

Grattus Pompeius Erastus led the escort out of Tiberius on the unusual route to the west. It was unusual because it was a combination of duties which dictated a detour to the junction of the road from Caesarea to meet a convoy of supplies from the coast. It was bad enough that it had fallen to his lot to escort the weekly provision of stores from Tiberius to Capernaum - which was always a tedious, uneventful chore - but on this occasion, he was to relieve the detail from Caesarea - who were destined to supplement the garrison at Tiberius - replacing them with his own men for the remaining few miles to Capernaum. It sounded like a typical convoluted, over-clever scheme dreamed up by a desk-bound bureaucrat in the office of the Procurator.

Anything to save a few denarii!

Moodily he reflected that none of the savings would be coming in his direction. He estimated the coastal convoy of pack animals would be on the point of exhaustion and would have to be whipped the remaining tortuous miles through the hills to Capernaum. He had twenty men with him - two Decades - and no doubt they were as dispirited as himself.

It was hot under the glare of the afternoon sun. The morning had been wasted in Tiberius, due to the incompetence of the clerks who were supposed to organise the weekly provisions. In all fairness, it wasn't entirely their fault. They had grown used to the consistent and repetitive order published by Urban Phobius - but now there was a new regime and Marcellus seemed content to leave stores replenishment in the hands of an inexperienced and bumbling bureaucrat, newly arrived from Rome, who didn't seem to know which way was up - especially when it came to ordering standard supplies from Tiberius.

They reached the junction of the road from Caesarea, but there was no sign of the convoy they were expected to meet. It was typical! Grattus swore softly to himself. It was winter, but around the Sea the climate was warmer than the bitterly exposed hill areas around Jerusalem. He looked around him critically, this was a hill area too. The looming, almost sinister bulk of what the locals called the Horns of Hattin, was beyond the road. Grattus became suddenly aware of how small his troop was. To be sure, Tiberius was little more than three miles distant and they could actually still see the lake, but that couldn't alter the fact that they were only twenty men, plus a few slaves. He glanced along the road to the south, but there wasn't so much as a dust cloud. Admittedly, he couldn't see very far because of the hilly nature of the terrain. He debated what he should do and decided to remain until either the convoy arrived, or darkness - at which time he would retreat to Tiberius. He cursed again - this was supposed to be the much vaunted Roman efficiency! He knew it was repeated time and time again throughout the empire. It was a small miracle that there WAS still an empire and it managed to remain a cohesive entity.

Across the road and almost in the embrace of the Horns, was a small grove of olives. It could have provided shelter, but he was wary. It was almost too peaceful, as if everything was hushed, waiting for some explosion of action. He elected not to allow his men to get under the shade of the trees. There was little protection on this side of the road, but they would have to make do. The enticing grove on the other side, would provide good shelter for anyone coming down the slopes of the Horns, to take the small force unawares. He gestured to a few straggly trees on the near side of the road, and barked an order.

"Get in the shade - but don't dismount!"

The troopers obeyed, sitting uncomfortably in their leather body armour and metal helmets. The sweat was trickling down his own nose and chin and once more he cursed the unknown bureaucrat sitting in the comfort of a cool office in Caesarea.

He kept a watchful eye on the slopes of the hill in front of them, but detected no sign of movement. Without a doubt, it was a strange shaped mountain, with two peaks which gave it its name. Between them was a hollow, almost an amphitheatre. He had been there once on patrol in the supposition that some bandits or Zealots were using it, but had found no-one. He had reflected at the time that the clatter of his patrol toiling up the slopes of the hill, would have given any potential enemy ample time to organise a retreat. That was the problem with policing Palestine, they had an elusive enemy who was able to strike and melt away into home territory.

They sweltered for a further hour in the heat and he was on the point of returning to Tiberius, no matter what the repercussions, when a small eddy of dust announced the arrival of the convoy from the coast. His eyes narrowed as they came closer. It was clear that they had taken casualties, with several of the troopers reeling in their saddles, or draped over the backs of their horses, a mute testimony that they had fought and lost their last battle. Grattus assessed their strength. Despite the casualties, they still had

twice the men he had at his disposal. Their commander saluted him, he had taken a wound to his left arm and his left side was bloody, although whether this was due to the arm or some other wound, he couldn't tell.

"Aquila Priscus! Greetings."

"Grattus Erastus! Greetings! You appear to have met some trouble."

The newcomer nodded.

