



Maud Hart and Delos Wheeler Lovelace Family Papers.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

(D) Now was the time, Vedius Rusco said, for everyone to eat something. *Who can tell when you will have?* *Maybe you won't get another chance* ~~quite a while,~~ he warned the household. "But lightly!"

"Nobody ever made his best fight on an overloaded stomach." Nobody, he corrected himself, except Helius Naepor.

He did not, himself, eat anything. He never did at such a time. Instead, he tried to think about his affairs, to make sure, or as sure as possible, that they were all in order. He thought of his will and was glad he had had ~~the~~ ~~it~~ ~~thing~~ rewritten. One copy was safely lodged in Jerusalem and another, as a precaution, was on its way to Lucianius's father.

The will took care of Bracae and Bria, freed and rewarded Candace and all the other slaves, and left Deborah, he reflected with satisfaction, more than she would ever need. It had been rewritten to include a bequest to Lucianius and he wondered if he had been right in deciding against providing for sacrifices to all the major gods -- Jupiter, Juno, Ceres, Diana, Apollo, Neptune, Vulcan, Mars, Minerva, Venus, Mercury and Vesta -- all twelve. Jupiter and, of course, Ceres had

been provided for all along and sacrifices to the other ten ~~certainly~~ wouldn't hurt.

But could they really help? The doubts which talks with Joseph had driven deep into Vedius Rusco drove deeper. Joseph had said such sacrifices could not help because there were no such gods. There was only One, and sacrifices did not move Him, only mercy and justice and humble prayer.

"Maybe we ought to put out the lights again," Bracae said.

"Keep every one burning," Rusco said. "When they come, let's be as bright as a festival."

"Lights may bother them, at that!" Bracae grinned over the prospect of bothering ~~Salvidianus~~ Muso and Panthera. "Lights could keep them ~~shy~~ away for fear we've baited a trap."

The elation which had risen in Vedius Rusco with the coming of the messengers was higher now and, unexpectedly, for the first time in his life he thought ~~that~~ he had the explanation for this familiar mood. It was that danger brought a man to the very curtain which hid the answer to the final mystery. A man knew about this world, but what about the next ^{one?} Well, in a little while he might know. He might know whose priests -- Jupiter's, Mithras's, Osiris's or the priests of the mighty One God in whom Joseph believed -- had the right story. ~~and~~ it would be worth knowing. This dying, when you came to look at it, was the biggest thing of all.

"Bracae," he said, "with me out of the way Herod can build hippodromes and fortresses until they choke him. ~~The~~

~~enzy old tyrant~~ has been aching for this chance. So Muso and Panthera will have their orders. I'll ^{well} never live to see a prison."

Bracae shuddered at the most foolish statement he had ever heard from a man supposed to have good sense. They certainly could hold off Muso and Panthera for a while, he said, maybe ~~for~~ long enough to let the General realize what a mistake he had made.

"And besides," he said, "what's to keep us from at least trying to ^{get away?} ~~clear out?~~ We have horses. We might ride straight through the ring. And unless we've forgotten everything we ^{know,} ~~learned the hard way,~~ we can hide long enough to get word to Quirinius up in Damascus, or even get to him ourselves."

"We just might," ^{said and} Rusco ^{laughed}. So one-sided a gamble tempted him.

"Then let's get ^{started!} ~~going!~~" Bracae shouted.

"The hour that Herod ^{that had} had certain words ~~slipped~~ through his fingers," Rusco said, "every slave in this villa, including Candace, would be tortured into knots. And Deborah and Bria and Lucianus would be run to earth and killed."

~~"I'll turn off for Jericho the minute you get clear."~~ ⁽¹¹⁾ You can hide alone while I take Deborah and the rest away."

"No!" Rusco said. "It ^{is} a risk I can't take. I'll just make my fight a good one and settle for that."

"Our fight!" Bracae said. "Ours!"

"Not yours, Bracae! Just me against Panthera and

Muso." That was the way to handle it, alone.

+ "They won't let themselves be talked into ^{anything like} that kind
+ ~~of a deal~~. And ^{besides,} anyway, it would be two against one."

"I ~~can~~ ^{will} talk them into it," Rusco boasted. "And even
if it is two against one, I'll see ~~to it~~ that they never live
to ~~regret~~ ^{report} it. I don't know where I ^{am} going after this. I ~~ve~~
^{about several} been told ~~three or four~~ places. But those two will go along ^{with me}.
They don't deserve to live any longer." He gave the back of
his neck a thoughtful rub. "The laugh isn't going to be on
Joseph after all," he said and looked around to plan an all-
out defense, ~~just~~ in case he could not make good his boast!

"We ~~ve~~ ^{have} got nearly two hours," he said. "And when
the time is up I want this place as hard to get into as
Antonia. If the legionnaires face nothing but knocks they ~~will~~ ^{will}
~~maybe~~ ^{be glad to} leave the fighting to Muso and Panthera. Round everybody
up, the whole household! And give a look to their weapons,
though I hope I ~~will~~ ^{will} be the only one to use any."

"If the others get a chance they'll all fight
like Romans -- or Gauls," Bracae said and hitched ~~up~~ his long
pants up to his hard, naked middle.

o-o-o

Beams, logs, broken chests, upended tables were
heaped against the gates. Shards of pottery, all available
debris, were tossed along the inner base of the high, thick
wall.

"If anybody climbs over and jumps into that mess,"

Rusco said, "he'll wish he hadn't."

The biggest stones at hand were balanced above the gates to discourage the first ^{assaulted} assault. Doors were braced. Spare weapons were stacked where they could be readily ^{seized} grabbed on need. When all was done that could be done, time remained, ~~and~~ ^{and} Rusco used it to give his army the best advice he had.

