

They started back to the camp, the watery sun was setting over the mountains that separated them from Gaul. There was a bitter, thin, cold wind blowing down from the higher peaks to the north. It cut through the several extra layers of clothing he had put on. At the rise above the temporary camp, Marcellus paused, staring down into the cluster of tents and the precise gaps between them. At regular intervals, flares guttered in the wind. Men wandered about between the tents, but the place was hardly a hive of activity after the punishing day's march up the pass. Lucian remarked to break the prolonged silence.

"An impressive sight."

Marcellus snorted derisively.

"Hardly the impressive imperial progress it's supposed to be. I tell you this, if Caesar had been showing his face on this march, there would have been at least one legion - probably more - our pathetic little exercise is a pale excuse!"

There was venom in his voice, Lucian glanced around cautiously, it was as well they were alone. Marcellus grated on.

"Have you ever seen the legions on the march, Lucian."

"No."

Marcellus nodded and continued.

"First comes two troops of lightly armed men armed with bows - you can always pick them out, they have leg-muscles out of proportion to the rest of their bodies. They're sent first, so that they can counter any surprise attack from any direction. These days, they're composed of foreign levies from the provinces, such as Gaul and Germany. When it's time to call a halt after the days march and when they're satisfied all is secure, they start to clear the site for the camp.

After them come detachments of heavy armed Roman cavalry, mounted, for the most part on Germanic and Hispanic horses, they're there to back up the scouts if it becomes necessary. After these come the surveyors with instruments for marking out the camp, together with the engineers for building any roads. Foot soldiers follow these,

who protect the baggage carts of the officers.

Now the real guts of the legion appears - two hundred cavalry to protect the commanding general and his senior officers - or Caesar, should he choose to be present. Behind them come other great units of cavalry, together with mules dragging the engines of war, each item surrounded by foot soldiers. That isn't the end of it - not by far! Then come the commanders of the cohorts, together with junior officers - then the golden eagle and the standards of the legion, carried by the best physical specimens you can find, mounted on especially fine horses. Then come the trumpeters, drummers, water-boys and cooks - again, all well protected by foot soldiers."

Marcellus paused, his face was transformed, Lucian could see that he was living the description.

"After all this come the real fighting men - six abreast, shoulder to shoulder. Then come the servants, mercenaries, mules, asses, camels, wagons, together with a rear-guard of light infantry, a detachment of heavy infantry, and then units of rear-guard cavalry. That's the way its been for centuries - the legions have always marched this way!"

Lucian responded after a little pause.

"Surely, not in times of peace - you've described a war setting."

Marcellus answered abruptly.

"The legions are always on a war setting! That's why the legions can't be beaten."

Lucian trod cautiously.

"And you feel we can?"

"I didn't say that! But our oversize escort is seriously undermanned, even to protect the illustrious senator."

They had continued down the slope to the camp. Marcellus responded to the sharp challenge of the sentry and they were allowed entry. The centurion nodded abruptly and suddenly wheeled about to go to his own quarters, leaving Lucian to wonder what the sudden resumption of a dead relationship had been all about.

He wasn't left alone for long. A messenger arrived with a brief request for him to present himself before the Imperial Legate. Lucian glanced at the man - a young Decurion with an impassive face - He tried to decide whether his junior ranking implied an insult or otherwise. The fact that a Decurion had been used rather than one of Honarius' tame entourage, might also have some significance.

"Tell his Excellency I'll attend him as soon as I've changed."

The Decurion departed, armed with the intimate details of Lucian's intentions. Lucian took his time - feeling no inclination to hurry, but every intention of annoying Caesar's delegate. It was more than an hour before he arrived at Honarius' tent. The usual buzz of activity for that time of the evening was absent - in fact, the large canopy appeared to be lit with just one lamp. The usual two guards were at the entrance, and they presented no problems when he entered. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust. Honarius was in his cot, swathed in coverings and attended by one of his beautiful courtesans, who appeared to be making a valiant if clumsy effort to be an administering angel. The Imperial Legate croaked.

"Publius, so good of you to come - as you can see, I'm stricken down!"

Lucian found insincere words.

"Nothing too serious, I hope?"

Honarius groaned.

