

# The deserter

## Italy 83AD

Lucius finished his last lesson with Hypatos, a discussion of Plato and the lost glories of Athens. Lucius liked Hypatos, fat, short and tending to rambling, but the lessons were mostly boring. History was the only thing he liked reading about, the rest was irrelevant to his life. He couldn't understand why his father insisted on them.

Now he was free. He stood on the path leading to the villa, took a deep breath, savoring the smells of dust and sun, then left the villa and walked down the hill. Golden fields of wheat swayed in the wind as it swept down from the north. Two slaves were harvesting one of the fields, one cutting the stalks with an iron sickle, the other binding them in his wake. They moved with smooth, practiced movements, their bare skin glittering with sweat. In the distance the mountains were barely visible. Soon the cicadas of sunset would start their song. He didn't have long.

In the past few days he and Hypatos had explored the question of the origin of heroes. Were they made or born? Hypatos thought they were made, forged by constant challenge and adversity. He himself was no hero of course. He much preferred drinking wine and eating figs in the porch overlooking the tinkling fountain in the courtyard of the villa. Hypatos made a special study of heroes. He read everything he could of Herakles, Aeneas, Scipio and other great men of history and mythology. Lucius and he spent endless hours discussing their relative merits, often past the time when the slaves blew out all the torches in the courtyard and the stars shone unchallenged in the night sky. These were the moments Lucius most enjoyed with his tutor. He didn't even care when Hypatos interjected some poetry or philosophy into the conversation, it was enough to hear of the stories and exploits of the great men of the past and wonder if there were any today to match them.

The quest to find modern day heroes was what brought him out today. Past the fields, into the olive groves, the leaves covered by dust after long weeks with no rain. He could feel his heart beating faster. The man, the slave, he was looking for was in the mill. He'd asked the overseer Caius in the morning. Caius didn't like the question, Lucius could tell by the way his enormous black eyebrows drew closer together and his brow furrowed. He wanted to know why Lucius was interested but Lucius wouldn't say. Of course Caius wasn't happy. He'd probably complain again to his father about Hypatos putting strange notions in his head, but his father would return only when the harvest was done, so there was no need to worry.

The man, Lucius had heard his name was John but he wasn't sure, had arrived in the spring with a group of slaves his father had bought. In the days after his arrival a ripple of unease had washed over the household. The slaves had taken to speaking less and when they did they did so quietly. Hypatos

was less sunny than usual. At first Lucius didn't understand why. Then he started catching glimpses of John and the reaction of the other slaves to him made it clear that he was the source of the disturbance. He tried to get a better look but John always came to the villa at night and kept to the shadows. Once Lucius was able to see him climb the stairs up to his father's study. From what Lucius saw, there was nothing frightening about his appearance. He was of average height, perhaps a little short even, and completely bald. His eyebrows were so white that for a moment Lucius had thought John had shaved them off. He moved with a power Lucius had never seen before. There was something unstoppable about the way he climbed the stairs, every movement driving like a fist. Questioning Hypatos was no help, he kept changing the subject. Lucius turned to his father. He seemed pleased by the question but gave no further information other than saying that John was a great man. Lucius was left wondering how a slave could be a great man. Slaves could become freedmen, but Lucius had never heard of any being called great before.

Lucius was left with no choice but to approach John himself and resolve the mystery. He'd spent weeks wrestling with his fears. Why John inspired disquiet in the slaves Lucius didn't know, but there was surely a reason. Not knowing it didn't allay Lucius' anxiety, the opposite in fact. The dread of the unknown is greater than any, Hypatos always said. Facing the unfamiliar was the only way to conquer it, just like Herakles before him.

The mill was a simple affair. It stood in the center of a clearing in the middle of one of the groves. It was made of two large circular stones and two wooden beams. One stone lay horizontally on the ground, with a groove along its edge where the other stood vertically. Each stone had a beam running through its middle. A pile of canvas bags, used to transport the olives, stood neatly by the side of the stone, covered in a thin layer of dust. To the left of the mill was the press, two low concentric stone structures with a wooden beam above them. After the slaves harvested the olives they placed them along the edge of the horizontal stone, hitched a donkey to the horizontal pole and led it in circles, turning the second stone in the first and crushing the olives. The resulting paste would then be placed in fiber disks, put into the press and squeezed to extract the oil.

John squatted by the mill, his back to Lucius. He held a large hammer in his hands, the head a slab of black iron, the handle as long as his arm. As soon as Lucius entered the clearing John got up and spun to face Lucius, the hammer held across his body. Lucius felt his breath quicken. He was here alone and the villa suddenly seemed very distant. There were at least twenty paces between him and John, a good head start. He was a fast runner but he had no idea if he was fast enough for John. Shouting for help would be useless, the sun was already below the crowns of the trees and all the slaves would be back in their homes. The demigods of the past were no help. They crowded in the back of his mind, insubstantial silhouettes, offering no encouragement, no advice, no assistance. John stared at him without emotion. Lucius tried to gauge his next move but John's gaze gave away nothing.

