



Maud Hart and Delos Wheeler  
Lovelace Family Papers.

**Copyright Notice:**

This material may be protected by copyright law (U.S. Code, Title 17). Researchers are liable for any infringement. For more information, visit [www.mnhs.org/copyright](http://www.mnhs.org/copyright).

## CHAPTER SEVEN - 135A

~~Panthera's swagger and the do-you-want-to-make-something~~  
~~of it~~ smile on his usually sullen face, ~~was his way of boasting~~  
~~that now he was as good as, practically, anybody.~~ In Sebaste he  
 had been only a centurion of least rank. The Emperor Augustus's  
 Road Commissioner could ~~make him jump through any hoop.~~ Now he  
 was one of the elite officers of the Legion. Now he was very  
 different from the humble fellow who had not dared defy an order  
 to stop baiting Joseph's party. His bold inspection of Deborah  
 and Candace, ~~and especially their uncovered arms and legs,~~ marked  
 a very different Panthera indeed.

"I hope," he said, "that we haven't made too much noise.  
 I put the cohort into a practice charge along the hill and they  
 got a little out of hand." The words seemed natural enough, but  
 the tone ~~said that anybody who didn't like it could lump it.~~  
~~was defiant.~~

"You didn't bother us at all," Vedius Rusco said  
 pleasantly. He moved forward a dozen paces to put Deborah and  
 Candace too far behind to call for introductions. Lucianus and  
 Bracae followed, and Micipsia followed them.

"The Tribune Marcus Seclator Lucianus," Rusco said,  
 "is just up from Egypt and I believe your general plans to give  
 him some duty in the Tenth." He knew Orfitus would wish, himself,

D to reveal the particular duty. ~~Orfitus~~ Proculinus always wished to reveal, himself, the particulars of every assignment in the Tenth.

Page Panthera nodded indifferently, too full of his own glory to be interested in any new young stranger. But his persistent smile now asked for some acknowledgement of his promotion. ~~And~~ it would have been quite in order to invite him into the villa ~~for wine, for a~~ congratulatory goblet, to mark his newly won place among the chief combat officers of Rusco's old legion.

Rusco, however, had despised the centurion who annoyed Joseph and Mary at Sebaste and he despised no less the swaggering Pilus Prior.

"When I was with the Tenth," he said smoothly, "the Eighth Cohort was one of the best, at fighting or drill. Will you show us how good it is now?"

"Glad to," Panthera drawled and his sleepy bold gaze went again to Deborah and Candace, running over them like an insistent hand.

Rusco turned. "Maybe you ought to go back to the villa," he said to his daughter. "And take Candace with you. You both may watch, if you like, from the balcony."

The girls turned willingly away, shepherded by Bria. Rusco, as the men strolled toward the legionnaires, spoke disarmingly of the value of combat practice. Panthera, aware of the ~~double~~ snub, strove to retain his swagger <sup>when</sup> they arrived at the cohort. He turned to smile meaningfully <sup>fully</sup> back at the balcony where the girls now appeared.

(D) "You train Amazons in your villa," he said, loud enough for the nearest soldiers to hear.

(D) ~~Rusco said nothing.~~ Bracae who had kept close to his master stirred at Panthera's impertinence but Rusco's look warned him to remain quiet. Micipsia's eyes stuck farther out and his brows arched more roundly in utter disbelief when no rebuke was given.

(D) "And every man of every legion envies them the training," Panthera went on, speaking louder. Plainly he had an idea which pleased him more than his promise of a show by the cohort. "I, myself, ~~would give anything~~ <sup>am eager</sup> to learn what Vedius Rusco Philippicus can teach. I don't suppose you'd <sup>would</sup> care to give me a lesson?"

(D) Rusco colored slightly. He recognized the intent of the new Pilus Prior to impress his men but ~~could it be that~~ <sup>was</sup> he really ~~wanted a fight?~~ <sup>in earnest?</sup> Even a practice fight was ~~risky~~. Did he really believe that his youth and bulk were sure to win against older skill and experience?

Rusco was almost alarmed to feel a familiar elation rising. He smiled, and Bracae understood that his chief, as always, was taking fire at the approach of an enemy.

(D) Rusco was taking fire, <sup>(in) all right,</sup> but he was also telling himself that he was too old to respond to the mixture of fun, fear, calculation, rashness and rage which ~~the mere hint of~~ conflict had aroused in him from his first days as a recruit.

(D) You have seen thousands at your age go down before younger champions. They had slowed up. You have slowed up yourself.

SUPERASE BOND  
25% COTTON FIBRE



(T)

He ~~told himself this~~ and was pleased that he had sense enough to keep his mouth shut, but the old elation went ~~right~~ on rising. He held his silence so long that Panthera swaggered wider, ~~tipping a wink to~~ <sup>winking at</sup> the ~~men~~ <sup>Legionnaires</sup> nearest him.

(O)

"Yes," he said, "I'd like ~~a lot~~ <sup>very much</sup> to learn what the Legions' old champion could teach me."

Page

Bracae burst into laughter, Micipsia squeaked derisively and Lucianus stared in cold contempt, but to Rusco's chagrin the murmur which ran along the cohort was not, in the main, ~~derisive~~ ~~or~~ contemptuous of Panthera's brashness. There was even a hint, mixed with the pleasure which legionnaires always felt at the prospect of any sort of ~~scrap~~ <sup>fight</sup>, that perhaps their big new commander was the one to prove that after many years the great ex-Primus Pilus was finished. ~~Evidently Panthera thought so.~~

(O)

(D)

The ~~old~~ elation rose higher. Rusco called himself ~~the biggest fool unhung~~ <sup>a self-esteeming fool,</sup> but it went on rising in spite of muscles which not only had to be slower but felt slower.

(D)

(D)

"I probably couldn't teach you a thing," he said with a modesty in reverse of his mood. "I've been ~~out of things~~ <sup>retired</sup> for ~~over~~ <sup>two</sup> a couple of years and even then I was ~~pretty~~ old for such ~~stuff~~ <sup>play!</sup>."

Panthera could be modest, too, and mean it just as little.

(D)

(D)

"But of course Vedius Rusco Philippicus isn't <sup>hot</sup> just any ~~old timer~~ <sup>veteran</sup> turned ~~out to pasture~~ <sup>off</sup> with his bonus and good service diploma. You must have <sup>a good deal of your old</sup> ~~quite a lot of~~ skill left."

~~"quite a lot?"~~ <sup>two</sup> Bracae's bellow brought ~~a couple of~~ recruits erect in alarm, but Rusco only smiled amiably.

any other (D)

A number of young men  
 "Plenty of you young fellows probably could give me a  
 good lesson."

"I am asking for a privilege as well as a lesson."

Rusco laughed. By Mars! By Hercules! Muscles were al-  
 ways muscles and his felt fine.

"I would be proud, all my life, just to be able to say  
 I'd crossed swords with the great Philippicus."

You don't want just to cross swords, Pilus Prior.

You want to <sup>best</sup> me <sup>up</sup>. Maybe you even want to <sup>wound</sup> stick me, by acci-  
 dent of course, but the deeper the better, because then your co-  
 hort <sup>be impressed</sup> would really ~~admit that you were boss.~~

"Swords!" Rusco pretended amazement. "One of us might  
 get hurt."

"I'll have to take my chances!" Panthera winked  
 again.

"Let's just get bows and arrows and shoot at a mark.  
<sup>might</sup> Maybe I can teach you a thing or two about a bow, <sup>(u)</sup> and some day you  
 might thank me."

"Roman weapons are good enough for me."

"Now wait! How about the sling? I'll try to give you  
 a lesson with the sling, and you might thank me for that, ~~too~~, some  
 day."

"I've watched those auxiliaries who are called the  
 world's best slingers," Panthera said scornfully. "Those Balearic  
 Island sharpshooters! I'll <sup>keep</sup> stick to sword, dagger and javelin."

Lucianus spoke <sup>up</sup>. "If Panthera wants a lesson so  
 much, let me try to give him one." <sup>He felt concerned.</sup> It wasn't, of course, as

95  
25% COTTON FIBRE  
9290  
though his own father were stepping out of fat middle-age to play champion. Vedius Rusco was so lacking in any look of middle-

(T) \* Seclator, ~~but~~ nevertheless Rusco <sup>also</sup> ~~also~~ carried a burden of years.

D ~~which might impose an unexpected tragic penalty.~~

"Why not Micipsia!" Micipsia squeaked. "I'll sword the man, bow the man, wrestle the man."

Panthera laughed.

"I'll give you a lesson," Bracae said solidly and no one could mistake his offer for a joke.

(B) "He <sup>well</sup> ~~will~~ have to put up with me," Rusco said lightly.

He decided that he ~~didn't~~ <sup>not</sup> feel a day over twenty-five. He glanced around the cohort and off to one side found a small, separate detachment and raised a hand in delighted greeting.

Pat "Arrius! Arrius Messala! I thought you <sup>had</sup> ~~was~~ retired. When did they call you back?"

D A centurion, full of wrinkles and gray hair, who stood at the head of twenty-five veterans ~~in the detachment~~, squared age-thickened shoulders at such warmth from so famous a comrade.

(D) "In September, Primus Pilus!" His use of the old title told how far back the comradeship ran. "They called me back to lead this independent unit." He waved up to a small, square banner, <sup>carried by an orderly.</sup>  
"And last week they brought us on from Africa for duty with the Tenth."

"And under your own <sup>vexillum!</sup> ~~vexillum!~~" Rusco looked to the banner as he held out an affectionate hand. "When were we together last? Wait! I remember. It was when we fought under Tiberius

GILBERT

SUPERBASE BOND

all the way from the Rhone to the Danube."

<sup>all the way</sup>  
"Clean into Pannonia!"

"And what ~~no-holds-barred~~ fighters those Pannonians were!"

Messala glanced down at his ~~gleaming~~ breastplate of hardened leather, faced with iron straps. "Remember <sup>this</sup> it?" he asked.

"Should I?" Rusco smiled.

"You gave it to me!" Messala cried. "After you cut down that Pannonian chief who charged our eagles. You took it off him!"

<sup>so</sup>  
"I did, ~~at that!~~" Rusco laughed. "And you certainly needed it because the Pannonians had slashed yours all over."

"I never fixed this little slit where your sword went through," Messala said, "but it's as good as ever."

"And good enough for me," Rusco said. "Will you loan it to me for a little while, and your helmet and shield and weapons?"

"They're all yours!" Messala cried and could not check a proud glance around. "And if I do say so, you couldn't have better. The sword is the one I carried under Tiberius."

Rusco ~~laughed. Elation ran higher and higher.~~ He felt more strongly than ever the grand familiar confusion of emotions which he well knew he ought to deplore.

"Aren't you going to send for your own gear?" Lucianus protested.

"Messala and I are of a size," Rusco said easily.

A little of Panthera's swagger ran out at such light treatment of the imminent meeting. Cuirass, shield, sword and

dagger were important. If a cuirass chafed, if a shield was ~~not~~ unbalanced or ~~felt~~ awkward on the arm, if weapons were not right -- if any one of these details was <sup>present</sup> ~~out of kilter~~ -- the difference could hurt and if all of them were ~~out~~ it might mean the difference between winning and losing.

"Go in and get your own metal," he said to Rusco.

"Take all the time you want."

<sup>This needs</sup>  
"I'm ready," Rusco said, the high mood ringing in his voice.

He finished arming with the help of three experts. Messala inspected the fit of armholes and tightened straps to snug the breastplate ~~along his ribs~~. Micipsia adjusted the broad, sporrانlike leather which hung between his legs. Bracae would not approve sword, dagger and shield until Rusco had tried the balance of the weapons and banged the shield hard to test it for an invisible flaw.

The recruits of the cohort were eyeing Panthera with admiration but the older men, Rusco was pleased to note, were eyeing one another with cautious grins.

"Five silver denarii on the Primus Pilus," Messala sang out. "No, twelve!" He had emptied his pouch.

Six recruits huddled and turned up enough brass, copper and silver to make eight and a half denarii.

<sup>one</sup> "I won't take all your money, babies!" Messala <sup>Said</sup> ~~refused~~ ~~the small change~~. "On Vedius Rusco Philippicus, twelve denarii!"

"On Panthera, eight denarii!" cried the recruits' spokesman.

"I don't <sup>even</sup> feel right ~~laying~~ you twelve to eight," Messala said in mock-mournfulness. He ignored Panthera. When did an independent evocatus under his own <sup>vexillum</sup> ~~vexillum~~ need to ~~knuckle down~~ <sup>truckle</sup> to a big <sup>boaster</sup> ~~show-off~~ like this one?

"How far is this to go?" Bracae demanded. "As far as first blood?"

"No further," Panthera said virtuously. "My whole idea is just to get a lesson."

"You will," Bracae said.

"We'll <sup>stop it</sup> ~~quit~~ any time you've had enough," Rusco said happily. "And we'll start any time you're <sup>are</sup> ready."

He looked back at the balcony. <sup>Deborah and Candace</sup> ~~The girls~~ were too far away to hear what was being said, ~~of course~~, but they could see what was going on. Both were leaning forward intently. Rusco waved.

"Hold on!" Lucianius cried. "Do you mean to ~~keep~~ <sup>at</sup> those on?" He pointed protestingly ~~from Rusco's soft shoes to Panthera's hobnails.~~ <sup>Such roots</sup> ~~The latter~~ were a brutal weapon in close fighting.

They had crushed many a foot, ~~so badly that the owner was lamed for life.~~ And ~~they~~ might accidentally do harm even in a friendly set-to. But Rusco smiled. "I don't mind."

"Isn't this just for fun?" Panthera asked, trying to make a molehill out of Lucianius's mountain.

"Of course it is," Rusco agreed. "And I've fought in soft shoes before. There were times, when I was young ~~and broke~~, that I couldn't afford any others!"

Reminded that Augustus's Road Commissioner had been forced,

in the days of his youth, to economies as hard as their own, the six gambling recruits were washed with one of those emotional waves which turn logic topsy-turvy. It inspired the glorious dream that they might rise to his high level and their young hearts, in spite of their eight denarii, began to hate Panthera who was about to attack their dream.

"I'll referee," Bracae announced. "And I want you both to obey on the dot when I command 'Ground POINTS!'" That way you'll be more likely not to get hurt." He addressed his last sentence to Panthera.

(D) ~~"I'll obey."~~ <sup>smiling</sup> You can count on me," Panthera promised loudly, ~~He tried~~ <sup>attempting</sup> for an artful frankness. He knew that the shoes had lost him some popular favor and he hoped that his ready agreement would persuade at least a few that he was, in spite of the <sup>scrupulously</sup> shoes, ~~as fair a fighter as any man could be.~~

"I'll stop on command," Rusco laughed. "I'm almost wishing I didn't have to start." The wonderful mood which he ought to deplore was higher than ever.

o-o-o

Panthera did everything by the book but he did everything well. He settled into position. His sword arm was ready to thrust forward or up or down because, of course, the old Greek technique of always using the edge had long since been discredited and now the point was paramount. In his shield hand he held his heavy dagger by the blade. This was something new, but also by the book. The blade was wrapped in his neckscarf, leaving the hilt bare for a quick <sup>snatch</sup> ~~grab~~ if he lost his sword or got into

quarters too close for the longer weapon. Bent, springy knees made movement in any direction easy. This was by the book also. Feet were a little apart, the left a little advanced. The top of his shield was in line with his chin, ready to protect face, neck or vulnerable arm-pit but well <sup>positioned</sup> held to guard soft belly or tender groin, the latter only poorly protected by the sporrán-like strap. He looked like a young bull, solid, massive, wholly formidable.

