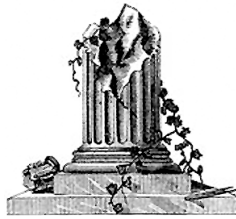


# ONE



THE PYRE HAD BURNED down at last. Marcellus, who had watched unflinching, turned now and wiped his brow with his hand. He took a breath, and drawing himself up he stepped from his mother's side, away from the solemn gathering of slaves and farm-hands, from Tyronius the steward, and from faithful old-man Clemens who had, in the end, outlived his master. At the altar of solid stone he paused, and taking a last fist of incense he cast it into the bronze fire-basket. The incense hissed and spluttered, and a strand of blue smoke wound up into the chill British air, curling over the old shrine with its pillared door and sloping roof, then drifting and dispersing between the surrounding poplars.

The youngest of the slave-girls wiped her eyes with her hand. Marcellus glanced up and gave her a brief smile, and for a moment, as he turned, his grey eyes met mine. I had scarcely dared look at him while the fire raged and

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his grandfather was consumed. The heat had reddened his square features; the undertow of pain, which showed in the fine lines about his mouth, had made him beautiful.

My heart filled. I knew he was holding his grief in check, for the sake of the others, and for his own pride.

He had told me, when we were alone, that this was no time for weeping. Aquinus had lived a noble life crowned with glory. He had shown there is a dwelling place for goodness in the world; he would not have wanted tears and wailing. He had stood against tyranny, and had preserved the province of Britain, and had died in peace, in his old age, in his own home. Count no man happy, he had once said, till he is dead, and the mocking hand of fate can touch him no more.

I took a step forward and gave Marcellus a nod. He met it with a private frown, as if to say, 'Well, Marcus, it is done, and we are on our own, you and I, to find our way as best we can.' Then, returning his mind to the business of the ceremony, he crossed back to the place of the fire, knelt down on one knee, and gathered the wine-cooled ashes into the alabaster jar, ready to join those of his ancestors in the ochre-painted tomb behind.

As he finished, his mother, who till now had remained silent, said in a tone as sharp as the frozen air, 'And thus the line is ended.'

Marcellus hesitated. I felt a tightening of the muscles in my back. This was the old fight between them; and I was the cause.

For the smallest instant he stared down at the ashes in his cupped hands. I saw the contours of his face harden,

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like a man in battle. ‘No, Mother,’ he said in a level voice, ‘there is me.’

He waited, not looking up. But she said no more; and after a moment he completed his task and set the cover on the jar. Then he stood, took the cloth from Tyronius, and cleaned the dust from his fingers. And she, whose features during the whole of the ceremony had remained still and cool as the embossed wreaths on the alabaster jar, continued to look out beyond the shrine to the middle distance, as if her words had not drawn blood.

I frowned, and considered her across the burnt-out clearing, feeling the beginnings of anger for his sake. He had wanted this day to be right, a final offering to his grandfather; but she would not let go her quarrel, even here. I was the enemy; but it was Marcellus, her son, and the man I loved, who had denied her what her heart longed for, when he failed to bring home a wife of her choosing, and produce a child to preserve the bloodline. Even Aquinus had chided her in the end, in his gentle, amused way, telling her she lacked proportion, that she should trust to the gods and the passage of time. But she had no trust in gods, and time had robbed her of her husband, Marcellus’s father, long ago. So in place of trust she had tried to order the world in accordance with her wishes; and the world had not obeyed.

I looked away, down to where a half-burned fragment of juniper-wood still smouldered near my foot. Who was I, I asked myself, to blame her? I had what I wanted, after all, while pain had made her brittle and remote. Some

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kindly god had brought Marcellus to me. He filled my life, he kindled my heart. Whom, I reflected, did she have, to set against the circuit of the seasons and the years? I knew she resented me, and I wished it were not so; yet I could not hate her. I had known too much of loss and solitude for that.

I let out my breath and watched it diffuse in the cold air. Already the frost was descending. Beyond the circle of poplars, the pale disc of the sun was drawing down over the canopy of forest, and above the tree line the evening star shone out, white and glimmering.

I returned my eyes to Marcellus. He was dousing the altar flame with wine from a silver pitcher. Across the remains of the pyre, silhouetted against the light, his mother was watching him from under her veil. Suddenly her head went up. I thought, at first, her gaze was directed at me, that she had divined my thoughts. But she was looking past me, out over the land. Then, in her precise, crystal voice, she said, 'Who are those people?' and everyone turned to stare.

Out below the ridge, caught in its long shadow, a line of horsemen were picking their way single-file down the track. 'Is this some business of yours, Marcellus, today of all days, when you have your family to attend to?'

'No, Mother,' he said, 'of course not.' He handed the pitcher to the steward and stepped out beyond the light of the torches. I moved up beside him. Unconsciously, with the habit of my training, I felt at my side, where my dagger should have been. But I had dressed for Aquinus's funeral, not for war. My dagger was at the house, lying on the

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table beside my bed where I had left it, in its latticed sheath of leather.

In a low voice intended only for me, Marcellus said, ‘See, they sit like soldiers, all but that squalid-looking one – you see him there? – the one second from the front, in the brown cloak.’

‘They are no soldiers I know. Where are their uniforms? And why do they come from the west, over the fields, and not from the road?’

He narrowed his eyes at them. ‘They did not want to be seen. They did not expect to find us out here in the open.’

‘We have no weapons,’ I said.

He nodded, then said, ‘I know.’

He threw a quick glance over his shoulder, towards the high-walled enclosure of the great house, judging the distance. It was built to resist a small army, in this time of barbarians, and there we should be safe. But already the horsemen were spreading into the low valley, closing the gap between.

He met my eye, and made a small angry gesture with his arm. ‘I am not going to run like some peasant before bandits, least of all today.’ Then he turned back to the others, the servants from the house and the landsmen. They were stirring now, and gaping in alarm. Raising his voice, Marcellus said, ‘Be still. These men have the look of soldiers. We will wait here, and see what they want.’

So we waited. We had little choice. I could see about thirty riders; I wondered how many more there were behind the ridge.

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In the valley they spread out and paused, looking at us warily and conferring. One of them pointed towards the oak gates in the enclosure wall, and the man beside him nodded. The gates stood open still, from when we had made our progress from the house, bearing Aquinus's body on its last journey. For a moment they glanced about confused; and I knew, if I had been armed, and with a troop of my men, that this would have been the time to strike. But it did not take long for them to realize we were defenceless, exposed in the open and at their mercy.

They divided. Some wheeled round and made for the house and high fortified walls of the enclosure; the rest, about twenty of them, led by the squalid-looking rider who sat so poorly on his horse, climbed the path to where we stood by the shrine and altar and burning torches. I frowned out at them, trying to make out the intention in their faces, preparing myself for violence. Recognition stirred. In the deepening gloom I shielded my eyes against the torchlight and looked again.

'What is it?' asked Marcellus.

'That one, the squalid one who rides like a slave. I know him.'

He had his hood up; but as he turned on the path the torchlight had caught him. He was older than I remembered; but childhood pain stays in the mind. His mean, self-satisfied face was one I could not forget.

'It's the bishop's creature,' I said. 'Faustus, the deacon. I am sure of it.'

Marcellus glared, but there was no more time to speak. The other riders circled us and dismounted, showing their

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swords. Then, when he was sure he was safe, the deacon clambered down from his horse.

‘What do you want, Faustus?’ I cried.

He peered at me, narrowing his eyes, and his sly face took on an expression of mock surprise. ‘Why Drusus, son of Appius, you are here too! But how not? Two doves with one trap, as the hunters say.’ To the armed men he nodded and said, ‘The traitor’s son; the father was executed.’ Then he turned and made a show of taking in his surroundings – looking with raised brows at the altar and implements, and the open doors of the mausoleum with the torches burning in their sconces on either side.

‘What is all this,’ he said, jabbing his finger. ‘Necromancy? Are you conjuring the dead? The penalty for necromancy is death.’

‘It is a funeral, you fool,’ said Marcellus. And his mother said sharply, ‘Who is this vulgar man?’

‘He is the bishop’s underling,’ I told her. ‘His name is Faustus.’

‘Whoever he is, he is intruding on family business. Tell him to leave, and take these men with him.’

‘That will not be possible, madam,’ answered Faustus smoothly. He reached into his cloak, and with an attempt at a flourish withdrew a crumpled document. ‘I have a warrant, you see, for the arrest of your son and his friend here. Now please, step away. These are not women’s matters.’

‘What warrant?’ cried Marcellus, stepping up. One of the soldiers warned him back with his sword. ‘The bishop has no authority. Is that why you come here, like thieves in the night?’

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Faustus gave him a brief, false smile; then he sniffed, rubbed his damp nose with his fingers, and wiped them on his cloak.

‘But who is speaking of the bishop?’ he asked with a pleased air. ‘This is an imperial warrant; it comes from the notary Paulus himself.’

‘I do not believe you. The emperor stripped him of his office.’

‘Yet the need calls forth the man. But have you not heard? Then I shall be the first to tell you. His eternity the emperor Constantius has reappointed Paulus to attend to the rebels and traitors in Gaul. The emperor knows his friends in adverse times, and there is none more loyal than Paulus. And the bishop, of course. And,’ he added, with a gesture at himself, ‘and me . . . So I am afraid your hopes have run away with you. The notary is waiting at Trier – see for yourself, see here, this is his seal.’

