

12.

Rivers of light flowed through the streets and open spaces surrounding the Palatine Hill, and converged into a great pool around the multitude of entrances to the Imperial Palace

Lucian, Rebecca and Joseph were caught up into the stream as soon as they emerged from the seclusion of the villa. It appeared as if half of Rome was on the move, an irregular procession of hurrying chair-carriers, mingled with escorts of slaves who carried guttering torches to light the way. Their own servants merged into the tumult, the hissing, spluttering pine knots flared in a stiff, evening breeze, to subside again into a mutinous, sooty glow before the next gust set them flaring once more.

They were in separate chairs and Lucian kept a watchful and anxious wife on the one carrying his wife, as they were sometimes separated in the press of people. The progress became slower as they toiled up the slope of the Palatine, and ahead he could see the great crescendo of light from thousands of lamps which blazed from every corner of Caesar's palace. He doubted whether there had been such a display of ostentation since Tiberius had left Rome - and from all accounts, not much before, for the old man was abstemious in the extreme and would rarely expend the prodigious amount of wealth such a display would entail. It appeared that Gaius Caesar - Caligula - was throwing caution to the winds, for certainly, word of the extravagance would reach the old man on Capri. The three chairs came to rest fairly close together, to allow their occupants to alight.

Joseph murmured to Lucian.

"If this is what he calls a small dinner party, I would like to see a large one!"

Rebecca declared emphatically.

"I wouldn't! Why did I accept!?"

"Because you were given no option, my darling."

"I hate this evening already!"

"Let's hope we're put in some obscure corner where we can slip away without being missed."

Amplias Urbanus worked his way through the chaos.

"Greetings honoured guests! Amplias Urbanus, with a special commission from Gaius Caesar to escort you to your places and to respond to your every need!"

Lucian responded before Rebecca had the chance.

"How very generous - I am Lucian - and this is the Prince Joseph of Arimathea."

There was a further exchange of bows and mutual appraisals. They followed their guide into the flood of light issuing from a thousand lamps within the outer halls of the palace, here the pace was less frantic, with groups of guests exchanging animated greetings and conversation, before moving in the general direction of where Lucian and his party were being taken. Abruptly they entered a huge area, flanked by the walls of the palace, but open to the sky. It was marble paved - a great expanse of floor which swallowed the spread of low tables and couches which had been arranged upon it.

The pillaged statuary of Greece was everywhere, gods, goddess and athletes in every posture pose. Some were enormous - others small and delicate looking as if one touch would send them shattering to the floor. Rebecca added the thought: 'And no one would care if they did'.

Urbanus led them to seating close to a raised dais upon which was set another cluster of tables and couches. Lucian reflected grimly that there would be no slipping away from such a position, they would be under the direct eye of their host. No sooner were they seated than a procession of slaves attended to their requirements. Rebecca looked at them, they were well enough fed and seemed reasonably well cared for, but there was a blank look in their eyes, as if they had been schooled to hide their thoughts - and their opinions. Some of the younger ones clutched at her heart - no more than children, carrying huge platters of sweetmeats and other delicacies, bowing low as if to gods.

Rebecca wasn't naïve, in Judaea there were servants and she was used to their attentions - and everyone understood and accepted the order of things which dictated that some had to be masters and others had to be slaves - but this was different, they were little more than babies, perhaps separated from their parents - or perhaps the parents had been butchered by the Legions of Rome and these were part of the spoils of battle. She went out of her way to accept the offerings and thank them kindly, until she caught Lucian's eye on her and the slight negative movement of his head which told her she had to be careful. No doubt, there were many eyes on them, speculative eyes. Some would know who they were, others would be measuring potential rivals and already scheming to ensure that their own privileged position wasn't compromised. A fanfare of trumpets announced the arrival of Gaius Caesar - Caligula. She stared at him frankly as he approached the dais. He wasn't a tall man, rather shorter than Lucian - and slight of build. His face was rather pinched - some would say sharp-featured. His eyes were quick - everywhere - they were a pale grey, not unattractive. He had the usual Roman crop of hair, curled, cut short, fringed, blond. His tunic and toga was slashed with purple, but this was the only concession to his rank. The woman on his right arm was undoubtedly beautiful. Rebecca had no idea whether this was his wife or whether she was the latest adornment to his vanity - undoubtedly he was vain - all men with unlimited power were vain - and Gaius Caesar was one step removed from the purple. The guests had risen at his entry and had remained standing. From the advantage of the podium, he stared out over them.