"If it comes to fighting, remember!" he said, "crowd ^{your opponent!} ~~the other fellow!~~ You won't get hurt ^{any} ~~a bit~~ quicker and you ~~just~~ may worry him so much he won't crowd you. And try your best not to fight alone. Keep a man at your back, or keep at a man's back. Always!"

He waved them off to rest while they could, and he and Bracae rested. Candace came in and he beckoned to her.

"Sit down!" Rusco said. "Sit down!" Although he would not have admitted it, he ^{felt} was lonely. It was ^{all} very well to look forward to the greatest adventure, but that was overshadowed now by the realization that he would not see Deborah again and that he and Bracae would never again sit together like this. Nor he and Candace, he thought, and stroked her hair. She sat stiffly but her warmth and love ~~were~~ ^{were} there. All three were silent.

It got to be well after midnight and the men and women of the household ^{began to} moved about with self-conscious stealth, ears pricked for sounds outside. There were no sounds save from owls, a distant jackal, a tile slipping off the roof. Only such small sounds under a sky full of stars.

The woman who was minding the hourglass turned it

again. A new sound, not birds, animals or a roof tile, seeped through the wall and the doorkeeper gave a warning hiss and the watchdog talked in threatening undertones.

"Check the gates!" Rusco said to Bracae. "I'll look from the balcony."

He got quickly up the cramped stairs, keeping back out of sight until the tip of his javelin had snuffed the lamp. Then, hugging the wall in darkness, he looked out.

A hundred yards down the hill a compact hedge of spears stood up into the sky like grape-vine stakes and in front of the hedge three men, two stiff in armor, stood in close parley. The ring of mercenaries was a little farther away, encircling the entire villa.

On second look the hedge was not as compact as at first it seemed. It was split. Rusco counted. About forty in the larger section, twenty-five in the smaller, and the smaller flew a pennant which startled him. It was a ^{vexillum} vexillum. The twenty-five had to be Arrius Messala's veterans. No other unit with the Tenth was entitled to a ^{vexillum} vexillum. A strange centurion stood at the point of command. Obviously Messala could not have delivered his message and returned in time to take charge.

"I don't like that," Rusco told the night. It was one thing to handle Muse and Panthera. It was another to persuade seasoned legionnaires, under a possibly unfriendly leader, to stand idle in disobedience of an arrest order.

Sixteen men of the forty formed a hollow square

around the two armed leaders, raised shields against missiles that might come from the villa and advanced. When they had ~~were~~ ~~got~~ forty or so yards from the gate they halted and one of the two leaders stepped forward.

"Hello, the gate!"

Rusco recognized Muso's patrician drawl. Panthera was the other one. Back with the main body the third leader stood alone, a long robe swaying in the breeze. The Chief Eunuch: ~~Herod's chief snake!~~

Whatever, Rusco wondered, had become of Naepor?

"Is that you, Muso?" Rusco called from his shadowy post. "You ^{are} ~~re~~ up late!"

Muso stiffened into the formal pose of a herald.

"I speak for ^{Julius} ~~Salvidinius~~ Muso, Tribune of the Tenth Legion and for Panthera, Pilus Prior of the Eighth Cohort, ~~and Galle~~ ~~who~~ speak for Orfitus Proculinus, General of the Tenth Legion," Muso cried, stilted and slow. "You are required, Vedius Rusco Philippicus, to submit to arrest on order of Herod, son of Antipater, King of Judea."

"What charge does Herod dare make against the Road Commissioner of the Emperor?" Rusco was proud of the amazement which he put into the demand. "Name your charge!" He could be formal, too. ^{however,} ~~But~~ then anger took hold. "What ^{do you mean,} ~~do you mean,~~ ^{submit to} ~~arrest~~?" he cried.

"Yes, arrest!" The sullen bellow came from inside the square.

"You ^{are} ~~re~~ even noisier than usual, Panthera," Rusco

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called. " *Free me why I should submit!* "

"For crimes against the Emperor Caesar Augustus and Herod!" This was Muso again.

"What crimes?"

"Make it easy for yourself, Rusco," Muso coaxed.

"We promise safe conduct if you surrender."

Some of the encircling mercenaries began to crowd closer, curiously, and the ^{vexillum's} vexillum's leader motioned and his twenty-five shifted to keep from being pushed against the group with the Chief Eunuch. The shift seemed a deliberate effort to keep separate and Rusco had a thought.

"Centurion! You there, with the ^{vexillum} vexillum! Come up." forward!"

The leader ranged alongside Muso and Panthera but kept himself separate, as he had kept his men.

"What is your share in this, Centurion?" Rusco demanded, ~~hopefully.~~

"I have direct orders from General Proculus," the Centurion replied, his voice somewhat defiant. "I am not to advance my ^{vexillum} vexillum unless the forty under the Tribune Muso and the Pilus Prior cannot make the arrest alone."

"Are the forty from the Tenth?"

"Not them! They're the bodyguard of the Chief Eunuch who is ~~standing~~ with them."

On his dark balcony Rusco breathed a pleased, "By Jupiter!" Calculating little Orfitus Proculus had not been able to keep clear of this thing, but he was trying to shift

as much responsibility as he could. ~~"By Jupiter!"~~ With the ^{vexillum} ~~vexillum~~ holding off, it should ^{not} ~~be~~ be hard to talk the Chief Eunuch's fight-for-pay ^{soldiers} ~~boys~~ into standing aside while he fought Muso and Panthera.

"You lie, Centurion!" Anger pushed Panthera beyond his protective circle. "You do not have an order to keep out of this."

The Centurion shrugged.

"Vedius Rusco!" Panthera bellowed. "We charge you with treason against great Caesar Augustus and Herod."

"And call upon you to surrender!" Muso cried.

"Centurion!" Rusco shouted.

"I hear."