"Zealots! Between here and the last junction - they came down out of the hills and were on us before we could close ranks. We killed several, and others they carried away - they were after the stores, I suppose."

Grattus growled.

"If they were bandits, they would have been after the stores; if they were Zealots, they would have been more interested in wiping you out!"

Priscus nodded and swayed a little in the saddle before forcing himself upright.

“Whichever! I gladly hand the convoy over to you - how far is Tiberius?”

“About three miles.”

Priscus nodded, saluted and moved off down the road, followed by his men and the dead.

Grattus watched them go and then turned his attention to the convoy. It appeared to be intact, despite the lack of formal handover. He turned to his troop.

“Keep your eyes open, they might try again.”

He merged the two convoys of stores and stretched his men in a thin line along the straggling length of it. They would be hard-pressed to defend it against a determined attack. The sullen bulk of the Horns loomed over them, it wasn't the best defensive position to be in. The pack animals were slow and tired and wouldn't be hurried, despite the beating of the slaves driving them.

Grattus muttered further curses and resumed his place at the head of the column, keeping his eyes focused for any movement off the mountain. Progress was slow and tense, even though it was only a matter of another three miles to Magdala. The descent back to the lake wound through the hills and he expected an ambush around every corner. He sent two men ahead to scout the path, but if there was to be another attack, it would more than likely come from the sides.

Aquila Priscus had said that they had inflicted casualties on the raiders, perhaps they were savaged enough for them to lick their wounds before trying another attack.

Grattus was a little incredulous at their audacity. The hills around Tiberius were alive with Roman patrols. To launch an attack against an escorted convoy, was to invite a rapid and ruthless retaliation. It smacked of desperation - or recklessness. He didn't breathe easy until they reached Magdala without incident, here they joined the coastal road to Capernaum, a mere seven miles further.

He tried to hasten the pace again, now that they were out of the hills. The sun was

already setting behind them, they had wasted a full day toiling in the heat, and waiting for the convoy from the coast. The road into Capernaum was choked with people walking into the town. Even this late in the day, there were still crowds flocking to see the new wonder-worker. Grattus gritted his teeth and ordered his troop to force a way through. People scattered to right and left to get out of the way and here and there, the troopers were forced to use the flat of their swords to hurry those inclined to be slow in responding. He was conscious of the cold hatred in many eyes, it was true what they said - Galilee was a hot-bed of intrigue and revolution - quite probably, that some of the Zealots who had attacked the earlier convoy, were now walking the same road, it was impossible to tell.

It was dark before they reached the garrison in Capernaum. The torches around the yard guttered and flared in the breeze off the lake. He dismissed his troop and dismounted stiffly. Aelius Verus stood in the portico of the residence. He commented languidly:

“Greetings, Grattus - you’re very late!”

Grattus glowered at him in rising fury.

“We would have been earlier - had it not been for some effeminate clerk in Caesarea diverting us to meet a convoy which was attacked by Zealots - and an equally incompetent clerk in Tiberius who couldn’t understand your writing!”

Aelius’ smile wavered.

“Dear me! Zealots, you say?”

Grattus grunted and continued the attack.

“Zealots, bandits - or clerks - equal menaces!”

He stormed past the administrative assistant and stamped into Marcellus’ office. He saluted with a ferocity which made his superior narrow his eyes - it was almost contemptuous.

“Report!”

Grattus drew breath and restrained himself from planting his fist between Marcellus' eyes!

"I have much to report, Centurion! What would you like to hear about first - the incompetence of your new clerical assistant, or the bumbling fool in Tiberius who compounded the problem - or the languid illegitimate in Caesarea who decided to send a convoy through Zealot infested country with an inadequate escort, with the pretext of saving the Imperium a denarii or two?"

Marcellus eyed his irate second-in-command.

"Let's start with the Zealots."

Grattus gave a succinct report. Marcellus frowned in concentration.

"They took casualties, you say?"

"So Aquila Priscus informed me."

Marcellus turned to the window and looked out on to the darkened lake.

"The question now is - whether our new Healer and his friends are implicated. I've always thought he was the cover for a Zealot uprising! I tend to agree with you - sheer audacity to attack a Roman convoy so close to Tiberius - I think that eliminates the possibility of bandits. The Zealots are creating a diversion with this - Jesus - knowing that we are concentrating on watching him and the crowd he attracts. If they took casualties, they might well bring them to him for attention. We'll mount additional patrols - night patrols! They won't bring the wounded to him in the market place, but they might try to reach him under the cover of darkness. We'll watch the house of the fisherman - that seems to be his headquarters."

