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The newly arrived ambassador from the Eastern Emperor was rather younger than Faustus had expected him to be: a smallish sort, finely built, quite handsome in what was almost a girlish kind of way, though obviously very capable and sharp, a man who would bear close watching. There was something a bit frightening about him, though not at first glance. He gleamed with the imperviousness of fine armor. His air of sophisticated and fastidious languor coupled with hidden strength made Faustus, a tall, robust, florid-faced man going thick through the waist and thin about the scalp, feel positively plebeian and coarse despite his own lofty and significant ancestry.

That morning Faustus, whose task as an official of the Chancellery it was to greet all such important visitors to the capital city, had gone out to Ostia to meet him at the Imperial pier—the Greek envoy, coming west by way of Sicilia, had sailed up the coast from Neapolis in the south—and had escorted him to the rooms in the old Severan Palace where the occasional ambassadors from the Eastern half of Empire were housed. Now it was the time to begin establishing a little rapport. They faced each other across an onyx-slab table in the Lesser Hall of Columns, which several reigns ago had been transformed into a somewhat oversized sitting-room. A certain amount of preliminary social chatter was required at this point. Faustus called for some wine, one of the big, elegant wines from the great vineyards of Gallia Transalpina.

After they had had a chance to savor it for a little while he said, wanting to get the ticklish part of the situation out in the open right away, “The prince Heraclius himself, unfortunately, has been called without

warning to the northern frontier. Therefore tonight's dinner has been canceled. This will be a free evening for you, then, an evening for resting after your long journey. I trust that that'll be acceptable to you."

"Ah," said the Greek, and his lips tightened for an instant. Plainly he was a little bewildered at being left on his own like this, his first evening in Roma. He studied his perfectly manicured fingers. When he glanced up again, there was a gleam of concern in the dark eyes. "I won't be seeing the Emperor either, then?"

"The Emperor is in very poor health. He will not be able to see you tonight and perhaps not for several days. The prince Heraclius has taken over many of his responsibilities. But in the prince's unexpected and unavoidable absence your host and companion for your first few days in Roma will be his younger brother Maximilianus. You will, I know, find him amusing and very charming, my lord Menandros."

"Unlike his brother, I gather," said the Greek ambassador coolly.

Only too true, Faustus thought. But it was a remarkably blunt thing to say. Faustus searched for the motive behind the little man's words. Menandros had come here, after all, to negotiate a marriage between his royal master's sister and the very prince of whom he had just spoken so slightly. When a diplomat as polished as this finely oiled Greek says something as egregiously undiplomatic as that, there was usually a good reason for it. Perhaps, Faustus supposed, Menandros was simply showing annoyance at the fact that Prince Heraclius had tactlessly managed not to be on hand to welcome him upon his entry into Roma.

Faustus was not going to let himself be drawn any deeper into comparisons, though. He allowed himself only an oblique smile, that faint sidewise smile he had learned from his young friend the Caesar Maximilianus. "The two brothers are quite different in personality, that I do concede. —Will you have more wine, your excellence?"

That brought yet another shift of tone. "Ah, no formalities, no formalities, I pray you. Let us be friends, you and I." And then, leaning forward cozily and shifting from the formal to the intimate form of speech: "You must call me Menandros. I will call you Faustus. Eh, my friend? —And yes, more wine, by all means. What excellent stuff! We have nothing that can match it in Constantinopolis. What sort is it, actually?"

Faustus flicked a glance at one of the waiting servitors, who quickly refilled the bowls. "A wine from Gallia," he said. "I forget the name." A swift flash of unmistakable displeasure, quickly concealed but not quickly enough, crossed the Greek's face. To be caught praising a provincial wine so highly must have embarrassed him. But embarrassing him had not been Faustus's intention. There was nothing to be gained by creating discomfort for so powerful and potentially valuable a personage as the lord of the East's ambassador to the Western court.

This was all getting worse and worse. Hastily Faustus set about smoothing the awkwardness over. "The heart of our production lies in Gallia, now. The Emperor's cellars contain scarcely any Italian wines at all, they tell me. Scarcely any! These Gallian reds are His Imperial Majesty's preference by far, I assure you."

"While I am here I must acquire some, then, for the cellars of His Majesty Justinianus," said Menandros.

They drank a moment in silence. Faustus felt as though he were dancing on swords.

"This is, I understand, your first visit to Urbs Roma?" Faustus asked, when the silence had gone on just

a trifle too long. He took care to use the familiar form too, now that Menandros had started it.

“My first, yes. Most of my career has been spent in Aegyptus and Syria.”

Faustus wondered how extensive that career could have been. This Menandros seemed to be no more than twenty-five or so, thirty at the utmost. Of course, all these smooth-skinned dark-eyed Greeks, buffed and oiled and pomaded in their Oriental fashion, tended to look younger than they really were. And now that Faustus had passed fifty, he was finding it harder and harder to make distinctions of age in any precise way: everybody around him at the court seemed terribly young to him now, a congregation of mere boys and girls. Of those who had ruled the Empire when Faustus himself was young, there was no one left except the weary, lonely old Emperor himself, and hardly anyone had laid eyes on the Emperor in recent times. Of Faustus's own generation of courtiers, some had died off, the others had gone into cozy retirement far away. Faustus was a dozen years older than his own superior minister in the Chancellery. His closest friend here now was Maximilianus Caesar, who was considerably less than half his age. From the beginning Faustus had always regarded himself as a relic of some earlier era, because that was, in truth, what he was, considering that he was a member of a family that had held the throne three dynasties ago; but the phrase had taken on a harsh new meaning for him in these latter days, now that he had survived not just his family's greatness but even his own contemporaries.

It was a little disconcerting that Justinianus had sent so youthful and apparently inexperienced an ambassador on so delicate a mission. But Faustus suspected it would be a mistake to underestimate this man; and at least Menandros's lack of familiarity with the capital city would provide him with a convenient way to glide past whatever difficulties Prince Heraclius's untimely absence might cause in the next few days.

Stagily Faustus clapped his hands. “How I envy you, friend Menandros! To see Urbs Roma in all its splendor for the first time! What an overwhelming experience it will be for you! We who were born here, who take it all for granted, can never appreciate it as you will. The grandeur. The magnificence.” Yes, yes, he thought, let Maximilianus march him from one end of the city to the other until Heraclius gets back. We will dazzle him with our wonders and after a time he'll forget how discourteously Heraclius has treated him. “While you're waiting for the Caesar to return, we'll arrange the most extensive tours for you. All the great temples—the amphitheater—the baths—the Forum—the Capitol—the palaces—the wonderful gardens—”

“The grottos of Titus Gallius,” Menandros said, unexpectedly. “The underground temples and shrines. The marketplace of the sorcerers. The catacomb of the holy Chaldean prostitutes. The pool of the Baptai. The labyrinth of the Maenads. The caverns of the witches.”

“Ah? So you know of those places too?”

