

After a while, a tavern becomes very much the same as the previous one when you're half drunk on bad wine. This mental observation was about the depth of profundity to which Tachius could aspire. This particular tavern was somewhere after the sixth - at which time he had stopped counting. In the earlier taverns, he had approached the subject with delicacy, but as he consumed more and more of the bad wine, his question became more demanding. Lucian had sent him to contact Septimus Publius - their old Patron had been on Caprae with Tiberius - now Tiberius was dead!

In each tavern he had visited, Tachius would single out a group of men who were obviously local sailors, buy them a drink and then ask.

"Will one of you take me out to Caprae?"

The answer was always the same.

"You must be crazy! Caprae's off-limits! No one goes to Caprae unless they've been given a pass - or unless they've got a death wish!"

Tachius would move on to the next group, and go through the procedure yet again.

When the possibilities had been exhausted, he would move on to the next tavern.

There were plenty of them, and that had to be something in his favour - surely - eventually, he would have to find someone who was willing to take him out to the island.

During one of his lurching journeys from one hostelry to the next, someone moved out of the shadows from behind him and he felt the prick of a sharp dagger ready to be eased between his ribs and into his heart. He stood very still, because he had no other option. He knew he was too old, too drunk, and not fast enough to turn and fight. The unknown assailant whispered.

"Walk forward, old man - give me no trouble - and you'll live!"

Tachius obeyed, at least, this was no common robbery, where by this time the knife

would have been driven home and his purse and the assailant long gone. He was nudged into a dark alley, along which they proceeded with no slackening of pace. As far as he could tell, there was only one of them, he conceded, there might be others keeping an eye on the situation. The man spoke again, a little louder this time.

"Through that door!"

It would have been a good time to regain control of his destiny, but he couldn't be sure what he would find on the other side of the entrance. Tachius obeyed, nursing the thought that he would surely kill his attacker given half an opportunity! He received a push which sent him staggering into the darkness. The door closed behind him. He held his breath, trying to hear the breathing of the other man. He couldn't be sure, perhaps his attacker knew that trick as well!

After a moment, a flint was struck on stone, and the sparks showered on to tinder, which was held against the wick of a small lamp. The room slowly filled with light and he was able to see that he was alone with the other man. It wasn't someone he knew.

"What do you want with me?"

"I want to know why you're asking to go to Caprae."

Tachius felt his hopes rise.

"Are you willing to take me? If so, why put a knife to my back? I could have turned and killed you!"

The man contemplated him with slight amusement.

"I don't think so - you're too old - too drunk - and too slow!"

"Try me!"

The man shook his head.

"Answer my question, old man!"

"I answer no man's questions - unless I know why he's asking."

"I'm curious, what else!? Why would any man want to risk going to Caprae when it's guarded like a fortress, and where anyone fool enough to try to get through the patrols

will be killed and thrown over the side?"

"I have business there."

"With a dead Caesar!?"

"If Caesar's dead, why guard the island."

"It isn't a case of if Caesar's dead - he's dead!"

His tone was bleak.

"You don't answer me - why guard the island?"

"To stop people like you plundering the treasures, perhaps."

"I'm not interested in treasures!"

"Then why go?"

"I'll answer no more questions!"

The man toyed with the dagger.

"Perhaps I'll use this!"

"Perhaps you'll try!"

The man suddenly blew out the lamp, leaving Tachius squinting into the darkness. He heard the door open and shut, and when he held his breath this time, he was sure that he had been left alone. He groped his way in the direction of the table, cursing loudly as his knee collided with a stool. He found the table. The flint and stone and the lamp had been left there. He re-lit the wick and contemplated the empty chamber. It was very small, perhaps used for storage, but there was nothing there other than the table, the stool, the lamp and the means of lighting it. There were no windows, and the door was jammed shut from the outside. Tachius perched himself on the stool and assessed the situation. He might starve to death but he wouldn't suffocate, there was a draught of salt air flowing in from under the door. He paid special attention to the door - it was substantial. He tried putting his shoulder to it, but it didn't even tremble. He returned to the stool, perched himself on it and cursed profoundly. He had been taken like a new recruit! He, a man who had fought in more campaigns than he could count, had been

held at knife-point, and if the man had had a mind, he could have been butchered without lifting a finger.

