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Young Punks and their Bible Adventures: A Collection of Biblical Fiction Short Stories

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**Young Punks and Their Bible Adventures:
A Collection of Biblical Fiction Short Stories**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Honors Studies
in Creative Writing

By

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Creative Writing

J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Arkansas

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Preface

In most portrayals of Jesus' apostles, they are shown as older men, most commonly around Jesus' age of 30 if not older. However, an interpretation of a conversation about taxes in Matthew 17 could indicate that the majority of his followers were under the age of twenty. The tax is only paid by men twenty or older and Jesus himself said "The children are exempt" (NIV). Immediately after, we see only Peter and Jesus paying the tax. It can easily be assumed that the others simply did not have to pay because of their youth since such an emphasis was placed on age in the passage.

These stories are based on the premise that the men who left their lives, families, and jobs behind to follow Jesus were not adults relearning a way to live, but teenagers learning about the world for the first time. The stories will not focus on the miracles we have seen on tv around Easter and Christmas times, nor will they revolve around Jesus. They will give us between-the-scenes views of the apostles in their everyday lives as regular teens.

And while these figures are certainly Biblical figures, my reader does not need to be any kind of expert in Christianity. These stories are meant to be fun, funny, and entertaining to everyone. Though I use the same sources (the *Bible* for their personalities, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* for childhood stories of Jesus to gossip about, etc.), I am writing a different view of figures generally highly elevated. I hope you find them enjoyable.

Find the Apostle

“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”—Matthew 16:18

Peter grumbled to himself as he tripped yet again on a pair of sandals dumped between the front door and the stairs. He was sure it must have been the eight or ninth time, but there should only be six other boys in the house. The darkness of the house with the setting sun certainly wasn't helping. And with each time a shoe caught his own, Peter nearly sent the food he'd brought back from the market flying. He may or may not have let a shout slip out during one or two of his losses of balance.

This was hazard. Honestly. Peter made a mental note to apologize again to the older couple that owned the house they were staying in. He kicked the shoes aside and out of the way with a huff. Better yet, he could make the boys apologize. They were all old enough to make their own apologies. Even at fifteen, John could have been engaged two years ago. He'd had a job before he ran into Jesus. A few of the guys—like Peter—had wives back home that they sent money to every few days. Why did they have to act so childish? Why did they always leave it up to him to be the adult? Sure, he was the oldest, but they could handle it.

As he shook what he prayed was the last sandal off his foot, it occurred to him that he had most certainly made his presence known to the boys upstairs. Between the shuffling, the shout of no-that-wasn't-fear-of-falling-to-his-death, and aggressively kicking the shoes out of the way, he'd made a lot of noise. They would now have warning to

clean up or hide whatever damage they had done while left to themselves. Peter briefly wondered if the shoe setup was strategic. Very briefly. He knew better than that. Frankly, Judas was the only one devious enough to come up with something like that, and he was out with Jesus tonight visiting the local temple.

He sighed and made his way into the kitchen to set the food down before he found something else to trip on. As he lit an oil lamp, he shook his head. When Andrew had introduced him to Jesus a year and a half ago, Peter had been thrilled. He'd had signed right up. But he'd realized pretty quickly that he was the oldest in Jesus' group. At twenty-four, he had half a decade's worth of experience over the next oldest, James. But the kid was still only nineteen. So Peter *was* the only real adult in the group besides the Bossman. Especially by tax standards. Which he soon realized meant that he spent most of his time either herding the boys through various towns, keeping them from picking fights, or straight up babysitting them. It was ridiculous. He did not sign up to be the babysitter.

But Jesus counted on him for this, so he did it without complaint. Or at least, without too much complaint. Without too much complaint to the Bossman's face. There was definitely complaining going on behind his back all the time. That probably wasn't going to stop any time soon. Especially if this stuff kept happening.

He finally made his way upstairs, bringing the lamp with him. Of the guys sprawled through the room, James and Phil looked up at him with innocently wide eyes and suspiciously blank faces, John was unsuccessfully attempting the same, and Barty and Matt looked on with smug amusement. Great. It was going to be one of those days.

Peter sighed and raised a hand to stop any forthcoming excuses. “You know what? I don’t want to know. I wasn’t here, so I don’t know. And if I don’t know, then I can’t be held accountable if the Bossman finds out. This one’s on you.”

The guys—the older ones more than the younger, he’d found—loved to get up to mischief when Jesus was out praying or helping the locals.

“I mean it, guys. The Bossman’ll be back in like...” he paused and glanced out the window in an attempt to gauge the sunset, “an hour. And this time, I won’t make any excuses for you. You owe me. You nearly broke my neck by leaving your sandals everywhere downstairs.”

Philip, at least, had the good graces to look embarrassed by that. And John looked straight-up sheepish.

Peter bit back a sigh. He couldn’t stay mad at that face, not for long. “I mean, if they were my shoes, I know I’d get to picking them up before anyone else could trip on them.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Subtle there, Pete. Very subtle.” Neither he nor Barty moved. But frankly, Peter hadn’t expected them to. They were stubborn.

“I wasn’t going for subtle. I was going for results.” Peter shrugged. “So. Is anyone going to clean up your disgusting sandals, or what?”

Nobody moved for a few more seconds, but eventually John nudged Phil’s shoulder with his own. “C’mon. It’s our turn to be the heroes, right?”

Phil rolled his eyes, but stood. “Yeah, I guess. It’s very heroic to move shoes around. What an adventure.” He led the way to the stairs, grabbing one of the oil lamps scattered around the room on the way out. John laughed and trailed along after him.

Peter shook his head and let out a sigh. Generally, John was quiet. But you put him with one of the funnier boys (Phil, Thom, Simon), and he could easily become the biggest drama queen in the group. Well, except for when Luke stopped by, reminding anyone, everyone, and their mother about his position as a medical student. At least he wasn’t really part of the group. He was more of the ‘friend of a friend of a friend’ type. But Jesus liked him well enough so everyone let him stop by when he needed to.

“I am sorry about your near-death-experience, Peter,” called Barty from his corner, making a face that Peter was guessing was supposed to be sympathetic. Instead, it made him look ill. “I was quite sure we’d cleaned up down there.” There was only a slight twitch of Matt’s lips to indicate a smile, but he hid it quickly.

“Oh yeah. I’m sure you did.” Peter shook his head and made his way into the room to drop onto the bundle of blankets that would be his bed that night. “And I’ll bet that you swept up after yourself, and then went straight to studying all day, right?”

Barty smirked and lounged back against the wall. “Well, naturally. What else would I have been doing?”

James, whose back was to Peter as he adjusted his bedding, muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “plotting” and “hidden” that got a bit of a dirty look from Barty. Peter started to wonder if maybe he should be more concerned about what they had all been doing before he got there than he was.

He looked around the room, automatically counting off in his head. Jesus and Judas were out together. Jude and James-the-younger-called-Junior were in the next town making sleeping arrangements. Andrew and Simon were still back in their last town, or maybe on their way here. John and Phil were downstairs... That meant that there should be four boys in front of him. There were three. He frowned. Finally, he ran through a full list of names in his head. Andrew, Barty, James, Junior, John, Judas, Jude, Matt, Phil, Simon, and... Thomas. Thomas wasn't here. Peter sighed. Well. Isn't that just great?

"Alright then," he began as patiently as he could, "Where's Thomas?" A sound rose from the seated boys, a combination of annoyed huffs, laughter, and, in Matt's case, a clink of coins as Barty dropped them into his palm. Really? Just how long had Barty thought it would take him to realize Thom was missing? "Is he at least in the house? Because I am not going on a manhunt when the Bossman will be back soon."

"Yeah, he's in the house," Phil muttered as he walked through the door, then stuck his tongue out at Barty's glare for giving the information up so easily.

"Okay... Okay, good. Is he conscious?" Important question. It was incredible how many times one of the guys had managed to knock themselves out or do something equally ridiculous, even with Jesus around. "You didn't hurt him, did you?"

"Come on, Pete," said John as he settled by his brother. "Do you really think we'd hurt him?"

Peter grumbled out, "I don't know, you broke Andrew's finger," as he got to his feet.

James rolled his eyes. “Just go rescue Thomas, will you? I think Phil is starting to get antsy.”

“I am not-”

“Don’t start, you two. Where is he?” The room fell silent. “Come on. You’re really not going to tell me?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” John wondered aloud, a cheeky grin on his face as he stretched out across the floor.

Peter rolled his eyes again. Honestly, these guys are supposed to be adults. “The fun is in not having an angry babysitter next time you’re left to me.”

“Oh, come on, Pete,” Matt set the accounts he was working on aside to roll his neck. “Don’t be a spoilsport. We all know you love us. Besides, it’s not like Thom wasn’t a willing participant. This time, at least.”

Well, that was promising. Peter remembered the last time one of the boys had gone missing on his watch. Judas had been going over their budget for the week and Philip had been trying to help. Unfortunately, Phil was notoriously bad at math of any kind and Judas wanted to keep him as far from the numbers as possible. Phil had been stubborn. Judas got annoyed. He convinced Simon and Matt to help him...remove Phil from the situation. Peter had found him locked in a closet an hour or two later, asleep under an old cloak in the corner, perfectly at ease while he waited for some kind of rescue. And now, Phil’s closest friend was hidden away somewhere. But, hey. At least Thom was involved this time, and so, probably not locked in anywhere without an escape. Probably. At least there were only so many hiding spots in the building.

“If I ask him, will he say the same thing?” He looked to James as the oldest of the group before him. He was reasonably responsible and usually managed to keep things from going too far, but it never hurt to check.

James nodded, then kicked at John as his brother tickled his leg. “It was his idea. He was very excited.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he was.” He sighed. “Right, then.” He checked out the window again to the now much darker street. “We’ve got maybe forty-five minutes before Jesus gets back, so let’s get this over with.” Peter sighed, wondering why he was indulging all of them again. He always did. Sure, he moaned and groaned and complained, but in the end, he always played along. But he had to get this done before the Bossman got home. He wanted to be the rock. What kind of rock was he if he lost a kid, huh?

He shook his head and glanced around the room again to clear it. There wasn’t much to hide behind—only a few bags and the boys, really—but there was a closet closed with a curtain on the side wall. It seemed too obvious of a hiding place, but it couldn’t hurt to check. He carefully walked over, avoiding slipping on the bedding spread all across the floor, and pushed the curtain aside to check the corners. Nope. Wasn’t here. He heard a snort behind him—probably Barty—and he turned to make a face at all of them

“Well, I’ve got to check everywhere, don’t I?”

“Of course, Pete,” Barty replied, his tone suspiciously light. “Gotta check every nook and cranny.”

Peter narrowed his eyes at him. He just knew that Barty was hinting at something, but he couldn’t tell what it was. Probably something to do with him looking like an idiot.

He didn't have time for this. "Right... I'll go look downstairs, then." Phil nodded at him encouragingly, and Peter didn't trust it for a second. But all the same, he made his way back out of the room and grabbed a lamp before heading back down.

Matt and Barty stood to follow, sticking close to each other. It was never a good sign to let the two of them team up. As Peter began his search of the downstairs, he was reminded of why.

Matt cleared his throat. "Well, Barty, it seems to me that we'll be having quite an entertaining evening, don't you think? Our Peter has gone straight for the living room. In the dark like this, we're getting a sort of haunted house vibe, I'd say."

"Oh, I would have to agree with you, Matt. The lone oil lamp casting shadows on the wall...quite ominous," Barty joined in on the commentary, leaning against the wall. "But I think he's made a good choice in starting place. It's the largest room in the house."

"You're right, Barty. But are there any good hiding places? I mean, we're seeing our dear friend Pete looking behind tapestries and under blankets here."

And so they were. There weren't exactly many options here either. He'd started by looking behind all the furniture. Under the small table. In the corners where the shadows were darkest. And the obnoxious little punks' commentary was only making the humiliation of checking the non-hiding spots worse. But he had to admit, if he were watching instead of being watched, he would probably be helping them out. So he didn't bother to stop them.

He moved through the rooms slowly, followed by his narrators. When he'd made a full circle of the bottom floor with no sign of Thom, he started to get anxious. He must

have just missed him, right? Yeah. Judging by the laugh Matt was trying to stifle, he just...skimmed over Thom. So he retraced his steps. He carefully rechecked every single room in the building except for the bedroom of the couple who actually lived there. Jesus had given them a rule very early on that they were not to disturb their hosts no matter where they were staying. They could do whatever they wanted to in the rooms they were given (to a point, obviously), but the families they stayed with were always granted their privacy. Thom wouldn't be in there. But most of the rooms were sparse. There weren't many places for a guy to hide, especially someone as tall as Thom. Peter was sure that he'd checked everywhere the younger man could have hidden. Every nook and cranny, as Barty had so eloquently said. But Peter still couldn't find him.

"Barty, Barty, Barty," Matt said, in his best melodramatically sad voice. "It seems to me that our dear leader might be a bit confused or misdirected."

"It would appear so, Matt. Such a shame. Perhaps he can make a comeback. Maybe if we all believe in him." Barty reached out to clap a hand on Peter's shoulder and squeeze it tightly. "We believe in you, Peter. What was it he called you? Our Rock? Yes. We believe in our Rock. You can find our lost man!"

