

How to Rescue a Wild Thing

by M. Licinius Verres (Albert J. Veres)

"If his aunt hadn't been rich he'd never have ended up with an ocelot in the first place," Atticus said. They sat on the rooftop terrace, a crenellated balcony framing the cascade of terracotta roofs and stark white chimneys tumbling southward towards the azure bay, punctured once or twice by a sudden green eruption of palm trees high above the esplanade.

"How would you ever feed a creature like that?" Rufus asked, his fashionable lisping accent lilting and sonorous in the affected manner of patrician youth. Atticus had learned to wait a while after his questions, to handle every innuendo and gauge each response, since there was such an age difference and of course the trouble in Rome - all everybody talked about now - with most of their friends afraid to take sides. Safer here in Naples. Rufus persisted: "How did he find an animal like that. I thought they were native to Africa."

Atticus drew out the long story about how they met, how they collaborated on his political career, and what Rome was like in those days - especially what the Republic was like in those days - hoping it would give Rufus more reason to consider the urgency of the task at hand. "His aunt was from an old Roman family and wealthy and he was the favorite nephew. So from time to time she sent him money. Rome was a lively place to be young in back then. We could carouse in the streets til all hours with reasonable chance of reaching home safely. There wasn't the open political hostility in the streets like now." Atticus realized he was apologizing for what was past and avoiding Rufus' slightly bored, inscrutable gaze. "He fed it live mice. But he meant well, he really did."

"You always talk about him," Rufus said. He had turned his gaze back away from the bay leaning toward Atticus. "You loved him, you love him still I can see that. But he had an ocelot and fed it live mice." "We were fast friends and he was very dear to me." Rufus is more sagacious than most, Atticus thought. Good he had been circumspect, in his effort to enlist him to act as his agent in Rome.

"He was very kind and actually loved animals. He didn't realize it couldn't live long there. Rome was crowded even in those days, the stench and filth of the streets and noise all the time so how could it have lived. Besides, it was already there not long for this world regardless. It was more or less a rescue attempt. He did everything he could; he used to put a leash on it and walk through the formal gardens at the house on the Palatine."

Rufus would not give up the advantage, Atticus knew, so he braced for the onslaught. "You know how tense the situation is in Rome. The runner said the conspirators are being tried in the Temple of Concordia so that the spirit of the goddess of national unity might ordain a just outcome. Why do you think I would want to give up here and go there even though you say the work you want me to do would be to my advantage as well as being important for your plan."

Atticus turned away, avoiding Rufus' penetrating stare. He knew he would have to stop talking about the past, sooner or later, that it might become an impediment to the success of his plan. It might even make Rufus doubt everything he had promised in exchange for his cooperation: an internship and advancement and a blossoming political career. "He was from Egypt," Atticus said defensively.

"You said he was from Arpinum."

"The ocelot was from Egypt, a curiosity, bought from a vendor outside the Circus Maximus rescued on a whim. He didn't think it would die." Rufus stared relentlessly at him. "Besides, as uncertain as the situation is in Rome at the moment, things will settle down when the conspirators are justly dealt with. The whole of the senate will be relieved and there will be rejoicing in the streets even if there is trouble continuing to simmer under the surface."

"You think about him all the time, even now. You compare me to him, you want me to leave here and go back to Rome and be successful and live up to his reputation. I like it here. I respect you, even more than my father, you're fair without the impossibly high standards he expects of me. Besides, the weather here is pleasant. It's cold in Rome."

"It's a dry cold and there isn't any snow. The sky can be so cold and blue that when you take a breath you can feel it rasping in your lungs." Atticus felt himself sinking into ancient memories, all of it as fresh as the present moment. "He had so much going for him. He was young then, like you. He was determined and persistent, he was a prolific writer and a master politician. He had a sense of humor, plenty of friends."

"And a rich aunt so he could buy an ocelot from Egypt that died. People in the suburra live in miserable conditions without enough food and water."

"At least there's plenty of food and water here."

"People will be suspicious if they know you sent me. They may suspect my intentions."

"No, be yourself, you are one of their crowd, they will welcome you. Just be on your guard."

"If they are suspicious, I'll remind them you are my mentor, that I am taking advantage of your expert training and connections, that my father expects me to live up to your standards to be competent and responsible. I can say that you're a good . . . what's the word . . ."

"Archetype? Perhaps 'example' is better." Atticus watched Rufus as he sifted through his thoughts. He was quick to assimilate the facts of a situation, consider the pitfalls, weigh his advantage. "It's more the things I can't foresee I'm worried about," he said.

"You need not be too concerned - especially while I continue to live here. They probably don't imagine I'm still alive let alone of any influence absorbed as they are with their own self importance and nefarious schemes."

"You are only twenty-two years old and a good student. So much promise. You can accomplish much, do much good. If only you remember the principles I have drummed into you, the ideals of the republic, the spirit of concordia. You don't yet know what they will think of you or how they will react."

Rufus blinked, bit his lips, and challenged: "Sometimes I think you don't understand me at all. You think I only want money or fame and excitement. What do you want? Do you really care so much about me?"

"Life isn't fair. When your father sent you to me that was true. You have been an apt pupil and have changed a great deal. But I admit, you remind me of my lost youth." Atticus infused his candor with warmth as he placed a hand on Rufus' shoulder. "It's my own youth I want back," he said with a wry smile. "And you make me feel it sometimes. That's worth a great deal."

"You want my youth and I want your wisdom," Rufus countered. "Isn't that fair enough?"

"Perhaps we have made an equitable exchange then." Atticus sighed and looked off into the waning twilight. "Life is hard."

"No," Rufus said, "Not so hard."

As evening fell they lingered on the terrace having consigned the future to the fates. The moths drifted about the torches, a wash of stars illuminating the heavens. The night air was cool and sweet with the sent of jasmine, the breeze rustled the palms and gulls lofted on the updrafts rising from the esplanade. Muted sounds stirred in the air, a puppy barked from a nearby terrace. To the south, a shooting star flashed across the sky. Rufus turned to face Atticus directly. "I guess I don't really care about the danger. I guess I'll go back to Rome. I'll tell them it's a rescue operation."

The End