

Tiberius Caesar was surrounded by the whole panoply of pomp and ceremony that his supreme status and the traditions of the court demanded - even if he had chosen to exile himself on the beautiful Isle of Capri. It truly was a glorious place - a jewel almost hugging the Campanian coast, whose towering cliffs plunged into the intense blue waters of the Mare Tyrrhenum.

Lucian was kept nervously waiting in an ante-room into which he had been directed by a bedecked and bejewelled individual, who looked as if he was trying to make up for the more austere dress sense of His Imperial Majesty.

Tiberius Imperator! Lucian savoured the expression, it conjured up visions of almost unlimited power - and yet, the shrunken old man whom he had met on the previous evening didn't remotely fit the description. He wasn't making the mistake of underestimating Tiberius - the man DID have almost unlimited power within the boundaries of his extensive empire. Lucian was even more acutely aware that he would have to tread very warily. It was therefore some surprise to be admitted to the royal presence after a wait of an hour, to find Tiberius completely alone in a large room which faced out over the blue sea. He was seated behind a large desk which was littered with scrolls. He looked exasperated. He gestured acknowledgement of Lucian's deep bow.

"No matter how I demand change, I'm never free of this nonsense - most of which could be decided by a junior clerk!"

Lucian tried to suppress a smile, he didn't quite succeed.

"You find that amusing, young man!?"

Lucian's suppressed the humour.

"I was reminded of similar circumstances some months ago - every day submerged in trivia - until I put my foot down and insisted on an army of clerks to sift it before the critical matters were brought to me."

Tiberius grunted.

"I tried that some decades ago - this is the result!"

Caesar leaned back in his chair and eyed the nervous young man. Septimus' young cockerel, whom he had been trying to shelter in Judaea.

"Tell me about Pontius Pilate!"

The demand was totally unexpected, Lucian managed not to gape. He answered carefully.

"The Procurator appears to administer Judaea competently, your Excellency.

Tiberius grunted again.

"I know that - otherwise he would have been withdrawn! I asked you to tell me YOUR impressions of the man - your honest impressions - not something you think I'd like to hear!"

Lucian swallowed. He stared into the eyes of the old man.

"I don't like him!"

"Encouraging - go on!"

"He's devious, contemptuous of whom he perceives as lesser men. He's quite ruthless in his dealings with those who manage to cross him in some way. He's manipulative of the various factions making up the complexity of Judaeian society - he sets Herod against the Priests, he keeps both unsteady by hinting that they have no favour with Rome. In turn, Herod and the Priests work against him - I understand, by trying to gain the ear of someone at the court!"

Lucian stopped, appalled by his tirade. Tiberius was granite-faced

"You've described to me the average Roman official in a position of authority - what sets Pilate apart?"

"I believe he serves important interests other than those of Caesar!"

Tiberius leaned forward.

"Your proof?"

"I have none, your Excellency - I have only my impressions of the man."

"Whom you do not like!"

"I detest him - as do most of the citizens of Judaea!"

"You're frank."

Lucian remained silent. Tiberius continued to stare at him.

"Tell me about Herod!"

Lucian swallowed again.

"He's his father's son, your Excellency - superstitious, vicious, always trying to advance his cause to become king in his father's place. He's unloved by his subjects who fear his capricious nature. He's manipulated by his consort - "

"Herodias!?"

"Yes, sir."

"Herodias, the sister of Marius Agrippa - whom I have recently thrown into a cell! - Go on!"

"Herod is one third of an unstable situation - the other two being the Priests led by Caiaphas - and Pilate."

"Tell me about Caiaphas - who appears to be a prodigious writer of letters of complaint!"

He fingered through some of the documents on the desk.

"Caiaphas detests Herod, but plays a waiting game because he knows Pilate is watching them both and that he's ready to exploit any division. Caiaphas leads the most prominent of the priestly factions, but by no means can speak for the rest."

Tiberius was staring down at one of the reports.

"What do you know about the Samaritans?"

Lucian thought furiously.

"Apart from the fact that they are considered not to be true Jews, and that they have their own separate place of worship - very little, your Excellency."

"You have a friend - Marcellus Flavius Valerius Dacius - tell me about him!"