Vedius Rusco's stance was not very different, but it was too relaxed to conform to the book. Every muscle was as loose as sand, <sup>making him</sup> ready to fall away, slide ahead, sway, step aside or leap clear. ~~He looked as quick as a wolf.~~ He did not hold his dagger by the book either. His shield hand gripped it between two fingers, by the hilt. Panthera had heard men claim that Vedius Rusco could seize a dagger by the point and throw it straight and true. He had even heard some say they had seen Rusco do this, but he doubted ~~the~~ <sup>the story.</sup>

"READY!" Bracae commanded.

Panthera nodded. Rusco smiled up at Deborah.

Sweat broke out on Lucianius's palms. Micipsia tensed as though he, also, faced a sword. Bracae ~~hardened his lips to give snap to his next command.~~ The cohort sighed loudly.

The men were well matched. Panthera was younger, a little heavier and taller and his reach was longer. Rusco was deeper chested and more strongly muscled. Panthera was scowling and breathing audibly. Rusco was expressionless and his gaze seemed to fall nowhere and everywhere.

SUPERASE BOND

100% COTTON FIBRE

Kegg

"GUARD!" Bracae cried.

Panthera feinted, then drove a swift long-point. Rusco evaded it without shifting his feet, a proof of balance which brought a "Ha!" from Messala's veterans. Panthera's blade stabbed at and under and around, but the opposing shield always met it. Panthera pressed but he was skillful and wary and never overreached. He never took a stride so long that a counterstroke could catch him off guard. His powerful, orthodox swordplay was always dangerous even though it had no originality to throw out an unexpected menace.

Both men were shifting their feet now, scraping the stony ground roughly and quickly. They reversed positions three times and then Panthera thought he had the sun in Rusco's eyes and drove straight for the belly and for once it seemed that Rusco would not intercept the thrust and Micipsia whinnied. But the edge of Rusco's shield came out of nowhere to ring against Panthera's blade a few inches in front of the hilt and Bracae nodded approval.

The blow would have knocked the sword out of the hand of almost any other soldier, but Panthera hung on although his mouth twitched.

*tree*  
 "Strong as a horse!" Bracae grunted to Lucianus. "But  
 I'll bet that wrist *must hurt by now,* hurts."

Panthera backtracked, waiting for the hurt to lessen.

"That's a good one to learn," Rusco said, faintly apologetic.

The cohort's veterans nodded in a growing conviction

*was in trouble*

that their Pilus Prior ~~had bit off more than he could chew~~ and the six converted recruits were happily surer that their eight denarii had gone up in smoke.

Furious at having been so nearly disarmed, Panthera set out to regain face. He did not let himself become reckless and did not open himself to another numbing shield blow, but he thrust, thrust, thrust and his heavy hobnails stomped.

Rusco fell back. He retreated half a dozen light, deliberate steps, began to circle right. Panthera was forced to change front and to reach across his own shield. He never could quite <sup>close with</sup> reach his target but after a circle or two his confidence grew. Two circles, three! His man was tiring. Four ~~circles,~~ five! Old Rusco <sup>seemed unable to</sup> couldn't even make a stand, much less counter-attack.

Panthera decided that his moment had come. In this scramble any blow could be <sup>explained.</sup> ~~alibied.~~ Half around the sixth circle he stabbed upward and when the shield rose and covered Rusco's eyes, or seemed to, he stomped at Rusco's lightly shod instep. He missed, heard a scandalized ~~voice~~ cry, "That could cripple for life!" stomped again and was all set for the contrite, virtuous apology when he knew he had missed the second time. Then, incredibly, he was in retreat.

Rusco was not, after all, too tired to stand or even to counter-attack. And this was a different Rusco. This was not the smiling make-believe opponent of the first five ~~minutes.~~ <sup>moments</sup> This was as unmistakable an avenger as the attempted foul had been unmistakable. And now Panthera discovered what oldsters

meant when they said that Vedius Rusco Philippicus was the best.

What ~~other~~ mortal man could be as good as this? This was a terror, long-fanged and flashing like a wolf. This was implacable, living death.

As fearful now as he had been confident, Panthera tried, like Rusco, a calculated retreat but when he attempted to fall back two paces he was driven back six. He tried to circle but found his <sup>arc</sup> ~~curve~~ cut by a blade slashing from a dozen points at once. He tried to stand his ground and, knowing himself already branded for a <sup>an unmistakable</sup> ~~disgraceful~~ foul, he swung a ~~shameless~~ sword at Rusco's unprotected shins but found it stopped by another <sup>AIS</sup> dozen slashing blades. He leaped mightily to buy a little relief. And now ~~he~~ discovered that he had underestimated the dagger. The damned thing came at him end-over-end. He got his shield up but the heavy blade hit and came like a spike through a plank, menacing his face and by its weight spoiling the balance of his shield.

His fear changed to terror as he realized that he was helpless. He had been tricked into his backward leap as surely as a balky horse was ever backed into a stall. Rusco had moved him at will and his leap had provided the <sup>necessary</sup> ~~precious~~ instant in which Rusco had been able to stab sword into the ground, grasp dagger and hurl, and catch up sword again.

And now the sword was ~~coming~~ at him again. It smashed his own sword down and Rusco's shield smashed his own shield back until the projecting blade of Rusco's damned dagger was at his eyes and the point of Rusco's sword was entering his cuirass,

was through, was into his very flesh.

Panthera told himself that he was a dead man. In wild terror he leaped back once more until the <sup>tip</sup> ~~half~~ inch of Rusco's sword was pulled free of his belly. Turning, he blundered into his own tittering troops and instantly realized what such a flight confessed. He turned to blunder back, hoping he might make it appear that nothing more than ~~a~~ proper caution had caused him to back away. He was sick with shame, and full of hate and he swung his sword to command a way and the titters around him changed to dismayed cries. As he swung right and left he swore that he would stand up against Rusco if he died, but he found himself facing an adversary who was once again easy-going, and smiling and even again faintly apologetic.

Blood seeped from Panthera's breastplate.

Rusco eyed it, glanced at Bracae, and stepped back.

"Ground POINTS!" Bracae roared.

Panthera started a forward stride, his face congested.

"Ground POINTS!"

Vedius Rusco touched earth with the tip of his sword, ~~a half smile on his lips.~~

Panthera hesitated, in uncontrollable rage and shame.

"Ground POINTS!" Bracae shouted and seizing the nearest soldier's shield and javelin, stepped in front of Panthera.

"Ground POINTS! ~~You fool!~~ Do you want a lesson from me, too?"

Panthera lowered his sword and, as his mind came back under control, prayed that his instant recovery from terror had deceived the cohort. He put out a hand and swaggered up to Rusco.

"You got the better of it this time," he said and hoped that at least some of his audience believed that "this time" <sup>would be</sup> meant he ~~was~~ willing to try it again.

"We'll do it again, any day you say," Rusco said pleasantly, but although only a little while before his gaze had seemed to fall everywhere, he did not now seem to see Panthera's hand and the Pilus Prior knew that he had his dismissal. Even his new rank did not give him daring enough to stay any longer.

"We certainly will, soon," he said and turned away, hating Vedius Rusco even more than in Sebaste, hating him for life. He motioned a corporal to stand as guide.

"Fall in!" he roared.

And even the men who had tittered leaped to obey. Messala had a little trouble covering up a smile as he helped Vedius Rusco out of the borrowed gear and indicated his intention to delay his detachment until he had finished. ~~But~~ this was the right of any leader who flew his own <sup>vexillum.</sup> ~~vexillum.~~

"For-ward, MARCH!" Panthera shouted.

"He's marching them at attention!" Lucianius exclaimed. A conscientious young officer, he disapproved of any needless ill treatment of the ranks.

"He doesn't know whether he's standing on his feet or <sup>(D)</sup> on his ~~big, swelled~~ head," Bracae said.

All of Rusco's fine elation drained off. Now why did I go out of my way to make a tougher enemy? he wondered. Abruptly he told himself again that he was too old for such horseplay as he had just engaged in. He greatly regretted the whole affair.

165  
101  
(A)

Rusco thought of Joseph, working in the dining room  
through all the <sup>commotion</sup> hullabaloo. Panthera, he remembered, was Joseph's  
enemy, too. He decided he would go and talk to Joseph.

25% COTTON FIBRE  
SUPERFINE BOND  
GILBERT

## CHAPTER EIGHT

~~Salvidianus~~ <sup>Julius</sup> Muso, tall, pink-cheeked, with a long, foxy face, walked toward Panthera's orderly room in the barracks near the Joppa Gate. The Tribune, still confident that he was Deborah's preferred suitor, had returned from leave in Caesaria, on the coast, to find an urgent summons to a meeting.

In the sunshine outside the barracks soldiers were cursing or rejoicing over their luck at dice games played on the pavement patterns. The orderly room was dim at first, but Muso made out Panthera, and Panthera's new woman, and then ~~big~~ <sup>big</sup> ~~gross~~ Helius Naepor.

The Primus Pilus was seated at a table, his heavy shoulders bowed over a goblet of wine, and Muso glanced with distaste at the dribbled tunic. He seated himself so that the broad purple band of his own immaculate tunic was conspicuous. Patricians alone were permitted the broad band. Equestrians were permitted only a narrow one, and plebians like these two, none at all.

Muso's usual air of condescension was, if possible, more marked than ever to keep the others from making capital out of the fact that they had summoned and he had come. He had not dared tell them to come to him, he needed money too much, and now he

(D) waited impatiently for one of them to state the <sup>amount</sup> ~~figures~~.

*page*  
Helius Naepor kept silent, offended as usual by Muso's expression because it said that even a Primus Pilus was favored beyond his deserts to be on familiar terms with a scion of one of the oldest patrician families of Rome.

Patrician beggars! Naepor knew of the Emperor's <sup>role</sup> ~~handouts~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~to~~ the Muso clan, ~~along with handouts~~ <sup>to</sup> scores of other impoverished ~~blue-bloods~~ <sup>no noble Romans</sup>.

(D) Let him wait, the Primus Pilus thought. He was resolved to leave all the talking to Panthera. Over and over he had wished that he had kept ~~entirely~~ out of this plot to hunt a baby for Herod, this <sup>darkness</sup> ~~mixing in~~ with a conscienceless half-man, a lecherous Pilus Prior and a despicable Tribune. He could not imagine Vedius Rusco <sup>taking part</sup> ~~sitting in~~ on such a meeting as this.

(D) Naepor had <sup>accepted</sup> ~~taken~~ the Chief Eunuch's offer, thinking to pile up a little wealth against a day when he no longer had his pay as Primus Pilus. He knew that day was close; <sup>he</sup> ~~his~~ superb strength was fading. But he had already frittered away the Chief Eunuch's advance and <sup>was well aware that</sup> ~~he knew~~ he would not end up with much of the balance. Meanwhile he must continue to submit to the humiliations of this alliance. He must, for example, look the other way when <sup>the</sup> ~~this~~ Pilus Prior whom he had made, brought his new woman where she had no right to be.

(D) In the corner nearest Panthera the woman was stretched out on a couch, as relaxed as a yellow cat. Newly oiled and rubbed, her body gleamed under the silks which had replaced the cotton semi-livery she had worn from the slave market. She ignored Muso

and Naepor, and only now and then spared a <sup>Page</sup> narrow, secret look for her new master. Her attention was being given to the scented pumice stone, the lemon water and the heavy unguents with which she was bringing back to her ~~too~~-wise hands the softness which had pleased men in Memphis.

Before beginning the difficult business of placing the Chief Eunuch's proposition before Muso, Panthera stood for a moment, <sup>eyes</sup> his ~~sleepy~~/enjoyably inspecting his new possession. Some, at least, of the rumors picked up months earlier from the Cyrenaican auxiliaries had proved to be true. Liars though Cyrenaicans were, they had not exaggerated <sup>Nepte's</sup> her skills. He was grateful that their description had led him to recognize <sup>her</sup> Nepte outside Vedius Rusco's villa. ~~He had made the purchase of a lifetime.~~

What luck for those auxiliaries to have had her travel with them from Egypt! He could only wonder at their willingness to release her to the Idumean widow. But he did not doubt that she had pleased the widow; nor could he doubt the determination of the widow's kin to send such incendiary <sup>baggage</sup> property to the slave market. But how about the Cyrenaicans' stories of Nepte's earlier achievements? Was she, truly, the cast-off of a disgraced family? The firebrand of a Memphis house of love? The corrupter of the chief priest of the triple Osiris in Memphis? The last offense would explain <sup>her</sup> the willingness ~~of a girl so well equipped~~ to become, briefly, a camp follower, ~~of the auxiliaries~~. Panthera wondered, looking down as Nepte oiled her incredible hands, until Helius Naepor grunted impatiently.

Gingerly then, the Pilus Prior began the necessary ex-

Julius

planations while ~~Salvidinius~~ Muso cautiously stroked his purple band and Naepor continued to slouch over the goblet of wine. Chiefly, Panthera <sup>the work</sup> tried to make it plain that most of ~~the job~~ would fall upon himself, some on Naepor, little on the Tribune.

"You'll hardly need to be around," he said. "You can go back to Caesarea or anywhere you like, just so long as you ~~come in with us~~ and keep the General <sup>quiet</sup> ~~off my neck~~."

"How much?" Muso asked, a quick tongue circling his mouth, <sup>as though</sup> ~~it was the sign of a money-hungry man~~ testing the wonderful flavor of gold.

"The Primus Pilus took care of that end," Panthera said with a large laugh. "And you know a better man doesn't live for squeezing out the last copper."

"How much?"

"Believe it or not, you'll get ten thousand denarii."

"How much for you?"

"Uh-uh-h! Five thousand."

"And you?" Muso looked sidewise at Naepor.

"Twenty thousand," Naepor said, contemptuous of what the Tribune might think of so large a difference.

"And ten for me? No!" Muso's legs shifted to get him out of his seat, and out of the room. They did not, however, complete the threat. ~~"I'm not interested at all."~~ Was a patrician worth so little when this plebian Naepor was being paid five thousand denarii more than he earned as Primus Pilus in a whole year?

<sup>use</sup>  
"Even a patrician can do ~~a lot~~ with ten thousand,"

Panthera cried.

"Not me!"

Panthera wanted to say that they might throw in some-  
thing. They probably could squeeze the Chief Eunuch for a little  
extra. But the offer was not his alone to make. He looked at  
Naepor.

The Primus Pilus helped himself to another drink in  
silence.

Now Salvidinius Muso did get up, his pink face hot.  
He got almost to the door.

Naepor threw in a question.

"Do you know you're being transferred?"

Muso whirled. "Transferred?"

"Almost any time now. General Proculinus has <sup>chosen</sup> tapped a  
young Tribune just up from Egypt for your post in the cohort."