If the man had had a mind! The man had had something else on his mind, and now he was gone - not even finishing off the job of killing and robbing him. Tachius' head was beginning to clear, perhaps the evening would be turned to profit after all. He thought suddenly of Lucian and his face twitched into a grin in the flickering light - it was as well his young friend couldn't see him at that moment - the old soldier would never live it down!

There was no way to measure how long he was left to contemplate his future, but it was still dark when he heard the door being unbarred from the other side. He crossed the floor quickly to crouch behind the hinge side, whatever happened, he would give a good account of himself this time! The door swung open and he tensed. There was a murmur of voices - So, there was more than one - no matter! A voice was raised.

"Come out from behind the door, Tachius, you can't manage all of us!"

He knew the voice but couldn't place it. He paused and then did as he was told.

"That's better!"

He stared into the face of Aquila Apolonius. Tiberius' errand-boy looked a little the worse

for wear, he headed a group of four men, who looked no better. One of the four was his unknown assailant. The group walked into the room and the door was close tightly against the outside. Apolonius looked around with disfavour.

"Not the sort of place to make your last stand, I think."

"Is that what I'm about to do - make my last stand!?"

Apolonius smiled a little.

"I was referring to myself, not you, Tachius - as you can see, our fortunes have changed in the last few days."

Tachius nodded warily.

"Not your usual average well-turned out Praetorian, I'd have to agree."

The smile twitched.

"You had me marked from the time we met in Caesarea."

"And warned Lucian not to trust you!"

Apolonius nodded.

"Trust - a well used word - with little substance!"

Tachius waited. Apolonius continued after a pause.

"Those we think we can trust, sometimes prove to be the greatest traitors."

Tachius answered gruffly.

"A man must be sure of his friends."

There was a pause, then:

"Are you our friend, Tachius?"

"Do I have reason to be - although I have no reason to be your enemy."

"Perhaps not - even if we are being hunted because we were Caesars' friends?"

Tachius answered very carefully.

"It would depend on which Caesar you mean, I suppose!"

Apolonius responded bitterly.

"Caesar is dead! Long life to Caesar!"

Tachius stared at his gaunt face.

"What happened to Tiberius?"

There was a moment of silence.

"You ask a dangerous question, Tachius."

"I've met danger before."

"The danger isn't only to you - but to your Patron Lucian and his wife and family. I hear that Caligula calls Lucian his friend these days!"

"Lucian is the adopted son of Septimus - who was the friend of Tiberius - and the Empress Julia."

Apolonius forced a smile.

"Now - all three are gone!"

"Gone! How, gone!?"

"The official story's been circulated that he died in his sleep - how else could you expect an old man of seventy-eight to die! There's another story which goes that Tiberius was smothered by his pillow, by a new contingent of Praetorians, especially sent by Macro, the Prefect - under the orders of Caligula! Macro knew the old man had ventured out of his fortress. Tiberius had made another of his erratic journeys - this time, to the walls of Rome, before changing his mind and heading back to Caprae - he got as far as Misenum. Let us just say he was assisted to death by the firm pressure of a pillow held by a strong young Praetorian officer especially recruited for the task. This young man did it for the glory of Rome - or so he was told."

Tachius throat was dry.

"How do you know this?"

"The young officer told us a great deal before we killed him!"

Tachius stared into his grim features. He forced the next question.

"What about Septimus - and the others on Caprae?"

"Since Tiberius wasn't on Caprae when he died, it took us some time to find out. We were supposed to be his trusted escort, but we were ordered to stand-down to allow the new contingent to take over. We were lucky not to be arrested straight away - no doubt someone will pay the price for that blunder - so we slipped away in the confusion following his death. It took some time for us to capture Tiberius' murderer and question him, then we returned to Caprae, avoiding the patrols. We gained access to the palace without much trouble, it was quite deserted. I believe the courtiers made their escape as soon as they knew what had happened to Tiberius. You would be surprised how many are hiding in fear in Neapolis at this very moment!

We found one old servant, whom we - persuaded - to speak. The Empress Julia didn't

travel with Tiberius - for some reason she remained on Caprae - but it didn't save her! The old servant told us that she was seized and carried by force to one of the high cliffs - and thrown over!"