Peter scoffed and flicked at his hand to get it pulled off. "Yeah, yeah. You could just tell me where he is, you know." When they offered no response, he shook his head. "Course not. You've probably got some bet going, don't you?" He didn't get an answer to that either. He didn't expect one. He knew he was right.

He decided to make another walkthrough, starting at the rear of the house and moving forward. He checked behind furniture, under cushions, in cabinets and baskets,

even behind some of the decorative tapestries (again) their hosts had hanging in scattered patterns throughout the building. Nothing. Thom wasn't down here. But the only room upstairs was the great room that he had already checked.

Man, Peter really hated babysitting duty. He rubbed his face, sighed, and dropped his hands as he made his way to the stairs. He must have missed something upstairs. That, or Phil had lied about Thom being in the house. Either way, he was going to figure it out now.

“Oh, Matt, it looks as though we've had a change of strategy. Going back upstairs. What do you suppose that means?”

“Maybe he's given up?” When Peter turned back to glare, Matt put his hands up in surrender. “And by that, I mean, he totally has a plan and most certainly is still in the game.”

Satisfied with his minor victory, Peter turned back to the main room. There still wasn't anything to hide behind in here. Not really. And the three remaining boys had moved around, so Thom definitely wasn't hiding behind one of them. James had laid out on his pallet to try to take a nap—though from the way he'd shifted when they'd entered the room, he was definitely still awake—and John and Phil were chatting about that pretty girl they'd run into at the market yesterday. Peter remembered her. Mousy girl with a cloak that kept falling off. She'd been about John's age, he supposed. Cute and kind of shy. Not unlike John. But the conversation lulled when they spotted Peter in the doorway.

“Alright, boys. Come out with it. He's not in the house, is he?”

Phil shook his head emphatically and sat up. “No, he is. Cross my heart.”

“You must have looked right at him,” James added without opening his eyes.

“I was sure you’d find him by now,” Matt muttered as he dropped the coins that he’d won from Barty earlier back into his hand. “You just cost me money, my friend.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “I just can’t believe Barty still makes bets with you. Everyone knows you should never bet against a tax collector.”

“Hey! Former tax collector, thank you very much. I’m reformed.”

Barty laughed. “Of course you are. At least when you quit, you lost all that betting luck.”

“No one really quits being a tax collector, Matt,” James said helpfully.

Peter clapped his hands a few times to get everyone’s attention back. “Hey guys? Thomas? You remember him, right? Tall guy? Looks just like the Bossman? Apparently missing?”

“Oh yeah. He sounds familiar,” Barty said thoughtfully, nodding slowly. “I think I know who you’re talking about. Bit of a downer? Big into being a cynic all the time?”

“Yes, Bartholomew. That’s exactly who I’m talking about. Where is he?” He peered out the window to find the street beyond nearly empty. Most people were in for the evening. “Jesus’ll be home any minute now.” Peter turned back and tried to watch all of them at once. Surely at least one of the five would give something away, even if it was accidental. Especially if it was accidental.

And there it was. It was Philip who gave him the hint, his eyes darting towards the closet Peter had checked earlier. It was a there-and-gone-again glance that Peter wasn’t sure was even purposeful. Could have been. Probably wasn’t. Peter half hopped over

James' prone form to get there and shoved the curtain aside. The closet was still empty. Nothing to hide behind, nothing on the floor. So Phil had been wrong. Or he'd misread the glance. He turned back to face the boys with a frown, but froze when he heard a strained giggle. A giggle that came from above him.

He faced the closet again and looked up this time. "Thom. Good to see you, man." The teen was stretched out against the ceiling, half of his body laying on the small shelf as high as it could be and still have room to store a few things. He had an arm and a leg propped against the opposite wall to keep him from rolling off.

"Hey, Pete. Fancy seeing you here." Thom grinned at him. "How'd you feel about giving a guy a hand down." Peter only raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, thought not. Hey, Phil! Come help me down!"

Peter dropped the curtain and stepped out of the way and turned to face the very amused crowd. "You're all idiots, you know that?"

James shrugged and sat up to smirk at him. "If we are, what does that make you? You looked in there twice without seeing him."

"Well I wasn't exactly expecting him to be flying—"

"Ah, ah, ah," interrupted Matt, all but skipping over to Peter. "No excuses, Mr. Rock, sir. We rely on you to defend our little group. Or...something like that. Is that what that means?"

Peter blinked at him, then shrugged. "I'm pretty sure it's not." There was a dull thud and a few 'oofs' from Phil and Thom as the latter fell on his friend in surprise. "But hey. I'll take it."

He would take it. He found Thom. No one was hurt (outside of maybe a bruise or two). And the Bossman never had to know. And that's what being a good babysitter was really about.

A Good Hostess

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”—Luke 10:41-42

For the first time in possibly years, Martha slept in. After the night she’d had, she deserved it. And frankly, she didn’t want to face the mess she knew was waiting for her in the kitchen and living room. She certainly hadn’t cleaned up before bed last night, and knowing Mary... No. The mess was definitely still there. All of the mess. So when she rolled over at her normal time, she refused to leave her bed. There wasn’t anything important to be done today anyway. Just clean up. She could afford to sleep for a while longer. Mary would definitely be sleeping in today.

So Martha closed her eyes again to try to drift off. It didn’t take long. She’d been up half the night anyway, hours past when she normally went to bed. That ‘little get together’ that Mary had allowed to be arranged on such short notice had gone from what was supposed to be a small dinner party to a surprisingly huge Torah study, then to a lecture, then finally to a very large (and messy) dinner. Everyone had been kind, of course. Kind, but excitable. Lost as they were in their conversations, no one left until well after two in the morning. And being the good hostess that she was, Martha most certainly hadn’t pushed the issue. If she had to stay up, she had to stay up. And so she had.

Which meant that now she was dreaming late into the morning, seeing images of broken lamps and spilled sauces, teetering furniture and scratched up walls, a laughing Mary and crowds of boys filling her living room, which seemed to grow and grow and grow....

She rolled over again with a groan, this time giving in to the urge to waken. She sat up with a stretch and slid out from beneath her blankets. Her window was open, letting in the warm, midmorning air. She must have at least slept until nine. That's later than she had thought. Maybe she could sleep in after all, if she really put her mind to it. It was noise through the window that woke her. People passing by on the streets below, chattering on their way back from the morning markets or their morning appointments. Martha shook her head as she selected her clothes for the day and considered how much time she had lost.

No, sleeping in wasn't for her anymore, she decided. As nice as it felt while you were doing it, you just wasted the whole morning. It wasn't worth it. And it certainly wasn't practical.

If only she could convince Mary of that. Wouldn't that be wonderful? No more having to force her little sister out of bed at 10 every other morning by dragging the blankets off or hitting her with a pillow. No more having to prepare breakfast or do the shopping by herself. Not that Martha didn't like cooking breakfast or going to the markets. But having Mary offer every once in a while would be nice. Just for a change of pace. The poor girl was never going to get married at this rate.

She was fourteen already with only one offer that had fallen through when the poor boy had fallen ill and not recovered. Martha was beginning to think that this ‘single life’ was going to Mary’s head. And, unfortunately, she wasn’t setting a very good example.

After Martha’s husband had died, his family offered to find some distant cousin for her to marry if she wished. But she had not had any children by Aaron and so she felt she would be of more help back home with her siblings. Mary was at a marrying age, and Lazarus traveled most of the time. So she returned home to do what she could to help keep things together. So far, that had been to make one marriage agreement—and get both Lazarus and Mary to sign off on it—before it fell through and to care for the house, since no one else seemed to want to do so.

So it generally fell to Martha. Just like today. Lazarus was off visiting some cousins for a couple of weeks, so he wasn’t around to help clean up the mess left behind by the party last night or to cook breakfast. Mary would sleep until nightfall if allowed. Martha was the first to make her way downstairs and walk through the living room. She had to choose her steps with great care to avoid the spilled food or cushions or scattered furniture or blankets or cloaks that were left behind or leftover ceramic shards from the lamp that had been haphazardly swept up (the only thing cleaned up last night).

Somehow she managed to make it to her kitchen without tripping or injuring herself, and she felt that that counted as a victory. She shouted to Mary to get up, then started to search her kitchen for any remnants of food that she could make a late breakfast with. Almost everything they had went into their dinner for fifteen last night—although, if you

consider the fact that eleven of them had been teenage boys, it really counted as close to thirty. She had very little left for breakfast—some flour, some oil, a little hummus tucked away—and essentially nothing for dinner unless she wanted leftovers from breakfast. They'd have to make do with just bread for now. She definitely should have gone to the market this morning. Sleeping in really hadn't been worth it.

She picked up between steps, unused to having her kitchen so messy. But she could hardly have cleaned it up last night. Not after the lecture Jesus had given her. It's a good thing he's a friend, she thought to herself as she slid the bread into her oven. Otherwise I might have kicked him out for that. It was rather rude. Insulting your hostess just for trying to make sure everyone gets fed. Especially when you decide to drop that many people on her doorstep last minute. Who does that?

Well, Jesus does that. That's just who he is. He's not exactly the most self-aware person, some of the time. Wise, most definitely. And a great teacher. But he gets lost in the teaching and sometimes forgets about the people. Or the effects. Or the consequences. But of course sometimes it was all about the people. Martha had heard all about his teachings that had turned into mass feedings and the like. Which was certainly incredible and only added to his kindness. But on a small scale...

Martha huffed. Jesus needed more women in his life if he thought that shunning her like that in front of all of those men was appropriate. That one girl of his... Mary Magdalene. She never would have stood for that. "Mary has chosen what is better," she muttered to herself as she scrubbed down a counter. "Well, if we all did what Mary did, you wouldn't have had any dinner last night, would you? And what's that supposed to

mean, anyway? Only one thing is needed? What thing? Laziness?” She huffed again and scrubbed harder before shouting for her sister. She’d give her until the bread was done, then she’d drag the girl out of bed herself.

There was a way to do things. A proper way to do things. And then there were many ways not to do things. And this mess that Martha now had to clean up came from people not doing things the proper way. She didn’t care if Jesus and his Twelve came to her home. She really didn’t. She loved having guests, actually. She loved playing the hostess and cooking dinners for them. But there was a way to plan these things. For starters, you don’t just invite yourself and twelve others over to someone else’s (especially by asking the youngest in the house instead of the head), arrive an hour later, *and expect to be fed*. No. It’s just not done that way. Martha would have to make sure to teach Mary that. Her sister wouldn’t be imposing herself on others like that. If she had to invite herself, she’d give her hosts plenty of time to prepare. And she most certainly wouldn’t insult them in their home.

Once the counter finally met her expectations of cleanliness again—completely bare without even a crumb in sight—she moved back into the living room. She had planned to leave this to her sister—she had done none of the work last night after all—but the mess was too much to just leave it there. She couldn’t enjoy her breakfast like this. First things first, she needed to get rid of the rest of the shattered ceramic off the floor. Whoever had tried to sweep it up last night—Matthew maybe?—had managed to get a majority of it up, but had been distracted by something. She vaguely thought that it had something to do with saving the boy who had knocked over the lamp in the first place

(Jude? Junior? Those two were always together. And nearly identical. It was hard to tell them apart) from a severe lecture from Judas. Although in Martha's opinion, he deserved a lecture. And he should have been the one to clean up the ceramic after knocking it off her shelf in a game of keep away with his friend's jacket. Maybe he actually would have learned something, and there wouldn't be sharp edges left all over her floor this morning.

She sighed. Now she was just being bitter. She supposed it was sweet of Matthew to offer to clean it up in the first place. And it was sweet to see boys coming to each other's aid like that. She just wished it wasn't at the expense of her decor. This lamp had looked so lovely up on that shelf. She had received many compliments on it—and of course she always directed those who asked back to the lamp maker she had bought it from. That was the neighborly thing to do, after all. The proper thing to do.

It looked like she'd be paying that maker another visit in the near future to get a replacement. And she'd probably have to replace a few of her cushions. She picked one up from the corner to check for more of the lamp and instead noticed a split seam. That one, at least, would be an easy fix. But the next one she picked up had gashes running through both faces of the pillow, making it useless. She sighed and tossed it towards the door to be dealt with later. It would likely be turned into something else. A few something elses if she was lucky.

She wasn't sure when that had happened, to be honest. Probably when she had been in the kitchen working on dinner. Or maybe it had been cut up by a chunk of the lamp when someone had sat on it? She just wished someone had told her about it instead of letting her discover it on her own. Especially since it was likely an accident. Most of

the damage and mess was. But leaving it for her to just...find it the next morning? That was rude.

She sighed again. Not purposefully rude, she had to remind herself. Every time she saw those boys she had to remind herself of that. They got so wrapped up in their teacher—and sometimes it was so easy to see how—that they forgot the rest of the world. All twelve of them, plus whoever had joined them for the day or week or month, were perfectly willing to cram themselves into a tiny little living room just to listen to him speak. And she had to admit, when Jesus was in town, she always went to hear him. She would always try to speak with him. So she could hardly blame them for getting distracted. But couldn't they at least pay attention to her home long enough to pick up before they left?

