

Aquila Apolonius and his companions had slowly worked their way northwards through the mountainous central spine of Italia. For obvious reason, the well paved military roads were denied to them. They moved at night, resting up during the day. It was hard to say why they had subconsciously headed for Rome - perhaps the thought of anonymity in its teeming thousands was attractive, although to leave Italia altogether - and even the empire - might have been a more prudent course. Four strangers in a locality would be conspicuous, the empire was well enough run for some bureaucrat somewhere to report the fact. Apolonius had no idea if they were wanted men, officially branded as such - or if those who had murdered Tiberius would work more secretly to eliminate them as potential witnesses. He knew enough about Gaius Caesar to know that if he was nothing else, he was thorough and his hatreds were carried to the ultimate conclusion.

Once in Rome - what then? He didn't know the answer! He and his four companions were professional soldiers - they knew nothing else. Not only that, they were Praetorians and a class apart. He could imagine none of them occupied in some plebeian occupation for two reasons - one, there was none that fitted, other than to attend horses - and secondly, they were Equites - knights of the empire - plebeian neither in rank nor temperament.

He had told Tachius that they might have to become robbers - it was said as a half-joke - now it was becoming more of a reality. Their limited coin was almost spent and unless they wished to starve, there might be no other option. It was a decision to be put off for only a few more days.

Misenum, Neapolis and Puteoli were behind them, now they were deep in the mountains, riding slowly and carefully on unseen tracks, allowing the horses to feel

their way. The animals were nervous, snorting loud enough to be heard for miles in the crisp, night air. He leaned forward and touched his mount on the muzzle, the animal reacted, nudging back against his hand. He mentally vowed that the last thing he would part with would be the horses.

In a direct line, Neapolis was little more than one hundred and twenty miles from Rome, but they were describing a shallow arc through the ranges, with many twists and turns which might have sent them back the way they had come, had it not kept their eyes on the stars. Even their help disappeared before morning, when the peaks were enveloped in a chilly mist. They continued riding like ghosts as the daylight intensified. Apolonius called softly:

"Time to call a halt."

Obediently, the other riders reined in their mounts. He peered into the mist, now it was becoming a hindrance. He could be a few yards from some peasant's hovel and they wouldn't know it until the shroud lifted. On the previous dawn, they had found shelter under a dripping shelf of rock and there had spent the daylight hours, alternatively sleeping and watching shepherds below them in the valley. Once or twice, they had wandered up the hill towards them, but had stopped short before they reached them. It was to their benefit, Apolonius was grimly determined to cut their throats before they could raise an alarm - and dispose of the bodies so that their passing wouldn't be known. It hadn't come to that - but it had been close.

In the drifting mist, they found a small side valley - more a cleft in the mountainside which led nowhere. It wasn't the place from which they could hope to escape if they were cornered, but it had to be better than exposure on the bare hillside. Automatically, they brushed down their horses and hobbled them to graze, before attending to their own needs. They shared their rations, there was precious little left and tomorrow they would have to go hungry unless they reached shelter. The question of shelter was raised on cue

"Have you decided what we're going to do when we reach Rome, Centurion?"

Apolonius smiled slightly.

"I think we'd better forget rank, Questus - you never know who might be listening in the bushes!"

"Sorry, sir."

"The best I've been able to come up with is to slip in through the gates, one at a time, and hope we don't meet anyone in the guard who knows us."

One of the others said gloomily.

"If they're Praetorians - they'll know us."

Apolonius nodded agreement. Questus pressed the point.

"If we get through the gates - what then?"

Apolonius stirred restlessly.

"It might be less conspicuous if we split up and take our chances."

They stared at him as if the thought hadn't occurred to them.

"Split up!"

"Less conspicuous! Look, I know we'd like to equal the score with those who've sharpened their swords for us, but I see no way of doing that - especially - if Gaius Caesar was party to Tiberius' death - and I'd stake my life that he was! Then, there's Macro to contend with - our illustrious Praetorian Prefect! Get it through your heads, we're marked men who won't be allowed to quietly slip back into the Guard. We know too much about Macro and his obvious complicity in Caesar's death. That leaves us with alternatives - individually or collectively. If anyone has any bright ideas you'd better speak out!"

There was a glum silence during which the rations were consumed. The mist was lifting, Apolonius took the first watch and crawled to the entrance of the little valley. The wider valley below them was devoid of life, not even wild goats to be seen. He relaxed a little and searched the higher ground above them on each side. There was nothing on the

skyline either.