Tachius stared at him mutely. Apolonius continued harshly.

"You already know what was never declared openly on Caprae - the so-called Empress Julia, the supposed mother of Tiberius, died eight years ago. The woman playing her part on Caprae was an unknown impostor, whom Tiberius chose to accept for his own dark reasons - except when he drifted into one of his mental lapses - and then he declared her to be what she was - a fake! Being an impostor didn't save her, she made many enemies on Caprae - and in Rome, and she came to a just end!"

Tachius continued to hold his gaze.

"And Septimus?"

Apolonius shrugged.

"Septimus was Tiberius' - and Julia's friend. He condoned the fact that she was a fake. The servant told us that he was dealt with in a similar manner!"

Tachius felt the colour drain from his face and his fury began to rise in the face of the casual dismissal of Septimus Publius. He spat out.

"I intend to make my own enquiries!"

Apolonius stared back into his rage.

"That, I wouldn't advise, Tachius. I can guarantee that you'll find yourself at the bottom of the ocean before you come within a mile of Caprae's cliffs. If by chance, you get ashore, you'll be butchered without question by Macro's guards, who now control the island. My friends and I barely escaped with our lives, and we've been hunted ever since. Each of us has a price on our heads. Sacrificing yourself won't bring Septimus Publius back to life. I suggest you'll be of better use to Lucian alive - to protect him from Macro's ambitions - and from Caligula!"

Apolonius reached under a fold of his toga and retrieved something he held out to the

old soldier.

"I found this in Septimus' quarters after the servants and slaves had pillaged it - but before Macro's guards made a more thorough job - it appears to be in some sort of code - which I have no doubt your young Patron can decipher."

He handed the small scroll to Tachius. The old man accepted it with a hand that trembled. It was the last legacy from his old friend.

"You swear to me, Apolonius - on your honour as a Praetorian - that your story of Septimus - death - is true?"

Apolonius stared him back into the eyes.

"I swear that I tell you the truth - but I can't swear that the old servant told the truth - this you understand?"

Tachius nodded - Apolonius went on.

"If he told a lie about Septimus - then, he could have told a lie about Julia - or the woman who pretended to be Julia. You must understand, I didn't only serve Tiberius - she recruited me, I served her first. I failed them both!"

There was another silence. Tachius asked.

"Who was she?"

Apolonius shrugged.

"Does it matter? - Just another intrigue among many others. There wouldn't have been one on Caprae who didn't know the truth. Even our illustrious new Caesar knew it - he would have been blind or stupid if he didn't - and that he certainly isn't. Gaius was obliged to attend Tiberius for the past five years on Caprae. Tiberius had his own dark reasons for that - perhaps it was no more than to corrupt the son of Germanicus by his own obscene example - and you can believe me, he was depraved, even by the standards of the Julians. It wasn't often that Gaius could escape, and even then, he didn't prolong his absences. Tiberius had the habit of disposing of family members without compassion - no one was safe - and certainly not Caligula.



How can I be sure that I know he knew of the imposture? Very simple! Gaius Caesar read the eulogy at the real Julia's funeral - she was, after all, his grandmother - and before she died, he lived in her house!"

Tachius stared into bitter eyes.

"What will you do now?"

Apolonius smiled slightly.

"What every other wanted man does - hide - and run when the coast is clear! Perhaps we'll all become thieves - Questus tells me he could have knifed you and had your purse at any time!"

There was a ripple of subdued laughter. Tachius growled.

"Not much hope - I was biding my time!"

Apolonius grew serious.

"It'll be light within the hour - it's time for us to disperse. I advise you again, Tachius - don't even think of trying for Caprae - that is, if you value your own skin - and the skin of Lucian and his wife and children!"

Tachius nodded cautiously - then:

"Lucian would want to offer you shelter if you come his way."

Apolonius shook his head.

"That I wouldn't do - not while Macro rules the Praetorians in Rome!"

They eased out of the door, one after the other. Tachius faced Apolonius in parting.

"I was wrong about you - I should have told Lucian to trust you!"

Apolonius smiled.

"Don't change your mind so quickly - trust only your friends - and even suspect them from time to time!"