“Who doesn't know about the Underworld of Urbs Roma? It's the talk of the whole Empire.” In an instant that bright metallic facade of his seemed to melt away, and all his menacing poise. Something quite different was visible in Menandros's eyes now, a wholly uncalculated eagerness, an undisguised boyish enthusiasm. And a certain roguishness, too, a hint of rough, coarse appetites that belied his urbane gloss. In a soft, confiding tone he said, “May I confess something, Faustus? Magnificence bores me. I've got a bit of a taste for the low life. All that dodgy stuff that Roma's so famous for, the dark, seamy underbelly of the city, the whores and the magicians, the freak shows and the orgies and the thieves' markets, the strange shrines of your weird cults—do I shock you, Faustus? Is this dreadfully undiplomatic of me to admit? I don't need a tour of the temples. But as long as we have a few days before I have to get down to serious business, it's the other side of Roma I want to see, the mysterious side, the dark side. We have temples and palaces enough in Constantinopolis, and baths, and all the rest of that. Miles and miles of

glorious shining marble, until you want to cry out for mercy. But the true subterranean mysteries, the earthy, dirty, smelly, underground things, ah, no, Faustus, those are what really interest me. We've rooted all that stuff out, at Constantinopolis. It's considered dangerous decadent nonsense."

"It is here, too," said Faustus quietly.

"Yes, but you permit it! You revel in it, even! Or so I'm told, on pretty good authority. —You heard me say I was formerly stationed in Aegyptus and Syria. The ancient East, that is to say, thousands of years older than Roma or Constantinopolis. Most of the strange cults originated there, you know. That was where I developed my interest in them. And the things I've seen and heard and done in places like Damascus and Alexandria and Antioch, well—but nowadays Urbs Roma is the center of everything of that sort, is it not, the capital of marvels! And I tell you, Faustus, what I truly crave experiencing is—"

He halted in midsentence, looking flushed and a little stunned.

"This wine," he said, with a little shake of his head. "I've been drinking it too quickly. It must be stronger than I thought."

Faustus reached across the table and laid his hand gently on the younger man's wrist. "Have no fear, my friend. These revelations of yours cause me no dismay. I am no stranger to the Underworld, nor is the prince Maximilianus. And while we await the return of Prince Heraclius he and I will show you everything you desire." He rose, stepping back a couple of paces so that he would not seem, in his bulky way, to be looming in an intimidating manner over the reclining ambassador. After a bad start he had regained some advantage; he didn't want to push it too far. "I'll leave you now. You've had a lengthy journey, and you'll want your rest. I'll send in your servants. In addition to those who accompanied you from Constantinopolis, these men and women—" he indicated the slaves who stood arrayed in the shadows around the room—"are at your command day and night. They are yours. Ask them for anything. *Anything*, my lord Menandros."

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His palanquin and bearers were waiting outside. "Take me to the apartments of the Caesar," Faustus said crisply, and clambered inside.

They knew which Caesar he meant. In Roma the name could be applied to a great many persons of high birth, from the Emperor on down—Faustus himself had some claim to using it—but as a rule, these days, it was an appellation employed only in reference to the two sons of the Emperor Maximilianus II. And, whether or not Faustus's bearers happened to be aware that the elder son was out of town, they were clever enough to understand that their master would in all probability not be asking them to take him to the chambers of the austere and dreary Prince Heraclius. No, no, it was the younger son, the pleasantly dissolute Maximilianus Caesar, whose rooms would surely be his chosen destination: Prince Maximilianus, the friend, the companion, the dearest and most special friend and companion, for all intents and purposes at the present time the *only* true friend and companion, of that aging and ever lonelier minor official of the Imperial court, Faustus Flavius Constantinus Caesar.

Maximilianus lived over at the far side of the Palatine, in a handsome pink-marble palace of relatively modest size that had been occupied by younger sons of the Emperor for the past half dozen reigns or so. The prince, a red-haired, blue-eyed, long-limbed man who was a match for Faustus in height but lean and rangy where Faustus was burly and ponderous, peeled himself upward from a divan as Faustus entered and greeted him with a warm embrace and a tall beaker of chilled white wine. That Faustus had been drinking red with the Greek ambassador for the past hour and a half did not matter now. Maximilianus, in his capacity as prince of the royal blood, had access to the best caves of the Imperial

cellars, and what was most pleasing to the prince's palate was the rare white wines of the Alban Hills, the older and sweeter and colder the better. When Faustus was with him, the white wines of the Alban Hills were what Faustus drank.

"Look at these," Maximilianus said, before Faustus had had a chance to say anything whatever beyond a word of appreciation for the wine. The prince drew forth a long, fat pouch of purple velvet and with a great sweeping gesture sent a blazing hoard of jewelry spilling out on the table: a tangled mass of necklaces, earrings, rings, pendants, all of them evidently fashioned from opals set in filigree of gold, opals of every hue and type, pink ones, milky ones, opals of shimmering green, midnight black, fiery scarlet. Maximilianus exultantly scooped them up in both hands and let them dribble through his fingers. His eyes were glowing. He appeared enthralled by the brilliant display.

Faustus stared puzzledly at the sprawling scatter of bright trinkets. These were extremely beautiful baubles, yes: but the degree of Maximilianus's excitement over them seemed excessive. Why was the prince so fascinated by them? "Very pretty," Faustus said. "Are they something you won at the gambling tables? Or did you buy these trinkets as a gift for one of your ladies?"

"Trinkets!" Maximilianus cried. "The jewels of Cybele is what they are! The treasure of the high priestess of the Great Mother! Aren't they lovely, Faustus? The Hebrew brought them just now. They're stolen, of course. From the goddess's most sacred sanctuary. I'm going to give them to my new sister-in-law as a wedding present."

"Stolen? From the sanctuary? Which sanctuary? Which Hebrew? What are you talking about, Maximilianus?"

The prince grinned and pressed one of the biggest of the pendants into the fleshy palm of Faustus's left hand, closing Faustus's fingers tightly over it. He gave Faustus a broad wink. "Hold it. Squeeze it. Feel the throbbing magic of the goddess pouring into you. Is your cock getting stiff yet? That's what should be happening, Faustus. Amulets of fertility are what we have here. Of enormous efficacy. In the sanctuary, the priestess wears them and anyone she touches with the stone becomes an absolute seething mass of procreative energy. Heraclius's princess will conceive an heir for him the first time he gets inside her. It's virtually guaranteed. The dynasty continues. My little favor for my chilly and sexless brother. I'll explain it all to his beloved, and she'll know what to do. Eh? Eh?" Maximilianus amiably patted Faustus's belly. "What are you feeling down there, old man?"

Faustus handed the pendant back. "What I feel is that you may have gone a little too far, this time. Who did you get these things from? Danielus bar-Heap?"

"Bar-Heap, yes, of course. Who else?"

"And where did he get them? Stole them from the Temple of the Great Mother, did he? Strolled through the grotto one dark night and slipped into the sanctuary when the priestesses weren't looking?" Faustus closed his eyes, put his hand across them, blew his breath outward through closed lips in a noisy, rumbling burst of astonishment and disapproval. He was even shocked, a little. That was something of an unusual emotion for him. Maximilianus was the only man in the realm capable of making him feel stodgy and priggish. "In the name of Jove Almighty, Maximilianus, tell me how you think you can give stolen goods as a wedding gift! For a royal wedding, no less. Don't you think there'll be an outcry raised from here to India and back when the high priestess finds out that this stuff is missing?"