Naepor grinned. "As a matter of fact, the shift <sup>was settled</sup> has been all set  
<sup>Several</sup> for a couple of months <sup>ago</sup>, and it came to a head while you were in  
<sup>arranged</sup> Caesarea. Vedius Rusco <sup>fixed it up</sup> fixed it up."

"Why would the General transfer me at Vedius Rusco's  
request?" Muso said.

Do you want me to say why, right out? Do you want me  
to say you're the lousiest Tribune the Tenth ever had? Naepor  
eyed his victim in silent, contemptuous triumph. A word now  
would bring him into the plot.

<sup>He</sup> Naepor withheld the word for a moment. He knew -- he  
had known ~~in his heart~~ all along -- that if he did not bring Muso  
in, his own release would be easy. He would need only to say that

he and Panthera could not ~~swing~~ <sup>manage</sup> the ~~job~~ <sup>Commission</sup> alone. Then he would be free of this pair and the Chief Eunuch could whistle for the money advanced. But this feeble clash of good and evil impulses was familiar to Naepor. He knew which always won. He knew he would speak, and he did. After all, fifteen thousand denarii were still to come.

"The Road Commissioner," he said, answering Muso's "Why?", "has a young friend who has been in Egypt. He didn't like Egypt. So Rusco asked if there was an opening in the Tenth. ~~Orfitus~~ Proculinus said there was. And the young fellow has come on to fill it."

"And I'm <sup>Am</sup> being <sup>pushed</sup> ~~kicked~~ out!" Muso cried.

"You <sup>are</sup> ~~re~~ just being promoted," Naepor said. "You ~~re~~ <sup>are</sup> going to Legion headquarters. Young Marcus Seclator Lucianius is assigned there now but as soon as he learns <sup>his way around</sup> ~~the ropes~~ he ~~will~~ <sup>will</sup> replace you here."

"Lucianius!" Muso exclaimed. "I remember him. He's ~~is~~ the Greek brat Marcus Seclator adopted. I'm being <sup>pushed</sup> ~~kicked~~ out for him?"

"You're being promoted," Naepor's thick lips spread in a grin.

"A little, homeless, scabby Greek brat!"

"Not scabby now," Panthera blurted. "He's ... the girls will go wild over him."

"And not homeless!" Helius Naepor grinned more broadly. For the first time he found something in this interview to please him. "He <sup>is</sup> ~~s~~ living at Rusco's villa."

"Rusco's villa?"

"Haven't you called there since you got back? Yes, young Lucianus is living there. You thought of marrying the Rusco daughter, didn't you? Pretty, and a fortune, too!"

Muso cursed through his choice few of the major gods of Rome.

"Ask a little help of Bacchus, too," Naepor said, pouring and still grinning. "He'll dry their throats maybe, if you ask." "What ~~could be worse?~~"

Unsmilingly, Muso called on Bacchus to curse Marcus Seclator, his son Lucianus and Rusco. Especially Rusco.

"The gods helping," Naepor said, "this <sup>commission</sup> ~~deal~~ will give you your chance."

"Chance for what?" Muso demanded blankly.

"To ~~get even.~~ square accounts" (U)

"With ...?"

"With Vedius Rusco."

Muso frowned.

"How? Tell me how?"

"Tell me, too," Panthera said, the sleepy look fading from his ~~olive~~ face.

"Do you mean you don't see how?"

They waited, their eagerness as plain as writing. Muso licked his mouth testing a flavor almost as irresistible as money. Even greed was hardly greater than his wish to <sup>square accounts</sup> ~~get even~~ with the man who had cost him his post in the Eighth Cohort. Panthera's eyes ~~hardened.~~ He was seeing himself revenged for <sup>two</sup> every defeat.

suffered at Vedius Rusco's hands.

(D) Naepor let them wait. He withheld the revelation as he had earlier withheld the ~~bit~~ of news sure to bring Muso into the plot.

D Impulses clashed again. Why, he found himself wondering, did he want to turn this ~~rascally~~ pair loose on Vedius Rusco? Did he hate Vedius as much as that? Hate? He backed away from the word. He had admired Vedius all his life.

All his life he had wanted to be like Vedius Rusco, not merely best with weapons but best also, as Vedius was best, in a way that made men model themselves after him. The Road Commissioner lived by a code of his own making and, seeing this, men said, that is how I want to live! although they seldom did more than make a start.

Helius Naepor never had had a code. No moral signpost of his own erection ever warned against temptation. He always succumbed even though, afterward, always, he was ashamed and despairing until enough wine spread a fog over shame and despair.

Muso's insistent voice broke in.

"How does this hunting down of some baby tie in with Vedius Rusco Philippicus?"

It was the "Philippicus" which decided Naepor. He had never conceded to Vedius Rusco that almost ennobling identification bestowed by great Augustus. It always drowned ~~all~~ admiration in bitterest envy.

"Ask Panthera. He knows."

"Me!" Panthera was startled. "Me! I wish I did."

114  
110

"Didn't Rusco stop you a while back in Sebaste, just as you were starting to have some fun with a pair of Galileans <sup>?</sup> ~~hayseeds?~~" ~~cleopatra?~~

"Yes, but ..."

"The woman of the pair," Naepor said to Muso, "was having a baby. She <sup>will</sup> ~~ll~~ have had it by now. You throw in with us and when we make the hunt Herod is asking for, Panthera will go out of his way to <sup>find</sup> ~~come across~~ the couple, ~~and push them around.~~ And then, you know Vedius Rusco! He <sup>will</sup> ~~ll~~ come quick to help any friend."

"He will! He always does," Muso said. "But how will Panthera ever find a couple of Galileans?"

"He heard Vedius Rusco call the man by name. Joseph! And Panthera learned at Sebaste that this Joseph is a carpenter from Nazareth."

"Joseph, the carpenter?" Panthera's woman spoke over the two palms which were rubbing unguents into each other. She paused long enough to sniff in satisfaction. "Joseph? He was working at the villa the day I was sent away."

"Sent away!" Muso said. "What is she talking about?"

Panthera pulled the woman into his arms. She melted against him.

"Nepte was sold by Vedius Rusco's order," he told Muso.

"I thought Rusco never sold slaves."

"He certainly sold Nepte."

"They didn't want me around," Nepte said with an edge in her voice. "But Joseph ~~has the run of the place.~~ They told

~~no he~~ had been there for weeks, <sup>so I heard,</sup> while the villa was being finished. And the day I was sent off he <sup>had</sup> been called back for something special. The master treated him more like a friend than a workman. They got off together and talked and talked."

Muso looked at Panthera challengingly.

"Is this woman safe?"

"Safe?" Panthera was angry. "Hasn't she already been a help?"

Nepte spoke again, the hardness gone from her voice.

"I'd help you burn the whole villa," she purred. "I'd like to set a torch to it with its Road Commissioner and Bracae inside. And as for Bria and Candace and that precious Deborah!" She drew away from Panthera to make the gesture with which the women of Memphis's brothels welcomed customers.

Muso laughed. They all laughed, <sup>knowing</sup> ~~They all knew~~ the gesture.

"I'll do it!" The Tribune squared his patrician shoulders.

"Let me have my advance now. I'm a little short."

"I <sup>have</sup> ~~ve~~ got two thousand for you," Naepor said, "and you'll have eight more coming."

"This calls for a drink all around," Panthera cried and signalled to Nepte.

She held a palm pleurably under her nose for an instant, then brought goblets.

Helius Naepor looked through heavy eyelids while Panthera poured.

"Luck!" Panthera said and handed him the first drink.

11A

"No!" Helius Naepor said. Even being accorded precedence over a patrician could not make it go down. "I've got a thing to do that can't wait. Have your drinks. I'll have mine later." He hurried out.

I'll have mine later. But I'll have to work up to it.  
I'll have to work hard and think hard about those fifteen thousand denarii before I'll be able to drink to luck with those two.

## CHAPTER NINE (1)

The three Magi were courteously careful to reach the great palace on Jerusalem's western hill promptly at the hour Herod had set. Their gentle code would have called on them to offer every civility even to the falsest daeva from the deepest pit of their Zoroastrian hell. But they had been careful also to come prepared for any bolt the tyrant might loose. They were prepared, ~~for anything he might do,~~ because they knew everything about him.

All the long road from Persia they had forehandedly sifted a great store of information, and after Herod's summons came to them at Jericho they had uncovered more. They knew that the King was an Idumean, a scoffing convert to Judaism, practising it only from expediency. They knew how widely he was hated and where he was hated most. They knew of his ambitions, evidenced by his endless public works rising east, west, north and south in honor of Caesar Augustus. They knew of his ruthless assignments to Gaulish mercenaries. They knew of his fearful disease. They knew of his youthfully ardent marriage to <sup>Miriamme,</sup> ~~Mariamne,~~ and how he had murdered her, and the reasons for the eight calculated marriages which had followed. They knew all the murders, treacheries, lusts and terrors of his ~~thirty-six~~ years of misrule and that he endured his foul sister Tirzah because he believed she alone was completely loyal, although

a certain Soemus had been an indispensable companion for almost half a century. They knew the curious, hopeless task at which Soemus struggled.

The line of camels halted at the huge main gate and Gaspar looked around. He had heard much of this palace, second in magnificence only, Herod claimed, to the Imperial palace of Rome. If bigness meant magnificence, this was magnificent, Gaspar agreed. It was a walled palace and the walls ran seven hundred feet in one direction and almost six hundred in the other, enclosing a whole ten acres.

"Walls of rose and ivory stone!" Gaspar cried. "I never saw more beautiful."

"Wind, rain and sun turn native limestone from its natural white to these colors," Belshazzar explained.

"The effect is lovely indeed," Melchior said.

None of them mentioned fairer palaces left behind in Persia.

The big gates opened and the ~~prince~~ Chief Eunuch came mincing out and knelt in respectful welcome, and the camels knelt, and the Magi and their dozen retainers dismounted, and trumpets blew. A full hundred trumpets belled harsh sound up through the golden dancing motes filed off the whirling wheel of the noonday sun. An honor guard of two hundred clanking mercenaries ranged up to act as escort. A guard, besides honoring the party, was always useful in watching for an assassin who might use innocent arrivals for cover.

Tall in their jeweled turbans, the Magi went through the gates and Gaspar flashed a delighted look at his companions.

Enclosed by cloistered courts, lay gardens and parklike groves and rippling brooks and winding walks bordered by rare flowers, shrubs and trees. Quiet pools reflected statues of Augustus, and his empress, Livia, and Tiberius, his undoubted successor now that Drusus was dead, and the slain <sup>Miriamme</sup> Mariamne, as well as half a hundred ones whom Herod found it expedient to honor. These last rose and fell, Gaspar had heard. When one favorite fell, his bronze was melted so that a new one might go up.

Flanked by the honor guard, the three and their retainers walked into a broad ~~the~~ corridor ~~and~~ and through a lofty ante-chamber into the crimson and jet audience hall while the trumpets went on blowing.

Eunuchs were kneeling to indicate the silver seats set in readiness on a deep white carpet close to the golden dais, ringed by candles, which was in readiness for Herod. The Magi settled themselves so as to be comfortable through what was sure to be a long wait. They did, indeed, know everything about Herod.

Bowing in apology for the absence of his master, the Chief Eunuch could not hide a look of worry as he inspected the celebrated guests.

"He <sup>is</sup> ~~is~~ afraid our robes and jewels may make Herod's seem poor," Gaspar said. He was the youngest Magus. He was a beardless shining youth, a student of the other two until study had made him almost their equal and worthy of sharing the star-led journey into Judea. He came from Kashan.

"I should have thought of that," Melchior murmured regretfully. Their clothing was, <sup>indeed</sup> ~~for a fact~~, priceless as well

L20  
1157

as enviably bright. He was the oldest Magus. He was small and frail with face and hands of that ivory translucence which sometimes marks an ascetic of great age. He came from Savah.

"But it is a compliment to a king to wear our best," Belshazzar said. He was ~~the~~ middle-aged ~~Magus~~. He was deep-chested and deep-voiced with a big black beard which looked as though it had just met a whirlwind. Two tame nightingales sat upon his shoulders. He came from Pethor, not far from Ur where Abraham was born. His grandfather, sixteen times removed, had been Balaam.

The Chief Eunuch, out of a corner of his darting eyes, caught movement on either side and gestured angrily. Twenty, thirty, forty mercenaries clanked to space themselves and their javelins along the marble floor and bully back the fascinated crowd pressing in on the majestic three. Back, back, back from horizontal javelins stumbled clients, courtiers, officers, servants, slaves, friends -- But no! Herod had no friends. Back, back, back stumbled the greedy, the glib, the protesting, the worried, the hopeful, the humble, the fearful, the expectant-- ~~All~~ ~~pack~~ who did not dare stay away from Herod's audience hall if they could bribe their way in.

Behind the javelins <sup>these</sup> ~~the pack~~ continued to watch the Magi while minutes dragged on, ten, fifteen, a half hour, three-quarters.

"The King of Chaldea," Belshazzar said, at no pains to keep his voice down, "met us outside his palace. How long do we wait for this creature of Rome?"

Belshazzar had inherited a contempt for princes from his sixteen-times-removed grandfather. Balaam had been brought, by a prince at least as great as Herod, all the way from the ~~pressed toward the Promised land, after years in the wilderness~~ Euphrates to curse the Israelites, but had blessed them instead, being advised by the gifted ass on which he rode.

"I don't mind," Gaspar said, "I am learning something every moment."

"Herod is almost here," Melchior murmured although nothing around them gave any evidence of this. His right hand rose in the air palm up, as though receiving something. "I now speak as your Ancient!" His voice was still soft but his glance commanded. "Think of home. Think of Ormazd and of the Holy Spirit which is his other self. Think of nothing that concerns our coming into Judea. A man is with Herod. His mind touched mine. Block it from yours by thinking as I have told you."

Gaspar's shining face grew remote.

"And you, oh Ancient?" Belshazzar ventured out of his beard before he, too, did as he had been told.

"Such men have tried to enter my mind before," Melchior murmured, ~~unworried.~~

o-o-o

Trumpets blew, a forest of them. The harsh peals echoed off the lofty roof and were lost in the clanging of a hundred cymbals, rising and falling like yellow shields, and in the rolling thunder of a hundred drums. From the rear of the hall eight black slaves in orange livery entered as though walking

on eggs. They bore a purple litter on which reclined a gasping, blotched, bloated ~~monstrosity~~ <sup>old man</sup> over whose handsome enough apparel the Chief Eunuch sighed in relief before he fell on his face, along with all those crowded behind the javelins, while from all sides choked voices cried, "Hail, Herod!"

Only the mercenaries on the watch for assassins, and the Magi, did not fall. The Magi merely rose politely.

The litter halted beside the dais and Herod glared over a marble floor lumpy with heads, half-bald, wholly bald, and with hair of every color including courtesan green, and an occasional pair of quivering humped-up buttocks; then he looked toward the silver seats.

Belshazzar ~~bent in a brief bow~~ <sup>bowed</sup>, Melchior inclined his head in a measured benediction, Gaspar, his bright face intent, smiled with such friendliness that, to the amazement of the slowly rising courtiers, ~~the gasping, bloated old man~~ <sup>Herod</sup> gave a half-smile back.