Lucian jerked in surprise.

“He’s a Centurion of the Legions. He’s efficient, he takes orders and carries them through.”

“He’s your friend - tell me about that.”

Lucian answered slowly.

“It’s a friendship that’s not always remained steady - and I don’t see a great deal of him now that I’m married.”

Tiberius nodded, he picked up another document.

“I have a report from Proconsul Vitellius in Antioch, in which your friend Marcellus is described as a butcher of civilians engaged in religious worship.”

He flicked over another document.

“I have an outraged letter from Caiaphas, stating much the same thing, and also declaring that Pontius Pilate instigated the massacre.”

He flicked over another.

“This is from Herod, who accuses Pilate of being in a conspiracy with Marius Agrippa, and training a private army which will overthrow him - your comments!?”

Lucian flicked dry lips.

“Marcellus carries out his orders to the letter - no matter what other considerations. For some reason, Pilate has singled him out for special duties - many of which are of a dubious nature.”

“You’re saying that the Centurion is an accomplice?”

“Marcellus detests Pilate - I think it’s not too strong a word to say that he hates him - but Pilate has some hold over him, and if anything needs to be done, Marcellus is the man he chooses.”

“So, Caiaphas may be correct when he states that Pilate authorised the massacre?”

“It may be so, your Excellency.”

“The matter of raising a private army?”

“Herod’s interpretation of an innocent involvement of a Roman citizen, who was helping to train one hundred men for private security reasons.”

Tiberius’ laugh was more a bark of derision. He threw down the documents and leaned back in his chair.

“You are still no wiser as to my reasons for ordering you here - is that correct?”

“Yes, your Excellency.”

Tiberius leaned forward suddenly serious.

“Septimus is an old mother hen! I called you back because the danger is past - he doesn’t accept that. I reduced the threat from Sejanus, had him and his followers executed for treason - but Septimus still sees an assassin lurking in every shadow. He’s entrusted you with the administration of his wealth and his enterprises. Rome is the place for a man with such responsibilities - not some provincial backwater! I hear that you believe you can create an empire which will topple Rome!”

He leaned back again. Lucian shook his head.

“One of Pilate’s spies twisted an innocent statement and made it sound like a conspiracy ”

The old man nodded.

“Spies have a tendency to do so - when their payment is in question. So, I have no need to endure sleepless nights wondering when you will launch your next attack against me?”

“The only attack I will launch against Caesar, will be to gain his favour for me to conduct my business beyond the limits of the empire - I’ve already made a contact in Babylon - and I have in mind to go beyond Gaul into Britannia, Hibernia and Caledonia.”

Tiberius nodded.

“Worthy ambitions - tell me, didn’t your father serve Septimus in Gaul?”

Lucian’s excitement ebbed.

“My father and mother were killed in Gaul, in the service of Septimus - for this reason he

took me into his house - and eventually adopted me.”

Once again, the old man nodded.

“We must talk again before you go to Rome.”

It was a dismissal, Lucian observed the protocol and departed. Tiberius waited for the door

to close and then signalled hidden observers to emerge.

“I am satisfied! We shall give our Proconsul Vitellius the pleasure of interviewing Pontius Pilate!”

Lucian walked away from the imperial apartments not quite sure whether his feet were on the ground. The interrogation had not been what he had expected, and he tried to remember if he had been grossly indiscreet. That he was indiscreet to some extent was a foregone conclusion, but he fervently hoped he hadn’t opened his mouth too wide. He had allowed his feelings for the men concerned to spill over - but that was more a credit to Tiberius’ quality of interrogation than anything else. He badly needed to talk to someone - and the obvious someone was Septimus. His adopted father received him as a matter of course.

“I was expecting you. Now, you must tell me every word you exchanged with Caesar!”

Lucian sat down and hoped his trembling knees would soon come under control. He went through the conversation from beginning to end. On occasions, Septimus mouth pursed in a grimace - at other times, his eyes showed signs of alarm. It was when Lucian came to the reason for his recall from Judaea, that he finally abandoned his Stoic calm and exploded.

“This is outrageous! That meddling old man could well have signed your death warrant!”

