

In Mediolanum the circumstances surrounding Rebecca suddenly took on a new urgency. It was one of those sheer flukes of fate that one of her servants was recognised in the marketplace, where she had been sent to obtain some necessities for her mistress. She hurried back to inform her, being so frightened that she took no care to find out whether she was being followed. She hurried to her mistress' room and threw herself down at her feet, almost incoherent with fear.

"Oh! My Lady, he knows me - and he wouldn't stop with his questions! In the end, I ran away from him!"

Rebecca had slowly grown pale. Apolonius was with her, and he glared down at the wretched girl like an avenging angel. It did nothing to dispel her fears. Rebecca took control with an effort.

"Tell me exactly what happened - slowly, you understand - slowly and quietly!"

The girl burst into sobs and tried to crouch lower to the floor. Rebecca drew a deep breath and grabbed her by the shoulders, pulling her to her feet. Softly she said.

"Tell me what happened!"

Between the sobs, she gathered that her maidservant had visited the market, and had been moving from stall to stall, looking for what she wanted, when a man had stood in front of her and called her by name. She had found herself confronted by someone who had visited the town house in Rome. Rebecca asked sharply.

"What man!? Who is he?"

The girl became incoherent again in the face of the abrupt question. Apolonius moved quietly to the window and stared out into the courtyard of the inn. It was hard to tell if any of the traffic augured danger. Rebecca persisted with her patient questions.

"Be calm, Phoebe - the Master would expect you to be calm!"

Apolonius jerked his head round to watch the outcome. Phoebe gradually quietened down.

"I think he's named Jacobus, my lady - he comes with those who visit the Patron."

"He's a servant of one of the merchants?"

The girl nodded, then she blushed.

"He always tries to talk to me."

Apolonius arched his brows. Rebecca prompted.

"So, he knows you quite well?"

The blush intensified, she nodded.

"You say you ran away without telling him where we were?"

Again she nodded. Apolonius interjected.

"Did he follow you?"

Rebecca's patient work was nearly undone, she glared at the former Praetorian. She asked more softly.

"Did he follow you, Phoebe?"

She wailed.

"I don't know, my lady."

Rebecca sent her away, there was nothing more to be learned and she certainly distracted clear thinking. She turned to Apolonius.

"I think this makes up our mind - we have to leave Mediolanum!"

Moodily he responded.

"If we still can! On the other hand, if she wasn't followed, nobody knows where we are."

"Mediolanum isn't Rome! It won't take long to find us if someone has a mind to do it.

They'll go from inn to inn and before long we'll be found!"

"Assuming they're looking for you - and not a servant-girl who might have run away from you - or one whom you might have sold to someone else!"

Rebecca stared at the window.

"So, you think we should ignore it?"

He shrugged.

"The decision might not be up to me much longer, I sense my men are growing restless and they want to move on - I'm sorry."

Rebecca jerked her eyes to him, he wasn't looking at her.

"I can't expect any of you to stay with us - and I know you'll want to stay with your men."

He got to his feet savagely, turning to face her.

"You must realise, if we separate, it won't take long before one gets careless. If one gets captured, he'll be tortured until he tells all he knows about you and your children as well as the rest of our group!"

"And you think that you're indispensable, and that no one will be captured if you're with them!?"

He flushed at her tone.

"I'll remind my lady that we thought it a good idea that we travel together for mutual protection - there wasn't a question of anyone being indispensable!"

She flushed.

"I'm sorry - I shouldn't have said that."

He nodded brusquely.

"The question is - what's to be done? - We either wait and hope no one's curious enough to track us down - or we head north and face the blizzards!"

Apolonius returned to his men in their quarters over the stables. He felt the need to keep an eye on them and be in their company as much as possible. If there was a move afoot to pull out, he wanted to know about it. He had decided that he wouldn't argue with them if that was their decision. He would wish them well, wave them on their way, and hope that the amicable parting would spark a sense of loyalty if they were captured and put to the test by Caligula's torturers.