"Gently! Gently!" the Chief Eunuch hissed to the bearers. He had risen and raced over to direct the lowering of the litter. It came to rest on the dais and the Chief Eunuch clicked his teeth in relief.

"And now again! Gently!"

One bearer worked his hands lightly under Herod's bulging shoulders. A second worked his under the small of Herod's back. Numbers Three and Four got under the huge rump, Five and Six under the doughy legs. At another "Gently!" all lifted, and Seven pulled the litter clear while Eight made sure nothing

snagged. The Six poised their burden over the throne. It was less a throne than a second, golden litter full of cushions and deep soft pads. At another tense "Gently!" the bearers lowered carefully and slid their hands away as Herod's weight crushed into the cushions.

Then all eight drew back and eyed the Chief Eunuch, mutely asking for only a nod of approval, their faces bleak lest approval be withheld, their noses turned as far as they dared from the stench which poured through Herod's swollen lips.

From the waiting audience, as the Chief Eunuch finally nodded, a deep sigh arose, perhaps of relief, perhaps of hope deferred.

A slave, holding an enormous tray heaped with meats, roasted chicken, breads, cakes, sweetmeats, cheeses and fresh and dried fruits, hurried into position at the foot of the throne, prepared to satisfy the ravenous hunger which was a symptom of Herod's disease.

Propped among his cushions, the tyrant gasped until his swollen throat pulsed, like a frog's. For one brief moment his finger moved and an old man with a ravaged face bent over the throne and met the question in the rheumy eyes. This was Soemus, once a roving Ishmaelite, who had joined his fortune with Herod's when both were very young.

"No, Herod," he said in a low flat voice, "I have not found a new one. I have looked at many but none resembles her."

The Magi exchanged glances at this proof of the tale they had heard, that day after week after month after year, by the

King's orders, Soemus searched for one who looked like the murdered murdered  
 Miriamme <sup>SOEMUS</sup> Mariamme. He was dedicated to the search for he had loved her too, and now, long after her death, his consolation was to find, now and then, a girl who resembled her, but so far Herod was always unsatisfied, rejecting each one.

Herod's wrinkled lids drooped in disappointment and he sighed. Then, as though an inward fire had been refueled, he stiffened and willed himself to the interrogation of the Magi. His temporarily clear mind had been planning this since, having learned that Wise Men from Persia were seeking a child born King of the Jews, he had counselled with the High Priest Joazor and half a dozen former High Priests, ~~for he displaced High Priests on any whim.~~

In the periods when his mind cleared, Herod's will was as strong as ever. The trouble was that the mind seldom cleared. After years of driving, it was rusting away. As a boyish tetrarch of Galilee, his mind and will had overcome the whole Sanhedrin. Later mind and will had raised him to the kingship of all Judea and had held him there, poised on no more than the feathery breath of a Roman overlord. But now he was old, he was sick, and they failed him often.

He was not very old, he was only sixty-nine, but he was very sick and his ~~feul~~ disease left him capable of purposeful effort only by fits and starts. Between times the rust thickened.

His terrorized, watchful court knew when the mind rusted. The grey flesh, the vacant eye, the moaning misery of the unmentionable disease, the dis-interest in pomp, fleshpots and women,

Page

the commands forgotten almost before they had been completed, all told them. Sometimes desperate watchers wondered if their moment had not come, but just when they might have raised a dagger or thrown a strangler's cord, the will, refueled, leaped again for a while.

It was leaping now. The pendulous flesh was less grey, the eye was sharp, the misery of illness was defied, sixty-nine years were defied, death was defied.

A hunchback approached the golden throne. He was richly dressed and his hands were heavy with jeweled rings. Beneath a crest of silky brown hair and a wide bloodless forehead, his deep-socketed eyes were probing as he frowned toward the Magi.

Geber, the hunchback, was one of only <sup>six</sup> ~~fifteen~~ persons to whom Herod granted the privilege of close approach, <sup>Excluding the</sup> ~~the eight~~ and other personal slaves; for litter-bearers/and the tray-slave possessed it; for each of them, hostages more precious than their own lives had been found. Tirzah, Herod's sister, had it. The others were Joazor, the High Priest, the Chief Eunuch, the <sup>commander</sup> ~~leader~~ of all the mercenaries, and Always, of course, Soemus.

As the hunchback availed himself of his privilege, now, Tirzah jealously claimed it also. Once plumply pleasing to three husbands, Tirzah in these days was so shrunken that wattles swung from her cheeks and her flat breasts hung like empty water skins. Close beside her, Soemus motioned the Chief Eunuch.

"Another cushion," he whispered.

"He <sup>cannot</sup> ~~can't~~ sit up, and it's almost as bad when he lies flat," Gaspar said in pity. "Halfway is how they try to keep him." →  
next page

One of Herod's bloated fingers moved. Any larger movement brought pain, even speech brought pain, so that the finger had become an instrument of command, denial, approval, anger, instruction, interrogation. Even to lift his eyelids was painful. They remained closed, but the finger moved and Soemus and the hunchback watched it. Better than anyone else, Soemus could read the digital abracadabra, but this day the hunchback knew he would be involved in the command.

"The Magi!" Soemus said in his flat voice.

The hunchback scowled on the Chief Eunuch and the latter minced anxiously to the three who still stood wearing their several airs of indifferent obeisance, mild benediction and friendliness.

The all-purpose finger moved again and Soemus beckoned the tray and Herod's eye-lids opened. The slave moved a hand toward the bread but the finger said "No!" The slave poised a carving knife over the baked chicken. The finger said, "Yes!" and the slave carved a ~~thick~~ slice and fed it into the ravenous mouth.

"Please!" the Chief Eunuch whispered to the Magi.

"Please! Hurry!"

"We come, we come," Belshazzar said indulgently and stepped aside to let Melchior go first and then followed and was followed by Gaspar.

Across the great room the High Priest Joazor pushed past the javelin barrier with an air of importance quite justified by his apparel. The splendor of this had not lessened in almost

(next page)

fifteen hundred years since Moses had first decreed it for Aaron -- the tall, white turban; the immaculate linen coat with hem full of alternating golden bells and woven scarlet, purple and blue pomegranates, a bell, a pomegranate and then a bell all around; the Breastplate of Judgment inset with four rows of precious stones, ruby, yellow topaz and red carbuncle, then emerald, sapphire and diamond, then orange jacinth, agate and amethyst, then pink beryl, many-colored onyx and opalescent jasper, each stone engraved with the name of one of the Twelve Tribes. The costume justified Joazor's air of importance. It marked him as one who stood second to none in all Judea. It should have proclaimed him great. But to tell the truth he was not great at all.

In Herod's day the High Priest's apparel was still great but the man inside was Herod's slave. Herod had made Joazor and a flick of Herod's finger could unmake him. No High Priest held office except at Herod's pleasure. One had held it only a day.

~~And~~ <sup>and</sup> having reached Herod's dais, in the same moment as the Magi, white-bearded Joazor stood ~~slavishly~~ awaiting permission to speak. He seemed almost awaiting permission to breathe.

Herod turned upon an elbow. The white meat was devoured and when his finger waggled, the slave of the tray fed a piece of cheese into the mouth.

The finger commanded the High Priest. Better than anyone else, Soemus could interpret the finger's gestures but Joazor did <sup>quite</sup> pretty well from terror. Now, in obedient understanding, he bowed lower than any High Priest ever had bowed

SUPERASE BOND

25% COTTON FIBRE

+28

D before Herod's day, and beckoned to the Magi.

They did not move or bow. They were already close enough to hear and be heard.

"You may approach," the High Priest said huskily but not Belshazzar nor Melchior nor Gaspar moved and Joazor began to speak.

He spoke of the wonders of the night when the great light had shone over Bethlehem and of all the wondrous rumors which had gained strength since then, especially the one concerning the birth of a Messiah as foretold by prophets through many generations.

"And Herod asks," he ended, "whether it is true that you have come seeking this Messiah and if so whether you have found him and where."

Geber, the hunchback scrambled past the nine slaves and spoke directly into Herod's ear.

"Of course it is true," he said furiously. "And of course they have found him. I cannot reach the mind of any of the three but of course they know where he is." He spun back to Melchior. "Where?"

"We, also, wish to know where," Melchior murmured.

"But you have had a sign!" the hunchback protested, as the High Priest stepped submissively aside. "You have come all the way from Persia because you have had a sign."

"Yes, we have had a sign."

"But - but - "

*It muffled* Rales filled *clattered in* Herod's chest ~~with a muffled clatter~~ and

~~Rales filled Herod's chest with a muffled clatter and~~

the slave filled Herod's mouth with more cheese as the all-purpose finger commanded haste.

"I have told Herod," the hunchback cried desperately, "that there is nothing in heaven or under it that you do not know."

"Gebor, the son of Heth, is right in part," Melchior murmured, and such familiarity with his name and his father's name made the hunchback shiver.

He reminded himself that the Magi had been in Jericho easily long enough for their spies to learn such names and more. Did not he, himself, use spies? But the reminder did not ~~ease~~ console him. He used also a greater power and he had not needed to see the Magi to be satisfied that they used one, too.

Geber covered his fear with hard defiance.

"Right in part?" he challenged Melchior.

"There is little, indeed nothing, in heaven or under it that I may not know if Ormazd permits," Melchior murmured. "But only if Ormazd permits."

"Well," Geber said craftily, "tell Herod what Ormazd does permit."

"Two years ago, Magi and many others saw a great light filling the sky," Melchior said.

"Come to the point!" Geber said. "Speak of the second light, the one seen lately."

"Exactly eleven nights ago!" Melchior murmured. "And like the first it was a sign."

"Of what?"

"Among us," Melchior murmured, "darkness is an omen of

evil. ~~Contrarily~~ a great light is an omen of good. By the great light of two years ago we had forewarning that a mighty king would be born in the Westland."

"And being in Persia, the Westland had to be Judea!" Geber nodded to Herod. "Just as I said."

"Or in Syria, Egypt, Cappadocia, Mauretania ..." Melchior murmured. "The sign told us the Westland, but not where in the Westland."

"Nevertheless," Geber said sharply, "just a little while ago you did set out for Judea."

"We have been five months on the road."

"But always aiming for Judea," Geber insisted. "Why?"

"Later we were shown other signs."

"And the later signs brought you here," Geber pressed.

"I and my companions still await a last sign," Melchior said quietly.

"You mean one which will say exactly where this King, if he really has been born, is hidden?"

"A Messiah does not hide," Melchior murmured, "although it may be that he withholds himself."

The hunchback was bursting with fury.

"But you cannot tell Herod where he may be?"

"Ormazd has not made the place known to us."

"Joazor says all prophecies put the place in Bethlehem."

"Ormazd has not made the place known to us," Melchior repeated.

"But have you opened your mind to Ormazd?"

" "I? Open my mind to Ormazd?" The Ancient was gently rebuking. "Ormazd will do the opening in his own time, whether my mind wills to open or not." He smiled at Geber. "It is only to men that a Magus is able to open his mind ... or close it."

The hunchback colored. "Well then," he said quickly, "I <sup>know</sup> am sure you will gladly share with Herod the knowledge you gain when Ormazd does open your mind?"

"Gladly, if Ormazd wills."

"In Judea," Geber said coldly, "it is Herod who wills, Magus! And you are in Judea."

"All men know the power of Herod the Great," Melchior said calmly. "However, in Persia we are accustomed to think always of Ormazd."

Belshazzar had stiffened and Gaspar had flushed and Melchior turned to them repeating in veiled warning, "We think always of Ormazd."

Gaspar's shining face again became remote. Belshazzar's beard became a mask. Even the nightingales on his shoulder, which had been hopping about with interest, grew still.

Herod's finger waggled and Soemus bent close. Then he addressed the wise men. Although no more a Jew than his master, Soemus put reverence into his low, flat voice.

"Herod asks," he said, "that you go and search diligently for the young child; and when you have found him, bring him word again, that he may come and worship ~~him~~ also."

Soemus looked at the Chief Eunuch who made a sign that the interview was over.

Page  
Belshazzar made no more of a bow than he had made at Herod's entrance. Gaspar gave a farewell look of pity. Melchior repeated his benediction. Herod saw nothing of what any of them did. He had closed his eyes.

But as the three moved toward the silver chairs to pick up their attendants, the tyrant roused. He wagged a finger for a cake and then for Soemus who went quickly after the Wise Men.

"Herod says he will send a messenger with you. When the awaited sign tells you where this Messiah may be found, tell the messenger. Then he will hurry to Herod and Herod will hurry with his homage."

"And the messenger," Melchior murmured, "is Geber."

Soemus looked surprised, and Geber, who had joined them, shivered again.

As the Magi walked calmly past the fence of javelins, the hunchback kept close to Melchior. The fury which had marked him had faded. His face was drawn and cold.

Outside the gates where the camels waited, a beggar stood, a thin, dirty man wearing only a ragged burlap loincloth.

"Do you know that man?" Melchior asked the hunchback.

Geber ~~looked and~~ closed one of his heavily ringed hands upon his rich cloak of Herodian <sup>purple,</sup> drawing it aside. "No!" he said.

"Certainly not."

D "You will," Melchior said. "~~I think~~ you may know him well."

o-o-o

Back among his cushions, Herod's eyes grew vacant,

his flesh grey, his lips slack, and the misery of his sickness and of age and, perhaps, of the torment of the ghosts of his slain, overwhelmed him. The slave was offering fruit; the finger a second ago had demanded fruit. But Herod no longer had the strength to respond even to his ravenous hunger. Inert, the ~~glutted beast lay torpid once more.~~ His mind had stopped again and was rusting.

GILBERT  
SUPERASE BOND  
25% COTTON FIBRE

## CHAPTER TEN - (11)

Without the blemish of his crooked back, Geber might have been a High Priest, bolder than the slavish Joazor, and Herod's implacable enemy. His blood line was right for so great a role. On his mother's side he was a prince of Israel, tracing back to that King Zedekiah destroyed by Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar who razed Jerusalem and carried the Jews into exile. On his father's side he was descended from Zadok, High Priest under Solomon, and his great-grandfather and grandfather themselves had been High Priests. His father was even now the chief of one of the Temple divisions, and his four brothers were senior priests. But all these had been men without blemish, as the Code of Priests required.

Father and brothers had known from the first that blemished Geber could not follow the family tradition. Geber himself had known it early, but he had not been unhappy in the groves and gardens of his father's home, busy with his ~~scrolls and~~ studies. Mystically devout, he had searched out holy truths and had talked much with his brothers. Then his world had been turned ~~upside down~~ topsy-turvy. Through the conniving of an uncle he had been ordered to court. A crooked back would not do for a priest, but it was fine for a jester.

Thrown into the glittering arena of the court, the

had  
gentleness of the delicate boy/changed to fury. In bitter revenge,  
he had turned his strange gift, of which he was increasingly aware,  
to Herod's purposes. In time he was elevated to a place among  
the tyrant's intimates. He found himself ranking below only Tirzah  
and Soemus.

Herod indeed trusted Geber, the hunchback, to have  
sent him with the Wise Men to Jericho.