"Who can say - who can say! I'm on fire! My throat is parched and I can hardly swallow. I find it hard to breathe!"

Lucian fought down the insane suggestion that perhaps he shouldn't try!

"This malady must have struck you very suddenly."

Honarius prised himself up on one elbow and agreed vehemently.

"It certainly did! I suspect the work of an enemy! Something put in my food perhaps!"

Lucian moved forward cautiously, suddenly aware that they were carrying on the conversation across the length of the tent.

"I hope it's no more than a chill, Senator - the higher we go into the mountains the thinner the air - and the more the cold."

Honarius nodded eagerly.

"Perhaps you're right, Publius - I hope my worse suspicions are incorrect."

"Who would want to harm Caesar's Legate?"

Again he nodded vigorously and then groaned.

"My head! My head! - A man has enemies you know, enemies of a private nature - jealous and pernicious people who will stop at nothing - argh!"

The ministering angel had managed to pour the contents of a small dish into his clothing.

"Stupid girl!"

His voice was suddenly surprisingly robust. Lucian waited for the emergency to pass.

"In what way can I be of service, Honarius?"

The Imperial Legate tried to forget his damp condition. He squinted at Lucian.

"By being Caesar's friend, Publius. Gaius Caesar trusts you to be one of his Amici.

That is sufficient for me to entrust the leadership of this enterprise to you for the duration of my sickness. I will, of course, be close at hand, but compelled to ride in a litter."

"Perhaps it would be wise for us to remain here until you're well, Honarius?"

For a man with a fevered head, it was shaken vigorously.

"I think not - we must cross the mountains - another day or so should do it - then we will descend into a warmer climate."

Lucian added mournfully.

"It is to be hoped, Senator."

It was also obvious to Lucian that he had been the subject of subtle manoeuvring. Whether Honarius was truly sick, or whether it was some elaborate charade, the result was the same. Any thoughts Lucian might have had of braving Caesar's wrath and

returning to Rome, had been skilfully blocked. He was now the de facto leader of the expedition - he was given the itinerary for the march for the next two days, which would bring them to an unspecified point beyond the mountains. There really wasn't any other way to go, but the further journey would be decided then.

When he went to bed that night and he had further time to put together the events of the evening, he became suddenly very sure that he had been out-manoeuvred by the wily senator.

The question almost hit him between the eyes. Why hadn't the leadership of the march been given to a far more qualified candidate and one who commanded Caesar's greatest regard - Marius Agrippa? The only lame answer Lucian could find to his own question was - perhaps a column of Roman soldiers couldn't be led by a Jew!

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Three days after the flight of Rebecca and her children from Rome to the country estate, Lepidus paid his routine weekly visit to ensure that the resident servants and slaves were keeping the place in order. Rebecca had been on tenter-hooks waiting on a report of what had happened since her departure - and much more than that - a reply to her letter from Lucian. She could hardly believe that there hadn't been a visitation to the house - by whom she wasn't quite sure - to find out if this was where she was hiding. It seemed incredible that no one apparently suspected that she had secretly removed herself from Rome, together with her children. She had been torn with doubts and self-ridicule that she imagined herself to be in danger, while, on the contrary, nobody seemed in the slightest interested as to where she was or what she was doing.

Lepidus followed an unhurried regular pattern, riding slowly from the city, neither conspicuous nor furtive. He paused when entering the outer gates to the estate, as if to take note of something he thought required attention. It gave him the opportunity to glance back to see if he was being followed at a distance, but he found nothing out of

the ordinary. He rode around to the entrance to the servant's quarters and found them waiting for him. He was pleased to find that his mistress had contained her impatience and had chosen to remain out of sight. Lepidus played the part briefly, conversing with some of the servants as if receiving a report.

He wondered if he was being over-cautious - after all - he was now within the house and well away from prying eyes. He kept to his routine, before slipping through into the quarters being used by his mistress and her children, and Naomi. He carried a letter from his Patron, which he handed over after a respectful greeting. It had been sealed in the familiar convoluted way Septimus and Lucian used when they wanted the contents to remain secure from business - or other enemies. As far as he could see, it hadn't been tampered with.

"When did this come, Lepidus?"

"In the evening, yesterday, my lady."