Marcellus took the warrant from his outstretched hand and studied it in the torchlight, then handed it to me. The deacon continued, ‘So I advise you to obey. We do not want the lady here to suffer any inconvenience, above all in these troubled times, with no one to protect her. And if you are innocent, well, then you have nothing to fear.’

‘No one is ever innocent to the notary. Everyone knows that. The man is a murderer.’

Faustus merely shrugged.

‘I suppose your master is behind this,’ I said to him.

‘Bishop Pulcher is a man who helps his friends. It would have been better for you if you had remembered it . . .



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Oh, but I almost forgot. Where is Aquinus? He too is summoned; indeed it is he the notary wants most of all.'

'Then,' said Marcellus, 'you are too late.'

'Too late? Must I remind you . . .?' But then a vacant look settled on the deacon's face as realization dawned. He craned his head and squinted with new interest at the bed of white ash. 'Oh,' he said. He shifted uneasily, then glanced round, like a man who finds he has been the victim of a trick. Pulling himself up, he went on, 'The notary will not be pleased. Still, I suppose nothing can be done.' He paused, and scratched his ear. Then, his confidence returning, he swept his arm in front of him and declared in a mocking voice, 'I do not know why you trouble over the corpse of a pagan. You should have tossed him on the midden, like a dog.'

The guards were ashamed. I questioned one of them as he was tying me, but he only mumbled that he was doing his job, and would not meet my eye.

They were all uneasy; I sensed it like a smell. They would not wait for the dawn; and as soon as the others returned from the house we set out, travelling by starlight and the quarter-moon, following seldom-used tracks.

Only Faustus spoke. He chattered on, mocking and crowing in his toneless voice. But at length, finding himself ignored, even he fell silent, and concentrated instead on his horse, which had grown sullen and resentful from his constant shifting and snatching at the reins.

We travelled south. Whenever the guards saw the glimmering lights of a settlement, we left the track to avoid it. We saw no one. Eventually, in the first grey of dawn,

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we came to an abandoned hamlet beside a muddy tidal creek. There was an old jetty, half-collapsed from age and neglect, and moored on one side of it a seagoing cutter.

Here we dismounted. Faustus's humour, such as it was, had ebbed away during the long cold night. Now, with no more attempt at pretence, he merely said, 'At last we are rid of you.' He paused after this, then added in a loud, intoning voice, 'If the eye offends, then pluck it out.' It sounded like something he had picked up from the bishop, or from one of his sacred books. For a moment he looked pleased with himself; then he snapped his fingers at the guards and we were dragged off to the ship.

The deacon knew well enough the particular hatred that the notary held for us; the shipmaster, a slovenly man with a dirty vessel, did not care, so long as he was paid. He inspected the purse of coin the deacon gave him, then he ordered us down into the hold. Here we were carefully chained, because those had been the deacon's instructions. But thereafter we were ignored – not fed, nor given water. But at least not cast overboard in our heavy manacles, as I had partly feared – for these, I knew, were the notary's methods. It was little comfort. I knew too that if we were spared drowning, it would only be because the notary had something worse in store. He was known across the empire as a master of torture and slow death. It was his pride.

It is seldom one can say of the barbarians that they have brought one something good. But chaos, which is the enemy of civilized life, is sometimes the enemy of tyrants too. When we made landfall in Gaul the first sound that met our ears was an angry disagreement on the quay-

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side. ‘What now?’ muttered Marcellus with a grim look at the rusted grille above our heads. ‘Is even murder too difficult?’

We listened to the muffled disputing voices. At one point I heard the shipmaster’s voice shout, ‘But these are the orders, see for yourself, look at the seal!’ and another voice responding in a flat, uninterested tone, ‘Orders or no orders, I can’t conjure men from nowhere. It should have been arranged.’

They argued on. Eventually heavy feet sounded on the deck, the grille flew open and the shipmaster’s heavy face appeared in the opening, flushed and angry.

‘Out!’ he ordered.

The boat was moored at a long stone quay lined with warehouses. The warehouses looked abandoned, with open doors and empty space within. At one end of the quay, a line of drab fishing skiffs lay tied one to the other, like craft laid up for winter and then forgotten. There was a town on the rising ground farther off. Its walls shone russet-red in the glow of the late sun.

‘Where is this place?’ I asked, rubbing my chafed wrists.

‘Boulogne,’ said the shipmaster, ‘not that it matters to you.’ And then, with an angry sweep of his arm at the official who was staring up at us from the wharf, ‘Go on! What are you gaping at? Go and fetch them!’

The man sniffed and strutted off.

‘So what now?’ asked Marcellus.

‘It’s not my concern. Your deacon friend said a detail from the notary would be here; but that fool’ – stubbing his thumb in the direction of the official – ‘doesn’t know

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what I'm talking about. "It was not arranged." He mimicked the official's voice.

Soon the port official returned with a detachment of men. They were not imperial troops, but some sort of local militia, little more than youths got up in rough, makeshift uniform. But they moved with sturdy pride, and their weapons – hunting knives or odd swords – were oiled and polished. There followed more discussion in the lee of the warehouse. I could not hear what was said. Once or twice their leader, a young captain with a broad, farm-boy face, glanced up with a furrowed brow. But the shipmaster, at least, was smiling. He was rid of us; and after some brief negotiation we were led away, out through the walled gateway of the docks.

We passed through a run-down quarter of ships' chandlers, coopers, sail-makers, and the kind of low taverns one finds at any harbour. Most were shuttered and closed. From a doorway a gaunt-looking street-trull called out and flashed her breast at Marcellus; but then she noticed our fettered wrists, and seeing there was no business to be had she abandoned her pretences and hawked and spat.

'Why is it so quiet?' I asked the captain. 'Where are the people?'

The captain frowned. 'There is no work. They have gone away.'

He had an honest, open face, and it seemed to me he was not happy with the task he had been given. So with a smile I asked how the town managed for itself, with all the trade gone.

He gave me a wary look, to see if I was somehow trying

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to trick him. No doubt he had been told I was a dangerous criminal. But then, with a shrug, he answered, 'We manage well enough. We have to. Now stop talking.' And after that he moved away from me.

That night we were shut up in an ancient cell built into the bricked inner arches of the town wall, the kind of place municipal authorities use for common thieves and such people. It was dripping-damp and smelled like a latrine. But before he locked us in for the night the young captain unchained us, and tossed in an armful of clean straw from the horse-manger outside. Next morning he brought goat's cheese wrapped in a cloth, and milk and rough barley-bread, and allowed us to stand in the open and wash at the trough.

As I splashed my face I glanced about, taking care to be discreet, for the captain had told his men to kill us if we tried to run, and they were as tense as hounds on a hunt. We were in a paved open area just within the town gate. Around us, a convoy of men and transports was assembling. I asked someone who was standing at a mule-cart what was happening.

He eyed my clothing – I was still dressed in the formal tunic I had worn for Aquinus's funeral, dark-red heavy wool, with a black cloak over – and asked where I was from. When I told him he said, 'The roads are not safe to travel. Is it not so in Britain? No? Then you are fortunate. No man will go alone if he can avoid it. The barbarians lie in wait and pick off the unwary, like wolves taking lambs, and the emperor does nothing.' He kicked at the wheel of his cart as if he hated it. It was laden with

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crude earthen pots and dishes, packed with straw. 'I was a rich man once,' he said. 'I had a thousand iugera of land beside the Rhine. Now I am reduced to this.'

'What happened, sir?' I asked.

'What happened?' He regarded me sidelong, to see if I was mocking him. But judging I was in earnest he continued, 'It is a story told a hundred times, why tell it again? The Franks came from the forest across the river. They burned my home and took my land.' He made a blowing sound at his raised palm, as if he were blowing away a speck of dust. 'All gone, everything I worked for; and now I am here. We live like prisoners behind the walls. My wife takes in sewing, and I am reduced to peddling this cheap ware, which once I should not have deigned to eat from.'

Someone called him. But before he walked off he added, 'My wife calls it fate. She takes it calmly.'

'But not you, sir?'

'A man should be master of his fate,' he answered. 'We had what we had, and we have lost it. Well I have said enough. It is treason to speak thus.'

It was well after sun-up before we set off.

I had supposed we were the only prisoners; but before we left, six old men were led down in chains from the town. They had well-bred, intelligent faces, and were dressed in what once had been fine clothes. They were the kind of solid citizens who form the backbone of any provincial city, and just those whom the notary liked to implicate in his webs of treason, so he could confiscate their wealth. They gazed hopelessly at the ground, and did

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as they were ordered. I could not speak to Marcellus, for we were being kept apart, but I caught his eye and he frowned back at me. We had seen the same oppression in Britain, before we drove the notary out.

The old men were loaded onto an open cart, and we were told to climb up after them. Then the captain shouted the order for the gates to be opened.

From Boulogne we moved east, passing through good, flat farming land. But good though it was, the fields had been left untended, and were growing over with tall grass and saplings; and if we saw a farmhouse or settlement, it had a wall thrown up around it, crude work of wooden pikes or scavenged masonry, put up in a hurry. Then, arriving at Rheims, we found the city gates shut against us, and no traffic on the road, though it was daylight still.

We halted, and the captain shouted up at the grey, corbelled walls. From the gatehouse heads appeared, townsmen with spears. Were we mad, they called, when they had found out who we were, thinking to travel at such a time? Had the captain not heard then? German tribes had swept in from beyond the Rhine; word was that the fortress city of Cologne had fallen. No one knew how far the barbarians had penetrated, or how great were their numbers. But great or few, there was no Roman army to oppose them, and each city of Gaul was forced to look to its own defence.