Maximilianus, offering Faustus his sly, inward sort of smile, gathered the jewelry back into the pouch. "You grow silly in your dotage, old man. Is it your idea that these jewels were stolen from the sanctuary

yesterday? As a matter of fact, it happened during the reign of Marcus Anastasius, which was—what? Two hundred fifty years ago?—and the sanctuary they were stolen from wasn't here at all, it was somewhere in Phrygia, wherever that may be, and they've had at least five legitimate owners since then, which is certainly enough to disqualify them as stolen goods by this time. It happens also that I paid good hard cash for them. I told the Hebrew that I needed a fancy wedding present for the elder Caesar's bride, and he said that this little collection was on the market, and I said, fine, get them for me, and I gave him enough gold pieces to outweigh *two* fat Faustuses, and he went down into the Jewelers' Grotto this very night past and closed the deal, and here they are. I want to see the look on my dear brother's face when I present these treasures to his lovely bride Sabbatia, gifts truly worthy of a queen. And then when I tell him about the special powers they're supposed to have. 'Beloved brother,'" Maximilianus said, in a high, piping tone of savage derision, "I thought you might need some aid in consummating your marriage, and therefore I advise you to have your bride wear this ring on the wedding night, and to put this bracelet upon her wrist, and also to invite your lady to drape this pendant between her breasts—"

Faustus felt the beginnings of a headache. There were times when the Caesar's madcap exuberance was too much even for him. In silence he helped himself to more wine, and drank it down in deep, slow, deliberate drafts. Then he walked toward the window and stood with his back toward the prince.

Could he trust what Maximilianus was telling him about the provenance of these jewels? Had they in fact been taken from the sanctuary in antiquity, or had some thief snatched them just the other day? That would be all we need, he thought. Right in the middle of the negotiations for a desperately needed military alliance that were scheduled to follow the marriage of the Western prince and the Eastern princess, the pious and exceedingly virtuous Justinianus discovers that his new brother-in-law's brother has blithely given the sister of the Eastern Emperor a stolen and sacrilegious wedding gift. A gift that even now might be the object of an intensive police search.

Maximilianus was still going on about the jewels. Faustus paid little attention. A soothing drift of cool air floated toward him out of the twilight, carrying with it a delightfully complex mingling of odors, cinnamon, pepper, nutmeg, roasted meat, rich wine, pungent perfume, the tang of sliced lemons, all the wondrous aromas of some nearby lavish banquet. It was quite refreshing.

Under the benign mellowing influence of the fragrant breeze from outside Faustus felt his little fit of scrupulosity beginning to pass. There was nothing to worry about here, really. Very likely the transaction had been legitimate. But even if the opal *had* just been stolen from the Great Mother's sanctuary, there would be little that the outraged priestesses could do about it, since the police investigation was in no way likely to reach into the household of the Imperial family. And that Maximilianus's gift was reputed to have aphrodisiac powers would be a fine joke on his prissy, tight-lipped brother.

Faustus felt a great sudden surge of love for his friend Maximilianus pass through him. Once again the prince had shown him that although he was only half his age, he was more than his equal in all-around devilry; and that was saying quite a lot.

"Did the ambassador show you a picture of her, by the way?" Maximilianus asked.

Faustus glanced around. "Why should he? I'm not the one who's marrying her."

"I was just curious. I was wondering if she's as ugly as they say. The word is that she looks just like her brother, you know. And Justinianus has the face of a horse. She's a lot older than Heraclius, too."

"Is she? I hadn't heard."

“Justinianus is forty-five or so, right? Is it likely that he would have a sister of eighteen or twenty?”

“She could be twenty-five, perhaps.”

“Thirty-five, more likely. Or even older. Heraclius is twenty-nine. My brother is going to marry an ugly old woman. Who may not even still be of childbearing age—has anyone considered that?”

“An ugly old woman, if that's indeed the case, who happens to be the sister of the Eastern Emperor,” Faustus pointed out, “and who therefore will create a blood bond between the two halves of the realm that will be very useful to us when we ask Justinianus to lend us a few legions to help us fend off the barbarians in the north, now that our friends the Goths and the Vandals are chewing on our toes up there again. Whether she's of childbearing age is incidental. Heirs to the throne can always be adopted, you know.”

“Yes. Of course they can. But the main thing, the grand alliance—is that so important, Faustus? If the smelly barbarians have come back for another round, why can't we fend them off ourselves? My father managed a pretty good job of that when they came sniffing around our frontiers in '42, didn't he? Not to mention what his grandfather did to Attila and his Huns some fifty years before that.”

“'42 was a long time ago,” Faustus said. “Your father's old and sick, now. And we're currently a little short on great generals.”

“What about Heraclius? He might amaze us all.”

“Heraclius?” said Faustus. That was a startling thought—the aloof, waspish, ascetic Heraclius Caesar leading an army in the field. Even Maximilianus, frivolous and undisciplined and rowdy as he was, would make a more plausible candidate for the role of military hero than the pallid Heraclius.

With a mock-haughty sniff Maximilianus said, “I remind you, my lord Faustus, that we're a fighting dynasty. We have the blood of mighty warriors in our veins, my brother and I.”

“Yes, the mighty warrior Heraclius,” Faustus said acidly, and they both laughed.

“All right, then. I yield the point. We do need Justinianus's help, I suppose. So my brother marries the ugly princess, *her* brother helps us smash the savage hairy men of the north for once and all, and the whole Empire embarks upon a future of eternal peace, except perhaps for a squabble or two with the Persians, who are Justinianus's problem, not ours. Well, so be it. In any case, why should I care what Heraclius's wife looks like? *He* probably won't.”

“True.” The heir to the throne was not notorious for his interest in women.

“The Great Mother's jewels, if their reputation has any substance to it, will help him quickly engender a new little Caesar, let us hope. After which, he'll probably never lay a finger on her again, to her great relief and his, eh?” Maximilianus bounded up from his divan to pour more wine for Faustus, and for himself. “Has he really gone up north to inspect the troops, by the way? That's the tale I've heard, anyway.”

“And I,” said Faustus. “It's the official story, but I have my doubts. More likely he's headed off to his forests for a few days of hunting, by way of ducking the marriage issue as long as he can.” That was the Caesar Heraclius's only known amusement, the tireless, joyless pursuit of stag and boar and fox and hare. “Let me tell you, the Greek ambassador was more than a little miffed when he found out that the

prince had chosen the very week of his arrival to leave town. He let it be known very clearly, how annoyed he was. Which brings me to the main reason for this visit, in fact. I have work for you. It becomes your job and mine to keep the ambassador amused until Heraclius deigns to get back here.”

Maximilianus responded with a lazy shrug. “Your job, perhaps. But why is it mine, old friend?”

“Because I think you'll enjoy it, once you know what I have in mind. And I've already committed you to it, besides, and you don't dare let me down. The ambassador wants to go on a tour of Roma—but not to the usual tourist attractions. He's interested in getting a look at the Underworld.”

The Caesar's eyes widened. “He is? An ambassador, going *there* ?”

“He's young. He's Greek. He may be a little on the perverse side, or else he'd simply like to be. I said that you and I would show him temples and palaces, and he said to show him the grottos and the whorehouses. The marketplace of the sorcerers, the caverns of the witches, that sort of thing. ‘I've got a bit of a taste for the low life’ is what he told me,” Faustus said, in passable imitation of Menandros’ drawling tones and Eastern-accented Latin. “‘The dark, seamy underbelly of the city,’ is the very phrase he used. “All that dodgy stuff that Roma's so famous for.”

“A tourist,” Maximilianus said, with scorn. “He just wants to take a tour that's slightly different from the standard one.”

“Whatever. At any rate, I have to keep him entertained, and with your brother hiding out in the woods and your father ill I need to trot forth some other member of the Imperial family to play host for him, and who else is there but you? It's no more than half a day since he arrived in town and Heraclius has succeeded in offending him already, without even being here. The more annoyed he gets, the harder a bargain he's going to drive once your brother shows up. He's tougher than he looks and it's dangerous to underestimate him. If I leave him stewing in his own irritation for the next few days, there may be big trouble.”