The smell of baking bread drew her away from the slightly-less-of-a-wreck that was her living room and out to the yard to the oven. She'd managed to clear away all remnants of the lamp sort through all of her pillows and cushions, and even get her furniture back in the right place. Maybe Mary could get the rest. No, not maybe. She would. She had to contribute something to clean up.

After peering into the mouth of the large, stone jar that worked as her bread oven to check and make sure there was no burning, she carefully pulled the loaf and carried it back inside to the kitchen to cool. It looked lovely, especially considering it was nearly all the food she had in the house. Not bad for a late morning's work. And speaking of late mornings...

She started off towards Mary's room. It really was time for the lazier sister to wake up. It wasn't fair for Martha to do all the work, especially when she'd done all the work last night as well. She raised a hand to bang on her sister's door as loudly as she could—a courtesy really before she barged in—but paused when she heard knocking behind her at the front door. She bit back a sigh of frustration and decided to leave Mary for now. Guests take precedents over lazy sisters.

Martha cleared her throat and absently checked her hands for flour before she opened the door with a smile. She couldn't really help the smile's falter when she realized it was one of Jesus' boys at her door. Judas, she believed.

"Hello, Martha. I... I apologize for interrupting your day. May I come in?"

"Is it just you this time?" She glanced behind him for more boys, but he truly did seem to be alone.

"Um, yes. Just me." He smiled kindly, but shifted his weight when he happened to catch sight of the shredded pillow on the floor waiting to be turned into patches or coasters. "I came to speak with you."

As much as Martha didn't want to let him in and risk a bigger mess, she couldn't really refuse. After all, she prided herself on being a good hostess. So she managed a smile and stepped aside. It was the right way to do things. "Then come on in. If you're hungry, I've just made some bread." She closed the door behind him and led the way into the kitchen so they could sit and talk away from the mess.

"That would be nice, thank you." Judas sat down at her little table by the window as she cut two slices of bread and set out some oil and hummus for them. He seemed to

be waiting for her to settle before starting on whatever he'd come to say. And judging by the way he kept shifting and glancing towards the living room, he seemed to be almost... nervous, was it? Uncertain? When she finally sat across from him, he smiled a little and muttered a quiet, "Thank you," before saying a blessing for their meal. Martha appreciated that. She had never been very good at that sort of thing. At least not in front of other people. She usually left it to Lazarus when she could.

When he finished that, she broke off a bite of her bread. "What is it you wanted to talk about?"

Judas dipped a piece of bread into the hummus before them. "Well, first, I want to apologize for the damage everyone did last night. Peter and Jesus should have kept everyone more in check. It's not like we don't know what they can be like when they get excited." He popped the piece of bread into his mouth and glanced at her.

"Oh," she said softly. That was a bit surprising. She hadn't expected Jesus to send someone to apologize. He never had before. He'd never been very concerned with the proper way to handle situations like this. "No, that's alright. I know what he's like, after all. I'm getting it all cleaned up. It's no trouble."

Judas shook his head and sat forward. "It is, though. It's...inconsiderate at the very least. So I'd like to make it up to you. You've been very kind to us, letting us in and feeding us." He paused to take another bite, though Martha suspected he was also hesitating in his speech. After a moment, he continued, "You also managed not to get angry at Jesus when he told you off for no reason, which is not a skill I've quite mastered."

With a bite of bread halfway to her mouth, Martha paused and looked at him.

“Does he do that often?”

“No. No, not really. It’s more that he...teaches so vaguely, you know?” He tilted his head thoughtfully. “And then he gets disappointed when we don’t understand what he’s saying to us. So, of course, the best way to handle it is to try to understand as best you can and hide your confusion until he’s gone.”

Martha nodded slowly and finally ate the bread in her hand. When she’d finished, she replied, “Well, I guess I was just lucky in how I handled it, then.” She smiled a little at Judas and tore a piece of crust off.

He smiled back at her. “Yes, I guess you are.”

They ate in silence for a moment as Martha considered the man before her. She supposed he had sat apart from the rough-housers last night, and had been the one to tell off Junior/Jude for knocking over the lamp. He’d been very polite to her. Offered to help bring the dishes in. All of the proper things to do when you’re a guest in someone’s home. At least he wasn’t so bad.

When they had finished their bread, she stood to collect their plates. “Well, thank you for stopping by. And I appreciate the apology. But I really should get back to setting the house to rights.”

Judas blinked and stood a bit quicker than was probably necessary, his hands half outstretched as though he wanted to take their plates from her. “Let me help. Please. It’s the least I can do.”

Martha paused as she tucked the breakfast things away. “Oh, that’s sweet. But I couldn’t ask you to do that. I’m sure your teacher is waiting for you.”

A wry smile had Martha doubting herself as he replied, “No, he’s not. The Boss-man didn’t know I was coming here. He went off with Matt, Jude, and Junior to the temple. And Pete’s happy to have fewer guys to watch. I’ve got the day off.”

“Well...” She glanced into the living room, then shrugged. She had been complaining about how she never had anyone to help her all morning, hadn’t she? She might as well take advantage. “Alright. If you insist. Thank you, Judas.”

“I do. Thank you.” He smiled at her and followed her, following her direction to clean up all of the pillow stuffing that had been strewn through the room. The look of distaste he wore matched Mary’s own. “This... It never should have happened. Jesus can get so caught up in his lessons sometimes that he just doesn’t see what’s happening around him.”

“Funny,” Martha chuckled as she picked up another (apparently less fragile) oil lamp that had been knocked from its place. “That’s what I told Mary last night. From what I’ve seen, he gets caught up in the little moments and doesn’t see the big picture.”

“Exactly. Although, sometimes I think he sees too big of a picture.”

There was a moment of quiet as Martha left to get a broom, but she looked over at her cleaning companion before she started sweeping. “I’m not sure I understand.”

Judas sighed. “I’m not sure I do either, really. But it’s sort of like he has this endgame in mind sometimes. And he’s either focused on the immediate moment or the ultimate endgame and nothing in between, you know? There’s no step by step. No...”

“Repercussions? Consequences?”

“Exactly.”

Martha thought she understood what he meant. She’d seen some of that. She’d heard Jesus talk about the kingdom of Heaven as if it were right in front of him, and how it was coming to the rest of the believers. But he never seemed to mention the obvious truth that the Pharisees were watching his every move. She remembered one time after Jesus had stopped by to visit Lazarus, a messenger for the Pharisees had come by to ask them questions about the visit. She looked over at Judas. Was that what he was talking about?

She nodded slightly. “I’ve noticed. All or nothing. From beginning to end. He completely skips the middle sometimes.”

“Just for us mere mortals,” Judas said with another of his wry smiles. “I think he expects us to know how to handle the middle on our own. Or to figure it out from his riddles. That way he *can* just focus on the beginning and the end.”

Martha shook her head and started sweeping. “That just sounds far too complicated for me.”

Judas laughed. “Yeah. Me too. But someone needs to look out for these guys. Someone actually responsible. Who looks at all the middle stuff. So I keep tagging along and making all of Jesus’ apologies for him. Speaking of...” He poured his pile of pillow debris onto the cushions waiting to be repaired and reached into a purse on his belt. He removed a small handful of coins and offered them to her. “This is for you. To help cover the damages.”

Martha blinked, then blinked again. “You... For me? You’re giving me money?”

“Well, yes. We sort of broke your house,” he said lightly, offering them again, “I think it’s only fair. Replace what they broke.”

Hesitantly, she reached out to take them. “This isn’t your money, is it? Your personal money?”

He laughed. “Oh no. No. See, I’m in charge of the group’s purse. I run our charities and everything. And damage control, when necessary.”

She laughed with him and set the coins aside. “Well thank you, Judas. Really. You’ve been very kind, coming to help me.” And he had been. Talking with her, helping her clean, paying for the damages. She had eaten and now her living room looked presentable again. She really appreciated him coming by.

“Of course. Thank you for letting all of us come by last night. Even knowing the kind of chaos the Bossman brings with him.” He glanced around the room to see if there were any more pressing chores for him to do. When he found none, he nodded his head in a goodbye. “I should get out of your way. Let you have your day back. It was nice talking with you, Martha.”

“And with you, Judas. Really.” She walked with him to the door with a kind smile and waved to him as he made his way down the road.

Ultimately, with Judas’ help, she had been productive. Even with sleeping in, she’d managed to get her day back on track. It was nice to know that even in Jesus’ little club there was at least one man who still knew how to do things the proper way.

All Hail Twinboy

“Thomas (also known as Didymus)”—John 11:16

The crowd stared up at him with a sense of awe as he stood with his back to the lake. He knew that look. He had gotten used to the look. When it came to meeting the Son of Man, you either got this look, one of anger, or one of eagerness to learn. There were a few of those latter expressions scattered in the crowd too, he noticed. Though much fewer, obviously.

All eyes were on him as he sat before them with an easy smile on the rocky lakeshore. He'd finished delivering his lesson to the group of fifty or so and now awaited questions. There were always questions. But it always took a few minutes for people to come up with them.

He saw a man in the front row shift—he was ready to ask something—when he felt an elbow in his side. Bartholomew. “You didn’t introduce yourself. Must you always refuse to do so,” Barty muttered.

He sighed and rolled his eyes. “You never do.” He turned back to the front, but frowned when he was elbowed again.

“I don’t have to tell them who I am, Thom. Nobody thinks I’m Jesus when I teach.” Barty gave the crowd and their still-awed expressions a pointed look.

Thom pointed and turned back to the guy waiting to ask his question. “Well, it’s hardly my fault... Bossman’s like 50 years older than me. They should be able to tell the

difference.” He gestured for the man to speak, ignoring the mumbled, “Closer to 15 years, Thom”, and “Try not to be such a drama queen” behind him.

For the first time in a while, Thom’s first few questions were actually about the lesson he had tried his best to teach. And better yet, he was actually able to answer them. He was definitely getting better at this whole teaching solo thing. Just wait till he told Phil.

But of course, it had to happen eventually. It happened every time he went out without the Bossman. The fourth man to stand cleared his throat and asked, “How is it that you and your followers can do miracles? The healing? I’ve seen it.” And there it was. Confirmation that the people here, or at the very least this guy, thought Thom was actually Jesus. It was getting kind of obnoxious.

Thom sighed. Obviously, he need to clear this up. But it definitely wasn’t his fault this mistake kept being made. He didn’t think he and Jesus looked alike. Especially with the age and height difference. Like, Thom had a whole inch on Jesus! Come on! But it still happened all the time.

“Okay, well, first of all, just to clarify, I’m not Jesus, by the way. My name is Thomas. I *am* one of the followers. So there’s that.” He glances around. Just like that, a lot of their interest was gone. There were a few people in the back actually packing up to go home. “Hey, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know what I’m talking about. The Bossman—I mean Jesus—teaches us so we can teach you.” He paused and looked around around, trying to meet the gaze of as many people as he could. It was a trick Barty had taught him. Eye contact equals honesty, and honesty equals emotional connection. It was

something Barty's rich family had taught him. But it worked about half the time, so he might as well keep trying.

“I mean, you guys all came to hear a message he would teach you. Well, I've given you that. And I'll still do my best to answer your question if you want. I just thought you ought to know who you're really dealing with.” He sent another glance around to see if maybe, just maybe, he was getting through to them.

A few of the people who had started to pack their things had paused. Some of the disinterested people had focused on him again. He certainly hadn't won over everyone, but this would definitely work.

“Great. So. What was your question again, sir?”

The crowd had mostly managed to stay on topic after that. Then Barty had stood up to teach his lesson. Then there more questions, of course. So it was getting dark when they finally got to pack up and head back to the home they were staying in for the night. They walked in companionable silence for the first half of their trip back into the city from the water front, broken only by a few scattered yawns. Thom was thinking about his sermon as he tried to pick his way over the rocks on the path. What he could have said better, what he should have left out.

As they made their way into the city's so-called 'down town', Barty turned to look at him. “Is this a family affair for you?”

Thom blinked. “Is what a what?”

“Following him. Is that why you look like him? Because you're related?”

“Oh.” Thom adjusted the bag he was carrying with the leftovers from their lunch as they entered what was still left of the day’s market. They were in charge of getting food for everyone’s dinner that night. “No. I mean, not closely anyway. Our families are from the same area. And knew each other. So there could be some connection? But honestly, I don’t get it.”

Barty tilted his head, then wandered over to examine a selection of figs. “What do you mean?”

“Dude. I don’t look anything like Jesus. Like, at all. I’m taller than him, and he’s, like, ancient. And his hair is darker than mine.”

Barty snorted and nudged Thom to get him to grab some olive oil. “Don’t ‘dude’ me. You look exactly like him. It’s actually a little disconcerting how much you look like him. You have the same beard. You make the exact same facial expressions... When you get animated while you’re teaching, you could be the same person. I’ve got a bet with Matt going that we’re going to find out that you two are actually long lost twins or something like that.”

It was Thom’s turn to scoff this time, and he shoved his friend. “Yeah right. I’m pretty sure you can’t have twins with a sixty year age difference.”

“Honestly, Thom, he’s not that old! How old do you think the Bossman is?”

“I dunno. Like...Eighty?”

Barty actually had to put down the figs that he’d gathered to rub his face in disappointment. And he called Thom the drama queen. “Thom. My dear, dear friend. He’s only about thirty.”