“From the look on your face just now, it must have been signed a dozen times over!”

Septimus glared at him.

“You were grossly indiscreet - haven’t you yet learned the value of a guarded tongue?”

“Caesar demanded the truth - and I gave it to him - you haven’t lived in the centre of

that religious intrigue for the past few years!"

"You wouldn't know the meaning of the word intrigue, unless you had lived - as I have lived - under the threat of it at Caesar's court!"

It was the nearest they had ever come to an outright argument. Septimus looked into his adopted son's glowering face and gestured for conciliation.

"It would seem that your Pontius Pilate isn't the only one to stir strife between parties who should be at peace. Tiberius is an accomplished master! If I understand you correctly, he has told you to return to Rome and conduct our affairs from there, rather than Caesarea?"

Lucian nodded and relaxed.

"That appears to be the scope of it - of course - it will be you who will take over the reins - I'll assist."

Septimus flickered a quick look at him.

"That will be difficult for you, Lucian - you've steered the ship for some years - can you give away your control?"

"I can - and I will!"

Septimus walked to the window and stared out over the sea.

"You're the one given permission to return to Rome. I will never leave Capri - not while Tiberius lives!"

Lucian was shocked.

"Are you a prisoner!?"

Septimus shook his head.

"There are no physical chains, and I live in Caesar's luxury - but it's understood that I continue to do so for as long as he chooses. He gave me refuge, but in so doing, he bound me with chains of obligation."

"If it's safe for me to go to Rome, then surely it's just as safe for you. I'll speak to him on the next occasion!"

Septimus laughed softly.

“Do you imagine that you can now come and go as you please? Caesar summoned you - for his own purposes - he pumped you for information about Judaea - and you gave it generously! He may have said that he will speak to you again before you leave for Rome - but it will be when he chooses - and if he chooses - do you understand?”

Lucian nodded - he asked cautiously.

“What binds you to him - other than the obligation to remain during his pleasure? You hinted that there was more to tell.”

Septimus nodded gently.

“At another time and place, Lucian - not here!”

Tachius cornered him as soon as he left Septimus. Lucian was obliged to go through the same recital as before. The old soldier's response was unlike that of Septimus. He nodded brisk agreement.

“You gave Caesar what he needed to hear - high time someone took our friend Pilate off his high perch - and that goes for Caiaphas and Herod too!”

“Septimus thinks I opened my mouth too wide.”

“I agree with Caesar, Septimus can be like an old hen!”

It was the candour of a deep friendship.

“What do we do with the rest of the day?”

“I thought we were going to Rome!”

“Correction - I'm going to Rome - as and when I'm told to do so! I want you to stay with Septimus!”

“I'll give you two reasons why not! One, Rome is a treacherous place and you're hardly d
ry behind the ears! Two, Septimus has survived under Caesar's protection until now, an
d it could be construed that Septimus is either ungrateful, or distrusting, if I'm asked to
stay with him!”

They maintained the argument during at excursion to explore the island. They hardly not

iced the wild beauty of the place, so engrossed were they in their discussion. A circuit of the cliff tops was soon completed. Tachius declared.

"This overgrown rock is no more than four miles long and about one and a half wide."

"I'll take your word for it."

"It's also a place where you can't escape from anyone!"

The complaint was a growl of disapproval. Tachius pointed back towards the palace.

Apolonius was walking briskly up the path towards them. Tachius' growl continued.

"Now, there's a man I can't make out. Watch him, Lucian - don't be in a hurry to trust him!"

Lucian was denied the opportunity to answer. Apolonius marched briskly to a halt in front of them, as usual, he wasn't out of breath after the climb. Lucian envied his fitness.

"By Caesar's command, you are both to come to his table this evening. You need time to prepare - consult with the Chamberlain."

He turned to leave.

"Wait, Aquila!"

Apolonius turned back to face Lucian.

"Why are you acting the messenger? The Chamberlain could have sent a slave."

Aquila's severe expression twitched into a slight smile.

"When Caesar gives an order, I become whatever he wants me to be!"

Lucian held his eyes.

"Is that the only reason?"

Aquila hesitated.