“Trouble? Of what sort? He can't call off the marriage just because he feels snubbed.”

“No, I suppose he can't. But if he gets his jaw set the wrong way, he may report back to Justinianus that the next Emperor of the West is a bumbling fool not worth wasting soldiers on, let alone a sister. The princess Sabbatia quietly goes back to Constantinopolis a few months after the wedding and we get left to deal with the barbarians on our own. I like to think I'll be able to head all that off if I can distract the ambassador for a week or two by showing him a little dirty fun in the catacombs. You can help me with that. We've had some good times down there, you and I, eh, my friend? Now we can take him to some of our favorite places. Yes? Agreed?”

“May I bring along the Hebrew?” Maximilianus asked. “To be our guide. He knows the Underworld even better than we do.”

“Danielus bar-Heap, you mean.”

“Yes. Bar-Heap.”

“By all means,” said Faustus. “The more the merrier.”

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It was too late in the evening by the time he left Maximilianus's to go to the baths. Faustus returned to his



own quarters instead and called for a hot bath, a massage, and, afterward, the slave-girl Oalatheia, that dusky, lithe little sixteen-year-old Numidian with whom the only language Faustus had in common was that of Eros.

A long day it had been, and a hard, wearying one. He hadn't expected to find Heraclius gone when he came back from Ostia with the Eastern ambassador. Since the old Emperor Maximilianus was in such poor shape, the plan had been for the Greek ambassador to dine with Prince Heraclius on his first evening at the capital; but right after Faustus had set off for Ostia Heraclius had abruptly skipped out of the city, leaving behind the flimsy inspecting-the-northern-troops excuse. With the Emperor unwell and Heraclius away, there was no one of appropriate rank available to serve as official host at a state dinner except Heraclius's rapsallion brother Maximilianus, and none of the officials of the royal household had felt sufficiently audacious to propose *that* without getting Faustus's approval first. So the state dinner had simply been scrubbed that afternoon, a fact that Faustus had not discovered until his return from the port. By then it was too late to do anything about that, other than to send a frantic message after the vanished prince imploring him to head back to Urbs Roma as quickly as possible. If Heraclius had indeed gone hunting, the message would reach him at his forest lodge in the woods out beyond Lake Nemoensis, and perhaps, perhaps, he would pay heed to it. If he had, against all probability, really gone to the military frontier, he was unlikely to return very soon. And that left only the Caesar Maximilianus, willy-nilly, to do the job. A risky business, that could be.

Well, the ambassador's little confession of a bit of a taste for the low life had taken care of the issue of keeping him entertained, at least for the next couple of days. If slumming in the Underworld was what Menandros was truly after, then Maximilianus would become the solution instead of the problem.

Faustus leaned back in the bath, savoring the warmth of the water, enjoying the sweet smell of the oils floating on the surface. It was while in the bath that proper Romans of the olden days—Seneca, say, or the poet Lucan, or that fierce old harridan Antonia, the mother of the Emperor Claudius—would take the opportunity to slit their wrists rather than continue to endure the inadequacies and iniquities of the society in which they lived. But these were not the olden days, and Faustus was not as offended by the inadequacies and iniquities of society as those grand old Romans had been, and, in any event, suicide as a general concept was not something that held great appeal for him.

Still, it certainly was a sad time for Roma, he thought. The old Emperor as good as dead, the heir to the throne a ninny and a prude, the Emperor's other son a wastrel, and the barbarians, who were supposed to have been crushed years ago, once again knocking at the gates. Faustus knew that he was no model of the ancient Roman virtues himself—who was, five centuries after Augustus's time?—but, for all his own weaknesses and foibles, he could not help crying out within himself, sometimes, at the tawdriness of the epoch. We call ourselves Romans, he thought, and we know how to imitate, up to a point, the attitudes and poses of our great Roman forebears. But that's all we do: strike attitudes and imitate poses. We merely play at being Romans, and deceive ourselves, sometimes, into accepting the imitation for the reality.

It is a sorry era, Faustus told himself.

He was of royal blood himself, more or less. His very name proclaimed that: Faustus Flavius Constantinus Caesar. Embedded within it was the cognomen of his famous imperial ancestor, Constantinus the Great, and along with it the name of Constantinus's wife Fausta, herself the daughter of the Emperor Maximianus. The dynasty of Constantinus had long since vanished from the scene, of course, but by various genealogical zigs and zags Faustus could trace his descent back to it, and that entitled him to add the illustrious name “Caesar” to his array. Even so he was merely a secondary official in the chancellery of Maximilianus II Augustus, and his father before him had been an officer of trifling

rank in the Army of the North, and his father before him—well, Faustus thought, best not to think of *him*. The family had had some reverses in the course of the two centuries since Constantinus the Great had occupied the throne. But no one could deny his lineage, and there were times when he found himself secretly looking upon the current royal family as mere newcomers to power, jumped up out of nowhere. Of course, the early Emperors, Augustus Caesar and Tiberius and Claudius and such, would have looked even upon Constantinus the Great as a jumped-up newcomer; and the great men of the old Republic, Camillus, for instance, or Claudius Marcellus, would probably have thought the same of Augustus and Tiberius. Ancestry was a foolish game to play, Faustus thought. The past existed here in Roma in layer upon layer, a past that was nearly thirteen hundred years deep, and everyone had been a jumped-up newcomer once upon a time, even the founder Romulus himself.

So the era of the great Constantinus had come and gone, and here was his distant descendant Faustus Flavius Constantinus Caesar, growing old, growing plump, growing bald, spending his days toiling in the middle echelons of the Imperial Chancellery. And the Empire itself seemed to be aging badly too. Everything had gone soft, here in the final years of the long reign of Maximilianus II. The great days of Titus Gallius and his dynasty, of Constantinus and his, of the first Maximilianus and his son and grandson, seemed already like something out of the legends of antiquity, even if the second Maximilianus still did hold the throne. Things had changed, in the past decade or two. The Empire no longer seemed as secure as it had been. And this year there had been much talk, all up and down the shadowy corridors of the sorcerers' marketplace, of mystic oracular prophecies, lately found in a newly discovered manuscript of the Sybilline Books, that indicated that Roma had entered into its last century, after which would come fire, apocalyptic chaos, the collapse of everything.

If that is so, Faustus thought, let it wait another twenty or thirty years. Then the world can come to an end, for all that I will care.

But it was something new, this talk of the end of eternal Roma. For hundreds of years, now, there had always been some great man available to step in and save things in time of crisis. Three hundred and some years ago, Septimius Severus had been there to rescue the Empire from crazy Commodus. A generation later, after Severus's even crazier son Caracalla had worked all sorts of new harm, it was the superb Titus Gallius who took charge and repaired the damage. The barbarians were beginning to make serious trouble at the Empire's edges by then, but, again and again, strong Emperors beat them back: first Titus Gallius, then his nephew Gaius Martius, and Marcus Anastasius after him, and then Diocletianus, the first Emperor to divide the realm among jointly ruling Emperors, and Constantinus, who founded the second capital in the East, and on and on, down to the present time. But now the throne was to all intents and purposes vacant, and everyone could see that the heir-in-waiting was worthless, and where, Faustus wondered, was the next great savior of the realm to come from?