"I greet you all to my small supper!"

There was a murmur of gratitude, and Rebecca could have sworn that he looked at her directly with those slightly mocking eyes, when he said it. He paid no immediate attention to them while a great variety of dishes were circulated around the tables. Each guest was allocated a number of personal slaves to fill the plates and wine goblets. They did everything except to eat and drink on behalf of their temporary masters and

mistresses.

The general noise level rose as the conversation re-commenced, and became louder as the wine flowed. Gaius Caesar and his beautiful companion were served and pampered. Rebecca noticed the food taster who sampled every dish before it was accepted. The heir to the imperial throne took no chances - perhaps he kept in mind what happened to his father, Germanicus.

It was well into the evening before Caligula appeared to notice Lucian and his party. He gestured to a chamberlain, who thumped the floor with his staff. Even those who were well into their cups were wise enough to fall silent. Gaius leaned forward.

"I especially welcome you, Lucian Gaius Quintus Publius."

All eyes were focused upon them.

"This man is my friend - and has proved his friendship by risking his life for me in a street affray. I will tell you, honoured Senators and guests, if it was not for him, you would not be enjoying my food and wine this evening - and the coming feast of Saturnalia would be turned to mourning for my friends and rejoicing for those who are my enemies! This man has asked for nothing in return for saving my life - he's even hidden himself away so that I found it hard to find him - but he didn't count on the tenacity of Gaius Caesar!"

There was a surge of quiet laughter. Caligula turned to Lucian.

"Come up here, Lucian - let them see my friend!"

Lucian got to his feet reluctantly and walked forward to the dais. Caligula seized his arm as he approached.

"I give you my friend, Lucian!"

This time there was a surge of applause. Rebecca eyed the assembled group and wondered how much of it was genuine gratitude that the life of the next Caesar had been spared. Caligula turned to Lucian and embraced him, placing an arm across his shoulders. The applause swelled and then died away.

"Now, I will introduce you to another friend - one who should not be here."

Caligula contrived to look conspiratorial.

"I will let you into a secret, noble guests - I have prevailed upon the Prefect Macro to relax his rules for a few hours this evening. He has kindly consented to allow a visit from another friend - one of many years standing. Come forward Marius Agrippa!"

There was a murmur of whispered comment in the crowd. Caligula continued.

"When I explain to you that his temporary release is a matter of political necessity - as I will explain to Caesar himself - you will understand the urgency of my petition to the Prefect Macro!"

Rebecca watched him, he was an artist, manipulating his guests, planting suggestions, covering his rear, and setting the grounds for his handing of the aged Tiberius. A man emerged from the crowd, tall, elegant, slim, middle-aged, his hair already greying at the temples. He could have been a Roman - or a Greek - there was nothing to suggest that this was a Herod. Caligula extended his left arm and embraced the new arrival.

"I greet you, my old friend Marius!"

A smile flickered across Agrippa's austere features.

"As I greet you, Gaius."

Caligula faced the crowd.

"With such friends on my right and on my left hand - I can face the future with confidence! But, I have a further surprise for you, my dear Marius! Lucian has recently taken to himself a beautiful wife, whom I would also like to meet - a Jewish wife, Marius! This evening, she has graced us with her presence - and even beyond that, we have the presence of her brother, Joseph, Prince of Arimathea - and I have no doubt you will find much to discuss concerning the land of Judaea!"

Lucian was released to escort Rebecca and Joseph to the dais, further couches were brought into position, and the beautiful, un-introduced escort of Caligula found herself pushed into the background. Clearly, politics came first with Gaius Caesar. The noise

level wasn't as loud, as if it was understood that the real business of the evening was about to commence. Gaius Caesar leaned back in his place, perfectly relaxed and eyeing those who had been drawn into the semi-circle to each side of him. It had been stage-managed to perfection; Caligula in the centre and to his right, Lucian; to Lucian's right, Rebecca. On the left, Agrippa; and to his left Joseph. The wine cups were filled and trays of delicacies placed strategically before the slaves withdrew. Caligula smiled like a cat waiting to pounce.

"What a satisfying gathering of old and new friends!"

He leaned forward.

"It is particularly satisfying that you are here, Prince Joseph - one hears so little of our distant province - but I am being tactless - perhaps better said - the land of Judaea!"