"Centurion! This need not be a fight for more than three. Do this. Tell the Chief Eunuch's men that if they want to storm my walls they will, ^{perhaps,} ~~maybe,~~ take me, but ^{many} ~~plenty~~ of them will be ^{killed.} ~~hurt~~. Say that if they agree to stand aside, ^{will} I ~~will~~ come out and fight Muso and Panthera. If those two can take me, I ^{will} ~~will~~ be taken. But if the Chief Eunuch's men ^{will not} ~~won't~~ promise to leave the job to Muso and Panthera, I ^{shall} ~~will~~ fight in here with all my household."

The Centurion gave an admiring laugh and ran back.

Shortly ^a ~~an~~ approving shout went up from the bodyguard and rippled to the mercenaries who began to break their ring. They had no intention of missing ^{a conflict so sure to be memorable.} ~~what was sure to become a legend.~~

... Vedius Rusco Philippicus, against two enemies,
and one that bragging Pilus Prior who claimed he could ~~not~~ beat

12/1/61
 used
 and
 364

anybody ...

"All right, you two!" Rusco called down. "You heard! Make up your minds!"

"The forty agree!" the Centurion cried, trotting back.

"Make up your minds!" Rusco called again.

Musco and Panthera knew that their minds had been made up for them. They had no choice. A Tribune and a Pilus Prior could not expect men to follow them into battle if they, themselves, would not fight two against one.

"Come down and be killed!" Panthera bellowed.

"Vedius Rusco, traitor to Caesar Augustus, surrender or die!" Musco was hugging his patrician formality close.

Rusco walked down from the balcony. (11)

A raging Bracae met him. ~~"Two to one"~~ "You can't do it. You haven't a chance."

"Turn it around," Rusco said. "They haven't a chance."

"Let's mount and run for it."

"We ^{have} ~~ve~~ gone over all that. Now here is what I want.

Put ten men on the wall overlooking the fight. Divide the rest between the garden and courtyard entrances. Musco and Panthera may talk the Chief Eunuch into cheating. I don't trust him, and ~~I guess~~ ^{PERhaps} among his forty he could find a few willing to break a pledge. If more than Musco and Panthera jump me outside, the spears of our own ten can cover me until I can get back."

"Do I go out with you?"

"What else?"

"And you expect me to stand and watch?"

"You do not lift a finger. That ^{is} an order."

Candace hurried up, lamplight shining on her armor.

"And you stay inside!" Rusco told her.

"In my country, women fight," she cried. "I ~~will~~ ^{will} fight with you."

"You stay inside!"

"I ~~will~~ ^{will} fight with you!"

Rusco motioned ~~silently~~ and two of the slaves seized her. She struggled and called to Bracae and when he shook his head she cried despairingly to Rusco, "what did you teach me for, if I can't help -- now?"

"Come on, Bracae!" Rusco said and the doorkeeper unbarred the door, and the gate, and the dog crouched and talked in undertones, and the two men went out.

o-o-o

The moon was still bright. The light would be good although full of the warped shadows of night. ~~Unexpectedly~~ the Centurion had posted his veterans to form a square within which the fight would take place. He had made them kneel so that all behind might have a clear view. The bodyguard was scattering along the square's east side and nearby the Chief Eunuch, ^{Julius} ~~Salvidianus~~ Muse and Panthera were talking.

The mercenaries were collecting on the north and west, ^{for all the world} ~~They were acting~~ as though the arrival of the bodyguard had freed them of any further duty, ^{And} They were milling

around to find good places from which to watch the fight. They were in such numbers that the shifting bulk of their main body seemed to make the shadowed ground move.

A small group of ^{them, however} ~~the mercenaries~~ stood clear of the others, or rather the others all stood clear of this small group. Earlier in the day this group had numbered seventy-five men. Then it had numbered seventy-one, a fumbling, muttering seventy-one who had so enraged the Marshal at an afternoon inspection that he had said they needed more work and had sent them on night duty ^{to} at the villa. ~~But~~ They had scarcely started for the villa, when one man fell out for no reason and another suddenly sat down, saying he was tired, and another ^{would} said he ~~could~~ catch up as soon as he got rid of ~~junk~~ ^{stuff} he never should have packed in the first place. Another saw something to the east and went to take a look. Another went west. And on reaching the villa the balance had closed ranks and had looked at one another and pinched their mouths, and gestured, and darted glances left and right and fingered their weapons.

~~"We ~~just~~ have to stick together," the pantomime said. "If those others try to cold-shoulder us they'll find out. The very next one will find out."~~

insert →

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Looking at this group, now numbering ^{scarcely} ~~barely~~ sixty, Vedius Rusco was reminded of lepers keeping clear of the whole world and calling "Unclean! Unclean!" He was puzzled until he remembered Bria's broken cry. ~~Could~~ ^{could} these hang-dog men ~~be~~ ^{must be} the ones who had done the deed at Bethlehem ⊕

He saw, behind all the mercenaries, a few beggars ⊗

25% COTTON FIBRE

Wheat
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"We stick together," the pantomime said. "Let ^{those} ~~these~~ others
try to pretend they are better than us and ^{they will} ~~they will~~ find out. Let
them try only once, and they will find out."

~~Let it stand as you have cut it, or use this.~~

He saw Peleg, ^{vexillum's} And, as he advanced toward the vexillum's square, he saw more beggars and hard-muscled men of the country-side drifting through the warped, night shadows.

"I might ^{delay} ~~stall~~ this business if you ^{would} like a day-light fight better," the Centurion offered under his breath. Muso and Panthera were approaching. "Messala said I was to see, if the chance came, that you ^{were treated well} ~~got a square deal~~."

Rusco shook his head. His foes could not take any better advantage than he ^{could} ~~could~~ of the warps and tangents of light and shadow which the night created.

"But I'd like ^{To} ~~to have you~~ referee the fight," he said.

"Of course," the Centurion said.

"Panthera and I propose that the fight be with swords and daggers only," Muso said to Rusco.

"Speak to the referee, if you ^{will} ~~will~~ accept him as referee."

Rusco gestured toward the Centurion.