Prince Maximilianus was right that his own dynasty had been a line of mighty warriors. Maximilianus I, a northerner, not a Roman of Roma at all but a man who could trace his roots back to the long-ago Etruscan race, had founded that line when he made himself the successor to the great Emperor Theodosius on the Imperial throne. As a vigorous young general the first Maximilianus drove back the Goths who were threatening Italia's northern border, and then in the autumn of his years joined with Theodosius II of the Eastern Empire to smash the Hunnish invaders under Attila. Then came Maximilianus's son Heraclius I, who held the line on all frontiers, and when the next wave of Goths and their kinsmen the Vandals began rampaging through Gallia and the Germanic lands, Heraclius's son, the young Emperor Maximilianus II, cut them to pieces with a fierce counterattack that seemed to have ended their threat for all time.

But no: there seemed to be no end of Goths and Vandals and similar nomadic tribes. Here, forty years after Maximilianus II had marched with twenty legions across the Rhenus into Gallia and inflicted a

decisive defeat on them, they were massing for what looked like the biggest attack since the days of Theodosius. Now, though, Maximilianus II was old and feeble, very likely dying. The best anyone could say was that the Emperor was dwelling in seclusion somewhere, seen only by his doctors, but there were a great many unreliable stories circulating about his location: perhaps he was here in Roma, perhaps on the isle of Capreae down in the south, or maybe even in Carthago or Volubilis or some other sun-blessed African city. For all Faustus knew, he was already dead, and his panicky ministers were afraid to release the news. It would not be the first time in Roma's history that that had happened.

And after Maximilianus II, what? Prince Heraclius would take the throne, yes. But there was no reason to be optimistic about the sort of Emperor that he would be. Faustus could imagine the course of events only too easily: the Goths, unstoppable, break through in the north and invade Italia, sack the city, slaughter the aristocracy, proclaim one of their kings as monarch of Roma. While off in the west the Vandals or some other tribe of that ilk lay claim to the rich provinces of Gallia and Hispania, which now become independent kingdoms, and the Empire is dissolved.

“The best and in fact only hope,” Faustus had heard the Imperial Chancellor Licinius Obsequens say a month before, “is the royal marriage. Justinianus, for the sake of saving his brother-in-law's throne but also not wanting a pack of unruly barbarian kingdoms springing up along his own borders where the Western Empire used to be, sends an army to back up ours, and with the help of a few competent Greek generals the Goths finally get taken care of. But even that solution solves nothing for us. One can easily see one of Justinianus's generals offering to stay around as an ‘adviser’ to our young Emperor Heraclius, and next thing you know Heraclius turns up poisoned and the general lets it be known that he will graciously accept the Senate's invitation to take the throne, and from that point on the Western Empire comes completely under the dominance of the East, all our tax money starts to flow toward Constantinopolis, and Justinianus rules the world.”

Our best and in fact only hope. I really should slash my wrists, Faustus thought. Make a rational exit in the face of insuperable circumstances, as many a Roman hero has done before me. Certainly there is ample precedent. He thought of Lucan, who calmly recited his own poetry as he died. Petronius Arbiter, who did the same. Cocceius Nerva, who starved himself to death to show his distaste for the doings of Tiberius. “The foulest death,” said Seneca, “is preferable to the fairest slavery.” Very true; but perhaps I am not a true Roman hero.

He rose from the bath. Two slaves rushed to cover him with soft towels. “Send in the Numidian girl,” he said, heading for the bedchamber.

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“We will enter,” Danielus bar-Heap explained, “by way of the gateway of Titus Gallius, which is the most famous opening into the Underworld. There are many other entrances, but this is the most impressive.”

It was mid-morning: early in the day, perhaps, for going down below, certainly early in the day for the hard-living Prince Maximilianus to be up and about at all. But Faustus wanted to embark on the excursion as early as possible. Keeping the ambassador amused was his highest priority now.

The Hebrew had very quickly taken charge of the enterprise, doing all of the planning and most of the talking. He was one of the prince's most cherished companions. Faustus had met him more than once before: a big deep-voiced square-shouldered man, with jutting cheekbones and a great triangular beak of a nose, who wore his dark, almost blue-black hair in closely braided ringlets. Though it had been for many years the fashion for men to go clean-shaven in Roma, bar-Heap sported a conspicuous beard, thick and dense, that clung in tight coils to his jaws and chin. Instead of a toga he was clad in a knee-length tunic of rough white linen that was inscribed along its margins with bold lightning-bolt patterns

done in bright green thread.

Ambassador Menandros, Easterner though he was, had apparently never met a Hebrew before, and needed to have Bar-Heap explained to him. "They are a small tribe of desert folk who settled in Aegyptus long ago," Faustus told him. "Scatterings of them live all over the Empire by now. I dare say you would find a few in Constantinopolis. They are shrewd, determined, rather argumentative people, who don't always have the highest respect for the law, except for the laws of their own tribe, by which they abide under all circumstances in the most fanatic way. I understand they have no belief in the gods, for instance, and only the most grudging allegiance to the Emperor."

"No belief in the gods?" said Menandros. "None at all?"

"Not that I can see," said Faustus.

"Well, they do have some god of their own," Maximilianus put in. "But no one may ever see him, and they make no statues of him, and he has laid down a whole lot of absurd laws about what they can eat, and so forth. Bar-Heap will probably tell you all the details, if you ask him. Or perhaps he won't. Like all his kind, he's a prickly, unpredictable sort."

Faustus had advised the ambassador that it would be best if they dressed simply for the outing, nothing that might indicate their rank. Menandros's wardrobe, of course, ran largely to luxurious silken robes and other such Eastern splendiferousness, but Faustus had provided a plain woolen toga for him that had no stripes of rank on it. Menandros appeared to know how to drape the garment properly around himself. Maximilianus Caesar, who as the son of the reigning Emperor was entitled to wear a toga bedecked with a purple stripe and strands of golden thread, wore an unmarked one also. So did Faustus, although, since he too was the descendant of an Emperor, he was permitted the purple stripe as well. Even so no one down below was likely to mistake them for anything other than what they were, Romans of the highest class. But it was never a good idea to flaunt patrician airs too ostentatiously in the subterranean world of Roma.

The entrance that the Hebrew had chosen for them was at the edge of the teeming quarter known as the Subura, which lay east of the Forum in the valley between the Viminal and Esquiline Hills. Here, in a district marked by stench and squalor and deafening hubbub, where the common folk of Roma lived jammed elbow to elbow in shoddy buildings four and five stories high and screeching carts proceeded with much difficulty through narrow, winding streets, the Emperor Titus Gallius had begun carving, about the year 980, an underground refuge in which the citizens of Roma could take shelter if the unruly Goths, then massing in the north, should break through Roma's defenses and enter the city.

The Goths, as it happened, were routed long before they got anywhere near the capital. But by then Titus Gallius had built a complex network of passageways under the Subura, and he and his successors went on enlarging it for decades, sending tentacles out in all directions, creating linkages to the existing labyrinthine chain of underground galleries and tunnels and chambers that Romans had been constructing here and there about the city for a thousand years.

And by now that Underworld was a city beneath the city, an entity unto itself down there in the dank and humid darkness. The portals of Titus Gallius lay before them, two ornate stone arches like the gaping jaws of a giant mouth, rising in the middle of the street where Imperial forces centuries ago had cleared away a block of ancient hovels on both sides to make room for the entrance plaza. The opening into the Underground was wide enough to allow three wagons to pass at the same time. A ramp of well-worn brown brick led downward into the depths.

“Here are your lanterns,” bar-Heap said, lighting them and handing them around. “Remember to hold them high, to keep them from going out. The air is heavier down by your knees and will smother the flame.”

