter with him - he had a wife and two children - he didn't need the wife of another man and her two children! He hoped he kept his feelings from showing on his face, but it was becoming increasingly difficult. She looked up at him suddenly.

"We're trapped! It won't take long for Caligula to find out where we are - or that we're travelling together. It might be better if you took your men and rode somewhere else."

He stared at her - it might be better if he went - but not for the reasons she had given.

"If it's your wish, my lady, then, we'll go."

She wailed.

"It isn't my wish! It'll be better for you if you're not here when Caesar's men come for us!"

"We won't leave you unprotected, my lady!"

She held his eyes.

"Who will protect you when the Praetorians come and someone recognises you."

"All the more reason why we should go, perhaps - that way we won't bring trouble on your head for helping us to escape from the south."

She gestured wearily.

"One more trouble added to the rest doesn't make much difference."

"Then, we stay!"

"If that's your decision."

He was quiet for a few minutes.

"Is there no one you know here where you can shelter?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know anyone in Italia - except a few enemies in Rome!"

He was silent again.

"We ought to move on, the longer we stay, the more likely we'll be remembered."

She nodded vigorously.

"That's why we should continue north!"

He answered abruptly.

"That's impossible until the passes are open."

He left her and went back to the quarters he shared with his companions. Questus was the only one there. He asked sharply.

"Where are the others?"

"Watching the gate to the south - and listening to gossip in the markets. I don't have to ask how the lady took your news."

Apolonius nodded grimly.

"I feel like we're in a trap! We're hunted men sitting in the middle of a camp of the legions. A Praetorian Cohort can come up from Rome at any time looking for Rebecca -

Questus silently noted the use of the praenomen.

"Time to move on, perhaps?"

"It's already been suggested - I said no!"

Questus' eyebrows twitched. It had been assumed - no discussion! Again, he said nothing, but when his three companions returned half-frozen and out of temper, and when Apolonius had left them for another of his private excursions - the matter was discussed in muted voices.

In Rome, Gaius Caesar had graciously agreed to receive Lucinda. He had, of course, noticed her. She was yet another of those beautiful young - and not so young - women, who dressed to catch the eye and attract the wandering gaze of anyone likely to render an inattentive husband jealous. It was a totally provincial attitude - not because similar women in Rome did it differently, but because the average wife of a Roman administrator in the provinces expected a reaction and thought she knew when she could draw back. Lucinda was yet to learn that in Rome matters came to a head in a different way - especially if she was trying her wiles on Gaius Caesar! He contemplated these things when she was led forward by the chamberlain. He stared at her steadily, doubting if she had ever been unfaithful to her husband - except in thought - for all of her inviting glances.

He had cleared the room of his courtiers, and they had gone, fully aware of his intentions, smiling broadly and giggling between themselves. He didn't envy them their pleasure - and he felt flattered by their suggestive grins and gestures. He was in a magnificent mood! He had the world at his feet - that is the Roman world, and nothing else was of any account, including the kingdom of the Parthians, who tried to pretend that they could ultimately defy the might of Rome.

He looked down at Lucinda, sprawled at his feet in a low bow which had brought her to her face on the marble floor. He let her stay there for a few moments, savouring her, before rising from his throne and descending the steps to her level. He reached out his hand and drew her up, staring into her eyes. She was like a rabbit confronted by a snake! He didn't mind describing himself as a snake - they were powerful creatures in their own right. Some encircled their victims to crush them, others made a slight incision and infused their poison.

He smiled at her - he had a good smile - he was told it was disarming - even boyish! "You have brightened my day, Lucinda! How pleasing that you have thought of me sitting here so lonely and pre-occupied."

Lucinda's wits were almost gone, but somehow she doubted that he needed to be without company - he had only to command attention. His purple robe almost enfolded her as he led her to a low pile of cushions upon which they both sat. She found her voice.

"Your majesty is so kind to spare me the time - with so many matters to concern you." Gaius smiled wider.

"Now, you concern me! Caesar's hospitality fails! But I plead the cause to be your beauty, Lucinda - you have driven every other thought from my mind!"