O-O-O

There was no other city like Jericho near which the Magi,  
in their stately camp, awaited the last sign. It had been a  
spot of Canaanite beauty when Joshua's trumpets cracked its walls.  
The pupils of Elisha had found it perfect, barring bitter water,  
but his miracle sweetened that. Babylonian warriors had envied  
what they saw as their scythed chariots mowed through Zedekiah's  
fleeing army. Pompey had rested amid its luxury before his pro-  
fane treasure hunt in the Holy of Holies.

Close to the tumbling Jordan, it escaped the cold which  
sometimes briefly blanketed with snow the golden Temple high in  
Jerusalem. And other heights, Nebo and Pisgah, ~~indeed~~ the whole  
mountain range of Abarim, turned aside the eastern summer winds  
which scorched the rest of Judea. Its abundant fruits always  
ripened earliest; grapes, apricots, figs, dates, citrons, black  
and white mulberries. And now Herod had rebuilt the city and came  
often for its baths which, although not healing to his <sup>body</sup> ~~scars~~ like  
Callirhoe's sulphur pools, were a comfort to his brittle, aching  
bones. For his amusement he had built a theatre.

"And of course," Geber, the hunchback, said to Melchior,

"the big Fortress of Herodium. Half a cohort of the Tenth is stationed here and four hundred Balearic slingers."

Wherever Herod built a palace to live in, he had to build a fortress in order to feel safe.

After only a few hours with the Magi, the hunchback had felt safe. He shivered no more. The feverish tainted years with Herod fell away, his fury fell away, in these kind presences.

He enjoyed their calm discussions; and Gaspar's ceaseless interest in the whole wide world of thought and action stirred a wistful nostalgia. How wonderful to be as free from guile as this young saint! Gaspar was always bringing in fresh subjects for talk and Geber, in memory, went back to his own gentle youth and the talks with his brothers in their father's garden. His position in Herod's court had provided leisure, wealth, fine apparel, dainty food, and women. But none of these had been as comforting as this old resource, recovered now, of discussion and debate.

"I have learned two great things!" Gaspar cried coming into the council tent on the second evening, and Geber smiled in anticipation. He and Belshazzar sat alone. Melchior, a little earlier, had withdrawn himself.

"And what are the great things?" Belshazzar asked, pretending awe at such swift accumulation of knowledge.

"Well!" Gaspar said. "We all know, of course, that Sargos who was king of Babylon twenty-five hundred years ago was born while his mother hid from enemies, and was set afloat on the Euphrates in a bulrush boat to save his life, and was rescued and protected until he was old enough to lead his people ..."

527  
200next  
page

"And now," Belshazzar smiled, stroking first one and then the other of his nightingales, "you have learned that Moses who led these Children of Israel fifteen hundred or so years ago also was a bulrush baby, but in Egypt?"

"I might have known it would be old to you," Gaspar said.

"Old but more than great!" Belshazzar said. "Such parallels prove that Ormazd uses the same wonders to teach people everywhere."

"But your Ormazd had nothing to do with our Moses!" Geber protested. "It was our Lord who saved Moses and gave him the leadership of our people."

"Come, come!" Belshazzar said, much as the day before he had said, 'We come, we come!' "Isn't it true that you Children of Israel say there is but one God?"

"What else? 'Who is God, save the Lord?'"

"Well, isn't there still but one even though you call him Lord and we call him Ormazd?"

Here was an invitation to admit that Hebrews only shared, and with Gentiles, a possession which they jealously claimed for their own. Geber swallowed. He had never before considered such a possibility and it was hard, indeed, to accept.

"And what is the second great thing you have learned?" Belshazzar asked, turning to Gaspar. But Gaspar whispered, "Later!"

Ivory Melchior, frail but erect, had come from the council tent's inner room. He walked to the tent door and looked out. Judea's sun was suspended only a little above the horizon, a soft,

next page

GILBERT  
SUPERASE BOND

rosy ball wrapped with narrow grey clouds like swaddling bands.

A mile or so to the north Jericho's walls rose, and inside them, the towers of Herod's palace lifted and to the south stood the thick battlements of Herod's fortress filled with Roman swords and Balearic slings. In front of Jericho the ribbon of the Jerusalem road unwound but the Ancient kept his gaze on another road, hardly more than a donkey track, that wriggled through desert, crooked gulches and deep canyons toward distant, invisible Bethlehem.

D Melchior beckoned and the camel master trotted from among yellow tents that crouched amid rocks silvered by the ~~twi-~~<sup>waning</sup> light, and Belshazzar and Gaspar leaped up.

"Now?" Gaspar cried.

"Now?" Belshazzar cried, *his black beard aflow.*

D "Now!" Melchior said. They need wait no longer. The Ancient, at last, knew where, ~~exactly where~~, they might see the great one whose appearance they had awaited so long.

"We shall see the King this night," he said, his ivory face showing a little color.

"And worship him!" Gaspar cried.

"Tonight!" Belshazzar cried, ~~his black beard aflow.~~

"On the twelfth night after the birth," Melchior murmured. The camel master came in.

(D) "Make our ~~three~~ best mounts ready," Melchior said, ~~and~~ <sup>he</sup> smiled on Geber. "And an extra mount."

The camel master waited.

Melchior pointed to three carefully-corded packs against

max  
page

the tent wall.

"Put those on three baggage camels," he said, "and our best driver in charge, ~~of them~~."

"Your best driver is here and already in charge, Ancient," the camel master said. His leathery face was glowing.

o-o-o

Strapping the three packs to the three baggage camels, the camel master was almost choked with pride. He was a plain man of the desert, but he had served Melchior over many years and he shared a secret known in full to only three other men in the world. Now the secret would soon be revealed to the one for whom it was intended.

Oh, the whole caravan knew part of it! All the men had used their ears. All had picked up a bit here, a bit there. A baby, a prince not long in the world, was to receive the gifts.

But who else beside the Magi themselves knew the whole secret of the gifts: the curved perfection of every ~~last~~ jar, the delicate whorl of every ~~last~~ ornament, the gleam and flash of every ~~last~~ jewel? Who, but the one man who alone had put every ~~last~~ gift into the three packs and now was loading them?

Gold and frankincense and myrrh. The words made a song, Gaspar had said one time as he watched the camel master at the packing.

Of course the gifts were not ~~just~~ <sup>merely</sup> gold and frankincense and myrrh. The gold was not merely chunks of gold, or dust or bars or coins. The gold was in ornaments which, if only because of the time and skill required for their making, were priceless.

3 cannot find this in the text

D  
Next page

Gold thread bewilderingly woven through garments which, even without the thread, would have been <sup>worth</sup> a Magi's ransom. ~~And~~ amulets whose history would have made them, too, a ransom, even if they had been made out of roadside stone. ~~And~~ bracelets, necklaces and many other ornaments.

"Gold to crown a mighty king," Gaspar had said.

And the frankincense was not merely a fragrant solid, crushed from ~~the~~ winged seeds, and ~~the~~ <sup>a</sup> three-celled fruit, ~~of this~~ ~~or that~~ shrub, and enriched with its own lightly rising oil. Its perfume not only filled precious jars. It poured from linens and silks so fine that one touched them again to make sure they ~~were~~ <sup>were</sup> and not shadows, ~~were there.~~

"Frankincense," Gaspar had said, "for the worship of the true Messiah whose name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor - - the Prince of Peace."

And the myrrh was not simply so ~~and so~~ much pungent amber-colored stuff, darkly glowing with so ~~and so~~ much rockrose resin. Like the frankincense, it was stored in jars and vases on which master workmen had labored a lifetime.

Gaspar had lifted a jar to his nostrils.

"Myrrh for a great healer," he had said gravely. He had not added a thing which, back in Persia, the camel driver often had heard said of myrrh, that the bitter perfume prefigured tragic death.

The camel master puzzled over the saying a little as he finished strapping the last carefully corded pack on the last camel.

He almost forgot to order the beast intended for Geber.

Geber realized what had come to pass. He realized also that he ought at once to demand the information newly come to the Ancient, and hurry it to Herod. Herod's command had been imperative. Moreover, Geber knew the penalty for disobedience, <sup>3</sup> or rather, and worse, he did not know the penalty except that it would be dreadful.

Only two days earlier he would have tried to reach Melchior's mind and obtain the information. Now he knew better than to try. He opened his mouth to ask and then he closed his mouth. Who was he, to ask what this Ancient did not freely offer? He stood and waited in silence.

Melchior went to his own tent and Gaspar went to his and Belshazzar went to his. But first Belshazzar took the nightingales off his shoulders onto his big hairy wrist and carried them to a swinging perch and spoke softly until they sat quietly there.

Geber waited and all three men came back dressed in white. Even their shoes were of white leather and all wore immaculate turbans and Melchior's was taller, even, than the turban of the High Priest Joazor.

Melchior nodded and Geber, in his ~~own~~ cloak of Herodian purple, followed the others to four white camels, which knelt and the four men mounted. The camel master rode a dun-colored fifth and behind him, on lead ropes, were three more camels, carrying the three carefully corded packs. Melchior put his beast into an easy amble along the donkey track and soon ~~all~~ the animals were <sup>moving</sup> ~~footing~~ it through a canyon so deep that even their bobbing hammer-heads did not show over the rims.

(D) The sun set and darkness fell, or would have fallen <sup>were spreading</sup> except that uncounted stars ~~were on hand to spread~~ over bushes, rocks, riders and animals and, ~~indeed, over~~ all the desert landscape, a soft catholic luminosity which blended them into one vast, shadowy whole.

"Watch for a big rock like a thumb," Melchior said. "We turn at the Stone of Bohan."

(D) In silence, so skillfully did the camels set down their broad feet, they slipped through more canyons and finally they ~~did~~ come to the mark which reminded new generations of the long-forgotten thing done by Bohan, Reuben's son, when the Tribes <sup>first came</sup> ~~came out of~~ ~~the Wilderness.~~ <sup>into the Promised Land.</sup>

Now the track angled southerly and the camels ghosted through the starlight, and scrambled out of one canyon and into another, and across a narrow stream made turbulent by winter rains, and across another, and <sup>then</sup> ~~then~~ they came to the Valley of Trouble where Joshua stoned the thief, Achan.

(D) A big star had appeared in the East. The camels halted and then, hardly visible under a spreading terebinth <sup>tree</sup>, a man appeared.

He was the thin, dirty beggar who had stood outside Herod's audience hall. He still wore only a loincloth.

"The Lord our God is one Lord," the beggar said and touched hand to head and heart.

"Ormazd is god of all," Melchior murmured.

Melchior turned to Geber.

"Now you must make your choice," he said. "Will you

take the word back to Herod?"

Out from Jericho, down the deep canyons, past the stone of Bohan, over the turbulent streams, through the Valley of Trouble, and finally to the terebinth tree, this question had been boiling in Geber, far below the surface of his newly recaptured serenity and peace. The Magi, he had tried to believe all along the starlit way, would make the decision. Kind, gracious, infinitely wise, they would tell him what he should do.

He had been prepared to obey, but this ---

"You mean no one will stop me if I go back?" The hunchback's words rattled like stones down a cliff.

"No one."

The two words echoed in a long silence.

"Do you trust Herod so much?" Geber whispered at last. "He said he wished only to worship, but do you believe that?"

"I said I would tell you when the sign came," Melchior said. "That was our understanding, Herod's and mine."

"Oh, so that's it!" Geber screamed. "You will make me to blame. If I go back and tell, the ~~fault will be~~ <sup>evil is mine.</sup> mine!"

Again Melchior and the other two were silent. Geber covered his face with his hands.

This was worse than any of the old nightmares. The fever and the <sup>Palace</sup> fury of the ~~boiled~~ all around him. He lifted a drenched face to the sky. He dropped it into his hands again.

"But if I do not go back to Herod, what becomes of me?" he asked in a muffled voice.

"Only Ormazd can give the final answer to that question!"

(1)

(D)

P. 139

Melchior's white turban bent toward the beggar. "But Peleg here is one you can trust."

The hunchback crouched and trembled on his mount, but he forced the beast to kneel and climbed off.

"That's right," Peleg said. "Wherever you go, you'll be better off walking."

Melchior touched his camel and started on, and Belshazzar followed, and Gaspar.

Geber stared after them. He was still shaking but now it was from cold. The fever and fury ~~which had boiled around him~~ were gone. There ~~was~~ <sup>were</sup> only the piercing desert cold and the crystal purity of starlight. ¶ The new star seemed to grow brighter all the time.

He felt the hand of his tattered companion. Peleg was nodding toward the disappearing camels.

"You'll see them again," he said in the voice of a friend.

o-o-o

The four riders pressed on, and came out of another canyon, and now the big star's rays shone down more brightly ahead.

"There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel," Melchior said. And the star went before them, or at any rate seemed to go before them, and in a little

they came upon four shepherds.

One was playing softly on his pipes as he leaned on the windless side of a rock and the others rose from where they had been drowsing at his feet. One of the others was a quiet man and

one was an excitable man and one wore a yellow beard like half of a harvest moon. All carried heavy crooks and wallets and wore red-dyed sheepskins.

"I am Esrom," the piper said, "and this is Obed and this is Zorobabal and ..."

"... and I am Beor," Yellow-beard said, swinging toward Melchior.

"We thought you might like to have us along," Esrom said and waved his pipes in the direction of the Magis's travel, ~~gesture~~ <sup>gesture</sup> indicating the eagerness of the four to make themselves helpful, ~~no matter what the need might be.~~

"You had best all come up on the camels," Melchior said. "It must still be quite a way."

The camel driver spoke and Geber's animal knelt and the baggage animals knelt and the shepherds mounted and all started off again. White shreds began to drift down.

"I suppose," Gaspar said, urging his camel close so that he could speak to Esrom, "That this is snow."

"We don't have it often," Esrom said apologetically.

"It makes the night cold."

"Here! Take my sheepskin," Beor said.

<sup>No! No! I don't mind it</sup>  
~~"I can stand a little cold," Gaspar protested.~~

Up ahead Melchior hunched his shoulders and shivered.

Beor was over in a flash, unbelting his sheepskin which was really two sewn together.

"Here!" He wrapped the warm thickness around the frail old man.

it was  
 the  
 the  
 the

(D)

Page 141

"But you will be cold yourself," Melchior protested. Beor, leaning over, tucked the pelt under Melchior's meager legs and close around his ivory ears. "Look!" Melchior insisted, "You're bare except for a loincloth!"

"I've gone bare through a ~~lot~~ worse than this <sup>little</sup> ~~drib and drab,~~" Beor <sup>said and</sup> laughed. "Besides, I wouldn't feel warm if you were shivering."

"That which is pleasant to thyself, that do to thy neighbor," Belshazzar said, looking from Beor to Gaspar.

"But that is the other side of the second great thing I learned today," Gaspar cried. "It is the saying of Hillel, the most famous Jewish teacher in Jerusalem, but you've <sup>have</sup> got it roundabout. As I heard it, it went, 'What is unpleasant to thyself, that do not do to thy neighbor.' ~~It is Hillel's latest.~~ Do you know Hillel?"

"Who doesn't know Hillel!" Belshazzar said. "His sayings are getting into the very bones of <sup>and spreading from</sup> the Jews ~~and of many more besides.~~ <sup>this land to others.</sup> And I never hear one of them," he added honestly, "without wishing I had said it first." He nodded enthusiastically. "What Hillel means, I take it, is that men should live like neighbors -- like brothers -- and what he means he says well; although a day may come when an even greater one will say it better."