As they embarked on the ramp the Caesar took the position at the front of the group; Faustus positioned himself next to the Greek; bar-Heap brought up the rear. Menandros had been taken aback to learn that they would be traveling by foot, but Faustus had explained that using porter-born litters would be inconvenient in the tight passageways of the crowded world below. They would not even be accompanied by servants. The Greek seemed delighted to hear that. He was truly slumming today, that was clear. He wanted to travel through the Underworld as an ordinary Roman would, to get right down into all its muck and filth and danger.

Even this early in the day the ramp was crowded, both in the upward and downward directions, a quick, jostling throng. Ahead, all was cloaked in a palpable gloom. Going into the Underworld had always seemed to Faustus like entering the lair of some enormous creature. He was enveloped once again now by the thick, fierce darkness, cool, spicy. He savored its embrace. How often had he and Caesar entered here in search of a night's strange entertainment, and how many times they had found it!

Quickly his eyes began to adapt to the dim murky gleam of the lanterns. By the dull light of distant torches he could see the long ranges of far-off vaults running off on every side. The descent had quickly leveled out into the broad vestibule. Gusts of fetid underground air blew toward them, bearing a host of odors: smoke, sweat, mildew, the smell of animal bodies. It was very busy here, long lines of people and beasts of burden coming and going out of a dozen directions. The wide avenue known as the Via Subterranea stretched before them, and a myriad narrower subsidiary passages branched off to right and left. Faustus saw once more the familiar piers and arches and bays, the curving walls of warm golden brick, the heavy rock-hewn pillars and the innumerable alcoves behind them. At once the darkness of this shadowy world seemed less oppressive.

He glanced down at the Greek. Menandros's soft features were alive with excitement. His nostrils were quivering, his lips were drawn back. His expression was like that of a small child who was being taken to the gladiatorial games for the first time. He almost seemed like a child among the three tall men, too, a flimsy, diminutive figure alongside long-limbed Maximilianus and sturdy, deep-chested bar-Heap and fleshy, bulky Faustus.

“What is that?” Menandros asked, pointing to the enormous marble relief of a bearded head, cemented into the wall just ahead of them. From above came a spike of light from one of the openings that pierced the vaulted roof, admitting a white beam that lit up the carved features with an eerie nimbus.

“He is a god,” said bar-Heap from behind, with a tincture of contempt in his voice. “An Emperor put him up there, many years ago. Perhaps he is one of yours, or perhaps one from Syria. We call him Jupiter of the Caverns.” The Hebrew raised his lantern far over his head to provide an additional burst of illumination for that powerful profile, the great staring eye, the huge all-hearing ear, the ominously parted lips, the massive coiling stone beard thicker even than his own. Everything above the eye was gone, and below the beard there was nothing also: it was a single colossal fragment that looked unthinkably ancient, a brooding relic of some great former age. “Hail, Jupiter!” bar-Heap said in a resonant tone, and laughed. But Menandros paused to examine the immense somber face, and to take note of the marble altar, worn smooth by adoring hands and luminous in the reflected light of candles mounted along its rim, just below it. The charred bones of sacrifices, recent ones, lay in a niche in its side.

Maximilianus beckoned him impatiently onward with quick imperious gestures. “This is only the beginning,” the Caesar said. “We have many miles ahead of us.”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” said the Greek. “But still—it is so new to me, it is so strange—”

After they had gone some two hundred paces down the Via Subterranea Maximilianus made a sharp left turn into a curving passage where cold damp came stealing down the walls in a steady drip, forming pools beneath their feet. The air had a moist, choking mustiness to it.

It seemed less crowded here. At least there was less foot traffic than in the main avenue. The overhead light-shafts were spaced much farther apart. Fewer torches could be seen ahead. But out of the darkness came unsettling sounds, harsh laughter and blurred incomprehensible whispers and giddy murmurs in unknown tongues and the occasional high, sharp shriek. There were strong odors, too, those of meat roasting over smoky fires, cauliflower stew, tubs of hot peppery broth, fried fish. This was no city of the dead, however dark and grim it might look: it was bursting with secret life, roaring with it, this hidden frenetic underground world. Everywhere around, in chambers and vaults cut from the living rock, an abundance of events was going forward, Faustus knew: the sale of enchantments and the casting of spells, business deals both licit and illicit, the performance of the religious rites of a hundred cults, carnal acts of every kind.

“Where are we now?” Menandros asked.

“These are the grottos of Titus Gallius,” said Caesar. “One of the busiest sectors—a place of general activities, very hard to characterize. One may see anything here, and rarely the same thing twice.”

They went from chamber to chamber, following the low-ceilinged winding path that threaded everything together. It was Maximilianus, still, who led the way, hot-eyed now, almost frenzied, pulling them all behind him in his wake, often faster than Menandros wanted to go. Faustus and the Hebrew went along obligingly. This behavior of Caesar's was nothing new to them. It was almost as if some fit came over him when he was here in these tangled grottos, driving him on from one sight to the next. Faustus had seen this happen many times before down here, the bursting forth of this restless furious hunger of the Caesar's for novelty, this raging inexhaustible curiosity of his.

It was the curse of an idle life, Faustus thought, the poignant anguish of an Emperor's superfluous younger son, vexed by the endless torment of his own uselessness, the mocking powerlessness within great power that was the only thing that his high birth had brought him. It was as if the greatest challenge that Maximilianus faced was the boredom of his own gilded existence, and in the Underworld he warded off that challenge through this quest for the ultimate and the impossible. The Hebrew was a necessary facilitator for this: more often than not it took a quick word from bar-Heap, not always speaking Latin, to gain admittance for them to some sector of the caverns normally closed to the uninvited.

Here, under an array of blazing sconces that filled the air with black smoke, lights that were never extinguished in this place where no distinction was made between night and day, was a marketplace where strange delicacies were being sold—the tongues of nightingales and flamingos, lamprey spleen, camel heels, bright yellow cockscombs, parrot heads, the livers of pikes, the brains of pheasants and peacocks, the ears of dormice, the eggs of pelicans, bizarre things from every corner of the Empire, everything heaped in big meaty mounds on silver trays. Menandros, that cosmopolitan Greek, stared in wonder like any provincial bumpkin. “Do Romans dine on such things every day?” he asked, and Caesar, smiling that opaque Etruscan smile of his, assured him that they constantly did, not only at the Imperial table but everywhere in Roma, even in the humblest houses, and promised him a meal of nightingales' tongues and peacock brains at the earliest opportunity.

And here was a noisy plaza filled with clowns, jugglers, acrobats, sword-swallowers, fire-eaters,

tightrope-walkers, and performers of a dozen other kinds, with snarling barkers loudly calling out the praises of the acts that employed them. Maximilianus tossed silver coins freely to them, and at his urging Menandros did the same. Beyond it was a colonnaded hallway in which a freak show was being offered: hunchbacks and dwarfs, three simpering pinheads in elaborate scarlet livery, a man who looked like a living skeleton, another who must have been nearly ten feet high. "The one with the ostrich head is no longer here," said bar-Heap, obviously disappointed. "And also the girl with three eyes, and the twins joined at the waist." Here, too, they distributed coins liberally, all but bar-Heap, who kept the strings of his purse drawn tight.