She had opened it and had flattened it, and now was reading. He watched her face change from anticipation to resignation. Her tone was flat and controlled when she commented.

"Lucian won't be returning home yet, he suggests that it might be dangerous for him to do so - but he doesn't explain why!"

Lepidus ventured deferentially.

"To be too explicit can be incautious when dictated to a scribe, or put in the hands of a courier."

She nodded, there was a slight tremble in her voice when she continued.

"I had so hoped - with the death of Tachius - and with other matters I put in my letter to him - that he would cut short his trip - "

Then with a flash of venom.

"This ridiculous trip at the whim of a tyrant!"

"Caution my lady!"

She attacked him because he was the only one available.

"Why should I be cautious? Caligula is a tyrant and he twists everyone around his fingers and bends them to his will - I hate the man!"

Lepidus' alarm increased, she was practically shouting loud enough to be heard at the gates of the estate! There was a tense moment while she regained control.

"I'm sorry, Lepidus, it isn't your fault - tell me, hasn't anyone yet realised that I'm not in Rome?"

"There's been only one enquiry for you, my lady - the lady Lucinda demanded to see you - she was told that you were indisposed and had given orders not to be disturbed."

"When was this?"

"Yesterday afternoon, my lady."

The venom returned.

"Lucinda - of course! - She would be doing the tyrant's bidding! Her husband, Tertilius, used to be Pilate's creature - now he's ready to sell himself at any price to gain a plush position on the Palatine!"

Lepidus' expression of gravity increased.

"If it should be suspected that you are not in Rome, my lady, the first place you will be sought is here."

"As you say - if they do suspect! You can be sure, Lucinda will be back to the town house - perhaps even as we speak. Caesar may well send his tame physician again - especially if he thinks the wife of his bosom friend is ill! Lepidus! What am I to do!?"

"Perhaps, my lady, your escape from Rome was a little premature. I suggest this because there is no outward sign that Caesar has any interest in you - or where you are - "

"But Lucinda! - She hates me! She has no reason to seek me out! She must be Caligula's spy! Why else would she want to visit me?"

Lepidus waited for the outburst to subside.

"It is possible, my lady, that her visit is sheer coincidence - or perhaps she has some other motive not to do with Caesar - If the gossip on the streets is anything to go by, Caesar is basking in popularity, he is courting favour with the Senate and the people - he seems very determined to be seen to be doing the right thing."

"While secretly engaging in his vices - which include sending the husbands of women away so that he can use them as he wishes!"

Lepidus' eyebrows rose a fraction. He continued cautiously.

"It is said that so great is the public rejoicing, that countless thousands of sacrifices have been made at the altars, and he is very conscious of keeping the people's good will."

"And they show their good will for this monster by slaughtering animals and birds at their pagan altars!"

Lepidus hesitated.

"In this they are not alone, my lady, we Jews also slaughter animals and birds at the altar of the One God!"

She glared at him.

"Not the same I think! We sacrifice to the honour of God - not to pander the vanity of a cruel and sadistic man! - What else is this paragon of virtue doing?"

"It is rumoured that he intends to gather the ashes of his mother and brothers and return with them to Rome."

"I don't understand."

"Tiberius Caesar ordered the exile deaths of his brothers, and ordered the exile of his mother, Agrippina, to an island off the coast of Campania - where, it is said, she starved herself to death!"

Rebecca's eyes widened.

"Incredible! And you mean to tell me that our brave little Caesar did nothing to save them."

"It is said that he showed no emotion - that he had many enemies at the court of Tiberius on Caprae, and that to show any objection would have meant his own end."

"What a brave man!"

"A cautious one, my lady."

"So - now he wants to show how great he is by bringing back the remains of his mother and brothers - no doubt, so that the people will love him even more!"

Lepidus bowed again.

"It would seem so, my lady - whatever his reasons, it would seem that he is pre-occupied with these plans - and perhaps not inclined to offer you any threat."

"It might seem so - but can we be sure?"

"No, my lady, but to remain here might invite his attention - his curiosity might be roused enough for him to be reminded that your husband is not here to protect you."

Rebecca subsided into a chair.

"What am I to do, Lepidus?"

Again, there was a slight hesitation.

"It isn't for me to advise you, my lady - but I can repeat the words of Linus."