"I word of warning perhaps. Tonight you will sup with Caesar. You will not address him unless he addresses you. You will offer no opinion unless he demands one. You will be present, but you will be invisible - understood?"

Lucian nodded.

"Also something I would have expected to have been told by the Chamberlain!"

Apolonius stared at him.

"There are two subjects you are to avoid at all costs."

"They are?"

"Reference to the mother of Caesar - "

"I understood that she's here on Capri."

Aquila maintained his gaze.

"That is correct - and she may grace Caesar's table this evening - you will maintain your distance."

"I had no intention of doing otherwise! You said two subjects were to be avoided?"

Aquila nodded brusquely.

"The other subject is Germanicus!"

"Germanicus Caesar! - He died fifteen years ago."

"Seventeen! You are to avoid all reference to him - understood!"

"Understood - but why?"

"It's healthier to learn not to ask questions!"

"What if Caesar raises the subject?"

"He won't!"

Apolonius turned on his heel and strode back down the path. Tachius murmured.

"Now, what in Hades was all that about!?"

Lucian shrugged.

"Court intrigue I suppose - but why any reference to Caesar's mother has to be avoided when she's likely to be sitting in front of us - I wouldn't try to guess!"

"Perhaps Septimus knows."

Lucian shook his head.

"Septimus seems frightened of his own shadow!"

"Septimus is a cautious man - that's how he's survived in a dangerous world."

"He's not the Septimus I remember."

“Don’t forget, Lucian - he’s been living under the shadow of Tiberius for over three years !”

They had walked slowly back towards the palace. Lucian turned to look out over the intense blue of the sea. He could almost understand why Tiberius chose to live in voluntary exile in this place - it was breathtakingly beautiful - almost he could understand - but not quite! The man had inherited the Roman world from Augustus, whose daughter he had married - a divorce had followed soon after. Tiberius had fled the unhappy marriage and had retired to the island of Rhodes, to stay there for seven years, by the time he had returned to Rome, Augustus had banished his own daughter because of her scandalous behaviour. Tiberius had every reason to be thankful to his mother, who had worked to have him declared the successor to Augustus. The death of two of Augustus’ grandsons - Lucius and Gaius, had paved the way for him, and when Augustus had died at Nola, Tiberius had already been adopted by Augustus as his heir some ten years earlier. Once again, it had been Livia Drusilla who had ensured that her son succeeded to the imperial throne. Such was her power, that she was renamed Julia Augusta and had been known as such until that day.

There had been revolts to put down in Pannonia, Gaul and Germany - and in other parts of the sprawling empire. Tiberius had governed domestically with exceptional popularity, but gradually a change took place and there was a succession of conspiracies and consequent executions. Eventually Tiberius had left Rome for Campania and Capri, leaving Rome in the power of Lucius Aelius Sejanus - with near disastrous results. Lucian reflected on this potted history as he returned to his quarters. Tiberius had been - was - a capable ruler, the mystery remained why he had elected to turn his back on Rome - however beautiful Capri might be.

He had no time to consult with Septimus, for as soon as he put his nose in his room, he was seized upon by a mob of court officials, each one determined to fill his mind with procedure and protocol for his conduct at the supper table of the emperor.

He was hastily measured for new clothing, after his wardrobe of garments was passed over with scandalised disdain by one of his visitors. There was only one consolation to lighten an otherwise frustrating day, and that was the sure knowledge that Tachius was enduring much the same attention. He was even able to smile at the thought, which earned a frown of disapproval from the official in charge. Lucian allowed the smile to fade. By early evening, the scurrying mob departed. Balthus emerged minus his usual grin.

"I suppose they gave you a bad time too?"

"They told me I would be made a eunuch if you weren't dressed correctly, master!"

"Cheer up! They can only do that to you once!"

The smile didn't return.

"They told me to make a bath ready - and that you were to be oiled and scented."

Lucian nodded.

"Good! You can oil me with rancid mutton fat - and scent me with cow dung!"

Balthus fell to his knees."

"Get up! I'm joking!"

He roared with sudden humour.

"Can you imagine how Tachius is taking this?"

Balthus broad grin returned.