Muso and Panthera ^{consulted} ~~hesitated~~, then nodded.

Rusco continued in a louder voice than was entirely necessary; he wanted the audience to react and he wanted Muso and Panthera to feel the reaction. ¶ "Any weapons at all suit me," he cried. "Any or none. I'll fight ~~naked and bare-handed~~ if ~~that is what you like~~." And Holy Jupiter! What if they take me up!

He got his reaction. "Bare-handed! Naked!" The audience repeated the words gustily. This incredible Vedius Rusco Philippicus! The legend of the greatest centurion since Pullo and Vorenius began a new chapter.

Rusco knew why Muso and Panthera proposed discarding javelins. Throw or thrust, he was ~~ten times~~ better. He would have been almost sure of one center shot and they would have been lucky if either had nicked him.

"All right, swords and daggers only," the Centurion said. "~~And now here are the rules.~~ Vedius Rusco Philippicus takes the south side of the square. The Tribune and the Pilus Prior take the north. This will bring the moonlight over everybody's shoulders but not in anybody's face."

"Let's toss for north and south," Rusco said, aware that he was leaning over backward to be fair. The moon, for a fact, would fall a trifle into the face of Muso and Panthera.

"We're suited," Panthera grunted.

"The fool!" Bracae whispered. "He ^{is} so anxious to show off that he doesn't see you offered him an advantage."

"Positions!" the Centurion commanded.

The three placed themselves as directed. Panthera reached for his sword.

"Do not draw!" the Centurion warned. "But when I command 'WALK!' advance ^{two} ~~six~~ paces and halt. You will be ^{two} ~~twenty~~ paces apart. Then I'll command 'DRAW!' Then you will take your weapons but do not move. But when I command 'GUARD!' you are free to ~~do wherever you choose.~~ You are free to do anything you are man enough to do."

Rusco stooped and retied the laces of his boots.

In addition to helmet and breastplate he was wearing shin and thigh guards and he started to give a final ^{attention} ~~fix~~ to all of these.

"Let me!" Bracae said and tightened here, and there, and then looked up for Rusco's approval or dissent, ~~and loosened and looked again.~~ At last he stood back with tears in his eyes and pinched up some dust and spat on it and dirtied Rusco's neck where the flesh, above the breastplate's dark collar, invited a blow.

"Candace will go free with everyone else," Rusco said. "But ask Deborah to see that the girl either is invited to stay with her or is helped back to Numidia."

"She and Candace can ^{not} be parted now. But as long as Bria lives, she ^{will} say you should have married Candace."

"It's too late for that," Rusco said. "But one more thing. I hope Deborah goes back to Rome and I hope you and Bria stay with her."

Bracae dropped his hands to say that they were empty, that all of him was emptied, of any desire to go anywhere.

"And remember! You have an order. Stay out of this!"

"Not if Muso and Panthera live!" Bracae exploded. "If they live I'll kill them both or die trying."

Rusco threw his head back in laughter which drew amazed looks from the spectators, and angry suspicion from Muso and Panthera. But it was not pretended laughter. He felt wonderful.

"That's an 'if' you ^{will} never need to work on," he promised.

Muso and Panthera finished for each other the services which brace

which Bracae had just completed for Vedius Rusco, and Bracae got outside the square and looked around and now it was his turn to note the hang-dog mercenaries, and the thickening crowd of country folk and beggars.

The Centurion held up a hand to ask if the combatants were ready. He ^{received} ~~got~~ three nods in reply.

"WALK!" he commanded, and "HALT!" he commanded, when they had taken ^{two} ~~five~~ paces.

Panthera glanced to where the Chief Eunuch had set himself among his bodyguards. The latter waved. Vedius Rusco made sure his dagger slipped easily but he did not draw it. Against two he would not give his shield hand the double duty which had been a calculated risk against Panthera alone.

"DRAW!"

Rusco whipped his sword out, making the flat of the blade whine against the sheath and a murmur approved the showmanship which he knew he ^{should} have regretted.

"GUARD!"

o-o-o

Rusco heard Bracae roar an appeal to Woden, saw tall Candace race through the main gate, glimpsed Bracae lumbering to meet her and heard the audience loose a long shrill "Ya-a-a-a!" But after that he was very busy with his enemies. Muso and Panthera had leaped apart and were quartering in. He rushed the Tribune. He counted ^{ing} on two strokes before he would need to guard against the slower Panthera.

The second stroke drew a scarlet line along Muso's forearm. It was not crippling, ~~worse luck~~, but he hoped it would make Muso's sword hand slippery. Thereafter, however, he had little leisure to hope for anything.

Panthera was at him like a bear and Muso like a leopard and their points reached high and low and Panthera's big foot tried the stamping trick and Muso tried an uppercut with his shield-edge and would have lost shield and arm if Panthera's blade had not turned back Muso's counterstroke.

They were always at him. They never got far apart. Neither was willing to fight alone long enough to let ~~them~~ other slip in behind. But ^{nevertheless,} ~~just the same~~ Muso always faced two swords, high and low, always had to watch front and at least one flank, and once his thigh took a swipe from Muso which might have been serious if Panthers had struck it; and once sparks showered off his helmet and if the helmet had not been proof against even Panthera's sword the fight might have ended there; and once his shoulder took a numbing blow, and once his ribs took a bruising clout, and once a dagger screeched on his breastplate; and as the fight rolled on and on, blows battered his shield while it rose, circled and weaved in defense and, now and then, reflected the golden moon as calmly as might the untroubled surface of a lake.

His own sword kept raking at Muso's foxy face and threatening Panthera's groin and clattering against their shields. He kept them off balance but he was tiring and common-sense warned him he had better finish one of this pair or they

would finish him. But the high mood which stood higher than ever before assured him that he was not too tired. He would never be too tired. Like those demigods got by deities upon mortal maidens he could fight forever.