Grattus departed and Marcellus was left to continue his reverie. His mind was on three women. The first was out of his reach, Cornelia was out of his life and he had to accept the fact that he was never likely to see her again. The second, was the musician Nymphas had conjured out of thin air, who had entertained them on the previous evening. The third, was the girl he had passed at the head of his patrol.

The difference in social strata between the second and the third was quite obvious, even given the fact that the girl close to the meeting place of the Healer, was mounted on an ass. She had with her two bodyguards which certainly meant that she came from one of the influential families. She was undoubtedly Jewish, she was dark and slim and quite beautiful. The musician was also cultured and Jewish, but she hadn't come from any influential family. Nymphas had procured her from somewhere and she had performed for a price - no daughter of an influential Jewish family would have even deigned to do so - and would have considered it to be an insult if asked.

He was alone in the room, which was lit by a single lamp, which was only enough for him to make out the general shape of the furnishings. He ought to have gone to his own quarters hours earlier, but for some reason he remained. Perhaps it was the lingering presence of Cornelia - sometimes he thought he could smell her perfume, or hear her laughter or the chatter of her excited son. Marcellus felt utterly and dismally alone - and it wasn't only the fact that he was solitary within Urban Phobius' old office - this was something that ached within him. He couldn't trust any of those around him. Momentarily he thought back over the interview with Grattus Erastus - he was also a man harbouring a deep resentment. He was aggrieved because he had been passed over for the post of Centurion. Marcellus knew something of his history, this particular event had been one of many - there was still many who remembered and feared the gens of Pompey - and Grattus was of that gens! Grattus might also be described as lonely, but at least, he had a wife and a child to return to at the end of a day.

Marcellus asked himself if that was what he wanted - a wife and a child. He had drawn so close to Cornelia and Lucius, that they had almost become proxies - surrogate wife and surrogate child - a fantasy - a daydream! Savagely, he turned from the window - this was a room suddenly too full of memories and lost opportunities. He called Phillus. "Go to the kitchen and tell Nymphas I want to talk to him - now!"

Phillus disappeared without a word and within minutes, the steward hurried into the

room.

“Ah! Nymphas!”

“Is anything wrong, Centurion?”

He sounded apprehensive. Marcellus forced a smile.

“Nothing wrong, Nymphas - You did an excellent job last evening - although, I suppose, you’ve beggared me!”

Nymphas’ eyes widened in protest.

“I do assure you, Centurion - the expenditure was as restricted as possible - in accordance with your wishes.”

Marcellus eyed him for a moment.

“I believe you, Nymphas - but tell me, surely the girl you hired for our entertainment - she must have cost a small fortune?”

Nymphas shook his head vigorously.

“On the contrary, sir - a very modest sum - a few denarii - no more!”

Marcellus nodded.

“Remarkable - she has quite a talent - and she cost so little. Who is she? We might use her again.”

Nymphas started to babble in relief.

“Just a girl from one of the houses in the town. I heard her once at a festivity.”

Marcellus eyed him speculatively.

“You attend their festivities?”

Nymphas drew upright.

“I am partly Jewish, Centurion - my mother was Jewish - my father was Roman.”

Marcellus was genuinely surprised.

“I never suspected, Nymphas! So, you heard her once at one of your festivals. Tell me, would she come and play for me privately?”

Nymphas’ eyes widened a fraction before caution took over. He answered carefully.

“I can but ask, if that is your wish, Centurion.”

Marcellus debated whether or not it was his wish.

“Yes - you may ask her!”

Nymphas retreated and Marcellus wondered what sort of fool he had become to entertain such an idea. At the very best, it lacked caution, at the worst it showed poor judgement.

Who could point the finger at him - his fellow officers - his superiors, Julius Achaicus, for instance? Didn't Marcellus Flavius have the right to entertain who he chose in his private quarters? He told himself unconvincingly that he was only interested in the remarkable voice and musicianship of this girl. It was a fretful wait - he wondered what he would do if the girl refused to come. Would she dare to refuse to come? He was the military commander of Capernaum - could she afford to risk not coming, knowing that he could make life very difficult for her and her family, if he chose to do so?