Lucian felt strangely elated, intuitively he felt that this evening was to be a drastic change of direction in his life. He was in Caesar's favour - as far as he could tell. He was ordered to Rome and once there, he could send for Rebecca and their children. It was the start of a new life!

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There was still the matter of Caesar's supper to be negotiated. It might turn out to be as perilous as meeting him on the battlefield. Tiberius had been a competent general. He

had avenged the defeat and annihilation of three legions by Arminius in the gloomy depths of the Teutoburger Wald. He had campaigned in northern Germany against the Marcomanni, and had succeeded in quelling formidable insurrections in Pannonia and Dalmatia. Accompanied by Germanicus, his nephew and adopted son, he had made two more marches into the heart of Germany before returning to Rome several years later, to be afforded a well deserved triumph.

Germanicus Caesar! A subject to be avoided at the supper table! He had been the heir - but he had died seventeen years earlier - some said by poisoning! His popularity had been at its height, perhaps it had been his undoing - it didn't pay to become too popular! Lucian emerged from his quarters resplendent in the luxurious array dictated by the Chamberlain's officials. He almost collided with Tachius whose quarters were on the opposite side of the passage. The old soldier looked to be in danger of an apoplexy. His expression was thunderous and his temper didn't improve when he saw that Lucian was helpless with laughter. He complained loudly.

"I smell like a tart!"

Lucian mastered his mirth with difficulty. He managed a response.

"It's a definite improvement!"

Mayhem was avoided by the arrival of Septimus. He eyed the scene with a severe eye.

"I would advise a little less hilarity and prepare yourself to do battle!"

Lucian was quickly sobered, he murmured uneasily.

"I thought we were going to supper."

"Supper with Caesar and his courtiers can become a battle - for survival!"

Suitably chastened, they followed Septimus through a series of corridors until they entered the room set aside for the feast. Household servants escorted them to their places.

Septimus murmured.

"Near - but not too near."

Lucian took in the scene quickly. A semicircle of small tables set before the obligatory triple-seater couches favoured by the Roman aristocracy, which usually led to severe indigestion because of the necessity to half-recline against one's nearest neighbour. Lucian was used to it, but Tachius looked even more thunderous. At the open ends of the semicircle, suitably distant from lesser mortals, was the dais upon which the imperial party would be accommodated.

One wall of the room was no more than columns supporting the roof and open to the outside. Even across the room from the position in which they had been seated, it was possible to see the stars. The rest of the room was a confection of silks and rich cloths and the ever present statuary borrowed freely from the Greeks. It was sometimes said that there were more Grecian statues in Rome than were left in Greece - but that was to be expected, given the acquisitive nature of conquering armies and the plunder to be gained out of a successful campaign.

Slaves were already bringing in great platters of food - and more to Tachius' taste, others bearing great wine-jars from which the cups were already being filled. The room was also filling with courtiers, male and female. There had been little sign of them during the day.

Septimus whispered.

"This sort only emerge at night - they sleep during the day."

There was an edge of distaste.

They were ignored for the most part, only one or two inclining their heads towards Septimus.

The general level of noise gradually increased, conversation was animated and pierced by shrieks of laughter, which was not only confined to the over-decorated and over-painted women. Slaves weaved their way between the couches, offering fruits, sugary confections and wine. The Master of the Feast kept an eagle eye on their activity. At the main entrance to the room, the court Chamberlain positioned himself with golden

tipped staff in hand. Quite suddenly, he lifted it and rapped sharply on the marble floor. Dramatically, the noise died away and there was a hasty scrambling to the feet.

“Caesar comes!”

There was dead silence as Tiberius entered. He was dressed in a flowing purple robe and crowned with a circlet of gold - it reminded Lucian of a laurel wreath given to the victors in the games. The robe seemed to be too big, and Caesar appeared shrunken within it. On his left arm he escorted an aged woman, tall, upright, elegant in a dress embroidered with jewels and slashed with purple trim. She too wore a golden circlet studded with gems of a size which made Lucian's eyes widen.