“Meh.” Thom flapped a hand dismissively and continued on. “Thirty. Eighty. There’s not that much of a difference, is there? He’s old.”

“Of all the—” Barty sighed. “I’m going to lose the bet about you being an idiot. I really thought it was an act. But now... Come on.”

Returning with a jug of olive oil and an open hand for payment for it, Thom pouted. “I’m not an idiot... And just how many bets do you even have? And how do you and Matt keep track of them all?” Barty passed him a coin from the purse Judas had given them that morning, and a smile tugged at his lips as Thom’s questions continued even as the younger man walked back to pay the vendor he had taken the oil from. It started to droop again, however, when the questions were still coming when Thom returned. “—‘re just paying the same money back and forth at this point, right? So like, you’re not making anything. You know that. He knows that. We all know that. It just doesn’t make—” Barty had reached up to cover Thom’s mouth. It was another minute or so before the muffled words finally stopped.

“Please, I beg of you. Stop talking.”

Thom blinked at him, pouting under Barty’s hand. Then he mumbled something incomprehensible—probably an argument—and skipped off to get some grain for bread.

Barty stared after him, then tucked the oil and figs away into the bag he carried to follow him. “How are you still chuntering on? How do you have that much to say?”

“How do you not? Seriously, man! You, like, never talk. And when you do, it’s all super pretentious. Come on. ‘Chuntering’? Is that even a real word?” He grinned and handed over a little sack of grain, then waited for payment, which Barty gave.

“Of course it’s a real word. It means to ramble on. To talk too much without ceasing.” He followed Thom over to the woman he was paying.

“Suuuure it does. And I’m suuure it’s a real word,” Thom dragged out. “Just like antediluvian is a real word.”

“It is! It means antiquated! Pre-Noah’s flood! It’s most certainly a real word.”

Thom shrugged. “Uh huh. I totally believe you and your pretentious rich boy words. Anyway, I think that’s all we needed. We’ve got enough of everything else back at the house, right Barty?” He peeked into the bag Barty carried.

With a huff, Barty nodded. “Yes... Yes, I believe so. We can head back.”

Glancing up at him, Thom noticed a small pout on Barty’s face. “Hey. Don’t blame me because you talk all funny.”

Barty’s pout grew more pronounced before he managed to reign it in. “I don’t talk funny. It’s the rest of you who talk funny.” He grabbed the strap of Thom’s bag to get him moving towards home before he could get distracted again. “I speak perfectly respectably.”

Thom snorted. “Yeah, dude, see, that’s why it’s funny. You sound like an old man. The rest of us actually manage to sound our age.” He stopped walking and turned to face his companion. “I promise you, Barty. Someday, you too will learn to talk like the young people.”

Rolling his eyes, Barty shoved Thom to get him moving again without a reply. They teased each other for the rest of the walk—Thom trying to get Barty to say something juvenile, and Barty trying to get Thom to just stopping for more than twenty sec-

onds—then let themselves in to their temporary home. Their hosts were out for the evening. They'd said something about a sick friend and made their apologies that morning (and of course the Bossman promised to stop by the friend's house when the day's work was done), then left the house to the chaos of the Jesus' pack of deviants.

“Hey,” Thom called out as Barty dumped their sack of food on the counter. “Anyone else home yet?”

There was quiet for a moment, then a groggy voice rang out from the living room, “Who's that?”

“Barty and Thom.” He slipped away from Barty—who tried and failed to drag him back to help him unpack their purchases—and went to see who was there.

The living room was rather small but the woven rug on the ground and the old tapestry on the wall made it seem cozy. And curled up on the cozy woven rug were Matthew and Andrew, who had apparently been back long enough to take a nap. It had been Andrew who had answered, Thom guessed, since he was the one blinking blearily at them. Matt was still pretty deeply asleep. It took a lot to wake him.

“Oh,” Andrew said sleepily and sat up to rub his eyes. “Hey. Anyone else home?”

“Nope. Not yet. We're gonna start on dinner. You wanna wake up Matt?” Best to hand that job off as quickly as he could. Thom definitely didn't want to be stuck with it.

And from the grimace Andrew gave him, he knew it too. “Ew. Yeah, I guess...” He turned to shove at him. “Matt. Matty. Get up.”

Thom went back to the kitchen quickly to help Barty, but he heard the exact moment that Matt actually woke. There was a sputtering, then a sort of crash (Thom had no

idea what that was. There had been nothing around for Matt to break), and then finally a grumbled, “Wait, what?”

It was a pretty standard wakeup.

Thom waited until Matt actually made his way into the kitchen, and was therefore awake enough to walk around, to say anything. “Hey there. Guess what!”

Matt blinked at him a few times. “What.”

“People thought I was the Bossman again.”

Andrew, who had come in with Matt rubbing his head (had he been the crash?), rolled his eyes. Matt blinked slowly. And then again. “Huh?” He really was out of it.

Thom bit back a laugh. “I almost had people storm out during Q&A because I told them I wasn’t Mr. High and Mighty. Because Barty said that I had to introduce myself because they think I’m the Bossman even though I don’t look anything like him anyway, so that’s crazy...”

The blinking didn’t stop, but it did get faster at least. Matt turned to face Barty. “What’s he saying?”

Barty huffed. “He’s bitter about being Jesus’ twin again.”

Matt looked back to Thom and nodded slowly. “Oh. Think you’d be used to that by now, kiddo.”

Thom shrugged, then watched as Andrew stalked over to him and poked his side. He squirmed away. He couldn’t help it. He was ticklish. “Dude, what?”

Andrew poked him again. “How did your turn being paired with him go? Did you try? Did you get close?” He leaned in closer so Barty wouldn’t be able to hear. “Everyone

else said it was hard. That he's tough. And my turn's tomorrow. Is he as tough as they've said?"

"Well," Thom began thoughtfully, thinking of the bet he'd mostly forgotten about that day, "he's kind of a stickler, you know. I had another vocab lesson today, so I'm not sure it's actually gonna happen."

Andrew poked his side again to make him squirm again. "It can happen. And it will. I'll get him tomorrow. I will. I promise you, dude."

"Hey," Barty interrupted, looking up from the unpacked groceries on the counter. "Stop 'dude'ing—I beg of you—and come help me with supper."

"Don't diss the dude, my man," Thom said with a grin. "But fine, if we really, *really* have t—" He ducked the fig that was thrown at him. "I have to say, Junior has much better aim than you do. Just so you know."

"Get started on preparing the bread," Barty commanded (read: said in his snotty rich boy voice) since Matt somehow still wasn't quite awake enough to call the shots himself. As Thom and Andrew found an open space on the counter, Barty added, "I did learn something interesting today. Thom informed me that his family knows Jesus's family. That maybe they are related."

Andrew tilted his head curiously to look at Thom (who was mockingly mouthing 'Thom informed me, blah blah blah'), then grabbed all of the things they'd need to make the bread. "Really? So you knew the Bossman's family?" Thom nodded. "So... Do you know anything about what he was like? Before the whole teaching gig? Like... what was baby Bossman like?"

That seemed to be the final key to waking Matt up. And from the way Barty briefly paused in his movements of checking what food they already had stored away, he was clearly interested in where the conversation was going, too.

Thom debated for a minute. Most of the stories he'd heard were rumor. Not direct from the source. And frankly, they hadn't even happened in their town. They happened in the few years that Mary and Joseph had lived away in...Egypt? Was that where they lived? He couldn't remember for sure. But hey, they only asked what he knew, didn't they? He smiled brightly.

“Well, I guess I have a few stories I could maybe share—”

“Will they be true?” Matt asked.

Thom pouted. “And here I thought I was supposed to be the skeptic.”

Andrew looked back down at his supplies. “That wasn't a yes.”

“Do you want to hear my stories or not?” When no one protested, Thom nodded and helped Andrew divide up the supplies for the bread into two piles while he spoke. “Okay. So. When Jesus was, like, five or ten or something, he was playing on the roof with a bunch of other kids, right? You know, like we all did. Probably playing tag, or catch the monster, or whatever. Totally normal day. *Except* that one of the kids got too close to the edge, tripped, and fell over. The fall killed him.”

Thom glanced up to see his companion's reactions. Andrew had paused in making his dough to stare at him in confusion. Matt was frowning at him, toying with a fig absently. Barty was leaning back against the counter. In the silence, he asked, “Jesus...allowed that to happen?”

“Well, he was just a kid... He was probably distracted by the game, you know?”

Thom shrugged and started to mix his own dough. “Anyway, when the kids realized what had happened, they all scattered, except our junior Bossman. He went to peek over the edge to see if the other kid was okay. You know, with his big heart and everything. But naturally, that’s when the parents who had run to the boy’s aid decided to look up and see where he’d fallen from. Who wants to guess what they thought?”

Matt sighed and set the fruit aside. “They thought Jesus pushed him.”

“Ding, ding, ding. We have a winner!” He shook his head starting on the kneading, his shoulders rolling. “Anyway, they called him down, because they thought he murdered this kid, right? So he goes down. Just this little kid. And tells them that he didn’t do it. Sure, he was there, but it was an accident and the kid fell. He told the truth.” He glanced over at Andrew’s kneading technique (much neater and quicker) as he thought back to the way the kids from his neighborhood would all whisper the story to each other when they were away from their parents. As if their parents weren’t sharing the stories themselves.

“They didn’t believe him, I bet,” Matt stated, pushing Andrew out of the way to keep him from over-kneading the dough. Then he stuck it in the oven to bake, soon followed by Thom’s.

“Course not. They thought they’d seen it happen. So they told Jesus, ‘hey. Just tell the truth, and you won’t get in trouble,’ which we’ve all been through. It’s a classic parent line that we all know is a straight up lie, especially when there’s a dead kid, but whatever. Anyway, baby Bossman, with all the righteous fury of a five year old, refused. He kept

telling them that he hadn't done anything wrong." Thom smiled at the image. Frankly, all he could picture was an adult Jesus shrunk to the height of a five year old yelling at a bunch of condescending dads.

He picked up the fig Matt had set aside to toss to Andrew now that they were both empty handed. Andrew threw it back over Barty's cooking station. "So they kept that up for a while until Jesus decided he was done with all this and he just wanted his snack time. And from how the story goes, he just looked at the dead kid, and was like, 'hey. Wake up and tell them I didn't do it.' And guess what."

Barty's hand shot up to catch the fig on the next toss without him even bothering to look up. "What," he said at a deadpan.

"He woke up and told the adults what really happened. He was completely healed. Like, not even a bruise left. All because Jesus didn't want to get in trouble."

Matt sat back now that the bread was backing. "Huh. That's quite a story, Tommy." He tilted his head. "And probably completely made up, am I right?"

Thom scoffed, puffing up his chest and putting on his best offended face. "Me? Make something like that up? I'm wounded that you'd think something like that, Matt. Just wounded. As a matter of fact, that's a story that everyone back home knew. Like, literally everyone. The kids, the parents... Everyone. So, ha."

Barty rolled his eyes. "We believe you. Now calm down. And come help me with this." He gestured to the bean mix he was completely ruining as he tried to cook it.

“You rich kids. You shouldn’t be allowed to cook,” Andrew muttered, wandering over to rescue him before Thom could bother to come up with some excuse. Thom grinned at him in thanks and wandered over to check on the bread.

“It’s hardly my fault that it’s a new experience to me,” Barty muttered. “I was taught other skills. Other perfectly relevant skills.”

Thom grinned. “Oh yeah? What are your ‘perfectly relevant skills’, Barty? Are they antediluvian skills?”

“What? No. They’re modern. Most of them, anyway—”

“Then are they obstreperous? Pertinacious? Sesquipedalian? Contretemps?”

Barty scoffed. “You’re not even using those words right! Contretemps isn’t even an adjective. It’s a noun. That doesn’t make sense. And you mispronounced—”

Thom nodded and cut him off again. “Then maybe it’s splendiferous? Ultracrepidarian?”

“Where did you— Did you hear all of these from me? I don’t talk like that” Barty sputtered.

Thom grinned. “Do too! You say things like pre-antepenultimate and vainglorious, and I definitely heard you teaching John that autodefенestration meant to throw yourself out a window, but I have no idea why he’d ever need to know that word, like, come on—”

“Dude, can you shut up for ten seconds?!”

The room fell completely silent. Thom’s grin slid into a crooked smirk. Andrew’s gaze snapped up to Barty in shock before jumping between him and Thom.

Matt just nodded slowly. “Well. Would you look at that. Thom won. Andrew? Go upstairs and get my purse. We’ll take care of this when everyone gets back.” As Andrew ran off to do so, Matt turned to Thom. “Annoy him to death. Nice strategy. Well done.”

Barty glanced between the three of them, his stance somewhat wary. “Sorry... What just happened? What did Thom win?”

“Oh! We bet Matt that we couldn’t get you to talk like a normal teenager. And I won. I got you to say dude!” Somehow, the smirk grew more pronounced as Thom sauntered over to check on the cooking beans. “I didn’t think that would work, honestly. But hey! Whatever it takes, right?”

“But...” Barty shook his head, then turned to Matt. “You took a bet against me? I feel personally betrayed.”