So at Rheims we waited. It seemed that no one knew what to do. Days passed; but every delay that kept us from the notary was welcome.

We were kept on the upper floor of a disused townhouse,

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with bare boards and crumbling plaster, and a window that gave out onto a muddy court.

One early morning, the young captain appeared with the guard who brought our breakfast. He stood leaning at the door while we ate; and after a while he spoke. His orders, he said, had been to take us to Trier, the Western imperial capital. But now, since the road was no longer safe, he had decided to take us to Paris, where he could hand us over to the authorities and be done with us.

He had spoken awkwardly, and when he was finished he waited, shifting uneasily from foot to foot. He was a simple farm-lad with an unruly mop of curling, corn-coloured hair; he would have been happier building hayricks, and there was too much decency in him not to feel shame at holding prisoner men who were old enough to be his grandfather.

Sensing he was eager to talk, I asked if he would eat with us. As I had guessed, this was the lead he had been waiting for, even if he did not know it himself. He came forward and squatted down, and one of the old men pushed the common platter of bread and cheese to him, and asked him about his family.

His father, he said, farmed a plot not far from Boulogne – you could see the fields from the high part of the town, where the old temple was. He had two brothers; he was the third son – the youngest.

‘I too have a son,’ said the old man. ‘He is in the army, serving the emperor on the Persian border. I expect I shall not see him again.’

The captain paused and looked at him. ‘I am sorry, sir,’



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he said through the food in his mouth. 'I do not understand why the world is as it is.' He fell silent, and chewed with a furrowed brow. After a few moments he said, 'There are baths close by. If I take you there, will you promise not to try and run?'

'Run?' said another, giving a bitter laugh. 'Where to? We are too old to run. We have no money; we are already half dead. I will not lose the last of my dignity.'

So we got our first proper bath for many days, a naked row of grim, unhappy old men, the captain, Marcellus and I.

We fell to talking, as one does at such times, and soon the talk turned to the barbarians.

'Sometimes weeks pass and you do not see them,' said the captain, shaking his head, 'and then, when you think it's safe again – there! They have you.' He made a motion across his throat with his finger. He knew of whole families – father, mother, children, grandparents – who had been found cut to pieces on their farms, when they could just as easily have been spared. On one farm he had found two young children, a son and a daughter, strung up from the trees behind the grain-store. 'The girl,' he said frowning, 'was naked. She was six years old. My brother knew the family.'

'Is that why you joined the militia?' asked one of the old men.

The captain paused before he answered. 'I wanted things to be better,' he said.

The old men looked at one another. It seemed cruel to ask the obvious question: why he was escorting helpless

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townfolk far from home when he should be protecting his farm and family. I suppose he sensed it, for presently he said unprompted, 'I try to do my duty. I don't know what else there is.'

I asked what had happened in Gaul. He told me how last year the emperor had sent a general to set things to rights, but instead of fighting the enemy the general had declared himself Augustus. So the emperor sent another general to remove the first. Then the prefect had been caught plotting, and he too was ordered back to court. Little wonder, he said, kicking the water with his naked foot, that the German tribes were tearing Gaul apart.

After this, one of the old men said, 'And what then of the notary Paulus?'

The captain pulled a face. He threw a quick, wary glance across the steam-filled room before he answered. Narrow spears of winter sunlight were shafting in from the little windows under the tiled, domed roof. No one else was there. Even so, he lowered his voice before he spoke. The notary, he said, was supposed to be at Trier, where he had taken up residence in the imperial palace while he conducted his inquisitions. He paused, then added, 'But one of my men has got it from a tavern-keeper here in Rheims that the notary fled when the German barbarians took Cologne.'

'Where to?'

The captain shrugged. 'Who can say? All of Gaul is like a stirred-up wasps' nest. No one knows anything for sure.'

Private looks were exchanged. Marcellus said, 'Who then is at Paris?'

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‘I heard the emperor’s cousin is on his way. The emperor has promoted him to Caesar, and sent him to Gaul to save us.’

‘What, Julian?’ cried the old man beside Marcellus. ‘Can the emperor do no better? Julian is little more than a boy, and certainly no soldier.’

‘So people say. But word is he is surprising everyone of late. He has been fighting the barbarians in the south, and now he is marching north. They say he is an honest man.’

‘Then he must be rare as a butterfly in winter,’ said the old man bitterly. But he had little else to cling to, and so he said no more.

And thus it was, that winter, in my twenty-first year, and all because Cologne had fallen and the barbarians had come swarming across the Rhine, that I came to Paris, a small city I had never heard of. It changed my life forever.

It had rained all day, grey gusting swathes of it, driving in from the west. But, as we approached, the clouds finally frayed and parted, and the sky flared into a towering sunset, reflecting on the river in the valley ahead, and glancing off the wet terracotta tiles of the city spread before us. The town itself was unwalled – the first in Gaul I had seen without walls – but in the middle of the river, on its own boat-shaped island, a squat, ancient-looking citadel rose up, its sheer walls mottled in the slanting sunlight.

As we descended into the low valley the road divided. The eastern fork led to a square-walled army fort on the

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hill; the other, which we took, continued south, down to the bridge and the island citadel.

The cressets had been kindled by the time we reached the inner courtyard. We were received into a high, vaulted chamber that was divided into iron-barred pens, like a place for sheep or cattle. Here we waited, while a bored-looking clerk copied the details of the warrant onto a wax tablet, and called each of us before him.

When my turn came he peered at me, peered again at the warrant, then with a flick of his hand beckoned Marcellus up from behind.

‘Wait over there,’ he told us, gesturing to one side.

We waited, watching while a steady traffic of officials passed to and fro, dressed in their long dark tunics, clutching papers and tablets and scrolls, some deep in conversation, others staring fixedly ahead, all seeming busy, none of them noticing for an instant the prisoners and clients waiting to be seen.

‘All this activity,’ muttered Marcellus, who had no time for bureaucrats, ‘and yet the province burns.’

But presently a dapper young man in green and scarlet livery came up and asked us to follow him. He wore a wide belt of brown leather, studded with silver. It was fine and showy. I noticed it bore no weapons.

He seemed rather pleased with himself, but he was civil enough. He conducted us from the chamber, along one of the many corridors, and then up a flight of ancient stone steps, worn down by generations of footfalls. We climbed for some time, past tiny window embrasures that showed the river and land beyond, until we emerged at last into

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a wide high-walled courtyard somewhere in the upper part of the citadel.

In the middle a huge old cedar grew black against the darkening sky, rising from the flagstones. On one side, high up, a wooden walkway followed the line of the outer rampart, below the parapet. Here and there, narrow window-slots looked down from stone walls; but no lamps burned in them, and there was no sign of life, no sounds of voices – only the distant sweep of the river far below, and, in the boughs of the cedar, the indignant chirruping of some night-bird.

‘This way,’ said the liveried youth.

Soon he paused at a studded door with an iron handle. He unlatched it, and gestured us inside, saying others would come soon.

Then he left us.

Something was not right. I frowned to myself, trying to think. The room was long and whitewashed and unadorned, with a narrow mullioned window at one end. Someone had lit a lamp for us; it flickered from a recessed ledge. By its light I saw there were two beds, neatly made up with clean sheets and bolsters; and against the wall a table and a washstand.

I was about to comment on this to Marcellus; for one did not, in my experience, encounter prison cells furnished in such a way. But before I could speak, he called from where he was standing by the window. ‘Come, Drusus, look here!’

He had opened the shutter and was fingering the stone mullion. ‘See, there are no bars. It is narrow, but we could get through.’

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I moved up beside him. ‘Yes,’ I said, tapping the rough stonework, ‘I think so.’ I paused and frowned. Then, with a jolt, I realized what had been troubling me. ‘But wait, Marcellus!’ I cried. ‘Did you see keys or locks? Did you hear the guard close the bolt?’

He looked at me. And then I leaped past him to the door, and heaved on the iron-wrought handle. The latch clicked, and the door swung open.

I peered out across the dark courtyard, with Marcellus pressing up beside me.

‘I don’t understand,’ he said, ‘unless—’ But before he could finish I caught his arm and hushed him. On the far side of the great courtyard a door had opened, showing distant figures silhouetted by the light within. We drew back inside, and eased the door closed. Soon footsteps sounded outside on the flags. There was a tap, a silent pause; then the latch stirred, and two servant-boys entered, bearing in their arms a pile of towels, and, on top, two neatly folded tunics.

‘I am sorry, sirs,’ said one, ‘for keeping you waiting. I expect you are tired after your journey, and will be wanting to wash and change. I have sent for warm water. It will be here directly.’

I stared at him, and after a courteous pause he eased past me and set down the towels on the washstand, while his companion began unfolding the tunics, one on each bed. They were of fine white linen, with a waterleaf border embroidered in green.

Seeing me staring he turned with a look of concern. ‘I know, sir; forgive me. But I could find nothing better at

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this short notice. If you will tolerate it for today, I shall have something more suitable made up by morning.'

I gaped, first at the clothes, then at him. He smiled, then gave a small, polite cough. He must have supposed I was simple.

'My lord Eutherius sends apologies,' he continued, 'that he has not been able to greet you personally. But he hopes you will feel disposed to join him later for dinner.'

I looked at him, but it was Marcellus who spoke. 'Delighted,' he said, in his best charming voice.

It was as well he was there. I do not think I could have uttered a word.