As the sun grew stronger, he had to force himself to stay awake. The night ride hadn't been hard but he was mentally as well as physically exhausted with the tension of the previous days. The time they had spent in Neapolis and Puteoli had been one of dodging from one hiding place to another. Praetorian patrols had been everywhere and there was little doubt that they were the quarry. Clearly, the new Caesar didn't intend to leave any witnesses to the assisted death of Tiberius - no untidy knots left untied which might trip him at some later stage. Fortunately, Apolonius knew enough about the methods of the Praetorians to keep himself and his men one step ahead of the patrols, but eventually, he had decided that their best chance of survival was to escape from the coastal towns and take to the mountains - and then to Rome. Once again the mental question was raised - what then? It was during those hours of his watch that he came to a conclusion, which would not only continued to put himself and his men in danger, but which would also include others.

During his time on Caprae, he had got to know Septimus Publius quite well. It was unavoidable really, for the old merchant was a permanent guest on Caprae - at Caesars pleasure - and Apolonius was Tiberius' - and Julia's - obedient messenger boy. His lip curled at the thought - but that had been a matter of survival as well - one didn't refuse Caesar, or his supposed mother! The relationship with Septimus had begun cautiously - one didn't rush into friendships - or even make casual acquaintances on Caprae. There had been a period of quiet mutual appraisal, which had slowly developed into something warmer, but it had never become an intimacy. They were well aware that every casual meeting was reported by someone to someone else. As well as the more public perversions, Tiberius had his own more private peccadilloes which he chose to indulge away from public view. Apolonius reflected on them and his lip curled even more. The lecherous old man was quite incredible for his age, employing a team of young boys - whom he called his minnows - to swim with him.

Apolonius reflected that all the Caesars were the same - it had to be something in their blood - or their breeding!

He called his mind back to his relationship with Septimus Publius. The old man used to talk with some longing about his estate in the hills above Rome. It was a place he loved to be, although his business affairs kept him in the city for the greater part of the time. From all accounts it was large and isolated - and untroubled by many visitors. Septimus had shunned the lavish spectacles of the court, even when Tiberius had been in residence - and somehow he had avoided to close a relationship with those of his own social standing - The court on Caprae must have given him offence every day of his life! Tachius - the man Questus had trapped in Neapolis - had suggested that Apolonius might find shelter with Lucian and his wife. Apolonius had rejected the idea - now he had to consider it seriously. A great deal had happened in the weeks since that chance meeting - and most of it had been to the fugitives' disadvantage. They were becoming desperate and the country estate of Septimus Publius looked like the only port in a very stormy sea.

In Rome, the days after Tachius' death and burial coincided with a late burst of winter. The town house became once again a cold and bleak place - as was usual during such weather - the fires were stoked high but barely held the cold draughts at bay. The old house, which could be a charming and cool place in summer, became a grey prison. Lepidus was conscious of the discomfort of his mistress, which he knew was aggravated by depression over the old man's death. He did all he could to make the place cheerful, but knew he failed dismally.

Rebecca was still stunned by the suddenness of Tachius' death from one hour to the next. There had been conversation - and then he was gone. Her only consolation was that she had managed to make her peace with the old man before it had happened. It was a salutary reminder of the words of the old scriptures: 'Never let the sun go down on your wrath.' Her longing for Lucian intensified, by this time he would have received

her letter and she waited daily for his reply - or even better - for his return.

Some days later, Lepidus loitered after the customary discussion of the household management. Rebecca waited expectantly.

"Is there something else, Lepidus?"

"Mistress, I had the thought that you might be more comfortable at the country estate."

Her eyes widened. He continued.

"This house is uncomfortable in winter and the Patron would surely wish you and the children to be in better surroundings."

She objected.

"But, what if Lucian returned suddenly and found we were gone? I must be here when he comes home. Going to the country estate is out of the question."

Lepidus bowed.

"With respect, I'm sure the Patron would find you and the children there if you are not here."

She stared at him.

"Is there some other reason you're not telling me?"

Lepidus hesitated.

"Perhaps, a question of greater security - a woman alone with her husband away, could invite unwelcome attention."

Rebecca rose to her feet and stared at the steward.

"Make yourself clear, Lepidus - who's likely to give us unwelcome attention?"

Lepidus didn't drop his gaze.