Before the day was over, the choice was taken out of their hands. In the late afternoon,

there was a sudden stir of traffic in the courtyard, over and above what one might have expected from late travellers looking for lodgings for the night. A group of men clattered into the small square below Rebecca's window. In dull resignation, she counted them - there were nine - one was obviously in command. He wasn't a young man as far as she could see - but who could tell who Caesar would employ to track down a woman whom he wanted to procure for his own pleasures. Rebecca awaited the inevitable, the children were in another room with Naomi - Apolonius was with his men - if he didn't realise what was happening, she was defenseless. Perhaps, in any case, she was defenseless, Apolonius and his men could hardly be blamed if they chose to remain undetected.

There came a soft knock at the door, she stared at it. The knock was repeated, a little louder this time. Caligula's men would surely have thrust open the door and have secured her without the courtesy of knocking.

"Enter!"

She remained seated because she didn't dare to trust her legs. The door opened gently and Phoebe stood framed in the entrance, her eyes were wide with apprehension.

"A gentleman wishes to speak with you, my lady."

Rebecca nodded - what courtliness - Gaius Caesar must have told his messenger to act with courtesy. Phoebe was replaced in the opening by the older man who had led the group into the courtyard. He stared at her for a moment, before coming in.

"I am honoured to greet you, my lady - I am Tertius Anaeius Scipio - Have I the honour to address Rebecca, the wife of Lucian Gaius Quintus Publius?"

Rebecca inclined her head - words refused to come.

He moved towards her and she braced herself for what was coming next. He was a tall man, slender, but beyond his middle years; well groomed, his hair still full and practically white. She was surprised to find her hand raised and pressed to his lips.

"What is it you want with me, sir?"

He drew upright and blinked.

"To be of service to you, my lady!"

Rebecca stared at him.

"In what way, of service?"

He looked a little bewildered.

"As the wife of my Patron, I am most anxious to ensure your comfort, my lady

Rebecca!"

She seized on the word 'Patron'.

"You know my husband?"

The bewilderment increased.

"But of course! He is my Patron, I care for his interests here in Mediolanum - and in the surrounding cities!"

The thought had never crossed her mind that Lucian would have a representative in Mediolanum. She laughed and then started to cry - and then both together. He stared at her in growing concern - it was as well that Naomi rushed into the room and thrust him to one side, before nursing her mistress against her and glaring at the bewildered old man with the ferocity of a she-bear.

Apolonius also arrived, and Tertius Anaeus Scipio found himself on the receiving end of a short sword. It took some little time to sort out the situation. Scipio was thankful to find himself offered a seat, a glass of wine, and a series of apologies, all of which helped to reduce his heart rate. Rebecca said again.

"I am so sorry for your reception, sir."

Scipio twitched a smile. It looked an effort

"I do assure you, my lady - I have not had such an entertaining hour for quite some time!"

By this time, he had deduced that he had stumbled into a situation of some delicacy. He

was old and wise enough to see that the young servant who had nearly transfixed him with his sword, was clearly something to do with the military, but even allowing for his thoroughness, there was an unmistakable personal flavour about the defense of his mistress.

Scipio was a man who understood the necessity for delicacy in such matters. If the wife of his Patron had decided to travel the countryside in the company of such a young fellow - and had elected to keep a low profile while so doing - while her husband was elsewhere - it was hardly his immediate business. He decided that it was time to quietly withdraw and forget the episode had ever happened. Rebecca must have sensed his intention.

"I think it's time you were offered an explanation, sir. As my husband's friend, I plead for your assistance!"

Scipio blinked once again, altered his intention of an immediate departure and indicated his willingness to do everything in his power and resources to meet the situation.

Rebecca wasn't quite ready to divulge the full story.

"I am looking for a secure place where I can rest with my children and servants, without drawing attention to our presence. Lucian has been sent on a mission beyond the Alps, and I've been hoping for his return for some days."

"The passes through the Alps are quite blocked, my lady - it might be some weeks before they're reopened. Not even couriers from Rome can get through directly - all correspondence into Gallia, Rhaetia and points to the north has to be re-routed."

She nodded.

"Hence my dilemma - An inn is hardly the place to confine two lively children for any length of time. My intention was to travel through the Alps to join Lucian, so that we could make the return journey together."

"I gladly offer the hospitality of my home, my lady - my wife will be delighted - and to

hear news of Rome. I can assure you that she will invite all her friends and those who are - so to speak - exiled from home. And we all would like to hear first hand impressions of our new Caesar!"