The star kept shining, brighter and brighter ahead, and Bethlehem, hugging its hill, appeared to the left. The travellers got along, hurrying now, but their way did not lead into the town. It led through newly sown fields and then dipped down into another canyon, ~~but~~ not a steep one like those near Jericho. It was a

shallow ravine through which they ghosted until, finally, the star's glowing light fell on a small, nearly hidden house with a lamp in the single window. ~~And~~ the Magi halted their camels and rejoiced among themselves.

The search which they had ~~first~~ set about two years before, and which they had pressed hard for these last five months, was finished. They dismounted before the lighted window and so did the others, the camel driver gathering into one fist the lead ropes of the baggage animals.

In the shadowy moonlight most of the visitors, in their several ways, made ready. Beor's great forearm swabbed his uncovered chest to dry off the melted snow. Zorobabal ran his hands through his thick wet hair. Obed kicked a sandal to get rid of a clot of mud. Gaspar shook his white robe so that it hung straight and beautiful. Belshazzar optimistically gave his wild beard a finger-combing. Only Esrom and Melchior did not try to improve their appearance but Esrom, like a host, gestured toward the door and Melchior, like a patriarch entering among his people, went ahead and knocked.

Joseph opened the door, his tall, strong body outlined by the lamp ~~in the room~~ behind him. Over his shoulder peered the hooded head and lively face of Elizabeth.

"Where is he who was born King of the Jews?" Melchior asked.

Joseph bent forward to identify the speaker.

"We have seen his star in the east," Belshazzar said.

"We have come to worship him," Gaspar added.

Page  
"Come in," Joseph said, and Melchior sighed. He had not always been quite sure that his old bones would bear him to the end. <sup>The</sup> ~~His~~ sigh told his relief and gratitude. He gestured to the camel master; ~~and~~ then the Magi and the shepherds passed indoors.

The camel master, tugging at the packs out in the windy darkness, thought that this was a strange place to find a princeling. But as he quietly went in and ~~came out~~ <sup>delivering the</sup> ~~and went in and came out~~ ~~and went in, with the three~~ packs, he saw plainly that the others did not feel so. The room was very quiet and full of a soft light which glimmered on the rough heads of the shepherds, and on the three tall turbans. ~~Only~~ <sup>the</sup> turbans were not so majestically tall as usual.

Everyone was kneeling.

O-O-O

The snow had ended when the Magi and the shepherds and Joseph came out into the night again.

Melchior would not put on Beor's sheepskin.

"I can spare it," Beor said.

"The air is as soft now as Savah's," Melchior murmured. From his high perch on his camel he held out a white-draped arm, in ~~goodby~~ or blessing or, perhaps, to tell Joseph who stood below to <sup>guard well</sup> ~~take good care of~~ the two who had been put in his charge.

"We'll be getting back to our sheep," Esrom said, and the shepherds went away. ¶ The big star was gone.

The riders, and the baggage animals behind them, ~~made~~ <sup>were</sup> grey clouds drifting through a now charcoal night. They got beyond the Valley of Trouble and  over three brawling streams and

were again at the Stone of Bohan. In the shadow of the Stone two men waited with four camels.

"I think you should hurry," Peleg, the beggar, said coming forward.

The second man came forward also. He, too, wore beggar's clothes. He wore, that is, a ragged loincloth and sandals and a piece of sackcloth over his ~~shoulders. He had a~~ humped back.

"I did not return to Herod," he said to Melchior.

"I know," Melchior murmured. Mists, lifting off the ground in herald of the approach <sup>ing</sup> of day, swirled about him. He seemed to speak amid clouds of incense.

"Your people all are well on their way," Peleg said.

"He started them." Peleg jogged his head toward Geber. "He told them that you had been warned not to return to Herod. He told them to depart for their own country by another way and that you would follow. ~~They're travelling fast, but,~~ and Peleg jogged his head ~~toward Geber~~ again. <sup>ing</sup> "he saw to it that they left these fresh animals for you. He had them fed and watered. ~~They're all~~ <sup>were</sup> ready. They'll keep you ahead of even Herod's hunters."

"Thank you, Geber," Melchior murmured and Geber knew he was not being thanked for his care of the animals, <sup>alone.</sup> "And now what do you plan to do for yourself?" The question was warm and tender beyond anything the oldest <sup>Magus</sup> Magi often showed and Gaspar looked his surprise at Belshazzar. Belshazzar, as though in fear that the youngest <sup>Magus</sup> Magi might speak, put a big finger to his lips.

<sup>Magus</sup> "He is staying with me," Peleg said. "Herod's ~~pack~~ <sup>hunters</sup> ~~doesn't~~ go around looking for trouble with our kind. They

GILBERT  
SUPERASE BOND

know we take care of our own."

At the "our own" Geber's hunched back tried to straighten. He looked at Melchior as though something was still unsaid.

Melchior stretched ~~out~~ his hand over Geber's uplifted face.

"You will live in our hearts, Geber," he murmured.

~~"Truly, we rejoice with you."~~

~~"And truly, I rejoice. Thank you, Ancient," Geber~~  
said.

~~Handwritten scribbles and marks on the right margin.~~

CHAPTER ELEVEN <sup>107</sup>

Outside the orderly room in the barracks near the Joppa Gate only one change seemed to have been made since the earlier meeting of the Primus Pilus Naepor with Panthera and <sup>Julius</sup> ~~Salvidinius~~ Muso. Seemingly the same soldiers were dicing on the pavement, swearing the same oaths. But the time of day was different. ~~The~~ <sup>It was</sup> time now ~~was~~ late afternoon.

Inside the orderly room there was also only one certain change. Naepor was as gross and soiled as ever, Panthera was as darkly sullen and the Tribune as immaculate and supercilious. <sup>But</sup> Nepte was missing. Panthera had found that other men noticed his yellow woman too much.

"The Chief Eunuch says that by now you should have found what Herod wants," Helius Naepor said. "He is worried and I don't blame him."

"That little peacock is always worried." Muso gazed indifferently through the window. ~~He did not intend to delay his bath very long just to hear about the Chief Eunuch's worries.~~ With some of his two thousand denarii still unspent, he could revel in a patrician independence.

"That little peacock," Naepor said, "has good reason for worrying. Three Persian star-gazers have told Herod some-

burning

① thing new about this Messiah thing and Herod is ~~not~~ to see ~~the~~ <sup>our</sup> job finished."

① <sup>page</sup> "This isn't a <sup>thing</sup> ~~job~~ to be finished in a day," Muso said.

"If the Chief Eunuch thinks it is, let him make a try. He'll find out."

① "And how have you found out?" Panthera asked. "You haven't made a single try yourself." He was taking more and more liberties with his patrician ally as their enforced intimacy ran on. "I'm the one who's been <sup>running</sup> ~~chasing~~ all over the country."

"Except when you're spending your time with your Egyptian!"

Wouldn't you like to spend some time with her?

But that might have been too great a liberty. Panthera was glad he had held his tongue when Naepor's heavy fist banged on the table.

① "Stop, both of you!" Naepor said. "Fighting with each other won't get us the rest of the Chief Eunuch's money, and that's what we all want."

① The <sup>other</sup> two ~~men~~ fell silent. Panthera brought out a jar of wine. Outside the window a dicing soldier shouted exultantly, "A Venus! A Venus!"

① Three unbeatable sixes! Naepor drew from his pouch a set of crystal cubes, inlaid with gold, part of his loot after the great killing of brothers by brothers at Actium when Marc Antony and Octavian had ended the pact sealed at Philippi. He clicked them in the optimism which encourages every gambler to believe every other gambler will lose. He has lost his luck. He'll throw dogs from here on in. Tonight he'll have to borrow

drink money. He filled a goblet.

"Why hasn't Herod put his mercenaries from Gaul and Galatia into this hunt?" Muso asked, his pink face growing sharper.

"He won't use them unless he has to. He wants to keep <sup>free</sup> clear of the whole thing," Naepor said. "It's the same reason the the Chief Eunuch has <sup>free</sup> for not using his own body guard. He's anxious to keep clear because he is a Palace official."

"The cohort would like to <sup>keep free of it,</sup> be clear of the whole thing, too," Panthera grumbled. "They smell something fishy. They know the Legion is under orders not to rub Jews the wrong way <sup>and yet</sup> but that's just what I'm doing with the questions I have to ask. My second is beginning to ask me questions of his own."

"If you can't keep your optio in his place," Naepor said, "you'd better quit trying to be a Pilus Prior."

"I can keep him in his place. But that doesn't keep him from thinking. <sup>Many</sup> ~~A lot~~ of them <sup>men</sup> are thinking. <sup>Many</sup> ~~A lot~~ of them have friends among the Jews."

"Well, the Jews will be even touchier when word gets out about these three Wise Men from Persia hunting a baby," Naepor said. "And now you've mentioned Jews. How about the carpenter, Joseph? I've noticed from your reports that you haven't looked <sup>for</sup> him ~~up~~. Why not? Isn't he one of our best leads?"

"I'll look <sup>for</sup> him ~~up~~," Panthera said sullenly. "I'll do anything that gives us a chance to <sup>get</sup> even ~~up~~ with Vedius Rusco. But if you want the truth, I <sup>would</sup> have to go right into the Rusco Villa to find out about him. My men have <sup>nt</sup> ~~not~~ been able to discover where he ~~lives~~ <sup>is staying</sup>."

*Handwritten scribbles and notes on the left margin.*

*Handwritten scribbles and notes on the left margin.*

*Handwritten scribbles and notes on the left margin.*

*Handwritten scribbles and notes on the left margin.*

*Handwritten scribbles and notes on the left margin.*

"I think the hunt ought to turn on Bethlehem," Muso said.

"Everybody says Bethlehem is <sup>the</sup> ~~where we'll~~ most likely ~~find what~~ <sup>place.</sup> ~~we're after.~~"

"Bethlehem is just one of a handful of possibilities,"

Panthera said. "The Chief Eunuch told us so himself. I just haven't got around to Bethlehem."

"Naturally!" Naepor said. "That's near the Rusco Villa, too. Don't be afraid of Vedius Rusco, Panthera. He may not be Road Commissioner much longer. I hear that Herod is ready to put him in his place. And if the Emperor has to choose between one of his old comrades and a king who can keep Judea quiet, I know which one will lose."

"That's good news!" said Muso, but Panthera was brooding over the taunts aimed against him.

"Muso hasn't been near the villa since Lucianus ~~traced~~ <sup>came</sup>, but does that mean he's afraid?" the Pilus Prior asked. Helius Naepor eyed the Tribune questioningly.

"I don't go to the villa because I'm not wanted," Muso said bitterly. "When Vedius Rusco put that Greek bastard ahead of me, he as good as shut his door in my face."

"Do you mean you've given up trying to marry the girl?"

"I'd keep trying if I thought I had a chance," Muso said <sup>Angrily</sup> ~~angrily~~. "With all that money I'd marry her tomorrow. But there are other girls with money. ~~But~~ I don't ask, where the answer is sure to be 'No!'"

"How can you be sure if you don't ask?"

"I know she's ready to fall into the arms of the wonder-

ful Marcus Seclator Lucianius."

(D)

"The wonderful Lucianius," Naepor said, "is another reason for ~~getting around fast~~ <sup>finishing this hunt of ours</sup>. Any week now, any day, he may be ending the free hand you have had with the Eighth."

fog

"You mean ..." Muso began, frowning.

"I told you that Lucianius was going to replace you," Naepor said. "He won't be kept at headquarters much longer; He's learning too fast. You and he ought to be shifting places any day now."

"I'd like to shift him with the eighteen inches of a javelin head," Muso said.

"It might not be a bad idea, at that." Naepor was looking through the window to follow the fortunes of the dicers and suddenly he laughed. "There he goes now! Why don't you go after him and ~~do it~~ <sup>do it</sup> ~~this afternoon?~~"

Muso shrugged.

Panthera was staring at the floor.

Naepor clicked his glittering cubes and began to think aloud in mocking calculation.

"He <sup>is</sup> on his big bay horse. It's late. That means he's done for the day and is going back to the villa. And he's alone. For once, his black servant isn't hanging onto a stirrup."

Panthera went to the window and sucked in an audible breath as he picked up the thought.

"He's leaving by the Joppa gate, as usual. So Muso would have time to leave by the Dung gate, and gallop behind the hills and get set in plenty of time. There's a clump of trees I know

You have capped (=) those on Page 151

2

of that would make a fine ambush."

"But if ~~Muso~~ <sup>will</sup> smart he'll take help along," Naepor said, pushing his fat lips at Panthera. "He'll take, say, a Pilus Prior who <sup>will</sup> have real trouble if Lucianius joins the Eighth. With two, the ambush couldn't miss."

"Now wait a minute!" Panthera protested.

"There's no time to wait, ~~unless you two want to~~ ~~on being cramped by Lucianius,~~" Naepor said. "He'll come into the cohort and see a lot of things ~~that are~~ wrong and he'll put them up to General Proculinus and you'll both be in real trouble."

"Now wait, ~~a minute!~~" Panthera repeated. But he knew Naepor was right. He reckoned the odds and snapped his fingers. "I'll <sup>do it</sup> ~~go along,~~" he said and looked at Muso who still frowned but rose reluctantly.

Panthera threw open the door and when his orderly leaped up among the gamblers he said, "Horses! Mine, and the Tribune's!" ~~Muso's!~~ He turned back, breathing hard.

"Lucky the black isn't along," Naepor said. "You ~~two~~ will have a better chance to do the thing right."

"I could do it alone," Panthera said.

"I hear he can really fight," Muso said.

"I wish I'd taken him on the day I tangled with Rusco."

"You might have come off better," Naepor agreed.

"Vedius Rusco had a lot of luck that day."

"Well, see to it now that Lucianius doesn't have luck. Hit him quick and hard and get back into the trees."

"Quick and hard!" Panthera repeated.

A knock fell on the door.

"There <sup>were</sup> ~~is~~ be your horses," Naepor said. "Don't hurry inside the city. Somebody later might add two and two. And anyway there's no hurry. He'll be slow getting through Joppa Gate and the Market. You can make better time, for ~~almost nothing ex-~~ <sup>only a few</sup> ~~cept~~ refuse carts use the Dung Gate. Once outside the wall you can race and pick up the quarter hour you need."

"Quick and hard!" Panthera put into the words all his hate for Vedius Rusco, and ~~Salvidianus~~ Muso's pink narrow face was equally eloquent of his two-forked jealousy of Lucianus. They went out. Helius Naepor at the window watched them out of sight. Then he went back to the wine jar and drank until it was empty.

o-o-o

Panthera and Muso made a show of dawdling through Jerusalem's streets but beyond Dung Gate, with a hill between them and the city, they rode so hard that the ends of their neck scarves floated out behind like those of Imperial couriers.

"We've made it!" <sup>Julius</sup> ~~Salvidianus~~ Muso said when they came to the clump of trees. "He has to be still north of us. I'll take a look."