Joseph displayed a diplomatic smile.

"It's the same place, your Excellency - and regrettably, still a land of unrest and conflict.

"

Caligula's eyes widened.

"I heard nothing of conflict!"

"The conflict is between various factions and cliques, your Excellency."

Caligula laughed.

"You could be describing the ruling families of Rome, my dear Prince!"

Laughter was expected and was politely provided. Agrippa entered the conversation for the first time, Caligula leaned back and watched.

"You talk of cliques, Prince Joseph - bring us up to date - you will realise that it is some time since I was personally in Judaea."

Joseph looked totally relaxed, but Rebecca knew he was razor-sharp in his perception.

"My Lord Agrippa, in the main I would suggest the priests and other religious factions are constantly in conflict - and then, of course, the party supporting the Tetrarch

Antipas are in conflict with everyone else!"

Agrippa moved restlessly, but before he could pursue the point, Caligula intervened.

"And they all are in conflict with the Procurator - isn't that so!?"

Joseph inclined his head in agreement.

"Fortunate then, that Caesar has seen fit to recall Pontius Pilate - but you must have known that Joseph?"

Once again, Joseph inclined his head.

"We were somewhat surprised, your Excellency."

"Why so - don't tell me that you regretted his departure!?"

"How could I regret the wish of Caesar, your Excellency?"

Caligula leaned back and laughed.

"A diplomat wasted as a merchant prince!"

Agrippa interjected.

"Tell me of Antipas!"

Rebecca tensed, this was more dangerous ground and she prayed that Joseph would be cautious, Herodias was Agrippa's sister!

Joseph faced Agrippa squarely.

"Regrettably, my Lord Antipas is not well liked by the priests, or by the Romans!"

There was a prickly silence. Caligula broke it softly.

"But surely, he is Rome's nominee as Tetrarch of Galilee."

Joseph returned his innocent gaze.

"He is a man who aspires to greater heights, your Excellency - and won't be satisfied until he gains them!"

Caligula held his gaze.

"You imply that he aspires to be King of Judaea!?"

"That is so, your Excellency."

"Has he made this claim openly?"

"He is very cautious - but his ambitions are well recognised."

"A dangerous man, would you say?"

"All ambitious men present a certain danger, your Excellency."

Caligula smiled.

"You are very forthright, Prince Joseph."

"I am so because I am neither his friend nor his enemy - I neither support him, nor do I oppose him."

Agrippa interjected sharply.

"As a ruler of the people you have a seat on the Council."

"I voluntarily resigned my seat because of perceived corruption. Antipas himself keeps his own council."

Caligula murmured.

"I understand that Caiaphas, the High Priest has been deposed by order of Caesar."

Agrippa looked startled.

"I wasn't aware of that!"

Caligula shrugged.

"Perhaps I overlooked to inform you, Marius. That old rogue, Annas has been put in his place."

He turned abruptly to Lucian.

"You're very silent, my friend."

"Absorbed in the conversation. Part of this discussion wasn't known to me either, your Excellency."

Caligula nodded.

"Pilate was recalled to Rome and sent off to some obscure corner of Gaul - where I'm sure his talents will be well received. In fact, there's someone here present whom you would know."

He pointed to the far end of the room. The indicated person sat frozen like a mesmerised rabbit.

"Tertillius was his right-hand man - as you no doubt will remember - but Pilate has no longer need of such an extravagance - so Tertillius elected to stay in Rome, together with his charming wife!"

He looked sharply at Rebecca.

"Lucian, look to your wife, she appears to be about to faint!"

Rebecca was very pale and perspiring.

"It's nothing - I'm fatigued."

Lucian caught her as she slumped half-fainting against him. He turned back to Caligula.

"I think it best to take her home, your Excellency."

"I agree - how unfortunate!"

The little tête-à-tête was interrupted, but there was no doubt they were the focus of critical eyes as they made hurried farewells and Lucian half-carried his wife from the palace. Joseph found himself in a strong arm grip of farewell with Agrippa. The Herodian stared into his eyes.

"We shall find ways and means of talking again, Joseph."

"A pleasure I shall await, Prince Agrippa."

Caligula watched them, a tiny smile on the corner of his lips.

The cooler air revived Rebecca and she protested at Lucian's anxious attentions.

"Don't fuss, my darling - I'm a stupid, weak-kneed foolish woman!"