Well, at least he could fight until his opening came! And then his sword struck ^{so shrewdly} that not even Panthera's grip could hold his shield. It fell to the rocky ground and, while Panthera was reaching for it, the opening came. Rusco rushed Muso.

All along Rusco had heard the crowd's shrill "Ya-a-a-a-ing!" but as he rushed he heard a different sound. A hoarse roar swelled and suddenly was the only sound anywhere, as wide and deep as the world and more deafening than thunder. It filled Rusco's ears as he flung himself upon Muso. It drowned the crash of his shield against Muso's shield. As his sword slipped, more surely than seeping oil, into Muso's neck it turned Muso's scream to open-mouthed silence. It smothered the groan which Muso gave as he fell. It let Rusco spin silently, knowing that now he had only one enemy to finish. He advanced.

Panthera stood erect ten feet away, staring. Behind Rusco the roar began to break, amazingly, into the familiar elements of a general battle. But Panthera was unaware of this. In a fright which made him deaf, he was discovering again what oldsters meant when they said that Vedius Rusco Philippicus was the best. Once again he saw, and braced to meet, a terror, long-fanged and flashing like a wolf. The implacable living death from which he had once fled! And this time he could not flee. Rusco closed.

Off to one side the Chief Eunuch saw his chance. He had failed to find the Messiah Herod had demanded, but at least he could rid the tyrant of an encumbering Road Commissioner. He signalled and three of his bodyguards leveled their spears and charged.

Bracae shouted, but his voice was lost and it was the warped shadows of the spears, racing ahead, which warned Rusco. He got his shield over in time, but it could not ~~hold~~ ^{Turn} off three points, ^{aside} and they ^{all} went ~~clean~~ through him as his own sword went through Panthera. Turning, ~~with the spears tearing~~ at his bowels, he got his dagger out and stabbed one guardsman and fell on top of Panthera. And Bracae struck down the other two and knelt beside his master and friend, and Candace, crying in the voice of a woman, flung herself alongside Rusco.

The appalled Centurion signalled and his veterans swung into a protecting circle around the three, and, of necessity, dead Panthera; and the circle turned aside the stampede of mercenaries now in full flight from bitter country-folk and beggars. Trying most desperately of all to escape were the hang-dog sixty. And ^{thereby} the vengeful assailants tried most of furiously to reach ~~these~~.

The melee trapped the Chief Eunuch, mad with fear, attempting his own escape. At first he ran unrecognized and, ^{threat} being unarmed and no ^{threat} to anyone, was let alone. But an accidental blow made him shriek and Peleg looked close in the moonlight and shouted, "This one, too!" At that Jews swept in from every side and broke him bone by bone, nose,

jaw, skull, the arms he raised in protection, the legs on which he tried to flee, until a dagger at close quarters tore his throat wide open.

Four of the country-folk were not fighting. Rapt Esrom and quiet Obed and excited Zorobabal and Beor with his half-moon beard only watched and listened.

Country-folk and beggars alike were crying one word as they slashed and stabbed with weapons snatched from their ~~panicked~~ ^{panic-stricken} victims or ~~as they~~ flailed with staffs as murderous as weapons. They slashed and stabbed as one, as though the host of them swung like one sword in one giant hand.

"Bethlehem!" was the word they cried, although a few cried the old name, "Ephratah!" But old or new, the word always sounded as though it were spoken by hearts instead of throats. It was full of passion for the town which, although so small, had been great through generations and now was desecrated.

"Bethlehem!" "Ephratah!"

Bethlehem, where Rachel was buried and the proof, a pillar still standing; which had been on Jacob's lips, dying in alien Egypt; which had been a special prize when Joshus divided milk-and-honey Canaan among the conquering Tribes; which had nurtured the good judge, Ibzan. Bethlehem, which had received Ruth, mother of Israel's noblest line; where Samuel had sacrificed to the Lord; for whose sweet waters David had longed; lodestone which drew back from Babylonian exile one hundred twenty-three sons. Bethlemen, brief haven for the warrior Johanan before he fled Chaldean wrath into Egypt, and lately haven for a carpenter

now fleeing with his family from the wrath of Herod.

Shouting the name, country-folk and beggars, all answering a summons greater than themselves, hunted their prey reckless of any penalty Herod might ever demand, and chiefly they hunted the unclean sixty.

Rusco did not hear the shouting. Holding fast to Candace, he did not feel her tears although they rained upon his face. He saw her practicing gaily with Deborah. He saw Deborah. He saw ^{Naomi} ~~Miriam~~ plain. He saw Joseph's wife, serene and innocent-eyed.

He remembered how Joseph had quoted from the writings.

"Brace," he said, "Joseph will be sorry he had it right."

And then he shut his eyes to end the business of dying. He had been taught, in the hard school of his time, that when death comes there is nothing to be done about it except to clear the road for the living as fast as possible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

In Jerusalem, Nepte was one of the first to hear of the death by treachery of Vedius Rusco Philippicus after his great double victory. Those who had been witnesses, ~~could not~~ spread the news fast enough. ~~It spread~~ faster than Imperial couriers could have carried it. Men said later that the very waves and wind swept the story to the Empire's farthest shores, completing a legend which the Legions would retell for generations.

When the first confused shouts of returning soldiers roused Herod's city, the yellow girl was already awake. She lay on her pallet, building the day-and-night dream which filled her fancy more and more since she had teased from Panthera the will giving her freedom, if he died. It was the dream of where she would go on that day, and how.

The confused shouts ran on and she listened.

Vedius Rusco Philippicus, dead!

"I hope his women died with him," Nepte cried, springing to the window to hear more. She had known of the planned arrest but she had not expected this ending to it. She listened again.

But first he killed two, Panthera and ...

Listening no longer, Nepte danced around the floor.

"The dice fall for me! The dice fall for me!" she

whispered in wild exultation and sat down for a moment and hugged her naked knees against her naked breast.