There were others with them, for the most part elderly men and women, richly dressed and adorned with precious stones. The party moved slowly through the centre of the semicircle of tables. The courtiers and guests bowed low as they passed. Tiberius, and his aged partner gave no acknowledgement, but Lucian was quite sure that Caesar knew who was present and where they had been placed. After they had passed, Lucian stole a quick glance at the old lady - there could be no doubt that this was Julia Augusta, the mother of Tiberius and the widow of Augustus. He made a quick calculation - she had been sixteen when Tiberius had been born - Tiberius was approaching seventy-eight years of age. Incredibly, she had to be ninety-four, and obviously not only quite mobile, but alert and in full control of her faculties! Lucian flickered a quick glance at Septimus and almost recoiled in shock. His adopted father's expression was unreadable - rigid, controlled - a mask.

Tiberius, Julia and those who escorted them moved to the dais and took their places. Once again, the Chamberlain rapped the floor, and at this signal the remaining guests took their places. The chatter was resumed, but it was markedly subdued. The slaves circulated as before, but this time they carried great platters of food for the main course - some of which were placed firstly before Caesar and his party, and some before the assembled guests. Lucian watched Tiberius covertly. Caesar took little nourishment,

picking at a few dishes and then gesturing for them to be removed. He was equally abstemious with his wine, sipping a little before waving the cup-bearer away. He seemed tired, preoccupied, staring for the most part at the floor. The assembled guests caught the mood, the conversation even more subdued than earlier. After a while, the ageing emperor seemed to rally, becoming more alert and watchful. Suddenly, he called out.

"We have a guest, newly arrived from Palestine - an interesting young man who has told me many things. You should ask him his opinion of Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas."

There was an immediate cessation of conversation and Lucian felt himself the focus of assessing and speculative eyes. Tiberius continued relentlessly.

"Tell me Lucian Gaius Quintus Publius - in your travels in that far province, did you ever journey to Antioch?"

Lucian scrambled to his feet.

"I remained within the borders of Palestine, majesty."

Tiberius seemed not to hear him, he sounded almost petulant.

"You should have travelled to Antioch - there you would have found Germanicus - why have I not heard from Germanicus for so long a time?"

He was staring at Lucian and obviously expected an answer. Lucian felt every eye on him and knew he would need to be very, very careful.

"If I had known of your desire for me to go to Antioch, I would surely have done so, Caesar."

Tiberius nodded enthusiastically.

"You would have met Piso too - do you know Piso?"

Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso had been Proconsul in Antioch twenty years earlier. It was rumored that he had been implicated in the death of Germanicus Caesar. Lucian shook his head.

"Regrettably, I never had the opportunity, Caesar."

Tiberius continued plaintively.

“Why didn’t you go to Antioch? Why have I not heard from Germanicus?”

Julia leaned forward and touched him on the arm.

“You should rest, my son - the day has been long.”

Tiberius jerked around suddenly and confronted her.

“Don’t call me that - You’re not my mother! I don’t know you. Who are you who pretends to be Caesar’s mother!?”

The old lady remained calm, her expression was almost serene. She gestured to two attendants.

“Caesar has become unwell, escort him to his quarters!”

There was utter silence and for a moment it looked as if Tiberius would defy her.

Suddenly, he slumped and gestured surrender. He made no resistance as the two attendants took him gently by each arm and supported him out of the chamber. The assembled guests rose and acknowledged his passing, and Lucian took the opportunity to return to his seat with them. He looked up and found the eyes of Julia Augusta on him. She said nothing.

The interrupted dinner continued for a little longer, before the aged widow of Augustus rose and made her exit through the assembly. It was the signal for a general dispersal. It looked as if they were in a hurry to avoid discussing the extraordinary turn of events. Septimus said nothing on their way to his quarters. Tachius breathed heavily in Lucian’s ear as they followed him. Once behind the sanctuary of closed doors, Septimus sank wearily to a couch and closed his eyes. Lucian and Tachius stood before him, after a few moments, he looked up at them.

“Caesar is unwell.”

Lucian nodded.

“That much is obvious - “

“He has these episodes where he loses touch with reality - they are becoming more

frequent. This is one of the reasons why he doesn't return to Rome."

"But at other times he's alert and understands what's happening around him?"

Septimus nodded.

Tachius growled.