That at least was true! He gestured to unseen slaves who appeared with all manner of sweetmeats, cordials and wines.

"Give me the pleasure of seeing you enjoy these, Lucinda!"

She eyed the sweetmeats.

"I shall become fat, your majesty."

He shook his head solemnly.

"That you can never be, my dear - your figure is perfect - absolutely perfect!"

She blushed crimson under his ardent gaze. She stuffed her mouth with something unidentified and swallowed quickly. It was time to regain the initiative before things got

out of hand. Tertilius didn't know where she was, and she doubted whether he would be very pleased if and when he found out! Gaius played her game for a while.

"I'm told that you have something important to tell me."

Lucinda had rehearsed what she wanted to say, but the suddenness of the invitation to speak her mind, coupled with the proximity of the most powerful man in the world, drove her pretty speech out of her mind. She started to babble.

"Majesty - it concerns the wife of your friend Lucian!"

Gaius' face muscles tensed momentarily, his eyes became watchful.

"Rebecca - that is her name I think?"

Lucinda nodded eagerly.

"She's been behaving most strangely ever since Lucian was sent away."

Gaius corrected her softly.

"Lucian wasn't sent away, my dear - he chose to accept my invitation to join a most important delegation - and to do me a service."

She answered hurriedly - she'd said the wrong thing!

"Of course, majesty - but I think Rebecca believes you sent him away!"

It was a stab in the dark which was calculated to injure the aloof and disdainful Jewess.

"Now, why would she think that, Lucinda?"

"She can't bear to share her husband with anyone, majesty."

Gaius threw back his head and laughed.

"You amuse me, Lucinda - are you saying she's jealous of me?"

Lucinda retreated a little.

"It's hard to say, majesty."

Gaius eyed her - nothing worse than a spiteful woman out to injure her rival - but his court was full of them and sometimes they had important things to tell.

"Tell me why you think she's been acting strangely."

Lucinda was now back on track and she started to remember some of her pretty

speeches.

"She had become so reclusive since Lucian - went - away, that I became worried about her. She is, after all, a dear friend - and for this reason I have come to ask you what should be done."

Gaius nodded.

"Go on."

"When I attempted to visit her, I was turned away by her steward who declared that she was ill and had asked him to turn away visitors - even her dearest friend!"

"Distressing."

"On three successive days, I visited and asked to see her, and then I told the steward that I would call the guards if he didn't allow me through. He then calmly told me that Rebecca had left Rome intending to join her husband - taking her two children with her, if you please, at this bitterly cold season!"

Gaius' eyebrows arched and then smoothed again. He laughed.

"I must really ask Lucian what fatal attributes he has that his wife has to pursue him into the extreme conditions of the Alps!"

Lucinda murmured.

"He's very attractive, majesty."

Gaius smiled a little - so THAT was the motive! The smile faded. Rebecca was another beauty that he intended to possess! He was all the more determined because she had never declined to show her disdain for him. So, she had fled from Rome! The reason surely was not as Lucinda had suggested - he had used the word 'fled' - from whom was she fleeing? He permitted himself another smile - there could only be one she feared, and that was himself.

Lucinda was watching the play of expressions on his face. In his own way he was handsome, his features a little sharp perhaps, but his eyes were penetrating - and he was quite young - almost boyish - so young to have the responsibilities of empire thrust

upon him. He suddenly turned his attention back to her and his smile widened, she found herself responding. He leaned over and took her hand. Her heart started to race. "I am so appreciative of you taking the trouble to keep me informed, Lucinda. It might surprise you that I've been watching you ever since you joined us after that dreary journey from Palestine. I can see that you are the sort of woman who would grace any court - on the arm of your husband, Tertillius. I have my eye on him also, but you must understand that one has to be most careful when appointing those who has so recently come to our attention. I act with caution, but I can assure you that I have a most lucrative preferment for your husband - subject of course to the continued good conduct of you both."

Lucinda felt she was about to faint, she had never dreamed that her information would bring such an immediate reward. She was about to thank him profusely, when he drew her to her feet, staring into her eyes.

"Shall we go to a more private place to continue our discussion."

Then, she understood