The news continued through the window.

Oh At the Rusco villa, a riot, Mercenaries and Jews, in
a savage melee! *Nothing*, she told herself, could be better for her purposes. *Nothing!* She leaped up and, still naked, began systematically, to carry out her long-planned program.

She threw her cheapest, brightest clothing into a heap and spilled rank perfume over the heap.

She made a neat, innocent bundle of the richest clothing and veils that Panthera had brought for her and enclosed inside it a bag holding Herod's reward and the remainder of the Chief Eunuch's denarii.

She tied to her naked waist the pouch in which Panthera kept his plundered pearls, emeralds and rubies.

She hung around her neck, in another pouch, the most precious possession of all, the will, and then dressed in the perfumed clothes.

It was, ~~of course~~, illegal for a freed slave to run off before an officer of the State had sanctioned her freedom. It was death for such a one to be caught taking money and jewels not bequeathed to her. All such property belonged to the State. But Nepte's whole dream-plan stood upon Panthera's money and jewels.

"I ^{will} take the risk. I ^{will} not be caught. I ^{will} get away, and I know where to," Nepte whispered.

"Rome!" She spoke aloud. Rome was her goal. Since she ~~did not dare~~ ^{dared not} go back to Egypt, Rome was the city for her

horse.

The Risk would lessen as soon as she found a slave-dealer to provide her with respectability in the form of a maid and two strong bodyguards in ~~proper~~ livery. Two mutes, ~~Most~~ certainly mutes. And the maid a mute, also. She knew of such a dealer in Caesarea. Panthera had let ^{slip} that bit of helpful information. ~~slip.~~

"And then passage on a ship," she confided ~~subtly~~ to her hurrying mount.

"At Caesarea, a man will find a ship ready to sail for ~~almost~~ any port in the world," Panthera had said.

Certainly for Rome," Nepte ~~thought.~~

She kept her horse to a strong gallop. She did not expect pursuit. In the confusion following Vedius Rusco's death, not even a State informer would look for Panthera's slave until a few days had passed. ~~But~~ when she did halt ^{she planned} she would, ~~most emphatically,~~ pick cover to conceal her after the sun rose ~~and~~ even now she kept to the darker side of the trail, against any chance observer by moonlight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

By the same moonlight Helius Naepor led the hunt at a slow trot along the Jerusalem-Jericho highway. He was behind the Chief Eunuch's schedule, but he meant to be. He had been as late as he dared in starting and he did not care if he fell farther behind with every mile. He rode with his thick shoulders bowed.

He could hear the Tenth already. Naepor, the giant killer! Once let the ^{cohort} ~~troops~~ hear how their Primus Pilus had fought the battle of the Dead Sea -- five legionnaires crashing down on an unarmed carpenter, his woman and their baby -- and the whole legion would be as hard to handle as the Eighth ^{cohort} was for that empty-head, Panthera.

"Vedius Rusco," he whispered bitterly, "would have thrown this ~~job~~ in Herod's face."

Vedius Rusco had, in fact, thrown this very ~~job~~ in Herod's face. He had not only refused to help Herod hunt down babies, he had helped ~~this very~~ ^{the} carpenter and his wife get ~~aw~~ clear. That was why Muso and Panthera were south of Jerusalem right now, trying to trap a better man than the pair of them ever could make together.

He won't have his tunnel to help him get away. I fixed that. It was Panthera's doings, though. You don't turn

*the
don't
5*
~~scribble~~
*step
all*

in an old comrade even when you hate him.

Naepor's shoulders bowed lower.

I'm glad I sent Messala.

He wished he had remembered to bring something to drink, although he had ~~taken~~ ^{drunk ~~in~~ heavily} plenty, after receiving the Chief Eunuch's last order.

"You ^{will} find fresh horses waiting just west of Jericho, where you turn south," the bony anxious man had said. "If you push, you ought to run them down by dawn or not much later."

"Run them down! Run them down!" Naepor imitated the Chief Eunuch's thin hiss. This wasn't a job that called even for smart scouting. Except ^{perhaps} maybe for some hard riding, it was a job that anybody could have done. The carpenter had been at Rusco's villa only four days before, so he could have been in flight for only three. With a woman and baby along he wouldn't ^{not} have got far below Jericho, even now.

This piddling assignment wasn't, Naepor told himself, worthy even of a corporal, let alone a Primus Pilus. It was a chore for a recruit. ~~A silly chore~~ ^{for} just such a silly recruit as he himself had been when, high in the Alps, he had thought the fleecy clouds were Olympian meadows where Jupiter or Ceres or any of the twelve might come strolling.

Now why, Helius Naepor thought, was he remembering that? For years it had never entered his head but ^{now} then it had come back twice inside a month.

o-o-o

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At the relay station the service was slower than

cold honey. In spite of the Chief Eunuch's directions the remounts were still in their stalls and, of all things, eating!

"You were to have ^{had} your fastest horses fit and ready," Naepor said. He didn't ^{not} really care, but he had to protest such a lack of discipline. "If I run these stuffed cows, they ^{will} quit in the first hard quarter mile!"

The hostler looked back steadily, and even in the moonlight the hate on his face was unmistakable.

"Mercenaries!" he muttered. At least that was the way the word sounded.

Naepor rammed his javelin at the man's belly.

"Don't you know men of the Tenth when you see them?"

The hostler squirmed aside from the javelin point and raced into the night. Naepor let him go.

"Word of that Bethlehem thing has got down even here," he said as he and his four followers changed mounts. Nobody was clear even yet on what had happened in Bethlehem but one report was repeated oftener than any other.

"By Jupiter!" Naepor said. "If Herod did that, I ~~can't~~ ^{don't see} figure how he ^{can} ever sleep again. Killing babies!"

And what do you think Herod will do with this one you're going after?

o-o-o

They rode on and were just short of the turnoff when they heard behind them the pounding of hooves of a recklessly ridden horse.