I thought my twenty years of life had been eventful and varied; but nothing had prepared me for Eutherius.

We had stripped and washed, and dressed in the fine new clothes that had been brought for us. Later the servant-boy returned. He escorted us through the citadel, along dim corridors lit by bare lamps, through cavern-roofed halls, and down stone stairways, until we came to a part of that great rambling fortress that looked less like a barbarian stronghold and more like a rich man's palace.

We came at length to a room that put me in mind of some costly woman's tiring-chamber, decorated with silk hangings of vermilion and pink. Silver lamps in the shape of swans burned on a wrought standard, suspended on little chains. At one side, three upholstered couches had been placed around a low polished table. Arranged upon it, in green glass bowls, were figs and sweetmeats, and tiny cooked eggs garnished with herbs.

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‘Please,’ said the servant, making a civil gesture for us to sit. The lord Eutherius would be with us directly.

So we sat. The servant went off, and we waited, alone and unguarded, and stared about at the festoons of silk, and at the little glass bowls, and at each other.

Presently voices sounded outside. The double-doors with their painted panels opened, and a large middle-aged man swept in.

‘Forgive me!’ he cried, spreading his big fleshy hands in a gesture of supplication. ‘How rude you must think me, to have kept you.’

He was dressed in a bright ankle-length tunic of crimson and dust-blue, with embroidered edges and a belt of woven gold. The sweet smell of apple-scent hung about him. ‘No, no, please don’t stand,’ he cried, seeing us move. He eased himself down onto the couch opposite. ‘I have been obliged,’ he went on with a sigh, ‘to attend unexpectedly to matters of state: the new prefect has just arrived, you see, far earlier than anyone expected.’

He spoke in careful precise Latin, with a hint of the sing-song cadence of Greek. He smoothed down his clothes, and arranged his large body on the couch, saying, ‘But you have had the most arduous journey, I am sure; nothing must disturb your comfort further.’ He turned with a smile to a dark-skinned, exquisitely dressed boy who had entered with him, who had gone off to stand beside the hangings. ‘We will have our wine, I think, Agatho. And – if these gentlemen do not object – you may give word to the cook that we are ready for him at last.’

Earlier, waiting for the servant to fetch us, we had deter-



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mined that we should try to escape that night. The unbolted door must surely have been a foolish oversight; either that or, amidst the muddle of our arrival, we had been taken for someone else. Best to be gone, then, before some clerk discovered his error.

Yet this man Eutherius seemed to be expecting us. And now, after wine had been poured and passed around by the pretty servant-boy, Eutherius turned intelligent dark eyes on me and said, ‘I gather, young man, that you have fallen foul of our friend the notary?’

I swallowed. The wine – fine and cool and fragrant, the kind my uncle used to import from the Rhine for his richest clients – suddenly tasted bitter on my tongue. I had allowed myself to hope, fool that I was. I should have guessed the notary would not be content with a quick death. He would want to twist the knife: he had made slow murder his life’s business. Torture was his art.

I set down my gilded cup. ‘Then you know,’ I said, in a slow, even voice. I was about to go on, and tell him he could set aside this absurd pretence; but before I could speak the doors flew open and a team of liveried men marched in, bearing platters of food high in their hands, which they presented to Eutherius, and then set down before us: mushrooms in honey; diced fragrant chicken; mullet cooked with almonds and red berries; glazed pork on sticks; and other delicacies in small covered pots.

‘Excellent! How wonderful!’ cried Eutherius, beaming at the silver plates. But Marcellus coughed and frowned. His face was beginning to show the strain. ‘Forgive me,

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sir. I do not understand. Are we prisoners here? You treat us as honoured guests.'

'And so you are,' said Eutherius, turning to him.

Marcellus looked into his face, waiting. After the hardships of the journey I could tell his patience was at an end. I suppose our host saw it too. With a sigh he set down the little embossed dish he was holding and said, 'I see I shall have to explain, if I am not to spoil this banquet of ours. But please eat . . . and while you eat I shall tell you.'

The notary Paulus, he said, was not the only man to make use of spies. It was a sad reflection that even spies and their masters were watched – the notary included. 'But there it is. Spies are spied upon; guards are guarded.' And after the disaster he had caused in Britain – which, said Eutherius with a nod, Marcellus and I knew of at first hand – Constantius the emperor had decided Paulus had criminally exceeded his orders, and demanded his presence at court. 'The emperor,' he added, with a dry look, 'wisely ensures that he bears no responsibility for the faults of his subordinates.'

He paused, ate a honeyed mushroom, then went on, 'Well, as it happens, I myself was at court in Milan when Paulus arrived. He came by sea, all pomp and retinue and swaggering attendants – not at all what the divine Constantius wanted to observe when he had just received word of yet another rebellion. Really, it was a most injudicious move on the notary's part.' He puckered his lips, and surveyed us with wide innocent eyes. 'As for you, we knew you had been taken, but in all the confusion we did not

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know where. Then my' – he paused – 'my contacts, let us say, in Rheims, brought word. You may have noticed your appalling journey improved a little thereafter. Now do stop staring, and try to eat. You both look lean as stray dogs.'

We did as he bade us, and as my emotion subsided, I realized how hungry I was.

While we ate he went on, 'Between you and me, I can tell you that I too have had occasion to disagree with our esteemed notary. He is—' He raised a finger, and pulled a face as if he had swallowed vinegar. 'Well, perhaps best not to speak too freely of a man with such a reputation. So let us merely say that he can be contentious.'

Marcellus, eating mechanically, was watching him with eyes as attentive as a greyhound's. The servant-boy Agatho stepped up and refilled my wine-cup. I drank it quickly down.

'However you look at it,' Eutherius continued, 'the emperor has been badly advised. Now Britain is in turmoil and barbarians range over Gaul at will. So he has appointed his young cousin Julian as Caesar, and that is why I am here.' He slipped a berry into his mouth, and inclining his head to Marcellus said, 'So, to return to your question, you are most certainly not prisoners. You are free to leave, even now, in the midst of this feast. The unfortunate men who accompanied you have already been offered passage home. And you, if you wish, are at liberty to go with them . . . But perhaps, when you see for yourselves that all I tell you is true, you will consider staying for a while. Julian will be here this winter. I should like you to meet him.'

## TWO



NEXT DAY WE LEFT our room and walked about. No one stopped us.

We had been housed in the oldest part of the citadel, all thick ashlar walls and stone passages; but elsewhere there were newer additions in the Roman style: handsome panelled rooms with mosaic floors, frescoes and pilasters, built around a cloistered garden planted with neat plum trees and bordered with rows of box hedge.

We retraced our steps, and going by a different way we came to a long cavernous chamber flanked by squat columns and hung with heavy faded tapestries. It was some sort of room of state, with a dais and high-backed chair at one end. Grey winter light filtered in from narrow window-slits; an iron-wrought cresset hissed and flickered against the wall.

At the far end was a high ceremonial doorway with a postern in it. We walked through, emerging onto a balcony

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with a flight of steps which descended into the paved courtyard below. Around us on three sides the sheer walls of the citadel rose up; on the fourth there was a stone gateway, and beside it a guard dressed in imperial uniform.

Marcellus frowned down from the balcony. 'Now,' he said, 'let us see if we are truly free to go.'

We went down the steps, crossed the great square courtyard, and strode up to the gate. The guard's eyes moved. He nodded at Marcellus, and let us pass without a word.

We strode on, scarcely daring to turn. But when I glanced behind, no one was following.

I let out my breath. I had not realized, till then, that I was holding it in. After weeks of captivity, and sleepless nights on stinking straw, and days filled with the corrosive dread of sudden, violent death, it seemed we were free, just as our strange new host Eutherius had promised. I felt almost ashamed to have doubted him. But Marcellus said, 'We had to know, Drusus. Words are one thing; deeds are another.'

We wandered without hindrance. The island where the citadel stands is the oldest part of Paris, with the rest of the city spreading out to the south, across the river. Outside the citadel walls is an old town of narrow streets and shadowy iron-gated courtyards; and, beside the river, on the eastern side of the island, an old temple set upon a raised base. We came across it on that first day. As we drew near I looked up at the gable-end. Written in sculpted bronze was the dedication: IOVI OPTIMO MAXIMO.

'Jupiter's temple,' said Marcellus, gazing at the verdigris lettering.

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We climbed the marble steps to the podium, and walked along the colonnade of acanthus-topped columns, pausing at the ledge and looking down at the fast-flowing water below.

‘What do you think?’ said Marcellus, returning to the question we had been discussing all morning: whether we should stay or go.

I was watching a pair of moorhens as they darted on the water, dipping down, then bobbing up like glistening black corks and shaking themselves.

‘There is still Paulus the notary,’ I said.

Each time, as we had talked, we had returned to this.

He nodded. ‘Yes. I thought we were rid of him.’ His voice was bleak and angry.

‘I too. But now we know differently.’

I recalled the day I had dispatched the terrifying, hard-faced notary as a prisoner from London to answer to the emperor for his crimes. He had torn the province of Britain apart with his treason inquisitions. He considered himself above the law, like all of the emperor Constantius’s black-clad secret agents. It was I, and Marcellus, and Marcellus’s grandfather Aquinus who had stood against him in the end, and helped the people of Britain to drive him out. But too many had died. The province would never be the same. That day, on the quayside in London, he had said in a voice that chilled my soul that I had better hope we never met again. And now he was free, and restored to power. So much, I thought bitterly, for imperial justice.