Rebecca glanced at Apolonius, his face was inscrutable. She responded quietly.

"I have to ask you for the most absolute privacy, sir - my life and well-being might depend on it - no one must know that I am in Mediolanum!"

Scipio's smile of anticipation faded - there was a great deal more to this than met the eye.

He inclined his head.

"We shall, of course, be the souls of discretion - but may I request, my lady, that in your own time, you will tell me the full story - so that I can be of greater assistance - both to yourself and to your husband!?"

She nodded and smiled. The old man thought to himself that this frail creature was deceptive, she had a core of iron - and his Patron had found a worthy helpmate. He glanced at the young defender. His Patron had found a gem - and he had better be very quick to return to defend it before it was stolen away.

The transfer to the Scipio's home could have taken place that evening, but Apolonius counselled caution. First of all, Scipio had to be checked out to ensure he was whom he seemed. When they were alone again he told Rebecca.

"He says he's Lucian's representative here - but Caligula is known for his demonish cunning. He likes to play with people, building up their hopes before letting them fall into a trap - so let's be sure about Scipio. It won't be hard to do - a few enquiries here and there. Secondly, when we leave here, it must look as if we're leaving the city to head north - in this we're in luck, for if Scipio checks out, his home is outside the city in the hills to the north. So, we'll make it known that we're heading for the Alps to try to find a way through. Once clear of the city, we'll find his villa and quietly be swallowed up!"

Rebecca didn't like the idea of checking out Scipio, her instincts told her he was all he claimed to be, but she gave Apolonius his head - anything to keep him and his men happy. Once she was secure elsewhere, they would, perhaps, move on - but in the meantime, she needed them.

By the end of the next day, Apolonius was satisfied - their benefactor proved to be well known and respected. They spent their last night in Mediolanum, telling their servants to gossip about heading north to the frozen Alps - which brought out the inevitable prophets of doom. Everyone knew their intention on the following morning, there was much head shaking at the fool-hardy venture, some last minute advice. Sorrowing glances for the two children, who were being taken to their certain death by their love-sick mother. They were waved away, leaving the inn and heading for the northern gate, where they passed without inviting a second glance. It was too cold to think about revolutions, the guards were freezing, their only interest being to finish their spell of duty and get around the braziers in their quarters. If the travellers were fool enough to head north to their certain death - then so be it!

Apolonius led the party five miles out of the city, and then turned abruptly into a side road, in which they were soon hidden from prying eyes on the main road. Scipio's villa lay another five miles further - secluded, quiet, and a safe haven.

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The question of what was to happen next after the interrogation of Pilate, was firmly in the hands of Honarius. Lucian had no doubt about the renewed hatred he could expect from the administrator. He tried to place the sudden thawing of their relationship during the first evening into perspective. The best conclusion he could reach was that Pilate had been trying to split the forces he sensed were being arraigned against him - trying to set Lucian against Agrippa - trying, perhaps, to win an ally - but in this he would have been sadly disappointed by the weight of evidence Lucian had brought against him. In

fact, he had been more enraged with Lucian, than he had been with Agrippa and Marcellus.

To remain under Pilate's roof would prove to be prickly in the least - but - Honarius was the key. If his skin was not so sensitive, and if he chose to remain in a hostile atmosphere, there was little the rest of the party could do about it. Lucian toyed with the idea of confronting the Imperial Delegate, but the prospect of facing those arrogant, hostile eyes was daunting. He also played with the idea of seeking out Agrippa to test his sentiments, but his recently read history had soured the possibility of allying himself to a man who was so intimately connected with Gaius Caesar. In the end, Lucian decided to keep his own counsel and get on with his prime reason for being with the delegation - trading!

The promised meeting with the barbarian who called himself Ursus had been delayed by the trial of Pilate - Lucian could put no other name to it, it had been a trial! It was entirely possible that the German trader had retreated back into his forests, more than ever convinced that the Roman he had dealt with at the previous meeting was unreliable - perhaps afraid, perhaps arrogant, perhaps incapable of delivering his promises. If Ursus had gone, then so had the chance of establishing even a tenuous link with the barbarians across the Danuvius.