"And I'm a blind, self-centred, over-ambitious, indifferent idiot, who ought to be lashed!"

They were sharing a chair - Lucian ignored the straining grunts of the carriers supporting the extra load. The distance was short and the roads clear of the earlier traffic. There was a general concern when they reached their villa. Naomi, predictably, making a great deal of lamentation over the condition of her mistress.

"Poor lamb! She's totally exhausted - the birth, the worry, the long journey - she isn't well!"

Lucian was the recipient of her unexpressed wrath. He looked helplessly at Joseph,

whose expression didn't relax until the sounds of complaint dwindled into the distance - then Joseph rolled his eyes heavenward and expelled his breath.

"Take no notice - Naomi becomes the raging lioness when her cub is in trouble."

Lucian nodded anxiously.

"I must go to her."

"Leave her to Naomi, who will give her all the fussing she can stand at the moment - go later."

Lucian gave another reluctant nod.

"You spoke very freely this evening, Joseph."

"A calculated risk! If I had tried to dodge their questions, or hide behind generalities, I would have put us all at even greater risk."

"Then, you think we're all threatened?"

"I would say you need to be very cautious - beware of Caligula - as I will be wary of Agrippa."

Lucian walked to the window opening.

"It was from this that Septimus tried to protect me."

"Having you out of reach in a distant province didn't suit Tiberius - you had no option but to come when he ordered it."

Lucian nodded unhappily.

"All I want to be is an honest merchant."

"There would be some who'd say there's no such thing! Seriously, merchants can't avoid being caught up in politics - especially when they're as prominent as yourself."

"Or as prominent as you!"

"You forget, I'm not only a merchant - I'm a Prince of Judaea, and born to political intrigue - especially with the Herodians in power - or hungering for it."

"Do you believe Agrippa is after the throne of Judaea?"

"Without any doubt - and eventually, his bosom companion, Caligula will give it to him - s

ooner rather than later."

"What about Antipas?"

"They'll find a way of neutralising him - especially if he shows signs of rebellion."

Lucian tried to suppress a shudder.

"They're no better than animals - tearing at each other's throats!"

"Until the leader of the pack dominates - and until he's challenged by one who's stronger

"

On the following day, there was an early visitor. Lepidus brought him directly to Lucian. The man was in his middle years and wore the unmistakable insignia of the Imperial Court.

"Cadmus Dacius, physician to Gaius Caesar - to attend your wife - at his command!"

"Greetings, Dacius - I assure you that my wife is much better this morning, after a restful night."

Dacius presented a thin smile.

"Gaius Caesar is most anxious to receive my personal opinion of your wife's condition."

"We're flattered by his concern, Dacius - if you will follow me."

He led the way, once again conscious that the initiative had been taken from him. Rebecca was seated before a roaring fire feeding Judith. Her eyes widened as he entered followed by a stranger. He made the introduction before she could protest.

"Gaius Caesar is most concerned about you, Rebecca - to the extent that he's sent his own physician."

The introductions were completed. Dacius sat opposite Rebecca and watched her as she concluded feeding.

"A robust child, my Lady - who draws much strength from you. You should consider a wet-nurse!"

Rebecca answered quietly.

"I wish to feed my child - I do not favour a wet-nurse."

Dacius nodded, the austere expression didn't relax.

"I am told that you have recently completed a long and arduous sea voyage. The child is no more than a few weeks old - you are weak from the birth. I repeat, you are over-taxing your strength! If you will not consider a wet-nurse, you must take other steps to conserve your energy."

He turned to Lucian.

"Rome - at this time of the year - is not the most favourable place for peace and rest - you should consider a quieter alternative."

He turned back to Rebecca.

"I shall provide herbs to strengthen you, which should be taken as the moon rises to obtain the benediction of the goddess!"

Lucian didn't dare to look at Rebecca. Her answer was carefully controlled.

"I thank you, master Dacius - for your attendance - as I thank Gaius Caesar for his concern and thoughtfulness."

The physician bowed stiffly and turned again to Lucian.

"I urge you to leave Rome for a quiet place - additionally, the herbs will function better in those conditions."

"I shall take my wife to our country estate in the hills."

He escorted Cadmus to the outer entrance and returned to Rebecca. She eyed him solemnly and then burst into laughter.

"It's good to hear you laugh, my darling!"

"Why shouldn't I laugh when I'm well and happy!"