Matt laughed. “C’mon, man. You and I both know that you could do to lighten up a bit. I thought this might help. Open the door, as it were.”

“Of course, Matt. You were only trying to help.”

“I most certainly was, my friend.” Matt grinned, then held his hands out for his purse when Andrew offered it. “Thanks. I’ll present it when there’s a nice big audience.”

Barty sighed a bit dramatically, hiding his face. “Must you?”

“Yes, Barty,” Matt replied seriously. “I must.”

The door crashed open behind them and, judging by the voices, at least four more guys had made it home. Phil was one. Maybe Junior. And was that...Mary M.? She hadn’t caught up with them in a while. It would be good to see her again. The smell of food drew the whole crowd into the kitchen and everyone said their hellos. Hugs were

given to Mary—she was always welcome here, as one of the Bossman’s and their favorites—and stories were shared about teachings.

Until Matt cleared his throat. “Hey. Attention, everyone. I know we don’t have everyone here, but I want to get this out of the way before the Bossman gets back. I have an announcement to make.” Everyone immediately fell silent. An announcement from Matt meant a big bet had been settled. Thom bit back his smirk, but he couldn’t help the glance over to Barty. Was he blushing? “So we all know that our dear friend Bartholomew, known as Barty, can be kind of pretentious, don’t we?”

Any protest Barty might have made was completely drowned out by cheers from everyone else. Even Mary M. knew. Granted, Barty had mellowed a lot since coming to travel with them, but still. Old habits die hard.

“Well,” Matt continued when the cheering died on, “it seems that he’s finally learning to chill out. As a matter of fact, on this very day, our very own Thomas, sometimes called Didymus, aka Twinboy, behind his back—” Thom blinked and made a sound of questioning protest that was completely ignored, “managed to get Barty to say, and I quote, ‘dude’. I myself stand as a witness.”

A combinations of cheers of victory and boos of loss went through the group. The guys were definitely happy that he’d managed to pull it off. But of course, they all wished they’d been the one to do it.

Thom bowed theatrically a few times. “Thank you, thank you. I accept your applause with a most humble heart.” Phil shoved him with a snort and rolled his eyes.

Matt grinned at them and threw an arm around Barty's shoulders. "Anyway, as our victor, Thom gets our spoils and, as always, the bragging rights. Victory to Thom!" Another cheer went up from everyone but Barty, who looked like he was too busy trying to shove Matt off in embarrassment.

Phil cleared his throat. "All hail Twinboy!"

Everyone laughed at Thom's sputtering.

"All hail Twinboy!"

The Girl Apostle

“The Twelve were with him, and also...Mary (called Magdalene)”—Luke 8:1-2

For all that these boys were idiots, Mary really did love them. Every time she managed to catch up with them, she was reminded of just how idiotic they really were, and of just how much she had missed them. For example, at the moment, at least six of them were involved in a very heated argument about which of them was the best. To be quite honest, Mary wasn't sure what they were saying they were the best *at this time*, but they were all quite certain it was them. Peter seemed to be winning for once, judging by the way he had one hand muffling Andrew's mouth, the other covering Matt's, and was shouting to cover anyone else's protests.

Yeah. They were definitely idiots.

But she loved them all the same.

And because she loved them, she needed to get them moving. The breakfast dishes had been put away and lunches had been packed, but still no one had made any sort of move to leave. They were still too busy arguing. Even Peter, who was normally in charge. Even Judas had gotten in on the argument. And he was normally so levelheaded. Which left Mary. She sighed.

“Hey!” When she only caught the attention of a few of the Twelve, she shook her head and raised her fingers to her lips. Those who had been paying attention quickly cov-

ered their ears. Smart move. Those who had not followed suit a moment later when she let loose a shrieking whistle.

“Hey!”

“—not fair!”

“Ow!”

“Why do you—”

“Mar—”

“—always do that?!”

Mary just crossed her arms and waited for their protests to die down, fighting back a smug smile. Frankly, they should have expected this sort of thing by now. It’s hardly the first time she’d used that technique. It was very effective.

She gave them her most innocuous smile, which was almost always effective. With her long hair laying in braids that only just peeked out from beneath the veil she’d pinned in place and her hands clasped gently before her, she could almost pass for innocent. “So then, boys. Are we ready to go?”

Peter gave her a dirty look with his best glare and his most stern eyebrows, then looked out the window to gauge the time. “Yeah, yeah. I think we’re good to go. Everyone knows their pairs, right?” While no one except Phil actually answered him verbally, there was a definite yes in the way the boys squirmed around each other to stand next to their partners. “Great. And we all know where and when to meet up tonight?” There was a slight hesitation, so Peter sighed and repeated Jesus’ instructions from the night before.

He'd had left early that morning to pray, so they were to break off into pairs (Mary was to pick a team) and go off to do their teaching. Answer some questions. Feed the hungry. Give to the poor. Then go to meet Jesus later. Mary had been doing much the same in her time away from the group, except she'd been doing it on her own, or with another woman, usually. Teaching to small groups or anyone who would listen. Spreading the word. But it was always more fun to have back up like these guys. People who heard it directly from the source like she had. People who loved the man and the message. And who made the message fun.

Peter cleared his throat. "Now, everyone's got it?"

Simon raised his hand in a mock salute. "Sir, yes sir!"

Mary smiled in amusement as Peter rolled his eyes. "Great. Now, Mary, pick a team."

There were a few pleading glances from the younger boys—no doubt they wanted to hear more about her travels—but she stepped closer to Simon and his partner Andrew. She could do with a bit of sarcasm today.

Andrew grinned and pumped his fist into the air. "Ha! We're Mary's favorites! Told you we were the best!"

Mary rolled her eyes. "I wouldn't go that far. You're just my least least-favorites today." When Andrew put on his best offended face, she smirked and tugged her veil straight again. "What? After that argument, did you expect me to really be impressed by anyone here?"

A scoff drew her attention to Simon, who was double checking his bag for his lunch by completely emptying it. “Well *yes. Obviously*, Mary. What do you think the point of arguing about who’s the best is unless it’s to impress someone? And we obviously weren’t trying to impress little baby John here—”

“I’m not a baby!”

“So you’re clearly the impressee,” he continued, ignoring John’s protest and shoving everything back into his bag.

Mary was already regretting choosing Simon’s team. “Right... Still not impressed, though, Si. I think all of you will have to do better than that. I’ve seen a lot on my travels. Some little boys squabbling over who’s cooler really isn’t all that exciting for me.” She wandered off to pick up her own bag, checking to make sure none of the boys had stolen her lunch. “You’re just going to have to try harder. You ready?”

There was a dramatic sigh as Simon heaved the bag onto his shoulder. “You wound me, Mary. We all know that you really like us. Just because you won’t admit it doesn’t mean that it isn’t undeniably visible to all of us. Right boys?”

By now, all of the Twelve were grabbing their things to head out and smiling at the exchange before them. Some had the decency to try to hide it, but Phil and Thom, the first to brush past her on the way to the door were openly grinning. Phil waved in Simon’s direction. “Right!” And with that, he dragged Thom out the door.

Barty and Judas were next. They, at least, were more composed. Until Judas smirked and leaned over to squeeze Mary’s arm in goodbye. “Don’t worry, Mary. We

love you too.” A sentiment echoed by Barty, and then Jude and Junior as they slipped outside.

Mary pouted and tried to push her way out of the door next. “I hate you all. I hope you know that.”

“No, you don’t!” Andrew said cheerfully, throwing his arm around her shoulders as he caught up to her. “Why would you keep coming back otherwise, hm?”

She stuck her tongue out at him and ducked out from under his arm. “The free food. And no other reason. None. At all.”

Si chuckled and started off down the road. “Sure, Mary. If that’s what helps you sleep at night...”

Man. She really loved these guys. Even if they were idiots.

Andrew loved listening to Mary talk. He really really did. She had a way of talking that was so different from the way the other guys did. Like she couldn’t wait to get the words out. Like she knew that whatever she was saying to these people was absolutely necessary for them to hear. Which, he totally knew it was. And he always tried to have that mentality when he was teaching too. But he didn’t think it really came across like it did for Mary.

When he taught, he was still pretty clumsy about it. Especially in front of crowds like the one that had gathered to hear her in the market. He felt much more comfortable talking to small groups or one-on-one. But the Bossman said that he was sure that Andrew had potential with public speaking. That he was sure Andrew would be very good at

it with some practice. So Andrew kept at it. He was definitely better than when he started, that was for sure. But he was no Mary.

“Who is this woman,” a voice behind him asked. For once, instead of standing with Mary up at the front and enjoying the shade of the tree of the center of the market she had chosen as her podium, he and Simon had chosen to stand amongst the crowd and experience her lesson as they did. Andrew glanced back to see who had spoken. The man was rather portly, and judging by the scrunching of his eyebrows, quite annoyed, “I’ve never seen her before.”

Andrew smiled a little and shifted to turn enough to speak with the man quietly, only bumping into two of the people in front of him. “Her name is Mary Magdalene. Jesus kind of healed her a while ago and she’s been teaching all over the place since. She’s good, isn’t she?” If Simon made a mocking face at his praise beside him, Andrew absolutely did not see it. Definitely not.

The man shifted his weight from one foot to the other, seemingly not worried at all that he was bumping into someone no matter which way he leaned. “She’s a good speaker, I suppose... Where’s her husband?”

Andrew blinked. Next to him, Si seemed to go still, listening more intently. “Her...husband?” Andrew asked. “She’s not married. She was sick for a very long time, then when she got better, she wanted to teach like Jesus. So she didn’t bother. Why?”

There was a quiet huff through the man’s nose. “She’s unmarried? And teaching like this? What does her family think of this?”

What an odd question. Andrew tilted his head and turned to face him more, narrowly avoiding knocking a jug of wine over. After he muttered an apology to the man who was now gripping it rather tightly, he replied, “Um...I don’t know. I think they’re proud of her. She’s accomplished a lot, you know? I mean, I hadn’t asked...”

The man’s face seemed to be growing red. Andrew wasn’t quite sure what the problem was, but this guy had a problem with something. In fact, it looked like he was about to start shouting about his problem. He guessed it could be the heat—it really was hot outside and anyone who had brought a cloak to fight off the early morning chill had shed it by now—but that didn’t seem right. This had come on pretty quick. And seemed to be getting worse.

That is, until Simon quietly turned—somehow much more graceful than Andrew had been—and placed a gentle hand on the man’s arm, and murmured, “Why don’t we take this elsewhere? I’d hate to disturb everyone else. They’re learning so much. Hm?” When the man only stared, clearly confused about why another stranger was intervening, Si nodded his head away from the crowd to a small collection of spice tables. “I suggest over there. We could have a little privacy. Or we could stay here and you could stay quiet and just listen to her. Your choice.”

The guy’s eyes narrowed and Andrew shifted. There was a tension in the air, and for a moment he could swear that there was going to be a fight right here and now. Which would not be good at all considering how close everyone was pressed. Normally a crowd like this was great. It was the kind they hoped for, where everyone packed in, standing

room only. But if a fight were to break out in something like this? No... That wouldn't be pretty.

The man seemed to realize that too, so he nodded and made his way through group. His belly pushed people out of his path, though whether that was his intention or not, Andrew couldn't tell. Si met Andrew's gaze, then the two of them followed him. Andrew could feel Mary's eyes on them. Of course she was curious about them leaving. She was nearly finished with her talk. She had expected them to ask some questions when she was done. Lead the others in that sort of thing. He just glanced back at her, shrugged, and followed Simon over to the open space behind the spice tables so that the crowd wouldn't hear them.

"So," Simon began, "who are you, and what's this about? I hear you have a problem with Mary?"

The man drew himself up to his full height, attempting to seem authoritative, Andrew guessed. He was only an inch taller than Simon, and at least two shorter than Andrew, but it seemed to make him feel better. He was older than them both by at least ten years, maybe twenty, and clearly found that comforting. "I am Abner, an elder in this town."

Andrew shifted. "Nice to meet you Abner. But, uh... What's your deal with Mary?" Judging by the quiet snort from Simon, that wasn't the best way to ask. He didn't care. He liked Mary. And they'd never had anyone question what their families thought of them teaching. He just didn't understand why this guy was getting so upset.

“What’s my *deal*?” He seemed disgusted by the very phrase, judging by the way his very large nose was crinkling up into his face. “My ‘deal’ is that this woman is walking around unsupervised, unmarried at her age, teaching about things she must know nothing about.”

Andrew blinked and leaned back against a tree. “Un...supervised? Dude, she’s seventeen. She doesn’t need a babysitter. And a lot of the time she travels with Jesus and us anyway. If not, she usually has some women to travel with. So she’s safe, if that’s what you’re worried about. She doesn’t need a husband. She’s doing just fine. And she knows what she’s talking about, for sure.”

Simon glanced at Andrew indulgently, then shook his head and looked down at some of the spices on display. “Look, man. Abner. I’m sure that, just like my friend here said, you’re just worried about Mary’s safety. And that this isn’t some sort of remark about Mary’s abilities to teach based on her gender. Because that would just be dumb. Especially since she’s one of Jesus’ favorites. I mean, I’m pretty sure he likes her more than me and Andrew here. Because she’s just that good of a teacher, and that much of a believer. You feel me? So I’m *sure* that’s what you were saying. Right?”