“The young master,” John said. He let the hammer slide from his grasp and let its head rest on the ground, holding it now by one hand only. He bent slightly forward and straightened quickly, a movement which Lucius assumed was meant to be a bow. He considered rebuking John for this inadequate show of respect, then glanced again at the hammer and thought better of it.

“Your name is John?” Lucius asked.

“Yes.”

“My name’s Lucius. I’m Alexander’s son.” Stupid. John had already recognized him. “I came to talk to you.”

John made no reply, no movement.

“Where are you from?” Lucius asked, trying to make conversation.

“I’m from Italia. This is my home,” John said.

“No, but before.”

“Before?”

“Before you became a slave.”

“Before I became a slave.” John seemed to consider the question. Lucius took the opportunity to advance. The danger was gone and having a conversation at a distance was awkward.

“Your father said you would come, but he thought it would take you longer. ‘Curious as Socrates’ cat’ he said.”

“He knew I would come?”

“Your father is a wise man,” John said. “A little reckless, perhaps, but wise.”

“Guard your tongue, you’re talking about the man who owns you. He could have you executed, right now.”

“And that means he owns me? I could kill myself too, you know. Does that mean I have more than one master?” John loosened his grip around the hammer’s handle. A wordless hint, Lucius thought, the danger was not all gone.

“No, only one. The laws of the senate govern the world and it is they which assign ownership. My father paid for you, you’re his property.”

“The laws of the senate are supreme here in the heart of the empire, but out on the edge, or beyond, there are other laws, other kings, other gods. You and I, we have the same master.”

“What do you mean?”

“God. The God of our ancestors and of us. I am slave to your father, yes, but I’m also a slave of God. So is your father.”

“Oh, the ridiculous Jewish god. We’re Jews yes, but we don’t take him too seriously. A strange notion, that there should be only one god. Judea is conquered, the Temple destroyed. Either God is not so powerful, or he leads his followers into slavery and defeat. In any case, I’m not his slave, and neither are any of my family.”

“Oh, you’re a cosmopolitan Jew. Worldly. I knew many of those.”

“What happened to them?”

“Dead, along with the rest. God didn’t help the believers and philosophy didn’t help the others. God has better things to do than trouble Himself with the insignificant little conflicts we breed every day.”

“Then why worship Him?”

“Man’s life is short, his horizons limited. Like a child, he cares only for the immediate. God has no such boundaries. There are many who think that worshipping God means killing and dying in His name. For myself, as I said before, I don’t believe God concerns Himself with such trivial affairs. To become closer to God, one must try to share His perspective.”

Lucius had come to solve the mystery of John’s identity, to face his own fears, and now he was discussing philosophy with a slave who might murder him at any moment. He didn’t like the direction the conversation had turned to. He sat on the oil press, trying to show John he wasn’t afraid of him.

“Why did you say my father was reckless?” Lucius asked.

John cracked a tight smile. “I see you’re not one for philosophy. It will come, in time, if I read you right. But you are full of questions. The answer to your last one is that your father was reckless for buying me. You see, in another life I was the emperor’s enemy, I killed many of his soldiers. My comrades captured the eagle of the twelfth legion. If word ever got out that I’m here, on your father’s estates, he may fall under suspicion.”

“Then why did he do it?”

“He wanted you to meet me. He wanted you to hear the story of how I came here. And, though this I can only guess, because he felt he had an obligation to me, as a fellow Jew.”

“And what is the story?”

“A long one, not to be told hastily on the edge of night. Your father told me that your tutor keeps you busy. Come here tomorrow, before the sun rises. We’ll have a few hours before your lessons, and my work, start.”

John turned his head to the sky. “The moon is rising, go, before darkness hides the trail.”

Lucius wasn’t used to taking orders from slaves. He tried to answer but the words wouldn’t come. As John had looked up the right side of his face had been revealed. It was horrifically disfigured, a burn scar like a hungry, grasping vine reaching from the cheek to the ear and nose. It was all Lucius could do not to retch. He nodded and started on the path.

“I will come, tomorrow,” he called out without looking back.

John smiled again. He knew the reason for Lucius’ sudden departure. After the wound had healed he’d felt ashamed for a long time. He’d learned to keep the scars hidden as much as he could, always showing only the left side of his face, avoiding people whenever he knew he couldn’t. As time passed pleasure had sidled its way to lie alongside shame. He enjoyed the discomfiture people felt when they saw the scar. There was a secret delight in displaying his savage origins, though there was a price to pay. He was the only man living who knew how he got the scar. Whenever he was reminded of it the pain, the fire returned. He could still feel the flames sloughing off the skin.

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