"Block the road!" Naepor said. "Let's see who's

in such a hurry. It can't be couriers. There ^{is} only one."

A shadow thickened and rushed at them and became a hugh roan rearing and scattering foam from ^{an open} ~~a wide~~ mouth as his rider see-sawed him to a halt against four spears.

"I ride on private business," said a big weary voice.

"I don't want trouble but I won't be stopped. Pull over!"

"Bracae!" Naepor cried.

"Naepor!" What are you doing here?"

The Primus Pilus said cautiously that he was on a mission. "But you!" What business is so big you ^{would} kill a horse to finish it?"

"Vedius Rusco Philippicus is dead," Bracae said.

"Vedius?" Naepor's hands fell heavily to the pommel of his saddle. "Vedius! No! How?"

"By treachery after a fight with Muso and Panthera."

"But Muso and Panthera were only to arrest him."

"They'll arrest nobody any more."

"You killed them?"

"Vedius Rusco Philippicus killed them both in fair fight but then the Chief Eunuch's sneaking bodyguard killed Vedius." Bracae's voice thickened with savage satisfaction. "And the Chief Eunuch is ~~good and~~ dead, too. The Jews finished him when they stampeded the mercenaries."

"What Jews?"

"Jews from Bethlehem and all around. A mob of Jews! I never saw such a sight."

"But Rusco!" The world drew away from Helius Naepor.

He stood alone, naked, cold and frightened. He would not have admitted while Vedius Rusco ~~still~~ lived that he felt closer to his rival than to a brother, but it was so. He had loved him .
~~above kin.~~

"Vedius Rusco Philippicus is dead!" For years he had never allowed himself to speak the distinguished ~~egomen~~^{title}, but he used it now.

"They were only to make an arrest," he repeated dully.

"I'll be getting along," Bracae said and looked at the four legionnaires and they lowered their spears without awaiting permission. He whipped his reins sharply across the roan's neck and was off again at breakneck speed.

o-o-o

Riding into the ghostly wasteland below the Plain of Moab, Naepor thought of the dead. Not only Vedius! The Chief Eunuch was dead, that cheating peacock! Muso was dead, And not much loss to anyone! Panthera was dead, with only Nepte to mourn him, And she would be purring around a new protector by morning, unless she had already stolen away to a new base of operations. She ^{would} make it, if she had.

A thought tickled Naepor like a feather. He, he alone, was left to haul in all the reward Herod would pay. I'll get Herod's whole heap. There was no one left to share and no one left to make trouble by talking.

He lifted his head, and in place of gaunt rocks

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and shadowy hills, he saw a golden shower falling all around him. He rode along in this enriching rain. He would retire and go back home and buy a farm. Vedius Rusco always liked a farm. First, of course, he had to find the carpenter, but that was nothing.

He was skirting the Dead Sea, before the craftiness which had helped him keep on top of sixty centurions, warned him to give a thought to Bracae.

Bracae, ^{no doubt} ~~of course~~, had been riding to give Deborah the news about her father. ~~But~~ by now he would have told of meeting the Primus Pilus and four legionnaires, and he and Lucianius would be putting things together. Deborah and that ^{wise} ~~smart~~ Bria, too. They all would suspect what he was up to. They would have been with Vedius Rusco (Naepor now had little trouble withholding the ^{the} Philippicus) when he helped the carpenter get away and would know the carpenter's route and would be planning to warn him, if only out of loyalty to Rusco.

Naepor spoke to the four behind him. The horses had had time to shake down their food.

"Gallop!" he ordered, and put his ^{mount} ~~horse~~ to the faster gait. He ^{would} ~~show~~ Bracae! He ^{would} ~~run~~ down the carpenter and take him back by a different trail, farther east.

Why do I always think "the carpenter"? It ^{is} ~~is~~ the young mother Herod wants, and even more, the baby.

He held his horse to the gallop and on the barren, rocky track east of the Dead Sea he began to ^{estimate} ~~figure~~ time.

GILBERT

The moon was sinking into clouds along the west and the desert air was sharp with predawn cold.

"Look!" one of his four men said.

On the left, in dense shadow made by ~~some~~ giant boulders, something stirred. Tethered horses! Twelve! They might have been overlooked if the smell and clatter of the five approaching animals had not made them restless.

"Whoa-a!" Naepor cried. Twelve horses were too many to pass. Their owners might already be set in an ambush.

A head popped from behind one boulder.

"What do you want and who are you?" a voice demanded.

"I am the Primus Pilus of the Tenth Legion," Naepor called.

I almost believe you are!

"Hey!" ~~You could be at that!~~

Naepor passed over the impudence in the tone.

"I'm ^{And} hunting a man," he said. "A squat man with a patch over one eye. Maybe you've seen him."

"Squat? A patch?" The voice was thoughtful. "No."

"He might have slipped in with a caravan or even a smaller party. Have you seen a southbound caravan, or three or four travelling alone, or even two or three?"

"I certainly have." The voice began to laugh.

"Would you count Gestas?"

"Gestas, the robber?"

"He was around yesterday. And Hassaf, a tricky

Sound
VERY
roughly, but
perhaps you
can hear
more
D

monkey who runs spices from India to Damascus, was just a little to the south. And so was a small party of two with a baby and a donkey."

"I guess Hassaf's outfit is where I ought to look," Naepor said.

"He won't be far, and he'll be angling a little westerly to hit the Red Sea. The pair with the donkey probably will be close behind. Take a look at them, too."

"Why are they worth seeing?"

"You never saw such a pair." The man stepped clear of his rock, both hands upheld to show that they were empty. As though, Naepor thought, twenty-two other unseen hands were not full of weapons in the darkness behind him.

"Do I look like a ~~softy~~^{fool}?" the man asked.

"You look like one of two men Herod has been wanting for months," Naepor grinned. "You look like Gestas's^s other half, like Dimas, the robber."