I glanced up from the swirling water to Marcellus’s face, then gestured out southwards at the undulating green land

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in the distance, with its leafless fruit trees, and old enclosures, and black vine stocks on the slopes. 'He may have fled from Trier, but he is out there somewhere, and the emperor has forgiven him his crimes, or does not care.'

I saw Marcellus's broad, strong hand clench and unclench, showing the tendons in his wrist. He raised his arm and pushed his fingers through his mane of hair, in the unconscious way he had when he was troubled. His hair was the tawny colour of old bronze. It always turned that way in winter.

'I will not live like a caged animal.'

I nodded; then said, 'I know.' It was one of the things that made me love him.

'If we go back, Drusus, we will never rest easy; we will never know when he is coming for us – he and his agents and that creature Faustus, lurking like thieves in the shadows, waiting for our guard to drop. He hates us too much to forget. Every stranger's visit, every creak in the night . . .' He paused and frowned. Then he said, 'I ask myself what Grandfather would have done.'

I too had asked myself this question. Aquinus had stayed true to his honour, and to what befitted a gentleman. He was gone; but his lesson stood before us. He had never consented to slavery, either of his body or his mind.

'Then,' I said, 'we must see this onwards to its end, wherever it takes us.'

He nodded slowly, and gazed downriver.

It had been a day of cloud. But now at last the sun had broken through, horizontal spreading bands of purple and brilliant orange, set against the rain-soaked land.

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‘There is something I like about Eutherius,’ he said, after a pause. ‘He may dress like a springtime flower, and drench himself in scents, but he is no man’s fool. I trust him, don’t you? If he thinks so highly of this new Caesar called Julian, then perhaps we should wait, and see him for ourselves.’

Grief wears many faces, as in the time that followed I began to understand.

Some men weep, and tear their hair, and like a summer tempest it is gone. This is the grief we see in the theatres: all show and noise, that makes the people stare. But even the young, if they stop to reflect, will know there is another kind. It sits in the heart, and dwells there like a banked-up fire, smouldering unseen.

Marcellus had loved his grandfather deeply. In the absence of his father, who had died when he was young, his grandfather Aquinus had made him what he was, fashioning by his example every fine and pious and noble part of him. And since the last short illness that brought his death, Marcellus’s mind had been forced to his duty – to Aquinus himself, to his brittle mother, to the farm, the hands, the household. They had all turned to him, placing on his shoulders the burden of their need. And he, because it was in his nature, had borne it, as Atlas bears the world.

He was twenty-one, my age. We had fought together and loved together; and when I saw he did not stumble I looked no further. I did not see what it cost him. But now, at last, I began to sense a change, the first flickerings of the hidden fire.

As always, when we were with others, he was faultlessly



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courteous. He had been bred to civility, and good manners came to him as naturally as drawing breath. But when we were alone I would catch him gazing silently at the lamp flame, or out to the empty horizon, absorbed in some private melancholy.

He was too generous to burden me with it; yet I could feel his sadness. If, at such times, I broke in on his reverie, he would look up and smile, and say something light; and for a time seem to shake off the mood. But always later it would return.

Near the Paris forum, on the south side of the river, we had found the town baths, and the palaestra behind, with its grassy spaces and colonnaded athletics courts. Here, in the time we waited for Julian to arrive, we took to exercising. I had never known Marcellus fail in anything; so when he began seeking out the wrestlers and pitting himself against far stronger men, brutes for whom the gymnasium was their life, I supposed he knew what he was at.

They thrashed him, time after time. Yet always he would go back for more, sitting afterwards in grim silence while I tended to his grazes, never crying out, keeping his pain within by some act of angry will. Perhaps the violence purged him of something. Whatever it was, he did not speak of it, even to me.

Yet at times the mask would slip and he would grow angry at some minor thing – a broken bootstrap, a lamp wick that would not light, or some mislaid piece of clothing. Sometimes, at night, I would hear him stirring and groaning in his sleep, until eventually he would start awake. I would speak his name in the darkness, and he

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would pad naked across the floor and crawl beneath my covers, and fall into a deep slumber without a word.

And next morning he would wonder how he got there.

Thus the days passed; and it seemed I could not reach him.

In those first weeks, we saw Eutherius often. Dressed like some large exotic bird, in oranges and yellows and mauves, he told in his sing-song voice of his life in Constantinople among the corrupt, self-seeking officials of the Consistory; or he lamented the crudeness of northern Gaul, which he regarded as brutish and uncivilized. But always there was irony shining in his dark eyes, as if he had known much worse.

As indeed, I soon discovered, he had.

It was one evening during dinner that we found out. He had happened to mention that he had passed that day along the street behind the forum, where the brothels are, adding with a shake of his large expressive face, 'An appalling sight. Even the courtesans lack art. They move with the gait of farm-girls, paint their faces as if they were whitewashing a barnyard wall, stare and spit and pick at their noses. I wonder that they persist in their trade at all; I can hardly imagine they make a living . . . Not, of course, that I should be one of their patrons.'

Marcellus and I answered quickly that we were sure of it. We had already drawn our own conclusions about his tastes, and they did not include the backstreet whores behind the forum.

'But do not be deceived, my dear Drusus,' he continued, divining at least in part my thoughts. 'You will find it is

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often the finest peacocks that chase the dullest hens, and the most fastidious men who secretly relish the mire. One notices – being deprived of such pleasures oneself.’

I agreed, even though I did not quite follow what he meant. He was clearly a man of means, who could afford whatever pleasure he cared to purchase. I concealed my sidelong look, but he must have noticed, for he said then, ‘You did not know?’ And, seeing my confusion, ‘Well, after all, why should you? I had assumed . . . but one should not assume.’

Then he sat back on the wide upholstered couch, gently smoothed his clothes, and told us his awful story.

He had grown up in Armenia, in a wild hill-village on the fringe of the empire. It was a land that had been often fought over. One day, when he was eight years old, tribesmen had come raiding across the mountains. They burned his village, and killed everyone they found, forcing the women first. He would have died along with his father and mother; but he had been a pretty child, and the raider had stayed his sword.

He quickly learned, however, that he had not been spared out of pity. At the next market-town his captor sold him to a Roman merchant. ‘At first I could not understand it, for I was not ill-treated nor set to slave-work, and indeed my surroundings were immeasurably more lavish than what I was used to. But then, half a month later, when I was stronger and had ceased to cry all day, my new master, who had been kind to me, came one morning and told me I must go with two friends of his who were waiting in the hallway.’

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‘And so I went. They took me out of town, to a farmstead set in an olive grove. I heard the screams as we drew near, but even then I did not struggle, for in my innocence I did not know they gelded boys.’

Marcellus had been eating, picking at a dish of dried apricots and figs. Slowly he set the dish down, and stared at Eutherius with an appalled look. ‘By the gods,’ he whispered.

‘It was long ago. One forgets.’

‘What happened?’ asked Marcellus. ‘How is it that you serve the emperor?’

He told us. After that day he had never seen his master again. As soon as he recovered, he was sold to men who traded in such goods, and they took him on the long journey to Constantinople. There he was purchased by an agent of the imperial palace. He was given an education, and, proving able, was put to work as a clerk. He excelled, and was promoted.

‘I have often reflected that, but for those cattle-thieves, I should be hoeing scree and tending goats on some sun-parched hillside, as my parents did, and theirs before them. But now I read pleurably in four languages; I have a delightful house of my own looking out on the Bosporus, I have wealth and friendship, and I dwell at the centre of power. It was a trade no man would choose to make. And yet, after all, perhaps it was a good one.’

There was, of course, no answer.

Marcellus and I drank a good deal of wine that night. Later, as we lay in the darkness of our bedroom, Marcellus, who had been a long time silent, whispered, ‘You

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know, Drusus, I am glad Eutherius told his story tonight. I think I was meant to hear it. I was letting myself forget that there is misfortune everywhere. No man can escape it; it is how he faces it that matters.'

After that day I sensed a change in him. Often I would find them together, he and Eutherius, walking slowly about the paved gardens among the box hedges, or along the colonnaded walkways, deep in talk, Marcellus, straight-backed and handsome, his muscular, well-shaped hands moving as he made some point; and Eutherius, tall and large and gentle, ambling beside him like a silk-clad bear. Had he, I wondered to myself, seen further than I, and given Marcellus what he needed? I could almost have been jealous.

But if Marcellus warmed to Eutherius, he soon came to detest the newly arrived prefect, whose name was Florentius.

Florentius was the kind of man who has never for an instant doubted his own merit. He was of middle age, with a lean, haughty face, and a tight-knit nest of chestnut hair, an effect he achieved by having his slaves curl it for him each day with hot irons. He also had a fine-tuned sense of his own dignity, and was entirely devoid of humour.

Both Marcellus and I disliked him from the start, and I daresay we should scarcely have crossed his path – which would have suited us well – but that he got into his head that all eunuchs were a centre of intrigue. And so, determined not to miss anything that might concern him, he forced himself into Eutherius's company.

Though Florentius was sensitive to the smallest perceived slight to himself, he was capable of the grossest

rudeness. He would keep those he had summoned waiting outside his office half a day; he would cut people short; he interrupted; he made remarks that caused those with him to blush with impotent fury. For though, as prefect, he lacked military powers, he was not a man it was wise to clash with. The emperor Constantius himself had appointed him, and any decision he made would be given unquestioned approval at court. He could punish and demote at will within his extensive bureaucratic domain, and his subordinates lived in terror.