"Do you know, Faustus, who is the greatest freak and monster of them all?" asked Maximilianus, under his breath, as they walked along. And when Faustus remained silent the prince offered an answer to his own question that Faustus had not anticipated: "It is the Emperor, my friend, for he stands apart from all other men, distinct, unique, forever isolated from all honesty and love, from normal feeling of any sort. He is a grotesque thing, an Emperor is. There is no monster so pitiable on this earth as an Emperor, Faustus." The Caesar, gripping the fleshiest part of Faustus's arm with iron force, gave him such a queer look of fury and anguish that Faustus was astounded by its intensity. This was a side of his friend he had never seen before. But then Maximilianus grinned and jabbed him lightheartedly in the ribs, and winked as if to take the sting out of his words.

Farther on was a row of apothecary stalls cluttered one upon the next in a series of narrow alcoves that were part of what looked like an abandoned temple. Lamps were burning before each one. These dealers in medicines offered such things as the bile of bulls and hyenas, the sloughed-off skins of snakes, the webs of spiders, the dung of elephants. "What is this?" the Greek asked, pointing into a glass vial that contained some fine gray powder, and bar-Heap, after making inquiry, reported that it was the excrement of Sicilian doves, much valued in treating tumors of the leg and many other maladies. Another booth sold only rare aromatic barks from the trees of India; another, small disks made of rare red clay from the isle of Lemnos, stamped with the sacred seal of Diana and reputed to cure the bite of mad dogs and the effects of the most lethal poisons. "And this man here," said Maximilianus grandly at the next stall, "purveys nothing but theriac, the universal antidote, potent even for leprosy. It is made mainly from the flesh of vipers steeped in wine, I think, but there are other ingredients, secret ones, and even if we put him to the torture he would not reveal them." And, with a wink to the drug's purveyor, a one-eyed hawk-faced old Aegyptian, "Eh, Ptolemaios, is that not so? Not even if we put you to the torture?"

"It will not come to that, I hope, Caesar," the man replied.

"So they know you here?" Menandros asked, when they had moved onward.

"Some do. This one has several times brought his wares to the palace to treat my ailing father."

"Ah," the Greek said. "Your ailing father, yes. All the world prays for his swift recovery."

Maximilianus nodded casually, as though Menandros had expressed nothing more than a wish for fair weather on the next day.

Faustus felt troubled by the strangeness of the Caesar's mood. He knew Maximilianus to be an unpredictable man who veered constantly between taut control and wild abandon, but it was mere courtesy to offer a grateful word for such an expression of sympathy, and yet he had been unable to bring himself to do it. What, he wondered, does the ambassador think of this strange prince? Or does he think nothing at all, except that this is what one can expect the younger son of a Roman Emperor to be like?

There were no clocks in this subterranean world, nor was there any clue in this sunless place to the hour

available from from the skies, but Faustus's belly was telling him the time quite unmistakably, now. "Shall we go above to eat," he asked Menandros, "or would you prefer to dine down here?"

"Oh, down here, by all means," said the Greek. "I'm not at all ready to go above!"

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They ate at a torchlit tavern two galleries over from the arcade of the apothecaries, sitting cheek by jowl with scores of garlicky commoners on rough wooden benches: a meal of meat stewed in a spicy sauce made from fermented fish, fruits steeped in honey and vinegar, harsh acrid wine not much unlike vinegar itself. Menandros seemed to love it. He must never have encountered such indelicate delicacies before, and he ate and drank with ravenous appetite. The effects of this indulgence showed quickly on him: the sweat-shiny brow, the ruddy cheeks, the glazing eyes. Maximilianus, too, allowed himself course after course, washing his food down with awesome quantities of the dreadful wine; but, then, Maximilianus adored this stuff and never knew when to stop when wine of any kind was within reach. Faustus, not a man of great moderation himself, who loved drinking to excess, loved the dizzy float upward that too much wine brought on, the severing of his soaring mind from his ever more gross and leaden flesh, had to force himself to swallow it. But eventually he took to drinking most of each new pitcher as fast as he could, regardless of the taste, in order to keep the Caesar from overindulging. He gave much of the rest to the stolid, evidently bottomless bar-Heap, for he knew what perils were possible if the prince, far gone in drunkenness, should get himself into some foolish brawl down here. He could easily imagine bringing Maximilianus back on a board from the caverns some day, with his royal gut slashed from one side to the other and his body already stiffening. If that happened the best he could hope for himself would be to spend the remainder of his own life in brutal exile in some dismal Teutonic outpost.

When they went onward finally, somewhere late in the afternoon, a subtle change of balance had taken place in the group. Maximilianus, either because he had suddenly grown bored or because he had eaten too much, seemed to lose interest in the expedition. No longer did he sprint ahead, beckoning them on along from corridor to corridor as though racing some unseen opponent from one place to the next. Now it was Menandros, fueled by his heavy input of wine, who seized command, displaying now a hunger to see it all even more powerful than the prince's had been, and rushing them along through the subterranean city. Not knowing any of the routes, he made random turns, taking them now into pitch-black cul-de-sacs, now to the edges of dizzying abysses where long many-runged ladders led to spiraling successions of lower levels, now to chambers with painted walls where rows of cackling madwomen sat in throne-like niches demanding alms.

Most of the time Maximilianus did not seem to be able to identify the places into which Menandros had led them, or did not care to say. It became the task of bar-Heap, whose mastery of the underground city seemed total, to explain what they were seeing. "This place is the underground arena," the Hebrew said, as they peered into a black hole that seemed to stretch for many leagues. "The games are held here at the midnight hour, and all contests are to the death." They came soon afterward to a gleaming marble facade and a grand doorway leading to some interior chamber: the Temple of Jupiter Imperator, bar-Heap explained. That was the cult established by the Emperor Gaius Martius in the hope, not entirely realized, of identifying the father of the gods with the head of the state in the eyes of the common people, who otherwise might wander off into some kind of alien religious belief that could weaken their loyalty to the state. "And this," said bar-Heap at an adjacent temple flush against the side of Jupiter's, "is the House of Cybele, where they worship the Great Mother."

"We have that cult in the East as well," said Menandros, and halted to examine with a connoisseur's eye the fanciful mosaic ornamentation, row upon row of patterned tiles, red and blue and orange and green and gold, that proclaimed this place the dwelling of the full-breasted goddess. "How fine this is," the Greek said, "to build such a wonder underground, where it can barely be seen except by this dirty



torchlight, and not well even then. How bold! How extravagant!”

“It is a very wealthy creed, Cybele's,” said Maximilianus, nudging Faustus broadly as though to remind him of the stolen opals of the goddess that would be his gift to his brother's Constantinopolitan bride.

Menandros drew them tirelessly on through the dark labyrinth—past bubbling fountains and silent burial-chambers and frescoed cult-halls and bustling marketplaces, and then through a slit-like opening in the wall that took them into a huge, empty space from which a multitude of dusty unmarked corridors radiated, and down one and then another of those, until, in a place of awkwardly narrow passages, even bar-Heap seemed uncertain of where they were. A frown furrowed the Hebrew's forehead. Faustus, who by this time was feeling about ready to drop from fatigue, began to worry too. Suddenly there was no one else around. The only sounds here were the sounds of their own echoing footsteps. Everyone had heard tales of people roaming the subterranean world who had taken injudicious turns and found themselves irretrievably lost in mazes built in ancient days to delude possible invaders, bewilderingly intricate webworks of anarchic design whose outlets were essentially unfindable and from which the only escape was through starvation. A sad fate for the little Greek emissary and the dashing, venturesome royal prince, Faustus thought. A sad fate for Faustus, too.