"But weak and over-taxing your strength!"

"So the learned physician says - I won't stop feeding Judith, no matter what that stupid man has to say!"

"Nevertheless, he makes sense - I wanted to take you to the country when you arrived, but I had to come here. The country villa is much more comfortable than this barn!"

We'll be there by nightfall!"

She protested.

"But, Lucian - your business!"

He waved his hand in dismissal.

"There isn't much to be done with Saturnalia coming - Rome stops for a week or more - all the business houses close their doors and everyone joins in a great communal party. Believe me, we're better off away from Rome."

She was thoughtful.

"I wonder why Caligula wants you to leave Rome, Lucian? Didn't you notice - Cadmus emphasised it a few times - as if he'd been instructed to ensure you go."

"I think you're seeing intrigue in every word someone says - Cadmus is quite right - this time of the year is not the best time to be in the city - especially if you want peace and quiet."

He went away to give instructions for removing the household to the country villa, leaving her thoughtful and staring into the flames of the fire. Judith slept peacefully in her crib, apparently forgotten by Naomi, who could usually be counted upon to whisk her away as soon as feeding was finished. No doubt, the old nurse was caught up in the general upheaval. Lepidus announced another visitor. Lucinda burst into the room like the sunrise, her dress a blazing golden yellow which nearly hurt the eyes.

"My poor, Rebecca, I was so worried when I saw your indisposition last evening."

It was a patent lie, but Rebecca let it pass.

"I didn't think you noticed us, Lucinda."

"How could we avoid not to do so, Rebecca. You were so prominently in the favour of Gaius Caesar - while we were in a more modest position."

It was silky smooth. Rebecca played the game.

"But, Gaius Caesar knew you were there - he pointed you out to us - explaining that you'd remained in Rome when Pontius Pilate was sent to his new responsibility."

"Tertillius thought it best - Pontius agreed."

"I do hope your husband has secured a good position at court."

Lucinda looked slightly uncertain.

"We're still waiting for a final decision to be made."

"How exciting!"

Lucinda turned to the crib - she threw up her hands in mock delight.

"And this is your new child - how beautiful! A little girl!"

"Judith - named after a great heroine of my people."

"Really! You must tell me about her at some time! But you, Rebecca - so drawn and pale - so depleted in strength - I do so admire your courage - traveling to Rome - to a foreign land - to join your husband!"

Rebecca answered quietly.

"As any wife would be glad to do, Lucinda."

"But, of course! And who wouldn't want to join such a man! I tell you frankly, Rebecca - in Palestine, we all had our eyes on Lucian - we had our dreams. Until you stole him from us!"

She laughed, Rebecca smiled.

"But, beware! This is Rome - and here we're much more determined!"

"I'm sure Lucian will be flattered."

"Oh! But you mustn't tell him! Men allow such attention to go to their heads - and you wouldn't want him to stray or to be tempted, now would you?"

"Lucian is devoted to our children."

"Such an asset children - they can bind an otherwise precarious relationship."

"How many children do you have, Lucinda?"

The answer was bland.

"Tertillius feels that children would be at a disadvantage as he pursues his diplomatic career, for this reason we have decided to forgo the undoubted pleasure."

Rebecca looked profoundly serious.

"I'm so sorry to hear that you're barren, Lucinda!"

Her visitor's eyes widened.

"I do assure you, that isn't the case! I ensure that I do not remain pregnant!

There are means - if you want details - ?"

Rebecca shook her head.

"Thank you - no! Tell me, doesn't this practice raise problems with the policy of Caesar which promotes families and forbids abortions!?"

Lucinda began to look decidedly flustered. She rose abruptly.

"I'm so pleased to find you looking so well and recovered from your spell of weakness - I shall be sure to tell Tertilius not to concern himself!"

"Please convey our regards - mine and Lucian's - to your husband."

Lepidus escorted Lucinda from the premises. Rebecca leaned back and closed her eyes

The effort of the verbal duel with Lucinda had weakened her again. She was well aware that the wife of Tertilius despised her - and that she could prove to be a formidable enemy if she gained the upper hand. The challenge had been thrown down - Lucian was the target and Lucinda would do everything in her power to entice him away from his wife and children. Rebecca had no concerns about Lucian's loyalty to her. He loved her and was devoted to her - but this was Rome and Lucinda's home-ground. Quite suddenly, she was glad that they were leaving for the country villa.