"I felt sorry for the Empress Julia."

Septimus looked at him sharply.

"You have no reason to pity her!"

Lucian's eyes widened in astonishment.

"Her own son denied her in front of us all!"

Septimus hesitated and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"With good reason! She's not Julia Augusta - she's not Tiberius' mother - she's an impostor! - Keep your voices down!"

Lucian hissed.

"Explain!"

"Julia Augusta died seven years ago - after Tiberius came here from Rome. The news of

her death was suppressed on his orders. This woman has some hold over him -

otherwise, I can't account for his acceptance of her under normal circumstances. Only when he loses grip on reality does he accuse her of being an impostor - only then does he tell the truth!"

Tachius muttered.

"Doesn't anyone question it?"

"To what end - to find a knife in your back during the night? Capri is a small island and the places to hide are limited. When Tiberius comes back to reality, he accepts her - it would be a brave man who would then question whether she's really Caesar's mother!"

Lucian whispered after a moment.

"How can you be sure she's an impostor?"

“Because I knew the real Livia Drusilla when Tiberius and I were young men - she became Julia Augusta when Augustus died. This woman is good - but she isn’t good enough to deceive me!”

“In one of your letters to me, you told me how glad you were to be received by Julia, who arranged for you to meet Tiberius and how you all three shared many memories - you didn’t give a hint!”

“For that reason, I’m still alive and so are you! I’m concerned for us all, Lucian - we witnessed something this evening which might prompt swift retribution - perhaps it will be considered too dangerous for us all to continue breathing!”

“Tomorrow, Tachius and I go to Rome - come with us!”

“If we live until tomorrow! You may find your plans will be delayed - we will be watched and our reaction assessed. I won’t be going to Rome with you - I can’t leave Capri - I’m an undeclared hostage for your good behaviour - don’t you understand? No one has said so, but they know I understand - and they know that if one word of this episode finds its way to Rome - or even a hint that Julia Augusta isn’t whom she claims to be - my life will be forfeit as well as yours!”

There was no more discussion - in the suspicious climate of the court, three men talking in whispers was inviting retribution. Lucian had a restless night, the events of the evening milled around in his mind, and the uneasy feeling that an assassin’s knife might emerge at any moment from the shadows at the open window.

Septimus’ prediction that there would be a delay in their departure for Rome was confirmed early on the following morning when Aquila Apolonius interrupted his breakfast.

“We have new instructions to travel to Rome later in the week. There’s a possibility that Caesar may wish to talk with you again.”

Lucian stared at him steadily.

“How is Caesar?”

The response was guarded.

"I'm told that Caesar spent a good night, but that he has a chill which might keep him confined to his quarters for a few days - during that time, he will see no one."

Lucian nodded.

"I'm relieved to hear it."

Apolonius was in no hurry to retreat.

"You handled yourself quite well last evening."

"Thank you - it was clear that Caesar was a little confused - but you did warn me not to discuss Germanicus."

"I'm glad you took my advice - obviously, as you say, Caesar sometimes becomes a little confused. He is, after all, an old man with the weight of great responsibilities."

"I'm all the more amazed that he might wish to talk to me again."

"Might - is the operative word - Caesar expressed the wish to do so - we must see whether that's still his wish in a few days - in the meantime, enjoy yourself on Capri."

Lucian nodded, Apolonius still loitered.

"What did you think of the Empress Julia."

"Another subject I wasn't supposed to discuss! What did I think of her? I suppose - awe-inspiring! To think that she's the widow of Caesar Augustus, that she's still alive and obviously very alert - and that Caesar can still rely upon his mother to care for him when he has a - chill!"

Aquila nodded slightly, he didn't drop his eyes.

"Nothing else!"

Lucian eased back in his chair.

"What else is there to be said? She's an incredible lady for her age!"

Again, Apolonius nodded. This time he moved towards the door.

"If you want company during your time here, I'm available - Caesar's spared no expense the garrison have good baths and a gymnasium, if you're interested. There's an

interesting grotto which can be accessed by boat.”

“Thank you - I’ll take you up on the offer.”

Apolonius nodded and made his exit, leaving Lucian to stare after him speculatively.