"Me? A robber?" The voice was all hurt innocence.

"Never mind, Dimas," Naepor said. "The Legion isn't interested right now in anybody but the man with the patch. Let's hear about your wonderful pair and then I'll ride after the caravan."

Not denying the name Naepor had bestowed, Dimas hopped nimbly onto a boulder.

"It was like this," he said. "Yesterday this pair came walking along, a tall, scorched man and a young woman with a baby, and a loaded-down donkey, And out came my crowd from behind a little hill."

"A nice ~~cle~~ an ambush!"

?
"That pair ^{wasn't scared} (~~didn't scare~~) at all," Dimas said, ignoring the accusation. "The man said, 'Peace!' and she gave us a sort of friendly look. Nobody was scared, not even the baby. But, believe it or not, I heard someone asking if we could be of any help, ~~And~~ it was me."

Naepor waited.

"No, they said, they were getting on fine. They were just going to Egypt. Imagine! Hundreds of desert miles with only what a donkey could carry, ~~And~~ people like Gestas all along the trail, ~~But~~ these two were just walking along. 'Peace!' he said."

"~~And~~ you don't know where I'll find my big fellow with the patch?" Naepor asked.

"Squat, you said before."

"But big, too."

"No. With Hassaf, maybe."

~~Get~~
"I'll have a look," Naepor said and waved and rode off and took a deep satisfied breath. Barring ^{an encounter} ~~a run-in~~ with Bracae, he was in the clear and his quarry was just ahead. All he had to do was ride. Ride to Herod's reward. And Herod was generous with blood money.

Blood money! Naepor shook his thick shoulders.

o-o-o

The long, cold, desert night was ending. The dawn was opening all around, a leaden ~~dawn~~ with heavy mists in the hollows between the dun hills which, like retreating elephants,

blocked the eastern horizon.

Off to the right the Dead Sea looked like the belly of a floating dead fish. Aloft a vulture searched in great slow circles for carrion. His small head made him look, at such a distance, headless. He looked, Naepor thought, as though he might be sailing his slow circles hours after being beheaded, hours after being dead.

Dead! All night long, except when talking with Dimas, he had been thinking of death and of the dead. He closed his mind against a new thought ... that the man and ^{the} woman and ^{the} baby would be dead, too, in a little while after he got them back to Herod.

But that isn't my ^{worry} funeral. It's the man who gives the orders ^{is} who ^{'s} to blame.

"Come on," he said to his four. "We won't be long now if we ^{hurry.} ~~speed it up.~~"

Just as they broke into a run he saw, far ahead, entering a ravine which carried the trail southward, three tiny figures. They ^{appeared, in the distance,} ~~were~~ as small as figures he had sometimes made idly beside a campfire, from brokentwigs. One was ~~certainly~~ a man, one was ~~certainly~~ an animal, and the third, he was fairly sure, was a woman.

"Follow me!" he cried and turned his horse up a rocky short-cut which would bring him back to the trail at the far end of the ravine. It would bring him there, he estimated, ~~just~~ about the time the three figures emerged.

He reached his goal in triumph. The three were

not yet in sight and he halted his party on a hill overlooking the mouth of the ravine. The trail on which his quarry must walk was still thick with mist, but the sun was getting higher.

No softness now, he told himself! Panthera, Muso, the Chief Eunuch were dead and he would need to share with no one. Vedius Rusco was dead, so that if he did^{not} make a fool of himself he could live high, and never be galled by a higher rival again.

He stared toward the ravine and planned how he would pounce, after charging grandly down. It would be an easy charge, the hill was not steep. He would aim for that scrubby evergreen. He would halt there and swing an arm to send his men in for the capture.

Reins held close to his paunchy middle, he waited.

Mary, the donkey and Joseph walked out of the ravine.

Mary walked first; she carried the baby in the crook of one arm.

Joseph walked last, with his staff. *The donkey* *ambled obediently between*

The mist along the trail caught the sun/ and drifting, gleaming, called Naepor back to lofty meadows seen long ago. He saw again the immaculate fields where once, he had been sure, a god or goddess would come walking. Rapt and awed, he leaned forward in his saddle.

The mist caught in the swinging folds of Mary's blue dress and swirled about her. The sun glanced brightly off her swinging brown braids; it outlined the swaddled treasure which she cradled in her arm as she walked through the feathery vapor.

Naepor could not think. His mind was a tangle of fantastic questions.

Did a man ever go hunting for a thing he had lost in his youth? And if he hunted, could he find it?

If a man had thrown virtue away, could he find it again?

If a man, all his life long, had never been able to resist wrong, could he at last find the strength to stand for what was good?

He dismounted and went to the brow of the hill and stood there, looking down. The woman with the baby approached, the donkey and the man following, and as Naepor watched, motionless and silent, he got one question untangled and answered. He knew that not fear of Herod, not loss of the reward, not loss of his post as Primus Pilus -- not anything -- could make him charge down the hill as he had planned.

He was no longer a gross, ~~swinish~~ hunter intent upon blood money. Although he was sweat-stained, dust-covered, dirty from head to foot, he felt wonderfully clean.

The woman, the baby, the donkey and the man passed and moved slowly into the distance.

"But weren't we .." one of Naepor's four men stammered.

"No!" Naepor said. "No!" He climbed onto his horse and turned the beast north. "Follow me," he said.

At the north end of the ravine he saw a dozen riders coming toward him at a gallop. He recognized Bracae's half-naked bulk, Deborah, Brīa, Lucianius, followed by Micipsia

leading a group of mounted, armed slaves.

Helius Naepor came abreast of them and halted and they halted. He raised his hand, and wheeled his horse, and they all looked to the south.

o-o-o

In that direction Heliopolis lay. It was / long, long miles away but Rioncolura, on Egypt's border, where Herod's power ended, was less than half the distance.

(end)

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