Eutherius never let on what he thought of him – he was too much the diplomat for that. But Marcellus loathed him, and when he was with him Marcellus retreated behind a wall of distant civility.

A better-bred man than Florentius, sensing this, would have let it pass. But Florentius responded by needlessly disputing with Marcellus, seeking his opinion only to dismiss it, forcing him into barbed conversation only to put him down. Mostly I do not think he was even aware of it himself; but he had grown used to flatterers, and his sensitive nose had sniffed out that Marcellus was not one.

Just then, what irked the prefect more than anything was the career of the new Caesar Julian.

Julian had been studying at the university in Athens when his cousin, the emperor, had summoned him to the court in Milan, there appointing him Caesar, and sending him to Gaul. At the time no one had expected much to come of it, for, as Eutherius explained, everyone knew that Julian was more concerned with books than war, and had never fought in battle, let alone commanded an army.

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But he had surprised them all. He had marched into Alsace, fought back the barbarians and restored the fortresses that guarded the undefended plains beside the Rhine. The German chieftains, outraged at being thwarted after years of raiding at will, had massed their armies to extinguish this presumptuous Roman. Having assembled a horde of thirty thousand men, they advanced on Strasburg, led by their high-king Chnodomar. They had assumed their victory was sure. But in the battle that followed, the German armies were routed and Chnodomar was taken. Six thousand barbarians died in the fighting, or were trampled in the rout, or drowned in the Rhine as they tried to swim to safety. Out of thirteen thousand men, Julian lost only two hundred.

When news of this victory arrived in Paris there had been joy. Everyone praised the young Caesar, who had so unexpectedly shown himself to be a great general – everyone, that is, but Florentius. He had risen by careful stages, never taking risks, never crossing his superiors. He had plodded through his career like an ass at a waterwheel, and to him Julian's sudden rise was a personal affront. So amid the general happiness he observed sourly that Julian's success was no more than beginner's luck.

We soon learned that there were other men, too, for whom Julian's victory was unwelcome. That winter, Eutherius received a letter from Julian, saying he had been delayed. He had clashed with his Master of Infantry, a man by the name of Barbatio, who instead of supporting him, had thwarted his efforts all through the year's campaigning. Now Julian had dismissed him; and Barbatio,

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wishing to forestall criticism at court, had hurried to Constantius complaining of Julian's conduct, saying he was exceeding his authority.

'So Julian has asked me to travel to court and put his case to the emperor,' explained Eutherius. 'No one else will speak up for him; the intriguers and backbiters are already doing their work.'

'But does Constantius not trust even his own cousin, whom he appointed?' I asked.

Eutherius smiled, as a mother smiles at a charming, naive child. 'Constantius grew up with courtiers. He trusts no one. Remember that, my dear Drusus, and you will understand him.'

The court, which moves from city to city, following Constantius, was at that time at Sirmium in Illyricum, a journey of some weeks. 'Pity me,' Eutherius went on, 'for it will be a wretched trip – snow; mountain roads; miserable inn-food – and I do not travel well. But I hope you will stay while I am gone. Julian still plans to be here – though he cannot tell quite when.'

So we promised to wait; and next day walked with Eutherius's litter and small entourage to where his carriage and baggage-train were waiting at the limit of the city, and there we saw him off.

And when he was gone, Florentius made his move.

It was early one morning, a few days later. A clerk came rapping at the door and curtly announced that the prefect's secretary required us at once in his offices. When we appeared before him he looked up with an expression of



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assumed boredom and said, 'Ah yes; the Caesar Julian will be wintering at Paris, as no doubt you have heard. Therefore there is no longer space to accommodate you. You will have to make other arrangements.' He gave a strained smile, and then with a languid gesture of dismissal returned to his papers. It was the revenge of a bureaucrat.

Eutherius, in his kindness, had left us a little money. His dark-eyed servant-boy Agatho had brought it in a calf-skin purse tied with leather cord, on the day after he had departed. The money was enough for our needs if we had remained in the citadel; but it was no great sum otherwise. We discussed it. We did not intend to be driven off by Florentius. So now, finding ourselves suddenly homeless, we searched around and asked at the usual places in the forum, and in the end found lodging at a rundown farm close to town.

The farmer owned an orchard and a few fields, and needed help, offering in return two draughty bare-wood rooms in an outhouse, with hens clucking in the yard and a view out to the apple trees of the orchard beyond. His wife, he told us as he showed us this, had died some years before, leaving him with a daughter to raise alone. Now she was eighteen, and was more trouble to him than the farm. She stood at the porch on the day we moved in, hand on hip, regarding us with wide insolent eyes. Her name was Clodia, and she was to prove a trouble to me too, in a way I had not guessed at.

We moved to our simple quarters and set to work, clearing ditches, repairing dry-stone walls, and cutting back the neglected vines on the low slopes. Like all of

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northern Gaul, the place was pitifully neglected. Many of the farmer's labourers had fled, or had been conscripted during one of the barbarian invasions and had not returned. But worse even than the lack of men's labour was the flight of knowledge itself. We saw it everywhere, in every botched and half-done thing. The ancient skills were slipping away. They had not been passed from father to son, because the father had died too soon, or the son had seen no use in them, thinking a shoddy job would do just as well. While I worked – sweating in the cold fields, hammering planks, clearing bramble from the water-courses, or pruning the overgrown orchard – Marcellus brought something of far greater value: he brought ideas and schemes he had learned on his grandfather's estate in Britain, where the long thread of land-knowledge had not been broken. It is knowledge hard learned, till it dwells in the bones. But knowledge does not outlive the knower.

There was a peace in such simple work. The days passed one into the next, and each night I slept deeply. As for the farmer, he was glad to find he had taken on more than a pair of strong young men. Then, one grey, windless afternoon, while I was stacking bales in the barn, I heard shouting from across the fields, and when I asked the hands what it was they called up that it was the Caesar's army, come at last.

That day, Marcellus had gone to market with Clodia and her father. I jumped down from the stack of hay and hurried out, clambering up with the others onto the water cistern to see. Already, on the sloping grassland beyond the river, the horsemen of the cavalry, dressed in their

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scarlet cloaks, were rounding the camp wall. Behind them came the infantry cohorts, with their dragon-headed shields, painted gold on red. They wheeled and divided as they prepared to march through the gateway of the fort. Now and then, carried on the still, winter air, came the sound of their marching song, full of strength and pride. 'And why not?' I thought, feeling my heart stir with it. They had defeated the German barbarians, who supposed they could raid across the Rhine at will; they had given them a bloody nose, and sent them back to their endless forest to think again. So why not be proud? They had earned it. And if this young scholar Julian had restored their pride to them, winning victory against such odds, then it seemed to me he was not such a fool as the prefect Florentius made out.

All of us strained to see, hoping to glimpse this new young Caesar. But from so far off, each rider looked the same as the other, with none singled out in gold or white or purple. Perhaps, after all, he was not with them, for the army moved in stages as it divided itself for winter quarters.

But afterwards, returning to my work on the bale-stack, I felt a new impatience with my lot. I wanted to be with those men at the camp on the hill, working at what counted; not clipping vines and shifting stones on another man's land. Then, for the first time in a long while, I thought of my father, and was glad he could not see what my life had become.

I confess too that there was another thing preying on my mind just then, though it shames me to tell of it. For now I come to speak of love, and of my own failings.

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It had not taken me long to realize Clodia did not like me. She was slim and brown-eyed and, I suppose, pretty, except for a certain hardness about the mouth, which settled on her when she thought no one was looking. I have always hated slyness. I began to notice how she affected a laughing, careless manner when Marcellus was around her, which ceased as abruptly as a slammed door as soon as he was gone. She did not trouble to put it on for me.

Even so, I was always careful to be civil; but perhaps, with a hunter's intuition, she had read something of my secret heart. As for Marcellus, what he saw in her I never quite understood. Certainly her physicality and rude manners were unlike the cooped-up, high-born brides-to-be he had known in London, whom his mother had tried to force on him. Besides, she put on a good act, or so it seemed to me, and I thought it mean and small of mind to tell him what I saw.

Whenever he ran errands to town for her father, or took the mule-cart to the fields, she found a reason to accompany him. And I, seeing it all and feeling ashamed that I even noticed, found reasons to occupy myself elsewhere. Her advances were gauche and heavy-handed: a lingering touch, a thrusting accidental glimpse of her breast, a too-long smile that died on her lips if I happened to catch her eye. I found myself wondering if they did anything. If so, Marcellus did not mention it, and I did not ask.

So, from before the time of the army's arrival in the citadel, and after it, I began to find excuses to go out alone, walking the field tracks, or wandering without purpose about the city, as I once had done when I was still a boy

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at my uncle's house in London. I fell to brooding. I did not understand myself – or chose not to.

And so it was that I came, one late winter afternoon during my wanderings, to the spot overlooking the river where the temple of Jupiter stands, on its high ashlar base overlooking the river.

Already the light was fading into leaden dusk. For a while I sat on the ledge, my elbows on my knees, idly watching the swirls and eddies on the surface of the water. I do not know how long I remained, lost in my own turbulent thoughts. Eventually, across the river, I saw glimmerings of light as the first lamps were kindled.

I stood, and made my way back to the steps. Under the porch at the temple's front I saw that the tall bronze double-doors stood ajar, which earlier had been closed. I hesitated, and peered inside. The dusk was deeper within. There seemed nothing to keep me. But, being in no hurry to return to the farmstead, I decided to go inside and look around, just to see. I edged between the gap in the doors and entered.