Lucian took Balthus with him again, this time, his slave carried a roll of brightly coloured silk and Lucian, a small bag of pearls. They returned to the place close to the main gate where Ursus had been on the last occasion. He was there, but this time he was without company - except for the jar which he occasionally drank from. The barbarian didn't rise at Lucian's approach. The Roman eyed him speculatively, he didn't look drunk, but who could tell with these people.

"You take your time, Roman!"

It was uncompromising.

"I was delayed."

"Obviously."

Lucian offered no explanation - it was none of his business.

"You stayed to see what I have to offer."

Ursus shrugged.

"I had nothing better to do with my time."

He sounded supremely indifferent.

"I brought you something to sell to your chieftains."

Ursus stared at him but said nothing. Lucian gestured to Balthus, who slowly unrolled a length of shimmering yellow silk cloth. It stood out against the grey, rough walls of the surrounding buildings and the snow-heavy clouds. Lucian rolled a few pearls into his hand - they were of moderate size and some of the merchandise Bezar had brought to Caesarea. Ursus spat accurately within a few inches of Lucian's sandals.

"And what do you suppose my chieftains would do with that - or those?"

He took another swig from his jug, never taking his eyes from Lucian.

"Dress their women, perhaps."

Ursus nearly choked, and then he let out a roar of laughter which caused the guards at the gate to turn. He echoed derisively.

"Dress their women!"

He paused and then leaned forward.

"Let me tell you about our chieftains and their women."

Lucian waited, Ursus uncoiled from the ground, the movement ought to have been lumbering, clumsy, but it wasn't. Lucian knew then that he was no trader, his movements were too quick, disciplined. Ursus drew to his full height, he topped Lucian by a foot. He was surely over six feet and built like the bear after whom he had been named.

"If you want to know about our chieftains, remember the one you call Arminius!"

Lucian tensed, Arminius had been the disturber of Germany. Segestes - a German

chieftain loyal to Rome - had revealed the fact that a rebellion was being organised - particularly at a last banquet after which they had rushed to arms, and he had urged Varus to arrest himself and Arminius and all the other chiefs, assuring him that the people would attempt nothing if the leading men were removed, and that he would then have an opportunity of sifting accusations and distinguishing the innocent. But Varus wouldn't listen and allowed himself to be lured into a trap and he and his three legions perished in the German forest by the swords of Arminius and his army. Lucian kept a bland face.

"I remember ancient history - but where is Arminius now - and how long did you hold back our armies?"

Ursus' eyes narrowed, Lucian waited, riding the balls of his feet, ready to leap aside if the barbarian was goaded beyond discretion. The German thought better of it, he pointed derisively at the silk, still being held like a banner by Balthus.

"You want to drape our women in that!?"

Lucian shrugged.

"Most women favour something soft to the touch."

Ursus thrust his jaw forward.

"Not our women! I'll tell you about our women."

"Go on."

Ursus stared at him steadily.

"When you go into battle, you Romans leave your wives and children far behind you - when we go into battle we go as families and clans. We keep those dearest to us, close to us. In this way we are reminded why we fight, for we can hear the shrieks of women and the cries of our infants. They are to every man the most sacred witnesses of our bravery - and they are our greatest encouragement. When our warriors are wounded, they go back to their mother or their wife, who don't shrink from counting the cuts - or even demanding that their men return to the battle to take more punishment. Our

women make sure the warriors are fed. They are a part of the army!"

Ursus dropped his voice a little.

"I tell you this, if our armies start to give ground they are rallied by our women who stand in front of their men with their bosoms laid bare, reminding the wavering warriors of the horrors of captivity, which we Germans fear the most on behalf of our women and children. We know our nation can be bound with the strongest ropes by being compelled to give hostages, and among them, maidens of noble birth, or our children."

Now, Lucian was sure he wasn't dealing with a trader.

Ursus jerked his finger at the yellow silk.

"Do you expect to we would dress such women in that!?"

Lucian answered softly.

"Not in a time of war, perhaps - but now there is peace."

Ursus thrust his face forward.

"I tell you this, Roman - there is never peace among the German tribes! We live to protect our land and to gain more - what you call peace is no more than an uneasy truce to mend our wounds and gather our strength."

"You don't talk like a trader."