Abner’s offended nose scrunch started to fade as he began to realize just who he was talking to. “You... You two are his followers? Part of his Twelve?”

They both nodded, Simon with a hint of dignity and Andrew quickly.

“And yet you associate with this...woman?”

Andrew huffed. “Dude, seriously, what is your problem with women? It’s not like she’s the first woman ever to go without getting married. And she’s not the first woman to teach either.”

Abner frowned at him, though whether it was at what he said or at his informality Andrew wasn’t sure. “It’s not proper.”

Clearing his throat to draw Abner’s attention back to him, Simon smiled. It was what Andrew had once overheard Phil and Thom calling his “smartypants smile.” It was the one that meant he definitely knew more than you did about whatever you were talking about, and he planned on proving it. “It’s not proper? Are you sure? Having a woman teacher isn’t proper?”

There was suspicion in Abner’s gaze but he nodded all the same, leaning back against one of the tables and getting cinnamon all over the back of his robe. “Yes. I’m quite sure.”

Si’s ever-dangerous smile grew. “Interesting. Then I’m curious... What exactly do you have to say about Deborah, hm?”

Abner paused. “...Deborah.”

“Yeah. You know. Deborah. Judge over Israel after Ehud. Now what is it that’s written about her..? Oh yeah! ‘Now Deborah, a prophet, was leading Israel at the time’. What’s the rest? Andrew, do you remember?”

Oh, Si was a genius. Andrew grinned and nodded. “Yeah. I think it goes ‘the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided’. That sounds like a girl teacher to me. And a girl leader.”

Abner frowned, then huffed and crossed his arms, sending a small puff of cinnamon into the air. “Well, she was a prophetess. That’s hardly the same, is it? Not to mention she was married.”

Si and Andrew shared a look. So that’s how this was going to go.

Andrew shook his head and turned to examine his table to see if they had any rosemary—his favorite. “Seems the same to me. If a woman can be a prophet, why not a teacher? And what about Miriam, hm? Moses’ sister? I mean, The Big Guy talked to her face to face. If He can talk to a woman face to face, I’m guessing He can also trust them to teach.”

That one definitely caught Abner off guard. He seemed to be scrambling to remember that story. “Wasn’t... Wasn’t He only talking to her to shame her?”

Andrew shrugged and turned back when he finally spotted the rosemary. He might be picking up some of that before they left. No one else bought that. “Well, yeah. Her *and* Aaron. So let’s not put it all on her, right? Equal opportunity shaming here.” He frowned at Abner, who was shaking his head. “What? They screwed up, right? So The Lord scolded them both. Seems fair to me. And that seems pretty incredible to get a personal lecture from the Lord, you know? Miriam must have been a favorite. And she was a woman. In case you’d forgotten that.”

“No, I hadn’t forgotten,” Abner huffed, tugging at his belt to straighten in. “But that was a different situation. She was a sister to Moses and the Aaron. Not just some... Some woman who decided she was too good for marriage.”

“Wait, sorry, I’m what?” Mary’s voice rang out behind them.

The sermon had gone well, as had the discussion, even if it had been a bit short. Mary wasn't sure where the guys had run off to, and really she hadn't cared, but now it was Simon's turn to get up to teach. She told the gathered crowd to hold tight, then made quick work hiking up the hill she'd seen the boys go over. She hoped they hadn't gone far. She had another lesson she could teach if they'd suddenly decided to play hooky, but that really didn't seem like them. Mm... It maybe seemed like Si. But not Andrew.

She nearly called out their names—though how they'd be able to hear her over the rest of the crowd trying to reconnect with friends and family same as her was beyond her—when she spotted a flash of color through an awning that had fluttered in the breeze. More specifically, the same color green that Andrew had been wearing that day. As she got closer, she made out three figures. The shorter one was definitely Si, and the tall one Andrew. She didn't recognize the third, rounder man covered in... was that cinnamon? But whoever he was, he had the boys invested in some tense conversation.

She couldn't quite tell what was being said yet, but Andrew and Simon's voices seemed strained. Most people might not be able to tell. Si's in particular had a relaxed overtone to it. But she'd hung around the group enough to know them and their voices. The other guy... Well. He just sounded hateful. This couldn't be good.

She crept closer to them just, easily slipping past a family picking up some fruit for a snack, planning to politely interrupt and pull them both away to teach—and hopefully not anger the man further—but then she managed to hear what he was saying.

“— some... Some woman who decided she was too good for marriage.”

Mary froze. They were arguing about her? About her...relationship status?

“Wait, sorry, I’m what?”

All three froze and simultaneously turned towards her. The stranger seemed to be getting pale as he recognized her as the woman he was badmouthing, and he wore an expression of discomfort. Possibly constipation. Andrew seemed relieved that she’d shown up, judging by the grin that was slowly creeping over his face.

But Simon was the only one who answered her. “I believe that Abner here was telling us that because you’re a woman and unmarried, your teaching everyone isn’t... what was the word you used, Abner? She isn’t proper? Is that it?”

Mary looked up at Simon for a long moment, then huffed quietly and looked back to Abner. “Is that so?” She bit back the scowl she wanted to wear, and clenched her hands behind her back to keep from appearing too angry. “Si, it’s your turn to teach. Why don’t I give—”

“Abner,” Andrew supplied helpfully.

“Abner a one on one lesson, hm?” Mary continued.

Simon nodded and wiped his hands off on his clothes before nodding his head at Abner in goodbye. He paused by Mary on his way back towards the crowd and squeezed her shoulder lightly. Then, quietly, he muttered, “Please don’t actually fight this one. He’s apparently a respected elder.” At her slight pout that hid amusement, he shrugged. “You don’t want to be kicked out of town, do you?”

She couldn’t help a small smile, and that must have been enough, because Simon nodded and continued on his path. Andrew, however, stayed behind as though to protect

her should this man get more...reactive. Or, judging by the way he kept glancing at the herb bundles, maybe he was just staying to do some shopping. Mary looked back at Abner, then glanced around their little clearing. There were a few little stools left empty by the booths attendants who had flocked to hear Simon speak. "Why don't we take a seat, Mister Abner? Get to know each other?" She made her way over to the nearest stool. Abner didn't move. He seemed rather stunned, actually. Whether that was because he didn't know what she was doing, or because he wasn't used to assertive women, Mary neither knew nor cared. It took a few minutes, but Abner did eventually sit, though a good distance away. It was only then that Andrew pulled a stool over to sit next to Mary.

She smiled. "Wonderful. Let me introduce myself. My name is Mary. I'm a disciple of Jesus. And you are?"

Abner's shock finally seemed to be wearing off, as he shifted and tried to dust some of the cinnamon off his clothes, then cleared his throat before answering. "Abner. I am one of the elders here."

"Nice to meet you, Mister Abner. Truly. And I'm so glad you came to hear me speak today. Were you able to hear my entire sermon?" She knew he hadn't.

"Ah...no. I—"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did the boys pull you away before the end? They can be so protective of me sometimes. It's very sweet, but I'm sorry it got in the way of your learning." She smiled innocently at him. "Would you like to hear the end?"

Abner shifted on his seat. "No, that's not what—"

“But of course you want to hear the end. What was I thinking? You were interrupted. Now, Andrew, when did you two pull him away?” She looked away from Abner, effectively cutting him out of the conversation completely.

Andrew was just barely managing to hide his grin, rocking on his stool. “Um, right when you started your story about the girl with the lamp, I think, Mary.”

“Thank you, Andrew.” She smiled at him, then turned back to Abner. He was opening his mouth to protest—or more likely to tell her why she couldn’t teach him, based on what Simon had said—but she cut him off, though she was careful to keep her voice gentle. “I’ll just start that story over, shall I? I’d hate for you to have missed anything, Abner. A smart man like yourself, you must always be looking for more knowledge and new teachings, no matter where they come from.”

There was a small flash of anger in Abner’s eyes at the mockery and he leaned forward as though in preparation to rise. But Andrew lounged back against a booth, eyeing him, and started talking in case Abner wanted to. “Yeah, Mary. I think he’s a real smart guy. Besides, I had to miss the end of your sermon too. I want to hear it. Go ahead. The first part was really good. You’re a really good teacher. Don’t you think so, Mister Abner?” Between glancing at the two people before him Mary could see the bright yellow mustard dusting the back of his hair where it had brushed against the table

They both glanced over at the older figure. Mary watched as he slowly sank back into his seat. It seemed he knew he was going to lose this battle. He huffed. “Her teachings were...adequate. For a woman.”

Mary smiled and fluttered her hand in front of her face as though to cool an incoming blush, despite her annoyance. “Mister Abner, you flatter me. I’ll have to be careful not to let it go to my head.” She crossed her legs to get more comfortable, took a deep breath of spice scented air, then started up again with her story. The story continued on with her lesson.

Andrew was captivated. The sweet boy was always so excited to learn. And as for Abner... Well it took him a few minutes to actually start listening (boy, was he stubborn). But at least he wasn’t interrupting her. And as far as she could tell, he was paying attention. Maybe she had actually been right, and he really did want to learn. That happened to her a lot. If she could just get them to shut up and listen for long enough to get her sermon out, they usually left content. Maybe still sexist. But, you know. Progress is progress.

She finished her lesson before long, then tilted her head. “Any questions, Mister Abner?” There was a struggle happening across their little refuge. A fairly obvious one. Abner didn’t want to acknowledge that Mary had interested him. *But* he had questions he wanted to ask about what she’d taught. Mary glanced over at Andrew and winked. He grinned back at her. “If not, I’d like to go back and catch some of Simon’s sermon... But if you do, I’m happy to speak with you. Really.”

In the end, he caved. He leaned forward to put his elbows on his knees as best he could, and asked her questions. Not too many. Two. Three. But enough that Mary was satisfied that he would consider her a teacher. She gave her best answers. She taught him

the best that she could. And when they were done, he even wore a small smile. It was tiny, really, and not exactly meant for her, but she still counted it as a win.

She and Andrew let Abner wander off ahead of them, then slowly made their way back towards Simon. They had to work to slip through the throngs of people up to the front where Simon was teaching, deciding against standing with the crowd this time. At Simon's questioning glance, Mary smiled and waved him on. He had nothing to worry about. She hadn't even had to tough the old man. She was really getting good at this.

After Simon's teaching, Andrew stood and spoke. His sermon, while shorter than his predecessors', was effective, and Mary was very impressed. The last time she'd seen him speak, he'd been a stuttering mess, but now he was spreading his message as confidently as any of them. She was proud of them. After a final round of discussion and questions from the tired, cramped crowd, the three packed their things to go. They had a ways to walk to meet the others that night.

"So," Simon began once they were on their way, "are we going to be welcomed back here again?" He paused. "Do we want to be welcomed back here again?"

Mary rolled her eyes. "Eh. It wasn't that big of a deal, Si. It's definitely not the first time I've dealt with a guy like that. But no, I dealt with him all nice and pleasant-like."

Simon, being the cynic that he was, glanced to Andrew for confirmation as he directed them down one side of a fork in the path. The younger boy nodded enthusiastically. "It was kind of cool, Si. Cause Abner was all angry, right? And he wouldn't even listen to us! But then Mary swoops in and just like, doesn't even let the guy talk and just de-

cides *for him* that he's going to hear the rest of her sermon! And he can't even be mad about it because she did it so nice! Like she was being all sweet and stuff! It was weird. And it totally worked."

"Huh. Mary? Sweet?" Simon smirked. "I can't imagine that. You're sure you're talking about our Mary?" Mary shoved him nearly off their path. "I rest my case."

"Well, you'd better just believe him, then," Mary said stubbornly. "Because I'm certainly not going to be sweet to you. And besides, I wouldn't have had to do any of that if you hadn't riled him up in the first place."

Si blinked. "What? Us rile him up? Try the other way around, Mary. He was saying all this nasty— this nasty stuff about you. I thought he was gonna pick a fight. So we got him out of the way."

"Where you riled him up?"

Andrew pouted. "Simon was just trying to defend your honor..."

Mary stopped walking to gape at him. Si, also staring in amusement, didn't notice the stop and ran into her, nearly knocking them both down with a loud laugh.

Andrew blushed and muttered a quiet, "What, he was..." they both burst into a combination of giggles and laughter.

Oh yeah. These boys were definitely idiots.

But she really did love them.

Trust Me, I'm (Almost) a Doctor

“Our dear friend Luke, the doctor”—Colossians 4:14

Luke was a doctor. Well, almost. It's a process. He had been studying under Timothy for a couple of years now, after being handed off from Old Levi. Apprenticing under two different physicians wasn't the most common practice, but Luke thought it was... beneficial. Levi had taught him the older ways—dream interpretation, some cool herbal cures. Then Timothy had taught him the more modern practices—hygiene, surgery, which herbal cures actually worked and which would actually kill the patient. It was a comprehensive education, to say the least.

And sure, maybe Luke still wasn't allowed to see patients alone, and could only do the most rudimentary treatments without supervision, but he was still getting there. He was going to be successful someday. He could be Jesus' first missionary physician. Maybe he could travel with that group of his once he got further along with his training. That would be awesome. Some of those guys were really cool. Like Peter and Matthew and John. Everyone who knows Jesus knows that they're some of his favorites. He trusts them. Luke hoped he'd get to that point some day.