"Let me!" Panthera said. "I've tramped the cohort around here <sup>and know the terrain.</sup> ~~until I know every inch of the ground. You might give yourself away but I can take a look and never show hide or hair.~~ <sup>not be seen.</sup>"

He returned, laughing silently. "He's coming. I didn't risk more than a squint, but he's coming."

"You're sure it's Lucianus?"

"In about three minutes that bay of his will clop

around the side of the hill right in front of us."

"Fifty paces!" Muso estimated. "That's too far for a javelin cast."

"A lot too far. The one who throws his javelin ought to be near enough for a sure hit. We don't want just to nick him. He might get away. We'll rush him. He ~~will~~ <sup>may</sup> get his shield up, But not any weapon. He'll ~~just~~ have to try dodging and while he's dodging one of us can get near and throw a javelin clean through him."

"Don't try for clean through," Muso said. "It might snag on a bone, And if we leave in a hurry we ~~might~~ have to leave it behind. That would be as bad as signing our names. Just jam it part way into his belly and give it a twist coming out."

"Then the other one ought to put a sword into him, too, to make sure."

"Up where the neckhole of the breastplate leaves bare flesh."

In agreement on these fine points they nodded and Panthera urged his horse to the edge of the trees and Muso moved alongside and Panthera loosed his sword and so did Muso and each balanced his javelin. Muso said, "This might ~~kill~~ <sup>deceive</sup> somebody ~~up~~," and tied his neckscarf over his nose and mouth, and Panthera said, "Good idea!" and followed suit.

Beyond the trees the arid land stretched level and clear, except for a few great rocks, to where the highway curved out of sight behind the hill. On the highway there were ~~just~~ <sup>only</sup> enough pedestrians and horsemen to make for a helpful confu-

sion if pursuit developed.

"Six jumps and we'll be into him, ~~fall tilt,~~" Panthera said. "He'll never know what hit him."

"I'd just as soon he did, for a second," Muso said.

~~"Listen!"~~ "Look!"

~~"..."~~

The head of a bay horse poked around the hill. The animal was barely ambling and, luck of luck, Lucianius was looking to his rear.

"Now!" Panthera spurred and his horse leaped. Muso spurred, his usually pink face as dark as clotted blood.

Lucianius was able to get his shield forward. Indeed, at <sup>the sound of</sup> the loud hooves and <sup>the sight of</sup> two unexpected, masked enemies, he got his defense up with speed and skill. He spurred his own bay and skittered the animal so that only Panthera could come at him. But his javelin was uselessly socketed and his sword sheathed and Panthera was closing for the javelin thrust when Muso screamed through his scarf, not in battle frenzy but in warning and utter dismay.

"No, Panthera! No!"

Deborah in golden and Candace in silvered armor came riding round the hill, their breastplates reflecting the late sun. The sight was so unexpected and dazzling that Muso overlooked Micipsia, trotting alongside, until the black had strung bow, drawn arrow and notched arrow all in one fluid motion.

Deborah fumbled a little getting her sword out, but then she went for the thinner of the two masked assailants with

all the enthusiasm of a hunting Diana, and Candace rode at Panthera as boldly as a centaur's bride.

Neither girl had ever felt a wound or even a weapon blow in anger and so it was with all the confidence of innocence and inexperience that they charged the two most dumfounded ~~would-be~~ assassins in ~~all~~ Palestine.

Panthera was too dumfounded to change the master plan.

If he heard Muso's cry, he gave no sign. He threw his javelin and the throw was good. The massive point cut through Lucianius's shield and into his arm. But then Candace, her autumn-leaf face savagely afire, swung her sword at his ribs.

She swung through empty air. His horse stumbled away from her weapon and went down, one of Micipsia's arrows deep in its flank, ~~a second in its neck~~, and Panthera was flung clear. ~~And~~ as he scrambled for the nearest big rock, Micipsia notched a ~~third~~ <sup>second</sup> arrow.

Muso was not too dumfounded to pull up short. They might ambush Lucianius, but it was something else to take on the killing of the daughter of Vedius Rusco Philippicus. Mutely calling curses on Panthera for his careless squint, Muso thought fast and figured out what must have happened.

Deborah, with Candace along and Micipsia for protection, had ridden down from the villa to meet Lucianius outside the Joppa Gate. ~~But~~ just behind the hill <sup>they</sup> ~~all three~~ had momentarily been cut off from him by some highway happenstance. A cranky donkey could have done it. A clumsy litter. Dawdling pedestrians. It was as simple as that.

Muso jerked the scarf from his face as Deborah charged

him, sword swinging.

"It's a mistake, Deborah!" he shouted. "A mistake!" He threw his javelin down to prove his peaceful intention. To protect himself he only backed away. If they had been afoot, the amber Diana might have got him. Mounted, he kept fairly clear and went on shouting, "A mistake! A mistake, Deborah!"

Even so, Deborah slashed at his shield twice before she pulled up crying, "<sup>Julius</sup> ~~Salvidinius~~!" In ~~about~~ the same instant the ~~rampaging~~ <sup>raging</sup> Candace paused, looked down at Panthera and exclaimed, "You?"

Lucianus had wrenched Panthera's javelin from his shield and, holding ~~the~~ weapon ready, kicked his mount forward, too astonished and angry to notice the slow red leak from his forearm. And he and Deborah and Candace, all three, stared at Muso and Panthera until the girls began to beam in pride because of their own ~~daring~~ <sup>daring</sup> and then to giggle because the two culprits were ~~still~~ so ~~dunfounded~~ <sup>amazed</sup>.

Lucianus grew more angry. He signalled Micipsia who had continued watchful, although the girls were interfering with a clean shot at either assailant.

"Hold them, Micipsia!" Lucianus said and, dismounting, began to twist his neck scarf around his hurt arm, but more as a righteously indignant man might roll up his sleeves than ~~to an~~ <sup>even</sup> ~~aid to~~ his wound.

Deborah, for the first time, noticed the blood and got down from her own horse, full of small, ~~tender~~ mothering sound. Candace kept over the crouching Panthera, her sword just high

enough to whack hard if ~~he~~ budgeted.

The bandaging done, Lucianius turned on Muso.

"Get down!" he ordered.

Pretending an innocent embarrassment, Muso <sup>dismounted</sup> ~~got down~~ while Micipsia kept a wary aim around Deborah and Candace.

"You're making a mistake, Lucianius," Muso said smoothly.

"Almost as big a mistake as Panthera and I made."

"Worry about your own mistakes, not mine!" Lucianius said.

page

"Holy Juno!" Muso cried. "Do you think I'm not worrying? But we did make a mistake! We were after someone else. And you can't blame Panthera for the javelin. He <sup>has</sup> seen you only ~~about~~ <sup>once or</sup> twice."

"You <sup>have</sup> seen me often enough."

"I pulled up, didn't I?"

"Liar!" Micipsia squeaked.

"Let me explain," Muso insisted.

"Perhaps we ought to," Deborah said. Not to accept an explanation from a man who had had the good sense to want to marry her seemed a <sup>little</sup> ~~bit~~ unreasonable.

"<sup>Very well</sup> All right, explain," Lucianius said grudgingly.

"<sup>Well,</sup> you haven't been in Jerusalem very long, Lucianius, but you <sup>have</sup> been here long enough to know Panthera."

"I know him, ~~all right.~~"

"<sup>all right</sup> ~~Well,~~ as usual, Panthera is in trouble over a woman.

But this time it isn't his fault."

"Go on," Lucianius said.

"Since Panthera and his Nepte came together," Muso said glibly, "he<sup>has</sup> been a changed man. You know Nepte, she used to be at the villa."

"I know Nepte, too."

"Well, then, you can understand why Panthera isn't interested, any longer, in any other woman, not even the daughter of a rich Sadducee."

"A Sadducee's daughter?"

Muso nodded and Panthera, who had been listening with a confusion as considerable as the alarm with which he watched Candace's sword, began to smile.

"No ~~rich~~ <sup>rich or poor</sup> Sadducee would let Panthera ~~within a mile of~~ <sup>near</sup> his daughter," Lucianius said.

Panthera half-rose, then grimaced and dropped back as Candace prepared to bring her sword down.

"But the daughter," Muso said, "is so willing that her father hired a <sup>pair</sup> couple of toughs to get rid of Panthera ~~for keeps~~."

Candace began to laugh unwillingly, partly in disbelief of the colossal lie, partly in amusement at the colossal invention.

"Are you sure," Deborah asked incredulously "that you thought you were ambushing this Sadducee's men?"

"Just one of them," Muso said modestly. "A <sup>The description</sup> big fellow ~~like~~ <sup>matched well</sup> Lucianius, and <sup>his horse</sup> riding a bay. And I can prove it. The Chief Eunuch of Herod knows the whole story. If Lucianius says so, I'll ask the Chief Eunuch to tell you that I'm telling the truth."

"I can just imagine the Chief Eunuch backing you up!" Lucianius said.

① 4 "He will!" Muso ~~was on sure ground now and~~ smiled in confidence while Panthera looked at him admiringly. ✓ "He won't deny a thing."

"Well, I do," Lucianus said grimly. "Micipsia is right. You are a liar."

② Muso <sup>is</sup> ~~was in no position to make any protest but his~~ pink face darkened at such a charge in Deborah's hearing and darkened more when she spoke.

"Nobody would believe such a story," Deborah said.

"I don't suppose I can tell Micipsia to put a couple of arrows into you," Lucianus said, looking thoughtfully from Muso to Panthera. ↑

"You'd better not," Panthera called and swung a warning hand toward a slowly growing group of onlookers.

"Watch Muso!" Lucianus said to Micipsia and drawing his sword advanced on the Pilus Prior. "At least I can do one thing."

He paused at Panthera's rock. ~~"All right," he said.~~

+ "You wanted to kill somebody," <sup>he said.</sup> "I'll give you the chance. Get up! Let's see if you can kill me."

"Panthera can't fight," Muso cried, half laughing.

"Look at his foot!"

Through the straps of his boot the flesh of Panthera's left foot and ankle was puffing up like leavened dough.

"He sprained his ankle when his horse was shot down by your black," Muso said.

"Good!" Micipsia squeaked.

"Don't be too happy," Muso warned. "A slave doesn't

shoot down a Pilus Prior and go ~~set~~ free."

"Micipsia will," Lucianius laughed. "I <sup>suppose</sup> ~~guess~~ we're <sup>are</sup> even," He told Panthera. "You missed me, but now I know where you stand and you <sup>will</sup> have a hard time getting another chance." He turned to <sup>Julius</sup> ~~Salvidinius~~ Muso. <sup>But I would like to know</sup> ~~"Just for fun,"~~ he said, "~~will you~~ <sup>tell me</sup> what you have against me?"

"It was an accident," the Tribune said blandly. "We mistook you for someone else."

"Pick up their weapons, Micipsia," Lucianius said, and while the black <sup>with</sup> squeaky chuckles, obeyed, Lucianius turned to Deborah.

"Never," he said, "did I see even a veteran get into a fight faster than you. I owe you my life."

"We ought to hurry home. I can dress that wound better there," Deborah said, looking away.

She and Lucianius mounted, he a little clumsily because of his arm.

"Take the Tribune Muso's horse, Micipsia," Lucianius said. "Ride for a change. Those extra weapons are heavy to carry afoot."

"You aren't leaving us here without mounts!" Muso protested. "Panthera can't walk."

Lucianius pointed to the travellers who had gathered around - - rather timidly. It was not always wise to gather around Romans. He grinned.

"Ask some of these for a ride."

"Ask me to fight you when my ankle is well!" Panthera

25% COTTON FIBRE

165/61

shouted.

"I'll think it over," Lucianius promised. "But I'll certainly ask you one thing the next time we meet. I'll ask for the story you ~~two~~ make up when you have to explain how <sup>two</sup> Roman officers let themselves get separated from sword, javelin and dagger."

Muso and Panthera in silent anger watched the four ride away.

"Does your arm hurt?" Deborah asked Lucianius tenderly.

"I'll be glad to watch you bind it up again," Lucianius said.

"Do you think the master will be pleased with the way we handled our swords?" Candace asked Deborah.

Page

GILBERT  
SUPERASE BOND

## CHAPTER TWELVE - (17)

Naturally, Deborah welcomed Lucianius's wound, once she was satisfied it would not kill him. Like <sup>so</sup> many girls of her age she looked upon her two willing hands as the best possible tools for ~~doing~~ any <sup>task</sup> ~~job~~ perfectly. In the past, sometimes, she had had to ignore Bria's indulgent dissent and Bracae's surreptitious re-doing of perfection and her father's casual, surprisingly helpful hints, but such implied doubts on the part of her elders had not weakened her verdant conviction that when a thing was to be done, she was the ~~one~~ <sup>one</sup> girl to do it. And now she was out to do it as never before. Never before had there ~~been~~ anyone she so much wished to impress.

When they rode excitedly into the villa she allowed Candace a fair half of the story of their first fight, blow by proud blow. The two girls told how they had charged, how they had forced their enemies to bite the dust. They told also how mighty Micipsia's bow had been, how mightily <sup>Julius</sup> ~~Salvidinius~~ Muso had lied, how craven Panthera had ~~looked~~ behind his rock, and how heroically Lucianius had been ready to do battle in spite of his wound. But after the ~~bloody~~ bandage was pulled off and a better dressing was in order, Deborah took charge and became such a paragon of busyness that the Villa Rusco was turned ~~topsy-turvy~~ <sup>upside down</sup>.

page

"Alongside her," Bria whispered to Bracae, "a lark in its bath hardly flips a wing."

But not Bria, Bracae or Rusco hinted that anyone else might do more for Lucianius better or faster. They were, all three, aware of what was happening. They all knew what it was to sink delicious fathoms deep in the ocean of young love. Watching Lucianius and Deborah they all harked back to their own first raptures and none of them did anything to break the current flowing between this pair. Candace, having fetched hot water and bandages, and cool, healing oil, stood watching Vedius Rusco.

They were all gathered in the garden which had been turned into a dressing room. Joseph, who was still working at the villa, although the dining room was now repaired, had fetched from his tool box a jar of thick stuff smelling of tamarisk and cedar.

"Somebody is forever chiseling a finger," Joseph said, "~~er~~ sawing an arm, and this is wonderfully healing."

"We use a paste like that back home," Bria said approvingly, after a sniff.

"Where did she learn so much?" Lucianius asked in awe and admiration as Deborah buttered the salve on his wound and on her hands and dress.

Rusco gestured, as though saying, that's just Deborah, for you, and smiled at her commanding nod when Bracae brought a drink mixed from powders given by one of his mystical, medical druids.

"Drink it!" Deborah ordered when Lucianius sipped and

made a face. "Bracae and father always do, after a wound. It's <sup>is</sup> something to clean the blood."

Lucianius drank in ~~miser~~ and clamped his lips on the taste, so gamy that his stomach lurched.

"And you <sup>are</sup> to eat very little for a few days," Deborah said firmly. "Bracae and father always eat less." She gave his arm a last pat and wiped her willing hands free of Joseph's heavy, stinging balm.

"I'll eat just what you give me," Lucianius promised and she looked happily around, asking the others to mark his desire that she, and no one else, attend him.

"I'm <sup>also</sup> planning it all out," she said, the light of love and fifteen-year-old efficiency in her eyes. "I'll give you exactly what you need."

o-o-o

Rusco had been thoughtfully quiet for a few moments.