The air inside was cold and still. It smelled of damp stone and old incense. I stepped forward, watching where I set my feet, for the floor about me was scattered with a covering of dead leaves and pieces of broken stonework. I paused, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the gloom. And then, against the far wall, seated upon a throne of carved red granite, I discerned the god. He sat as tall as four men, bearded and mighty. The powerful face had been hacked, and one great marble hand had been axed off. It lay among the wind-gathered leaves at the foot of the plinth. The

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frieze too, which ran around the statue's base, had been chiselled and scarred, and daubed with Christian signs.

I had not set foot inside a city temple since London, when I was attacked and almost killed. I recalled Marcellus's words to me: it was madness to go to such places alone, now that the Christians took it upon themselves to kill a man rather than leave him to his gods. But now, once again, I felt the pull of something old and timeless. I knew I needed to be here, on this day, at this hour; though I could not tell why.

Advancing, I turned my palms upwards and spoke the words of a prayer, using the ancient formulas I had once heard Marcellus's grandfather speak, fine old Latin, like sculpted stone. And afterwards I knelt down and brushed the leaves from the broken marble hand, and raised it up. It took all my strength to lift it. With difficulty I set it on the plinth, at the god's feet. It was an offering of sorts.

My efforts had disturbed the silence. Now, as it returned, I had a sudden feeling that someone was watching me, though I had seen no one. I stilled my breathing and listened, and felt my hair prickle on the back of my neck.

There was a tiny sound, no more than a stirring, like a shift of leaves. I swung round. Twenty paces away, silhouetted in the twilight in front of the high door, a man stood regarding me.

'Who are you?' I shouted angrily.

The man took a step towards me, and as he moved I saw he was sturdy and broad shouldered, with the gait of a legionary or a peasant. Instinctively, like any man with

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a soldier's training, I felt at my belt. I had no sword; but I had found an old hunting knife at the farm, and had cleaned it up. My fingers settled on its old birch-wood handle.

'Forgive me,' the man replied, pausing in the place where he was, 'I did not mean to startle you.' His voice was friendly; his Latin had the lilting accent of the East. He turned, and said something quickly in Greek. There was a movement, and from the shadows another man, thinner and fine-boned, stepped out into the shaft of grey light.

I watched them warily, preparing to move. The one who had spoken lifted his hands to show he had no weapon. 'We mean no harm,' he said.

'Then what do you want?' I said back at him.

They stepped forward and looked up at the tall statue of Jupiter enthroned. I could see, now he was closer, the shadow of day-old stubble on the man's jaw. His hair was carelessly, unevenly cut. A common soldier, then; yet somehow he did not have a common soldier's coarseness, and his delicate-looking friend did not look like a soldier at all. He peered at the base of the statue, frowning at the scribbled alphas and crude daubed crosses. 'You see, Oribasius?' he said, gesturing. Then, turning back to me, 'We were here when you came; you startled us or we should have spoken out.' He paused, and when I did not speak he went on, 'Did you come with the army, friend?'

'No,' I said.

'Then you are from Paris?'

'No again.' My answers were cold and wary. I was in no mood for small-talk. I was angry that they had secretly

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watched me, when all the time I had supposed I was alone. Besides, there was a covert air about them, as if they were keeping something from me, or playing with me.

Sharply, with a stab of my thumb at the broken frieze, I asked, 'Are you Christians?' And I thought to myself, 'If they came looking for a fight, then I will give them one.'

'I did not do this,' he said carefully, keeping his eyes on me. 'I would never do such a thing. It is sacrilege.' He paused. 'But tell me, if you are not with the army, then with whom?'

To shut him up I answered, 'If you must know, I am a guest of a certain Eutherius, who is friend to Julian the Caesar. I daresay you have heard of him.'

His brows went up at this, and I saw the two of them exchange a private look. 'Indeed we have,' he replied. And the other, the one called Oribasius, said, 'Truly we mean no offence. But what is your name? It may be that we have heard of you.'

I answered that I doubted it; but seeing no harm in telling them, I said, 'I am Drusus.' And at this, to my surprise, Oribasius asked, 'Then do you have a friend called Marcellus?'

I stared at him, taken aback. But his burly friend laughed and said, 'You see, we too are friends of Eutherius . . . But the prefect said you had gone away.'

'So we did. The prefect turned us out. He said there was no room at the citadel.'

'Did he now?' He frowned, and once again they exchanged a glance. 'What will you do now?' he asked.

I shrugged. I had heard, I said, that the Caesar was



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looking for good men. Perhaps, when Eutherius returned, I should try my luck there.

‘Well, whoever told you that was right. But Eutherius will be away some time.’

‘Then I suppose I must wait.’

He considered, rubbing at the stubble on his chin. ‘Yet perhaps,’ he said, ‘there is no need for that. I think I can help you . . . Will you come and see me at the citadel tomorrow – you and your friend?’

I allowed myself a private smile. No doubt this man was some junior infantry officer who thought he had his commander’s ear, and wanted to make himself seem like someone. Still, he had an honest look; it seemed churlish to decline. So I said I would see him next day, as he asked. I did not have the heart to tell him that with Florentius the prefect as my enemy, I doubted I should even be admitted at the gates.

He nodded and gave a small, grave smile. He was not, I could see, a smiler by nature.

‘Then good,’ he said. ‘Until tomorrow then?’ He made to go.

‘But wait,’ I cried. ‘Whom shall I ask for?’

He looked surprised at my question, as if it had not occurred to him. He glanced quickly at his slim, dark friend, and seemed almost at a loss.

‘Say you have come to see Oribasius,’ he said. ‘I shall be with him.’

It was night by the time I returned. No lamp was burning in our outhouse, and at first I thought that Marcellus was

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not there. But when I went striding in I found him sitting in the dark, on the rough-wood three-legged stool in front of the stove. He was resting his chin upon the heel of his hand, frowning into the red charcoal.

‘Marcellus!’ I cried, and began to tell him what had happened.

He looked up startled. His cheeks were flushed from the heat of the fire. His brow looked creased and troubled. But it was something else that gave me pause. I turned, knowing already what I should find. Beyond the circle of light, beneath the shuttered window, the farmer’s daughter was reclining on the couch, propped up on one elbow, regarding me with eyes that shone in the reflected glow. She pulled herself upright with an angry flick of her hair. Her dress was loose on the shoulder, showing her pale neck, and the breast she was so proud of. But at least she was clothed; for already it was dawning on me what I had stumbled upon.

In a cold voice she said, ‘You are interrupting. Have you forgotten how to knock?’

I felt my colour rise, and my anger with it. ‘Then I am sorry, Clodia,’ I said, ‘but I did not know, and it is dark. But now I am leaving.’

I had picked up the stool beside Marcellus’s. I was still holding it in my hand. As I set it down, Marcellus caught me by the wrist. ‘No, Drusus, stay. It is freezing outside.’

For a moment I hesitated, caught by something in his voice – not frustrated lust, which is what I had expected; but a note of melancholy. I looked at him again; but in the dim light he did not see the enquiry in my eyes. Then,

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behind me, I heard Clodia draw her breath in an impatient sigh. My gut tightened, and I thought: What am I to her? Am I a rival? What, by all the gods, Marcellus, have you told her that she should think so? I was about to speak out, but I stayed my tongue. I had rather die than let her see my naked heart.

I pulled myself free from Marcellus, more roughly than I meant, knowing I needed to be alone, away from them. I heard him call; but already I was at the door, and ignoring him I fled into the night.

Only when I was among the dark trunks of the apple orchard did I pause, and as I stood kicking at the long grass, collecting my wits, one of the farmer's she-dogs came loping up. I crouched and ruffled her ears. Then I moved on, bounded over the low wall, and followed the cart-track off between the fields.

Marcellus was right: the night was freezing, and in my haste I had not picked up my cloak. Well, I thought wryly, it was too late now to return for it. I rubbed my arms and walked on. Above me, long strands of silver cloud were stretched across the sky, illuminated by a hidden moon; the breeze of earlier had dropped, and a hard frost was descending. Presently, with no clear sense of where I was heading, I came to the low-lying ground near the marshes. A carpet of mist had settled on the land, and as I walked it swirled and parted at my ankles.

Soon I came to a grassy hillock, a place I knew. In the luminous night it rose up like a low island in a sea of mist. I trudged to the top and sat, ignoring the bitter cold, staring out to the far-off lights of Paris, and the citadel beyond.

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I told myself the girl was not important; and yet my heart spoke differently. In this one thing, which should not matter, I saw I was not master of myself, and it made me wretched. I shook my head, and cried out at the night, and tried to think. I wanted to fill my mind with easier things. Yet I saw, like a climber lost in the wooded foothills who glimpses through the trees the sunlit peak, that here, somehow, lay a truth which must be faced.

I sat for a long time troubled, torn between my reason and desire. I spoke out loud, and called reproach to the waxing moon; and it seemed she answered me, saying, 'But why complain? I have shown you the way, Drusus; but it is for you to follow. Be master of your desires, or they will master you. Only then will you know yourself. That is the freedom God has given you. If you will not, no other can.'

And I remembered what I knew in my bones and in my deepest heart: that no man may possess another, or what he yearns for dies in his very grasp. Love must be free, or it is not love, but something baser. And desire, if not ruled by reason, is no more than a fire that consumes the very thing that gives it life.