She stared up at him.

"What does he say?"

"He says to trust in the Lord our God - and to believe in your Master - nothing can touch you unless it is so willed by our God!"

Lepidus left again shortly after. Rebecca couldn't come to a decision. Every instinct warned her that to return to Rome would place her and the children in greater danger - but then, cold, hard logic dictated that the house in which she now sheltered was no more than five miles from the walls of Rome and that if Caligula had any intentions of molesting her, it would be a pitiful, ridiculous distance for him to overcome. If he chose to send an escort of Praetorians to 'escort' her to his palace, there would be little she could do - or the servants, who would be slaughtered in minutes if they tried. She had

almost resigned herself to returning to the city, when one of the servants burst in on her, white-faced and gasping in fear.

She tried to untangle what he was trying to say to her.

It appeared that they were surrounded by a small army! A troop of men were at the rear door, commanded by an officer of gigantic proportions! His men looked quite ready to draw their swords and slaughter anyone who stood in their way! Without a doubt, they would burn down the house and everyone in it!

It was then that Rebecca became very, very angry! She had taken all she was about to tolerate from these heathen Romans, with their disgusting vices and the morals of their unhealthy sewers! She brushed past the petrified servant and stormed to the servant's door.

Naomi tried to block the way, but Rebecca wasn't to be hindered. She pushed through the huddle of servants and confronted the 'giant'.

Aquila Apolonius was weary, red-eyed and at the end of his tether. He hadn't washed in days and knew he smelled that way. His four companions were in a similar state of disrepair. They had dodged patrols and travelled by night. He wasn't sure if the patrols were specifically looking for them, or if they were the regular pattern for the areas through which they had passed. They had exhausted their rations on the previous day and hadn't dared to try to utilise any of the hostleries in the small communities they had so carefully bypassed, knowing that to do so would invite comment and unwanted attention. He eyed the diminutive Rebecca, who managed to look like the general of an invading army, and made a gallant attempt at social niceties.

"I'm sorry you've been disturbed, my lady Rebecca - You might remember me - Aquila Apolonius - from Caesarea? I am anxious to find your husband, Lucian - or Tachius, his Freed Man."

Rebecca's wrath ebbed to militant suspicion. Apolonius looked decidedly the worse for wear - and certainly totally unlike the aristocratic messenger from the court of Tiberius,

who had threatened to arrest her husband if he refused to abandon his wife only days before the birth of her child, to go with him to Rome!

"I'm sorry - neither are at present available."

He stared at her as if he found it hard to accept.

"You may know, my lady, we met Tachius in Puteoli - when he was trying to reach Caprae - perhaps he told you?"

Rebecca answered cautiously.

"I heard something about it - you imprisoned him in a cell, I believe!"

Apolonius twitched a smile - it looked painful.

"Believe me, it was for his own good - if he had gone through with his plan, you would never have seen him again."

She stared at him without blinking.

"Why do you want him now?"

Apolonius spread his hands and gestured to his companions.

"As you can see, my lady, our circumstances have changed since Caesarea - in fact, since the death of the old Caesar and the rise of the new. We met Tachius in Puteoli when the town was alive with Praetorians looking for us and others who had supported Tiberius Caesar. Our circumstances were then difficult - since then, they've become much worse. At that time, Tachius suggested that your husband might be prepared to offer us shelter - I said then that we would never create such a danger for him - but now we are desperate - and I had hoped - "

Rebecca took up the sentence.

" - You hoped Lucian or Tachius would help you?"

Apolonius nodded bleakly.

"I see that I was mistaken - I'm sorry to have troubled you, my lady. We won't cause you any further concern - if you would grant us one favour - if anyone should ask, you've never seen us!"

He bowed and turned for the entrance.

"Stay!"

He slowly turned.

"You are welcome to shelter here!"

"If you shelter us, you could invite trouble on yourself and your husband, Lady Rebecca.

"

She was unsmiling.

"Haven't you heard - Lucian is Caesar's greatest friend - at least, for the moment - and I? - I'm the wife of Caesar's greatest friend!"

He stared at her, she looked small and vulnerable - and defiant. A strange combination, he thought. Once more he bowed.

"We will be grateful for a few days respite - and then, we'll move on."