Ursus laughed.

"In our nation, traders are warriors - so are our women!"

Lucian smiled and nodded.

"I'm sorry we can't do business - I still think you're wrong! You talk as a man who tells his women what to wear. I say, if I showed this cloth to your women - and if they're as bold as you say - they might tell you to mind your own business!"

Ursus stared at him straight-faced, and then he shook with laughter.

"Little Roman, you wouldn't stand a chance against our women - they'd take one look at you and snap you like a twig!"

Lucian smiled back at him.

"Perhaps - perhaps not."

He gestured to Balthus to roll up the silk, and carefully replaced the pearls in the bag. Ursus watched him, Lucian sensed that he didn't want to break contact, even though the trading wasn't forthcoming.

"You should come to our camp, Roman! I challenge you to a contest with our women!" He bellowed with laughter again, but he watched Lucian with unwavering eyes. Lucian sensed rising sense of doom in his slave. He answered carefully.

"And where is this camp of yours, Ursus?"

The barbarian pointed casually to the north.

"Along the fancy road your army built through the forest."

Lucian considered it.

"And if I'm fool enough to take up your - offer - what's to stop you from slitting my throat and leaving my corpse to rot under a tree?"

"Nothing, Roman! - but we wouldn't leave your corpse to rot under a tree - what do you think we are - barbarians!?"

Lucian stared at him, it was a case of the bear baiting him - not the other way around. Ursus' mocking grin told him that he expected to be refused.

"How far along the road to the north?"

The smile faded, to be replaced by something more calculating.

"No more than five of your miles - you could bring your army with you if you feel safer!" Every instinct screamed that it would be suicide to accept the challenge - but it WAS a challenge! Lucian wasn't stupid, he could see that the suggestion had been posed in that manner, so that he would have to either accept or earn the ignominy of being branded a coward in the eyes of the barbarian. He also knew that there could be no question of 'bringing the army' - not even an escort, which would be overwhelmed in any case, if the encampment had a sufficient numbers of Ursus' fellow 'traders'. On the other hand, to go alone would be the epitome of recklessness. He made up his mind.

"Let's go!"

He turned to the goggling Balthus.

"You stay! Give me the cloth! Wait for me at the lodgings!"

He turned to Ursus, whose smile had gone completely.

"Do we ride - or do we walk?"

"We walk!"

Lucian hefted the roll of cloth on to his right shoulder and walked slowly to the open town gate. The guards eyed the retreating backs of the unlikely duet and decided it was time to alert their centurion. In turn, the centurion alerted the Tribune to the fact that one of the Imperial Delegation had departed Augusta Vindelicum in the company of one of the northern tribes - and that they were heading along the road to Castra Regina. Balthus bolted back to the Residency as fast as his legs could carry him. He was unsure who to tell or what to do - if he chose wrongly, he could expect an unmerciful beating. It was perhaps as well that he happened to nearly collide with Marcellus on the way, although the centurion was notoriously short-tempered with most people - let alone a slave who chose to cannon into him. Balthus fell prostrate at his feet. Marcellus took his hand away from the hilt of his sword.

"By the gods, Balthus - I'll see you have a whipping for this!"

Balthus clenched his hands. He tried to babble his story, it wasn't very coherent.

Marcellus dragged him to his feet roughly.

"Start again, damn you! Slower!"

Balthus repeated the main gist of what had happened. Marcellus nearly threw him away, mouthing something obscene about rich merchants and their dubious ancestry. He marched rapidly to the quarters of his commanding officer. Vespa listened to the concise report and agreed that even idiot merchants needed to be saved from their own folly.

By this time, a collateral report had reached the Tribune commanding the legions in

Augusta Vindelicum - who broke the habits of a lifetime and informed the civil administrator that one of the Imperial Delegation was undoubtedly suffering mania and required rescuing from slavery or death. Pilate was not alone, he was enduring another more private session with Honarius, who had just informed him of the intention to remove the Delegation from his premises to begin a round-about, tortuous return to the more civilised climes of Rome. Thus it was that both interested parties were informed of the interesting turn of events, and also, that a cohort including Marcellus, Vespa and other elements of cavalry, set off in pursuit of the erstwhile Lucian and his new friend.