And so I sat, alone beneath the glittering dome of heaven, and scorched my soul. The time passed, and I did not notice it. When next I stirred, the moon was gone, and the frost lay settled on the grass and on my clothes. I stood, and shook myself, and made my way back across the fields. A stillness had come upon me.

The house was dark; the fire in the stove had died. Silently I closed the door and tiptoed to my bed. I pulled

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off my clothes and shivering buried myself beneath the pile of blankets. I had thought Marcellus was asleep, but now, from the other bed, I heard him whisper, 'I looked for you.'

'I am here now,' I said.

There was a shifting, and I felt a tug at the blanket. 'You are cold,' he said softly. 'Move over; there is room in here for two.'

In the morning I told him about my strange encounter at Jupiter's temple, and the invitation to the citadel.

'Then we should go,' he said. 'Maybe this soldier can do as he says, if he is a friend of Eutherius.'

I thought of the scruffy, self-conscious, slightly odd young man I had met in the temple. 'It may be so,' I said, 'but don't count on it. I doubt he goes so high – except in his dreams.'

We were sitting on the edge of my bed, the blankets pulled around us. His body was warm beside me, but the room was bitter cold and our breath showed in the air.

I saw him give me a quick, sidelong glance. 'And then,' he said slowly, 'there is Clodia.'

I took a deep breath, and frowned out at a red-breasted robin I had been watching on the window ledge outside. Until now, we had not spoken of the night before. Marcellus turned to face me, pulling his legs up under our shared blanket. His knees touched mine and rested there.

'Drusus,' he said, 'I need your advice. You were with the army in London; I expect you know more of these matters than I.' He paused, and rubbed his face with his hand, and then pushed his fingers through his sleep-tousled hair. Lines of worry and concern showed about his mouth. I

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saw he had gone a little red. 'The truth is,' he went on, 'I do not know what to do about her.'

His eyes studied my face, full of trust. It brought a lump to my throat, and made me feel cruel and base.

I said, 'She does not matter. It is not important.'

His brow creased in a frown. 'She is very persistent.'

I swallowed, and wondered how the god was mocking me. 'Well,' I said, 'I suppose that is her way.'

There was a pause after that. I started to speak, to tell him he could take a girl whenever he chose, that it would not come between our friendship. But he silenced me, saying, 'I know that, Drusus; but it is something else.' He stared at the opaque glass of the window and gave a sigh. 'She was fighting with me last night when you came. She said many things. She accused me of wanting you more than her.'

I laughed. 'And do you?'

'It's not the same. You know how it is. In the end, when she went on and on, I told her to believe what she liked. That was when you walked in.'

I recalled her face upon me, accusing and resentful. 'She does not matter,' I said again. 'It was my own demons I had to wrestle with.'

And then he said, 'She claims she wants me to marry her.'

'What?' I cried, looking at him with amazement. 'But why? Is she with child?'

He shook his head. 'No; nothing like that. She has thought it all through; she talks of business, of uniting my land with hers; she thinks Britain would suit her very well.'

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I stared at him, and thought of what his mother would make of Clodia. I could almost have laughed, except he looked so grave.

‘Does she, indeed?’ I said eventually.

‘Well, yes; but I do not want it. Not now. I do not know where all this came from, Drusus, if you want to know the truth of it. It’s not as though . . . well, never mind. I fear I do not understand women at all.’

I thought to myself, ‘*I* understand this woman well enough.’ But I said, ‘Women are a mystery. And we are young still.’

‘Yes,’ he said, nodding. ‘And she should not have spoken to you like that; I told her so . . . I love you, Drusus; we belong together, and she can make of it what she likes.’

‘I will always be here. You know that.’ And then, with a grin, for there had been too much seriousness, ‘Still, you must not forget the bloodline, or I shall be blamed for it.’

This was an old joke between us. He smiled, then laughed, and gave my shoulder a shove, sending me back into the pile of blankets.

And then, as if I had brought to him some unexpected gift, he kissed me.

Later that day we crossed the bridge to the citadel.

At the gate I gave Oribasius’s name, and waited to be turned away. But instead the sentry pulled himself straight and called me ‘Sir’ and summoned his superior. A liveried steward conducted us inside, through the inner court with its pleasant columned cloister, box hedges and plum trees, along a wide bright gallery painted with landscaped

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gardens and hunting scenes. Beside me, Marcellus touched my arm and muttered, 'I thought you said this friend of yours was nobody.'

I pulled a face and shrugged. I had expected to be taken to some barrack-room.

We came eventually to a bright room with high windows and a painted, coffered ceiling. No one was there. But the steward, before he went off, turned and said, 'The honourable lord Caesar will be with you shortly.'

'Wait!' I cried, almost running at him. 'What "lord Caesar"? There has been some mistake; I am not here to see the Caesar. He does not know me. I came for Oribasius.'

The steward looked at me oddly, as if my words made no sense to him; but, before I could go on, there came the sound of approaching voices. I looked round, wondering how I was going to explain my presence to the cousin of the emperor. But, instead of some imperial prince, I saw advancing in the midst of the entourage the same man I had seen at the temple.

'Drusus!' he cried, striding towards me across the polished floor. 'You see, Oribasius, I told you he would come. And you must be Marcellus. Well, greetings to both of you, I am glad you are here at last.'

He turned and said something to the steward. It was only when the steward replied with, 'Yes, Caesar' that the truth finally came to me. He had smartened himself up, though not by much; he was dressed in a well-worn light-brown tunic bordered with a pattern of meandering scarlet, and someone had made an attempt with his hair. He was speaking to Marcellus, asking if we had been



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admitted without hindrance, and saying we must return at once to lodge in the citadel. Marcellus, poised as always, was answering with his usual well-bred civility – he was never awed by authority or title.

Around us, meanwhile, the room was filling with courtiers and servants and officers in uniform. There was a stirring in the outer chamber, and then Florentius the prefect strode in.

His auburn hair had been coiffured and sculpted into tight, artificial curls; he wore a fine cloak of dark-blue, clasped at the shoulder with a jewelled brooch of gilded filigree. People turned and looked, pausing in their conversation. One might have supposed, indeed, that it was he who was the Caesar. He was talking to his secretary, the man who had expelled us. But as he spoke he was glancing about, seeing who was present. For the smallest instant, as his eyes scanned my way, they paused; and though he tried to cover it, I knew he had seen me. He moved towards Julian, who was surrounded by a press of officials; but before he could reach him, Julian turned and called to me and Marcellus, ‘Come, let us go somewhere quiet where we can talk.’

I saw Florentius halt as if he had been struck. With an effort at smoothness he turned back to his secretary. Julian did not notice.

We went to an adjoining chamber. Oribasius followed, and shut the door. The room was small and plain. There was a table under the window, a few simple oak chairs, and a lattice-doored cupboard filled with books. It might almost have been a room at an inn, except for the books.

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‘I hope you will forgive me for last night,’ said Julian. ‘I think you scared us more than we did you. Even so, I did not like to hide in the shadows like that, when you thought you were alone. It was shameful really, but I had to be careful.’ He glanced at Oribasius, then added with a hint of a smile, ‘It would not do, you see, to have it known that the cousin of the great Constantius was poking about in a temple of Jupiter.’

He crossed to the table and picked up a letter of rolled papyrus from under an onyx weight. ‘This came from Eutherius. He says he has been delayed at the court.’

I said I was sorry to hear it. I had not yet recovered from finding out who he was, and had been going over in my mind my sharp words when we were in the temple. But he seemed not to care, and when I remembered to add, ‘Lord Caesar’ – which was what everyone else was calling him – he waved it away with a motion of his hand, saying, ‘Just call me Julian. It is enough, between friends.’

He paused and looked at me, and gave an awkward, slightly embarrassed smile, like a shy but courteous child. Then, looking serious once more, he lifted the letter and indicated a small tear in the corner. ‘You see?’ he said. ‘It is where the court spies broke the seal; they did not even trouble to conceal it.’

He followed my eyes, and nodded quickly when he saw I had understood.

‘I imagine you are shocked; but one grows used to such things. Eutherius will have expected it, and he will have written accordingly. Listen . . .’ He opened the page, scanned it for a moment, then read, ‘“And besides, I am

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pleased to report that the divine Constantius continues to be advised by the best minds in the empire.” He looked up with a short laugh. ‘That,’ he said, ‘is his way of telling me the grand chamberlain Eusebius is still dictating policy – so much the worse for me!’

He took a breath to continue, but Oribasius, who up to now had stood silently near the door, gave a slight, discreet cough. Julian glanced at him, and seemed to think again. ‘Still,’ he said, after a short pause, ‘there is no need to trouble you with the chamberlain.’ He looked back at the letter in his hands. ‘But what I wanted to find was the part where he said you would be here in Paris, that you were friends and I could trust you . . . Ah, here it is.’ And he read out the words happily, as one might pass on a compliment heard from another, and when he had finished he set the scroll aside, and placed the onyx weight on top of it.

‘You know,’ he said, turning back from the table, ‘I think some god had a hand in our meeting, don’t you? It was not just anywhere we met, and I doubt another soul has set foot in that temple for a year.’ He looked at his friend. ‘Now don’t tell me, Oribasius, that *that* does not mean something!’

The sound of voices could be heard, carrying from the great reception room beyond. Julian frowned at the door.

‘And now,’ he said, ‘I suppose I had better go to them. But Drusus, Marcellus, will you come and dine with us tonight? . . . and do please forgive me for the little deception at the temple. It was necessary.’