When an hour had passed and Nymphas had not returned, he resigned himself to the fact that she had refused. He couldn't even muster the spirit to be angry - he wasn't even disappointed - simply resigned to the bad throw of the dice of fate that had consigned him to this place forsaken by the gods. Nymphas hesitated at the door, Marcellus gestured for him to enter.

“You were unsuccessful?”

“No, Centurion - she has consented. I've brought her.”

Marcellus kept his voice casual.

“Bring her in.”

He was conscious of his heart hammering like that of an adolescent confronted with the realities of life for the first time. Nymphas had ducked out of the door and Marcellus made his face impassive before he returned with the woman. She stepped into the room and stopped.

“Come forward - you are welcome - what's your name?”

She advanced towards him, still shrouded in the heavy cloak and hood's worn in the winter - when he came to think of it, their women always seemed to wear some sort of head covering, especially when a man was around.

"I'm Jael, my Lord."

Her speaking voice was as low and husky as when she sang.

Marcellus maintained the impassive voice with some difficulty.

"Nymphas has explained my need for music?"

She inclined her head.

"He's explained it, my Lord - I'm honoured that you've asked for me."

Marcellus started to bluster despite himself.

"We were quite impressed with you last evening!"

It sounded patronising. She inclined her head again. Marcellus hastily gestured to a chair.

"Remove your cloak and make yourself comfortable - refreshments, perhaps?"

"My Lord is very kind - after I've sung perhaps."

Marcellus subsided into another chair and sprawled out. She removed her cloak and allowed the head-dress to fall back to her shoulders. She was incredibly beautiful, slender and dark, her hair falling to her waist. She produced her harp and started to strum.

"Does my Lord have a particular wish?"

"I don't know your songs - I must leave the choice to you."

The low strumming gave way to a melody and then she began to sing, her dark voice filling the room. Marcellus felt the spell of it washing over him - and then she was finished, it took a little time to come to his senses.

"That was very beautiful, but I didn't understand the words - you didn't sing in Aramaic."

She nodded.

"I sang in Hebrew, the real language of my people. The song was the story of a

troubled king who called a shepherd boy to him so that he could play and sing and soothe him.”

Marcellus laughed.

“A very suitable song, it happens!”

“You are troubled, my Lord?”

He laughed again.

“A lonely soldier, far from home - that’s all.”

She started to sing again, this time, the melody was more vivacious. Her voice was barbaric, insinuating - eventually, it too came to a close.

Marcellus was flushed with wine, he leaned forward.

“Now, what was that about?”

“About a lonely soldier who found love and forgot he was far from home!”

They stared at each other, but it was at this moment that Nymphas coughed discretely at the entrance to the room.

“My apologies, Centurion - but there’s an urgent despatch from Tiberius.”

The spell was broken. Marcellus glared at Nymphas, but there was no way in which he could delay receiving and answering the despatch, which would have to be urgent for it to come at that time of the night.

He turned to the girl, but she was already swathed in her cloak. He said urgently.

“You will come again?”

“As my Lord wishes.”

She followed Nymphas from the room and Marcellus went in search of the despatch.

Julius Achaicus had sent a messenger, who had ridden hard. The despatch was simple and direct.

To Centurion Marcellus Flavius, Greetings!

At dawn tomorrow, your Centuries and those from Tiberius, will begin a full sweep of the country around the Horns of Hattin. You will take the northern flank, while those

from Tiberius will take the southern. Leave a small detachment in Capernaum to keep order.

Julius Achaicus.

Marcellus stared at the document, it had been written in a hurry and there was no doubt that Julius had been stung into action by the mauling his new Decades had received when escorting the convoy from Caesarea. There was nothing for it but to obey. There had been no sightings of the new Prophet for some days and there were reports that he had moved out of Galilee and to the north. The crowds had correspondingly diminished, apart from those who came expecting to find him and who left again disappointed.

It would be safe to deplete the garrison in Capernaum - and if the truth was known, he was glad for the opportunity for some action - and perhaps, a little blood-letting! He called together his officers and they came, startled at the sudden summons. He eyed them sardonically and felt little sympathy for interrupting their cosy family unity.

“Tomorrow, we hunt Zealots - we want as many alive as possible - dead men can tell us nothing! Grattus can tell you that an escort was attacked today on the way from Caesarea - it made him late for dinner!”

There was a quiet titter of laughter - but not from Grattus. Marcellus went on:

“I propose to lead the Centuries - Grattus will remain in Capernaum with his Decades to keep the peace. We leave at dawn - that is all gentlemen. Dismiss!”