"You were right," he said to Lucianius, "to let the pair of them go."

Bracae nodded.

"They deserved killing, I <sup>suppose</sup> guess, but I ~~just~~ couldn't," Lucianius said ruefully.

"It wouldn't have been easy to do in cold blood," Rusco said.

Bracae nodded.

"And besides," Rusco said with a practical shrug, "there <sup>would</sup> have been an inquiry. And Panthera's ankle would have made someone ask why a lame man was so dangerous that he needed

↑  
 killing. And of course no inquiry could pass over the death of a son of a patrician family. ~~And~~ some family friend might have asked you to prove that you didn't ambush Muso and Panthera."

The astounding suggestion made Lucianius laugh and laughter twitched the lips of his wound. He winced.

"Are you sure the javelin didn't cut a muscle?"

Rusco asked.

"Flex the arm, Lucianius," Deborah commanded briskly as though the test had been next in her loving plan of action.

"It feels all right," Lucianius decided, after a few wriggles.

Reason out,  
 "What I can't figure," Rusco said to Bracae, "is why Helius Naepor would permit such an attempt."

Bracae was puzzled, too.

"What did the Primus Pilus have to do with it?"

Lucianius asked.

"Everything!" Rusco said soberly. "He owns Panthera. He made him and he owns him. ~~And~~ the Tribune Muso is under his thumb, too. They might want to get rid of you but they wouldn't try it unless Naepor gave the word."

"But why should they want to get rid of me?" Lucianius said. "That's what I asked Muso. I know I'll be taking his place in the cohort, but his transfer, you told me, had been discussed before I <sup>was</sup> even ~~had been~~ mentioned."

is  
 "That's true. He didn't satisfy Orfitus Proculinus. But Muso may hate you anyway. We saw quite a bit of him while he was courting Deborah."

page "Oh!" Lucianius said.

And Panthera, of course, doesn't ~~want to~~ <sup>like</sup> this household. None of that, ~~though~~ <sup>how every</sup>, accounts for Helius Naepor's interest. But I can think of one reason. As soon as you join the Eighth, you ~~will~~ <sup>will</sup> step on Panthera's toes. And he and Helius have had things their own way there and the gods know what they've been up to." Vedius Rusco looked speculative.

"I know <sup>old</sup> Helius," he ~~said~~ <sup>went on</sup>. "The worst of it is, I like him, and I think that in a way he likes me." He was silent a moment. "~~Old~~ Helius had it in him to be quite a fellow when he was young," he said.

In Rusco's mind the gross, slovenly Primus Pilus faded out and he saw the boyish Helius, strong as a bull, cheerful, with good and generous impulses which were not always carried through because he lacked that kind of strength. Even in those days he drank too much, and he had had <sup>also</sup> ~~also~~ a bad trait of wanting to be first, to stand above all rivals. He <sup>had</sup> ~~had~~ turned against friends, who ~~had~~ by luck or ~~by~~ hard work and ability <sup>had</sup> ~~had~~ won honors higher than his own. Yet even his envy had not come from an entirely bad source, Rusco thought. The young Helius had wanted not only to be a leader, but--most of the time--to be a good and even a noble leader. If only he had tried a little harder, and had not turned so frequently to drink!

Rusco pulled himself out of this long train of thought.

"Yes, I'm <sup>am</sup> sure Helius is back of the ambush. But being sure doesn't tell us what wrong trail he and Panthera are on, except that it is probably something ~~a lot~~ bigger than the ambush."

D  
and ~~a lot~~ worse."

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. No matter where evil sprouted in Judea, its root was usually found back in Herod's court.

"I have to go to court in a few days," he said, "about supplies for the new Gaza road. <sup>Perhaps</sup> ~~Maybe~~ I'll pick up some hint there of what Naepor and his pack are after."

Deborah drew Lucianius to his feet.

D "What if Helius Naepor is scheming against somebody?" she scolded. "And what if <sup>Julius</sup> ~~Solvidinius~~ does hate somebody? We ~~ve~~ <sup>have</sup> had enough talk for one day. Lucianius needs rest and quiet and warmth. It's getting chilly out here."

"They <sup>have</sup> ~~ve~~ got something else on their minds," Bria said as Lucianius was led willingly off. "Woden give them joy!"

"And Anuku!" Micipsia grinned.

"Would your God give them a little joy?" Rusco said turning to Joseph. "After all, half of Deborah's blood is the blood of your people."

Joseph smiled. "Of course, <sup>)</sup> ~~he will,~~" he said. He went on. "A Wise Man was in my house a few days ago. He worships a god he calls Ormazd. He said that Ormazd does not draw a narrow line from the world to his heaven and say, On this road only will I bless. Instead he stretches his arms wide and says, Whoever you are, come to me by whatever road! I bless all! We call ourselves the Chosen People, but I believe the Lord chooses to watch over all men."

"Then even a man like myself, who is supposed to die by

the sword, can hope for a little protection?" Rusco's tone was light but his face was serious. The attack on Lucianius, a member of his household, had strengthened his feeling of impending danger.

"There is no reason for you to speak of dying by the sword," Joseph said.

Later, when the carpenter had returned to his work, Rusco's mind went back to Joseph's remark about the Wise Man. Ormazd! That meant the Wise Man came from Persia. Could he be one of the Persian star-gazers about whom news had lately been spreading? But what could he have been doing in Joseph's home?

o-o-o

"There!" Deborah said and ~~stretched~~<sup>drew</sup> a rug over Lucianius who already, by her order, was stretched out on a couch in her father's study. "Isn't this better than out there in the cold, with everybody except Candace chattering until you can hardly think?"

The garden hadn't<sup>not</sup> been really cold. ~~The sun, when it reached you, was warm.~~ And anyway, Lucianius told himself, even if he had lost some blood, he hadn't<sup>not</sup> lost so much that he needed codling. But this was ~~certainly~~<sup>definitely</sup> better. Looking at Deborah he ~~decided that this was fine.~~ <sup>admitted it happily</sup>

Deborah was, at least, as pretty a girl as a young man would find in a long day's march. Those who claimed her equal was not to be found in all Judea ran into counterclaims, of course, from young men in love with other girls all the way from Dan to Beersheba. But she was ~~certainly~~<sup>indubitably</sup> inviting to the eye.

A hundred times more inviting, Lucianius saw clearly

It was  
let's  
be  
D

now, than any other girl he had ever known anywhere. A hundred?

*Page* A thousand! All the other girls he had ever thought he fancied, for a graceful shoulder, a mass of shining hair, a slim ankle, an arm of rosy ivory, a sweetly curved bosom, gentle eyes, a beguiling mouth, had vanished from his mind as though they had never existed. This was the girl of all the dreams he had ever dreamed. Not only had he never before seen such shining hair, so slim an ankle, so sweetly curved a bosom, an arm so moulded for kisses, never before had they adorned any mortal woman. Never, he was ready to swear, had even a goddess ever had such beauty.

Deborah had changed from her armor to a dress of the cut and color she liked above every other. It billowed all around in waves of soft green which made her foaming, jet hair seem more foaming and more black.

"You do like that color, don't you?" Lucianus said.

"Um-m-m-m!" Deborah's soft assent was also a happy recognition of something in his voice. Welcoming it no less because she had been expecting it, she decided that her closer presence would not be too much of an encouragement and started to sit on a cushion alongside his couch.

"Back home," Lucianus said, "when a girl marries she wears a flame-colored veil, so much of it that it goes <sup>all</sup> clear around her."

Deborah retreated. Glowing from a sure conviction of what was coming and suddenly unwilling to have it come too soon, she curled up on a big couch <sup>some</sup> quite a distance away. ~~Her~~ favorite reverie had been of the moment when the man of her dreams

*Man of her dreams*  
*the man of her dreams*  
*the man of her dreams*  
*the man of her dreams*

would face her and say, to the accompaniment of appropriate gestures, "I love you. Marry me!" But this roundabout, less breath-taking approach, she saw at once, was going to be even nicer.]

"Among us," she said, "among my mother's people, the bride is veiled in white and wears a robe of pure white linen."

~~She could be roundabout, also.~~

*Right*

"Oh, our bride wears white!" Lucianius said. "The night before the wedding she puts on a long, white nuptial tunic. But she wears color then, too. She puts her hair up in a scarlet net. And in the morning she puts on a dress held at the waist by a girdle tied in a Hercules knot. It<sup>is</sup> over this that the flame-colored veil goes. I've<sup>how</sup> been talking with the wife of General Proculinus," he explained.

"Our bride wears golden anklets with little bells and a crown of myrtle blossoms," Deborah said. She refused to ask why he had been talking with the General's wife. Matters were already going fast enough.

They both began to laugh. They were remembering how, at their first meeting, they had carried on in this same fashion but more than memory made them laugh. They were thinking, also, how instantly, always, they fell into accord.

"Our bride wears a flower crown, too," Lucianius said, "And her hair is put into six braids."

"Our bride is made sweet with scented, beaten oil after her bath," Deborah said and then worried a little. Should I have spoken of that?

"Our weddings are always in the morning," Lucianius said.

"In the morning! Our bridegroom isn't even brought to the bride's home until midnight. We say wise brides have their lamps trimmed and ready to light the groom in."

"We bring an ox-yoke," Lucianius said, "and the priest lays down the skin of a sheep he has sacrificed and the bride and groom sit on it and break the wedding cake." The corners of his mouth warned her against the cake. "It's tasteless stuff made from spelt, our poorest wheat. But it is important because it is an offering to Jupiter." He lifted the corners of his mouth. "Jupiter isn't the only one. Brides and grooms must make <sup>gifts</sup> ~~their~~ ~~manners~~ <sup>to</sup> to Juno, and, of course, <sup>to</sup> Ceres and all the other gods of the soil."

"Our bride," Deborah said, "meets her groom under a flowered canopy, and he sips wine and then he raises her veil and gives her a sip and then they break the goblet. No one ~~else~~ ever uses it ~~again~~."

~~"Our marriage is expensive for the bride's father," Lucianius chuckled. "Or anyway for her family. She has to bring a wedding portion." The corners of his mouth said that he thought little of the practice. "If her father gives the dos the groom keeps it no matter what. But if another relative gives it the bride must have it back if the marriage breaks up."~~

~~"Our groom must give fifty shekels," Deborah cried triumphantly. "And it's the bride's, no matter what!"~~

"Well, our groom gives his bride a ring for her left hand. Do you know that in Egypt a wedding ring is supposed to give immortal life, love and happiness?"

① "our groom gives a ring, too," Deborah said, "and his family must have on hand <sup>Even so many</sup> lots of beautiful clothes. Because if guests come in ordinary <sup>apparel</sup> wear they must be supplied with all they lack. And a procession, with lights and music and singing, escorts the bride and groom to their new home. And everyone throws white pomegranate and henna blossoms and there are songs and dancing."

"<sup>With us,</sup> ~~For our bride,~~ too," Lucianius said, "songs and dancing, and everyone parades the pair home. And the bride carries a torch of white-thorn wood to ward off evil."

He decided not to go into the songs, <sup>which</sup> now and then <sup>were</sup> ~~the~~ ~~songs were, for a fact,~~ <sup>rather</sup> pretty broad.

"And the groom," he went on, "carries the bride over the threshold and as he carries her she says to him," ... his voice fell, "'where thou art Gaius, I am Gaia!'" ...

<sup>page</sup> "Um,-m--!" Deborah thought how wonderful she could make the words sound. "Why?"

② "It <sup>is</sup> custom," Lucianius said. His ignorance made him apologetic. "I don't know why. But Gaius and Gaia are our commonest names."

"I know why!" Deborah cried. She was as sure of her wisdom as of her ability to do everything well. "She is making a promise. She is saying she will always be the same, she will never change. ✓"

Without thinking she sampled the words. "Where thou art Gaius, I am Gaia." And she found that Lucianius had drawn her gaze to meet his.

25% COTTON FIBRE

"Where thou art Gaia, I am Gaius," Lucianius said clearly, and regardless of her order to rest he threw off the rug and was at her couch, ~~before she could frown him into obedience.~~ He cupped his good hand under her arm and lifted her to her feet.

"Oh, Deborah!" he said. "Oh, Deborah!"

o-o-o

One good hand was enough. She was so weightlessly willing that it took next to nothing to bring her close.

"Deborah!" he said and began to kiss her. It was not practiced kissing. He was a young man of small practice, but his enthusiasm made up for that. Not only her soft mouth but all her flesh responded as he learned his way on her lips, her eyes, her cheeks, her lips again, and her throat.

Deborah kissed back. She was past diffidence now ~~and if she had been able to think she would have told herself that this was, truly, the perfect accompaniment to a proposal.~~

"Wear our veil, or your linen, or whatever you like," Lucianius said. "But marry me!"

"Whatever you want me to wear!" Deborah whispered. "I'll put on our flower-crown and I'll make my hair in your six braids."

They began to laugh again, once more delighted by how fully in accord they always were.

"Wear your anklets with bells and our woolen girdle," Lucianius said.

"And I'll trim my lamp and have it all ready," Deborah promised between kisses. "And I'll sit on your ox-yoke and sheepskin."

GILBERT

SUPERASE BOND

"And we'll break our spelt cake," he said against her soft mouth, "and your goblet."

~~"And you won't need to give me fifty shekels, or even one!"~~ Deborah said when she had the use of her mouth.

~~"I'll give you all my shekels, and my denarii, too,"~~ he said. ~~"And your father can keep his dog."~~

"And you'll carry me over the threshold?" Deborah asked

"I'll carry you all our lives. Oh, Deborah!"

"Where thou art Gaius, I am Gaia."

"We'll be married tomorrow," Lucianus said.

Deborah drew back. Tomorrow suited her, but she knew how Bria would complain. She could hear Bria now.

What will you eat? And do you think tomorrow gives time to invite the guests? And I need a week just to clean. And flowers? Where, in so little time? And wine? Who stores wine enough for a wedding on no notice at all? And what do you own that's half-decent for a wedding? What will you wear?

What WILL I wear? Deborah realized the justice of Bria's objections. ~~She didn't have a thing fit for a wedding. Not a thing.~~

"Not tomorrow," she said softly. "Not quite tomorrow."

"Day after?" Lucianus said.

"Well ... "

"Then when?" Lucianus cried. "When?"

"We really ought to <sup>ask</sup> let Bria have some say," Deborah said. "She <sup>will</sup> be in charge. Of the feast. The guests. Everything."

<sup>we do not</sup>  
 "Who needs a feast!" Lucianus cried. "And why do we need guests?"

"You haven't even asked father yet," Deborah said. Bria was right. A girl couldn't marry overnight.

She had to have at least <sup>4 or 5</sup> a couple of weeks. Well, at least one. Or at least three or four days. Or at any rate two. She had to have time to get proper things to wear.

"I'll ask your father right now!" Lucianus said. <sup>will</sup>  
 "He <sup>will</sup> be on my side. He once told me that he married your mother after they <sup>had</sup> seen each other only seven times."

<sup>bl</sup> "It was <sup>says my</sup> eight times!" Deborah said. "Bria ~~said it~~  
~~was eight.~~" <sup>mother told her 'it was eight.'</sup>