"A servant hears many rumours, my lady. I make it my duty to listen for them."

"What rumours - speak your mind."

"Servants of the great houses often meet in the food markets, my lady. Most are discreet - and ours are particularly so - but some make the odd remark, and many of the remarks have substance. Many repeat what they've heard from others, sometime

from friends or relatives elsewhere. When the rumour is confirmed from several sources, I listen."

Rebecca insisted.

"Who is threatening us, Lepidus? Who would dare threatened someone who's supposed to be Caesar's friend?"

Lepidus eyed her solemnly, she was suddenly struck by his Jewishness, he could have been one of the old rabbi's who had sometimes come to Joseph's house - except for his dress.

"Rome has changed considerably since it has a new Caesar, my lady. Rome has always been a city of licentiousness among those with wealth and power - even though Caesar Tiberius was absent for many years. The great families have always lavished their wealth on spectacle and excesses. In some way, they consider it to be a mark of the greatness of Rome, to display in sometimes grotesque ways their wealth and ostentation. With the advent of Caesar Gaius, the focus of such activities has once again become the imperial court and as each day passes, Caesar is demonstrating that there is no licence to which he will not go. His festivities are no better than orgies and they become more and more riotous. Promiscuity between his guests has become an open display - even between those of the same sex.

I have heard from a number of sources that he grows more and more abandoned - and particularly targets those women who take his fancy - especially if they are separated from their husbands."

Lepidus came to his conclusion and Rebecca sensed that there was a lot more he could have said, but that delicacy stopped him. The steward watched her face, which had grown very pale. He had said enough, but another of the rumours had stated that one of Caesar's tricks was to remove the husband from the scene by sending him on some mission, so that the lonely wife could become an easier prey.

Rebecca steadied her voice.

"You are suggesting that I will become the target of Gaius Caesar?"

Lepidus inclined his head. Rebecca continued.

"The country estate is no more than five miles from the city walls - do you imagine that it will stop him?"

Lepidus shook his head.

"I suppose not, my lady - Caesar is Caesar and he has many who will do his bidding."

"I will refuse any invitations to attend the court!"

"Can one refuse Caesar, my lady?"

"I can!"

Lepidus bowed once more, she was certainly capable of doing so.

"Thereby giving Caesar an excuse to summons you - which cannot be refused, my lady.

She stared at him.

"What am I to do, Lepidus!?"

"I can only suggest retreating to the country - which admittedly will buy only a little time.

There, perhaps, you can make further decisions."

"I must talk to Linus."

"That would be very unwise at this time, my lady - I'll ensure he's informed of the situation."

"I must write to Lucian."

He bowed again.

"If so, my lady, it should be sent by a personal courier - not by the court messengers. I'll find someone to be trusted."

She sat down slowly.

"I feel so helpless, Lepidus - I warned Lucian not to trust that evil man! I told him he was no friend."

"Perhaps the patron already begins to realise it, my lady."

"I feel so alone, Lepidus."

He stood awkwardly.

"I will do my best to protect you, my lady - as will the other servants."

"Thank you - it won't go unrewarded."

"For myself, I seek no reward other than your safety, and that of the children, my lady."

If there were spies watching the house - and Rebecca had no doubt there were - they would have seen nothing unusual in the succeeding hours of the day. The household routine was maintained. A closed cart was despatched, supposedly to make the usual visit to the market - as was usual. It returned after a number of hours. There was otherwise no traffic. The lamps were lit at the usual hour in the usual rooms, and the occupants retired to their rest at the usual time. Lepidus inspected the gates to ensure that they were secure, and the lights were extinguished.

Earlier in the day, the cart had taken an unusual detour and had reached the country villa without incident. Rebecca, her children and Naomi entered the house through a rear entrance. They had a minimal number of staff to attend to their needs and they didn't use the main rooms of the house, rather, the servant's quarters. They had put their trust in that their quiet relocation had gone undetected - otherwise they were even more vulnerable than if they had remained in the city.

Rebecca lay awake that night in an uncomfortable cot and reflected that it didn't matter how many servants she might or might not have around her, if Gaius Caesar decided that she was to become his latest victim, there would be nothing they could do to stop him, other than to allow themselves to be slaughtered fruitlessly. She also knew that the measures she had taken were at best stop-gap. It wouldn't be long before it was realised that she was no longer in Rome - and the first place they would look for her would be the country villa.