When he finished his training, of course.

He was almost there.

He hoped.

He had to be. His teacher always praised him on his logical approach to patients, and usually asked for his opinion on what to do first to test him. And he was usually right! AND Timothy had even started to put into practice Luke's idea of talking to the patient's family or neighbors for signs or symptoms that the patient himself hadn't noticed. It didn't contribute too much usually—just a confirmation of what they had already heard—but once or twice, Luke had stumbled upon a symptom that cleared up the issue right away so that Timothy knew what to do. So that had to mean that Luke was nearing the end of his studies. He was sure of it.

Of course, Timothy wouldn't confirm that. "If I said yes, you'd get cocky, kiddo," he always said when Luke asked. "And if I said no, you'd sulk. Better to keep you on the ropes." It was so aggravating. What more could he do?

But for now, at least, he could put those thoughts behind him. He and Timothy were traveling again, going to visit an uncle. Or a cousin? Maybe it was a brother-in-law. Luke couldn't remember exactly. It wasn't his family. He figured Timothy would remind him when they got close anyway. It didn't really matter who it was, specifically.

What did matter was that, from what Luke had last heard, he would be in Galilee at the same time Jesus and his group were. He could stop in and see everyone. It had been a long time since he'd seen them. The first time had been when he'd still been studying with Old Levi. They'd just treated a woman with a broken leg when Jesus and his Twelve passed through. It was really different for Luke. Seeing people like that, his age, just traveling and learning. And the stuff Jesus taught! And since then, he'd always looked for-

ward to running into them again. This time, he could feel out the waters. See how they felt about having their own personal physician.

“Who wouldn’t want one, though? I mean, how could they say no? That just seems...I don’t know. Not too bright. If you ask me.” Luke nodded to himself, then tripped on a rock in the path that had definitely not been there a minute ago.

“Funny. I don’t remember asking you.” Timothy gave him that look that clearly meant he was already bored of the conversation—it wasn’t the first time they’d had it—and resumed scanning the horizon.

Luke huffed and continued, ignoring the interruption. “They should just think about it. So I’ll start them thinking about it. Get them ready for me.”

“Luke, come on. Give them some credit. I’m sure they’re smart enough to figure it out for themselves. Especially after hearing all you’ve had to say about them. But this sounds like you’re not going to give them the option of saying no.” Timothy shook his head and glanced around for any sign of a well that was *supposed* to be nearby. They’d been walking since dawn and should be entering the city within an hour or so, but had mostly been traveling through uninhabited desert. It was only within the last couple of hours that they’d started to see the benefits of living near water, with vegetation cropping up out of the rocks until it was nearly everywhere. They’d emptied their supply of water about two hundred yards back, up and down hills, because “*We can refill at Lois’ well. It’s practically right here. I helped fix up her daughter’s broken arm a few years back, so she likes me well enough.*”

And here they were, fifteen minutes later, and there was still no well. Luke looked to his teacher. “You’re sure we’re close? Because it really doesn’t seem like it...”

“Yes, I know we are. I’m sure of it.” Timothy stopped walking to look behind them again, in case, somehow, they’d managed to pass it without noticing.

He took advantage of the pause to sit on one of the larger rocks around. “How would you know? That tree looks the same as any other we’ve passed by today.” Luke knew before his teacher turned around what expression he would be wearing. It was the you’re-really-going-to-act-like-a-child-now? look. It came with scrunched brows, chin tilted down, and pursed lips that sometimes (like now) seemed like they might want to be smiling in amusement, but knew they had to be stern to get the point across. Luke had seen this expression way too many times.

“I don’t need your lip, kid. Just give me a minute. It’s close, okay?” He looked around again, then seemed to spot something—though what stood out between the near-identical plants and the definitely-identical rocks, Luke had no idea. “There we are. I knew it. Come on. This way.” Timothy pointed towards the top of a hill before leaving the well-worn path they had been traveling.

Luke grumbled something about tripping and falling to their deaths as he followed him towards the miniature bluff, but only to bring out Timothy’s amused smile. Well, it could have been the same look as before. But considering they had finally managed to figure out where they’re going, he assumed it would be the former.

And he was right. Timothy smiled that same smile he always did when he thought Luke was being a drama queen. Which, granted, was quite often. But at least it wasn’t an

ugly smile. It honestly was amused. Most of Timothy's expressions were as sincere as the man himself. And he was still himself, even if he was getting rather old—definitely not senile yet—at 44. Luke had been helping to treat him for his old-age aches and pains since he had been taken on as an apprentice. Of course he had to run everything by Timothy first. But he was mostly responsible.

He liked to think of the old man as his patient sometimes. When he wasn't around, anyway. When he was, he always seemed to know that's what Luke was thinking, and would blurt out something like, "I'm not helpless yet," or "you're still just an apprentice, kiddo", or something along those lines. It was the worst.

Despite his complaints, it really wasn't that hard for Luke to hike up the mini crag. He was young and fit, after all. Something Timothy seemed to think he was rubbing in his face just by being alive and agile at this point.

"Come on, kid. Help me out, here. I want some water too." Timothy wasn't even trying. It was sad, really. The rocks could almost be used like steps in most places, but Timothy was trying to rock climb, poor guy.

"No— No, over this way, Timothy. Start over here," Luke pointed. "Just step up. No, you don't need your hands. Just step up. Good. Okay. So, a few steps to the left—no, your left. Your left. Step up again." And so on. It was a slow process. But they made it work. One little step at a time.

Once Timothy finally made it topside, he was able to remember the way. There was actually a path they could have taken instead of climbing. But it's fine, really. First, they both downed quite a bit straight from the bucket lowered to the water. There was a

brief argument over who got to drink first (“But I brought the water up! I should get to drink first!” “Respect your elders, kid.”) that was short lived.

Only once they were satisfied did Luke start to refill their skins. He made sure to get them as full as possible just in case Timothy managed to get them lost again. Then, as he packed their things again, a young man approached the well.

“Excuse me. Would you mind if I shared your well for a few moments before I head on? I only need a quick refill.” The voice was familiar to Luke, though he couldn’t quite place it. As he drew closer, the apprentice thought he looked familiar too.

“Sorry, my boy,” Timothy apologized, patting the rim of the well. “It’s not our well. We’re visitors too. But I don’t think Lois would mind. She’s a nice woman. Come, take some water.”

The boy—well, he was probably around fifteen or sixteen, so not *that* young—brightened and he grinned at Timothy. He already had his skin out of his bag. “Thank you sir. I won’t take long.”

Timothy smiled, and Luke realized that they would definitely be late getting to the city. His teacher loved strangers. Loved chatting with them, questioning, figuring out their lives. He had a feeling some such conversation was going to happen here at this well. “Are you heading towards or away from the city?”

“Away from, sir.” The boy pulled up some water for himself, scrunching his face up in concentration.

“Ah. What for, if I may ask?”

The boy leaned against the well as he began his refills. “My friends and I travel a lot. There was a bug going through the last town we went through, and one of my friends seems to have caught it. So I’m going back to the doctor who was treating them to see what we should do.” He shrugs, then looks up at them. “Oh. I don’t think I have it, if you’re worried or anything. That’s why I’m the one going. Just so you know. I was in the town with the sick people the least, so. I basically passed through. Barely talked to anyone. So you don’t have anything to worry about.”

That’s when it clicked. The face. The voice. The rambling. Luke had seen this kid with Jesus before. Oh, what was his name? He’d hung out with that Thomas kid a lot... Philemon? Phineas? No, Philip. That’s what it was. Philip. Luke blinked and blurted out, “You travel with Jesus, don’t you?”

Philip nearly dropped the bucket of water in surprise. “I do, yeah. How did you—” He paused, then leaned forward. “Luke? You’re Luke, aren’t you? You’ve come around a few times...”

Luke nodded enthusiastically, grinning at the acknowledgement. “I have, yes. I was hoping to see everyone soon. I had heard you were in Galilee and we were headed this way ourselves for work. Who is it that’s sick? Not Peter, I hope. Or John?”

Timothy watched the exchange with interest, fighting back an amused smile as Philip shook his head. “No, it’s Jude. He’s had a fever since early this morning.” He glanced down at his water, then nodded slightly, as though to himself. “I should be going. It was good to see you.” He gave a small smile, then turned to go, though he paused when

he heard Timothy clear his throat. The physician straightened and offered a hand with a kind smile.

“Hang on. Why don’t we save you the trip? Why don’t we let Luke take a look at him?”

The room Jude was being kept in was small, probably intended for a maximum of two guests at a time. Of course, that didn’t stop the group from setting up—how many?—five pallets of blankets on which to sleep. Jude’s was the only one full at the moment. From what Phil had said, most of the group had only reached the home that morning, thanked their hosts, set up sleeping arrangements, then settled Jude before leaving again. Phil had been sent off back to find the physician, James Jr. had been left behind to keep an eye on his brother with Peter to help, and Jesus had left with the rest to visit the synagogue, so at least there wasn’t a crowd to deal with.

Luke stood in the doorway, trying to resist fidgeting with his sleeve nervously. Timothy had walked as far as the house with him and Philip, then said his goodbyes and continued on to find his uncle. Or whatever he was. So now Luke was on his own. He was supposed to treat a patient on his own. Without supervision. For the first time. Ever. Yeah, he could do this. He could totally do this. Right? Yeah, definitely. He was a doctor, after all.

Well, almost.

Phil pushed past him to crouch down on one of the sets of blankets, listening to the apparently heated debate between the two brothers about whether or not Jude was go-

ing to be dead by dinner time. Peter had crammed himself into the far corner and, judging by the way his knuckles had been digging into his ears without stopping since Luke had arrived, trying his hardest to drown out their voices. Luke could understand why. Jude's claims of death seemed to be getting more and more gruesome each time he got a chance to speak. He was in the middle of describing one of his limbs falling off while his skin turned purple with rot when Philip finally caught James Jr.'s attention.

“Phil?” he asked, cutting his brother off. “What are you doing back? You should be way out of the city by now. Jude needs a doctor.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know Junior. But, uh,” Phil shifted his weight, “I kind of ran into one not too far out. And he said he'd help... I mean, he's lending us his apprentice. I figured that would be faster, so it would be better, right?” He glanced back at Luke. “Besides. We, uh. We know him.”

Sometimes you really could tell that James and Jude were brothers. This was one of those times. They both turned to see who stood in the doorway at the exact same time, stared at Luke with the same confused expression (scrunched brows, somewhat pouty lips) which then simultaneously changed to identical expressions of recognition (wide eyes, wide mouths). If he didn't know any better, Luke would have assumed they were twins. In fact, he had assumed that when he first met them. But James was very proud of his year-long lead, and made sure to correct him.

Luke raised one hand in a wave. “Hello.”

“Luke. What are you doing here?” Ah. Peter had unplugged his ears.

“Well, I... I can help. Timothy—that is, my teacher—and I ran into Philip, and he told us what was going on with Jude. From the sounds of it, with all of the training I’ve been doing, I can help him to recover.”

Peter looked skeptical. “I... appreciate the offer. But what about your teacher? Couldn’t he just help Jude?”

A frown crept across Luke’s face. “He has another patient to attend to. I promise you, I can handle this. I’ve been training and studying for years now. I’m practically a doctor already.”

Almost. Close enough.

Jude coughed weakly—definitely fake, Luke could tell. “Just tell me, ‘practically a doctor’. Am I going to die before everyone gets back for dinner? Or will I at least get to eat tonight?”

Luke rolled his eyes and pushed off the doorway to sit on some of the blankets next to him. “You’re not going to die at all—”

“Told you so, squirt,” James muttered.

“It doesn’t even look that bad,” Luke continued forcefully, as though he hadn’t been interrupted. He was the doctor, for now. He had hoped they’d at least try to respect him. “Come on. Let’s get this figured out. Go through the symptoms. You’ve got a fake cough, for one.”

“Fake!” Jude sputtered, forcing another cough and he pushed himself up into a sitting position. “It’s not fake! It’s absolutely real!”

Peter barked out a laugh behind them. “Yeah, your cough is real, and I’m a goat. Be nice, Jude.” He stood and stretched, then shook his head. “I’m going to get some more water. Behave yourselves. I mean it. And...listen to Luke, I guess. He apparently knows what to do here, so. Do as he asks. I’ll be back in a little while.”

Jude sighed dramatically, but James nodded in agreement. Luke smiled at him in thanks for the support. He figured these boys would be trouble without a word of warning.

Once Peter had left, he turned back to Jude. “Alright. Tell me about your real symptoms.”

James nudged his brother in encouragement—or rather, elbowed him—and Jude huffed and dropped back on his bundled up cloak of a pillow before replying. “I don’t know. My throat’s hurt since yesterday morning, like all the people we talked to on the way here. And now my head hurts too. And Junior here thinks I have a fever.”

“Because he does have a fever. There’s no doubt. Go ahead and check, Luke.”

Glancing between the two boys for any sign of another spat coming on—who knew with these two?—he reached down to feel Jude’s temple, then slid his fingers down to his neck. He hummed thoughtfully. “I agree. Definitely a fever... Does this hurt?” He swirled his fingers around on Jude’s neck gently. He didn’t really need to wait for any answer. Jude’s wince was enough. “Okay. Besides the throat and your head, does anything else hurt?”

“Um...” Jude looked to his brother, as though James would know better than himself whether he had body pain. “I guess a little. Some aches... Nothing major though. It

could just be laying on the floor for so long. It's hard to tell. I'm used to moving around more."

"I'm sure you are." Luke leaned in to check his eyes and nose, then instructed his patient to open his mouth. "If you don't mind my asking... Why doesn't Jesus just heal you? I know he can. I've heard the stories..." That had been Luke's one big concern about possibly becoming Jesus' personal physician. The man was a known miracle worker. Word had spread far and wide about his healing. He'd even brought people back from the dead! How was an ordinary doctor supposed to compete with that?

Phil glanced over Jude to meet James' eye with an expression that seemed to be asking the same question, then shrugged. "I don't know. He doesn't always do it. I think it depends on his mood, really."

"Yeah," James agreed. "I mean, one time I broke my wrist and he fixed me with nothing more than a 'be careful, Junior'. But then sometimes he's like, 'no, we need to go visit the physicians', and then that turns into him teaching them, usually."

Luke sat back to let Jude relax. "Do you think that's what this is for. He let you stay sick so that I could come maybe? Like... Like maybe he's going to teach me?" How cool would that be? His first chance to treat his own patient, *and* it was all because Jesus had a message for him. Just for him! It would be amazing!

"Nah, I doubt it," Jude said, easily shattering Luke's mini vision of grandeur. "I mean, he took off pretty quick once he got us settled. I don't think he's planning on being back for a while. Not till dinner at the very earliest. I mean, you know how he is." He

paused. "Or, I guess, you don't. We do. Sometimes he has dinner with the people he's teaching, so... And sometimes he stays out all night. Hard to tell."

Luke frowned. "Oh... Well." He shifted his weight. "Well, that's not what I'm here for anyway. So it's fine." He cleared his throat and turned to Phil. "Philip, I'm going to need you to run and get a few things for me for his treatment. Can you do that?"

Philip perked up. "Yeah, for sure. What do you need?"

Luke stood up and gestured for Philip to do the same, then met his gaze to make sure he was paying attention. "I'm going to need ginger, cayenne, basil, and honey. Will you remember all of that?"

"Basil, honey, ginger, cayenne. That's it, right?" At Luke's nod, he grinned. "Alright, I'll be right back." He waved to the others, then slipped out the door. Luke could hear him muttering his shopping list to himself as he left.

Shaking his head, Luke crouched next to Jude again and grabbed another blanket from the set up on which he had chosen to sit. He then draped it over his patient. "James, will you hand me your blanket too? We want to try to help him sweat out the fever some. That's all we can really do until we get water and everything else."

Jude grimaced as he started to heat up and squirmed beneath the blanket. "But... you can fix this, right? I mean, I'm not gonna die or anything? For sure?" He jerked a little as his brother shoved him.

"I told you, squirt. You're not going to die." James paused and looked to Luke. "He's not, right?"

“Of course not,” Luke said, in his best ‘comforting doctor’ voice. He’d managed to pick that up from Timothy a while ago. “It’s a pretty straightforward treatment. It might take a few days to set in. Maybe a week or two for you to be completely back to normal, especially if you push it. But I know what I’m doing. Trust me. I’m a doctor.”

Almost.

There was quiet after that. Jude was satisfied that he wasn’t dying, apparently, so he started to doze off into a nap. James relaxed when his brother did and slouched back against the wall to keep an eye on him. Luke, however, couldn’t sit still. At first, he tried to mimic James and just rest while he waited for the ingredients for his treatment. But he wasn’t used to sitting still very much. He was usually the one running to the market for the herbs while Timothy stayed behind with the patient. He wasn’t very sure what to do here, especially with the patient asleep... James and Peter had helped explain the symptoms, so double checking with friends and family was already done. He felt pretty confident about what he was dealing with—he’d seen Timothy face it a few times. So maybe he should just...make conversation? And maybe they could even be productive while they did so.

“So...James...”

“Junior.”

Luke blinked. “What?”

“Junior. Everyone calls me Junior now. Since there’s two James’ in the group. There’s James—he’s John’s brother? Second oldest?—and then there’s me. And since

he's older, I go by Junior." He made a face as he glanced down at Jude. "Even my little brother calls me Junior. I mean, how annoying is that?"

Luke smiled a little, then stood to stretch. "I can imagine it would take some getting used to."

"Yeah, to say the least. Anyway, you were saying something and I totally interrupted. What was it?"

"Oh. Right. Um." Luke shifted. "Two things. Firstly, we should let your brother rest. Maybe we could move to the other room? I should get everything cleaned up so it's ready when it comes time to make his medication anyway."

Junior glanced at his brother uncertainly. It was clear he didn't want to leave his side. But moving one room over wouldn't really make a difference. "Yeah, okay." He reached over to tuck one of the blankets in a little tighter, then stood and led the way into the kitchen. "What's your secondly?"

Luke hesitated. "I...don't want to press. But I was just curious... What's it all like? Traveling with him? Jesus, I mean? It's got to be incredible. All the healing and the teachings and the miracles and everything?" He couldn't help the excitement that crept into his voice when he talked about it. That always happened. Timothy tended to call this his fanboy mode, which it totally wasn't!

Mostly.

James—that is, Junior—laughed quietly and started to gather some cloths for them to use to clean up. "I probably should have seen this coming. It always comes to this. Yeah, it's pretty amazing sometimes. The whole miracles thing is pretty cool, I won't

lie. But, uh. Luke. Let me be straight with you. Because we do kind of know each other. We're kind of friends, right? Sort of. Enough. Right?"

Luke tilted his head and leaned forward in curiosity, taking a rag when it was offered. "Um, yeah, I would say so. I mean, I'd like to be."

"Right, that's what I thought. So, uh. Doing this whole...following Jesus thing? It totally has its pros for sure. But it's just weird sometimes. Like, okay, so. Jesus is supposed to be this great teacher, right?" Junior paused to look around the kitchen and figure out what the easiest cleaning project would be, and started to wipe down one of the counters. "And he *totally* is! But only like, half the time. The other half, he just tells us all these weird stories. Um...parables! Yeah, parables. Like, fables, you know? Stories with morals. Except, like, half of those are impossible to understand, right? We can't figure out the moral of the story! It just straight up doesn't make sense!"

"Well, doesn't he explain the stories to you," Luke asked as he started on another counter.

Junior shrugged. "Yeah, sometimes. And sometimes he doesn't because he wants us to figure it out for ourselves. And sometimes he explains them and it doesn't help at all. We're still just as confused when he's done. If not more so."

"Huh. How...complicated." Luke picked up a misshapen knick knack to examine before swiping his cloth over where it sat. "Doesn't he understand that you guys don't get it? I mean, my teacher always explains things to me until I understand them. That's how you learn."

“Well yeah, usually, I guess,” Junior replied. “But the Bossman is different. He’s got this, sort of, end game in mind, I think. It’s weird. So it all kind of comes from that as far as I can tell. In fact, I get the feeling sometimes that maybe the stuff we don’t understand now will all come together with the end game, you know? I mean, like I said earlier about healing or not healing, sometimes he makes weird decisions that end up making sense. ‘No, I won’t heal you this time’ and look, suddenly we’re teaching a whole convention of doctors we wouldn’t have otherwise. Like, how does he do it, you know? But I just wonder if some day the stories will come together like that. I hope so. Otherwise, we’ve got nothing.” Junior stopped cleaning, twisting the rag in his hands thoughtfully.

Luke was quiet for long moment as he listened, thinking. If Jesus normally healed his followers, and he chose not to heal Jude, then he had to have come here for a reason, right? “What if you guys just need help? A fresh set of ears, or something like that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I mean that maybe you could tell me the stories that Jesus has told you. And I could see if maybe I can figure any of them out.” When Junior hesitated, Luke added, “We’ve got to wait here for everyone to get back anyway. We have to do something. And I’d like to help.”

Junior still seemed hesitant, judging by the way he glanced at the doorway for any sign of Peter or Philip getting back, but he sighed and nodded. “Yeah, okay. I can’t guarantee I’ll remember all of them, though.”

“That’s okay. I can ask the others, too. I mean, the more accounts I have, the more accurate my information is. I do that with medicine too. Ask the patient, and the people around him, you know? Just to be sure. So I’ll do the same here. I’m sure I can come up with something.”

“Yeah, yeah, fine. Just, good luck with figuring this stuff out. Okay, so. There was this one about a lamp, right?”

Junior told as many stories as he could remember as Luke continued to scrub at the kitchen to keep himself busy. Between each one, the two discussed their theories on what the story could possibly mean. But Luke had been wrong. He certainly hadn’t come here to clear things up for the followers. These stories just didn’t make sense. Maybe he really was just here to be Jude’s doctor and keep moving on to the next town.

Even if they couldn’t come up with some kind of answer, Luke committed each story to memory. He kept coming up with new theories, no matter how preposterous, and planned to go over them with Timothy later. For all that Timothy wasn’t exactly as thrilled about the following Jesus had as Luke was, he would certainly lend a hand if Luke said it was important.

Their conversation (sometimes storytelling, sometimes a debate, sometimes an argument, sometimes quiet grumbling as Luke scrubbed at a stubborn stain) was finally interrupted by Peter joining them again with as much water as he could carry. “No, no. Come on, Junior, that’s not how it ended. It was way more ominous than that. Use your spooky voice. ‘*Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather*’. See? Like

that.” Both Luke and Junior froze, looking up at him. “What? If you’re going to tell one of the Bossman’s stories, you’ve got to at least make it interesting.”

Junior blinked, then burst into laughter. “Yeah, well. Fair enough. Otherwise you’ll just get angry, like we’ve been doing.”

Peter smiled a bit indulgently, then looked at Luke, who shifted nervously. “Why are you guys going over the parables anyway?”

“I, uh... I had hoped that maybe I could help all of you to understand some of them, maybe... I mean, I figured there might be some reason Jesus didn’t heal Jude and that might be it. But I think I was wrong, so...” Luke trailed off as he busied himself by getting some water.

“Oh.” Peter nodded. “Interesting thought... But don’t blame yourself. We’ve asked a few people. No one seems to get them.”

Luke sighed and carried his water in to his patient. “What a pity. They’ve got to be important. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have told you, right?”

Another voice croaked out, “Prob’ly not,” from beneath the blankets, and everyone turned to look at the newly woken Jude. “What’r we talking about?” Peter started laughing too loudly for anyone to answer. Poor kid.

While Junior hurried in and helped Jude to sit up, Luke offered him some water to drink, and Philip arrived, holding out a sack. “I’ve got everything! What now?”

Luke handed the water cup over to Junior, then took the sack from Philip. “I’m going to show you and Peter how to prepare this. He’s going to need to take this pretty often, for at least a week, and I won’t be here that whole time.” Philip blinked, then nod-

ded eagerly and beckoned Peter over. They found space on the newly-cleaned table to use for preparation, and Luke began his instructions.

He showed them which herbs to grind, which to chop, and which needed to be cleaned a specific way. Then he started to mix them into his boiling water—showing them the correct amounts, of course—to make a tea.

“Now, you’ll want to give this to him every four hours or so. It should help with the fever and with the pain. And I know he’s probably not hungry right now, but he really should have a little something every now and then. Some bread, maybe.” He looked up from his little cup of tea to check Philip and Peter’s understanding—Philip got a bit lost in the preparation of the basil earlier—and was somewhat confused by the expression Peter wore.

The quirked lips gave the whole look an air of amused confusion, but the warm eyes and the slight tilt forward of his head... Luke wasn’t sure. But it seemed like a good sign, so that’s how he was going to take it.

He cleared his throat. “So. Does all of that make sense? Any questions?”

Philip looked as though he might have had a couple, but Peter shook his head. “I’ve got it. I’ll show Junior how to do it too. Between the three of us, we’ll have Jude all taken care of.” Luke briefly wondered if ‘three of us’ meant Philip, Peter, and Junior, or Peter, Junior, and Luke, and Philip was just being left out. He supposed it didn’t really matter. He had assistants here, and that’s what mattered.

“Good. That’s good. Then we’ll give him this. And then I should go check in with Timothy. I can probably be back before his next treatment, if I can get away from his family on time.” He smiled a little.

Peter nodded. “Go ahead. We can keep an eye on things here. Thank you, Luke. Really.”

Luke’s smile widened. “Yeah, of course. Anything for you guys.” He waved to the others and gathered his things before heading out.

During his walk, he reconsidered the parables. Maybe Timothy would have some answers for the other guys. And if not... Well, if not, Luke would keep looking. He would find someone who had some answers. He just had to make sure he didn’t forget them first... Maybe he should write them down somewhere. Yeah. Yeah, writing them down would be a good idea. Get them all in one place. And maybe even spread it to others... And eventually he could get it back to the Twelve.

To Jude. His first patient. He had his first patient. And he did okay! He knew what to do! He managed to prescribe a treatment without any trouble at all. Just wait until Timothy heard. He’d be so proud.

Because Luke was a doctor now.

Well. Almost.

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