But this was not a maze of that sort. Four sharp bends, a brief climb by ladder, a left turn, and they were back on the Via Subterranea, somehow, though no doubt very far from the point where they had entered the underground metropolis that morning. The vaulted ceiling was pointed, here, and inlaid with rows of coral-colored breccia. A procession of chanting priests was coming toward them, gaunt men whose faces were smeared with rouge and whose eyesockets were painted brightly in rings of yellow and green. They wore white tunics crisscrossed with narrow purple stripes and towering saffron-colored caps that bore the emblem of a single glaring eye at their summits. Energetically they flogged one another with whips of knotted woolen yarn studded with the knucklebones of sheep as they danced along, and cried out in harsh, jabbering rhythmic tones, uttering prayers in some foreign tongue.

“Eunuchs, all of them,” said bar-Heap in disgust. “Worshippers of Dionysus. Step aside, or they'll bowl you over, for they yield place to no one when they march like this.”

Close behind the priests came a procession of deformed clowns, squinting hunchbacked men who also were carrying whips, but only pretending to use them on each other. Maximilianus flung them a handful of coins, and Menandros did the same, and they broke formation at once, scrabbling enthusiastically in the dimness to scoop them up. On the far side of them the Hebrew pointed out a chamber that he identified as a chapel of Priapus, and Menandros was all for investigating it; but this time Maximilianus said swiftly, “I think that is for another day, your excellence. One should be in fresh condition for such amusements, and you must be tired, now, after this long first journey through the netherworld.”

The ambassador looked unhappy. Faustus wondered whose will would prevail: that of the visiting diplomat, whose whims ought to be respected, or of the Emperor's son, who did not expect to be gainsaid. But after a moment's hesitation Menandros agreed that it was time to go back above. Perhaps he saw the wisdom of checking his voracious curiosity for a little while, or else simply that of yielding to the prince's request.

“There is an exit ramp over there,” bar-Heap said, pointing to his right. With surprising speed they emerged into the open. Night had fallen. The sweet cool air seemed, as ever upon emerging, a thousand times fresher and more nourishing than that of the world below. Faustus was amused to see that they were not far from the Baths of Constantinus, only a few hundred yards from where they had gone in, although his legs were aching fiercely, as though he had covered many leagues that day. They must have traveled in an enormous circle, he decided.

He yearned for his own bath, and a decent dinner, and a massage afterward and the Numidian girl.

Maximilianus, with an Imperial prince's casual arrogance, hailed a passing litter that bore Senatorial markings, and requisitioned its use for his own purposes. Its occupant, a balding man whom Faustus recognized by face but could not name, hastened to comply, scuttling away into the night without protest. Faustus and Menandros and the Caesar clambered aboard, while the Hebrew, with no more farewell than an irreverent offhand wave, vanished into the darkness of the streets.

There was no message waiting at home for Faustus to tell him that Prince Heraclius was heading back to the city. He had been hoping for such news. Tomorrow would be another exhausting day spent underground, then.

He slept badly, though the little Numidian did her best to soothe his nerves.

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This time they entered the Underworld farther to the west, between the column of Marcus Aurelius and the Temple of Isis and Sarapis. That was, bar-Heap said, the quickest way to reach the marketplace of the sorcerers, which Menandros had some particular interest in seeing.

Diligent guide that he was, the Hebrew showed them all the notable landmarks along the way: the Whispering Gallery, where even the faintest of sounds traveled enormous distances, and the Baths of Pluto, a series of steaming thermal pools that gave off a foul sulphurous reek but which nevertheless abounded in patrons even here at midday, and the River Styx nearby it, the black subterranean stream that followed a rambling course through the underground city until it emerged into the Tiber just upstream from the great sewer of the Cloaca Maxima.

“Truly, the Styx?” Menandros asked, with a credulity Faustus had not expected of him.

“We call it that,” said bar-Heap. “Because it is the river of our Underworld, you see. But the true one is somewhere in your own eastern realm, I think. Here—we must turn—”

A jagged, irregularly oval aperture in the passageway wall proved to be the entrance to the great hall that served as the sorcerers' marketplace. Originally, so they said, it had been intended as a storage vault for the Imperial chariots, to keep them from being seized by invading barbarians. When such precautions had turned out to be unnecessary, the big room had been taken over by a swarm of sorcerers, who divided it by rows of pumice-clad arches into a collection of small low-walled chambers. An octagonal light-well, high overhead in the very center of the roof of the hall, allowed pale streams of sunlight to filter down from the street above, but most of the marketplace's illumination came from the smoky braziers in front of each stall. These, whether by some enchantment or mere technical skill, all burned with gaudy many-hued flames, and dancing strands of violet and pale crimson and cobalt blue and brilliant emerald mingled with the more usual reds and yellows of a charcoal fire.

The roar of commerce rose up on every side. Each of the sorcerers' stalls had its barker, crying the merits of his master's wares. Scarcely had the ambassador Menandros entered the room than one of these, a fat, sweaty-faced man wearing a brocaded robe of Syrian style, spied him as a likely mark, beckoning him inward with both arms while calling out, “Eh, there, you dear little fellow: what about a love spell today, an excellent inflamer, the finest of its kind?”

Menandros indicated interest. The barker said, “Come, then, let me show you this splendid wizardry! It attracts men to women, women to men, and makes virgins rush out of their homes to find lovers!” He

reached behind him, snatched up a rolled parchment scroll, and waved it in front of Menandros's nose. "Here, friend, here! You take a pure papyrus and write on it, with the blood of an ass, the magical words contained on this. Then you put in a hair of the woman you desire, or a snip of her clothing, or a bit of her bedsheet—acquire it however you may. And then you smear the papyrus with a bit of vinegar gum, and stick it to the wall of her house, and you will marvel! But watch that you are not struck yourself, or you may find yourself bound by the chains of love to some passing drover, or to his donkey, perhaps, or even worse! Three sesterces! Three!"

"If infallible love is to be had so cheaply," Maximilianus said to the man, "why is it that languishing lovers hurl themselves into the river every day of the week?"

"And also why is it that the whorehouses are kept so busy," added Faustus, "when for three brass coins anyone can have the woman of his dreams?"

"Or the man," said Menandros. "For this charm will work both ways, so he tells us."

"Or on a donkey," put in Danielus bar-Heap, and they laughed and passed onward.

Nearby, a spell of invisibility was for sale, at a price of two silver denarii. "It is the simplest thing," insisted the barker, a small lean man tight as a coiled spring, whose swarthy sharp-chinned face was marked by the scars of some ancient knife-fight. "Take a night-owl's eye and a ball of the dung of the beetles of Aegyptus and the oil of an unripe olive and grind them all together until smooth, and smear your whole body with it, and then go to the nearest shrine of the lord Apollo by dawn's first light and utter the prayer that this parchment will give you. And you will be invisible to all eyes until sunset, and can go unnoticed among the ladies at their baths, or slip into the palace of the Emperor and help yourself to delicacies from his table, or fill your purse with gold from the moneychangers' tables. Two silver denarii, only!"

"Quite reasonable, for a day's invisibility," Menandros said. "I'll have it, for my master's delight." And reached for his purse; but the Caesar, catching him by the wrist, warned him never to accept the quoted first price in a place like this. Menandros shrugged, as though to point out that the price asked was only a trifle, after all. But to the Caesar Maximilianus there was an issue of principle here. He invoked the aid of bar-Heap, who quickly bargained the fee down to four copper dupondii, and, since Menandros did not have coins as small as that in his purse, it was Faustus who handed over the price.

"You have done well," the barker said, giving the Greek his bit of parchment. Menandros, turning away, opened it. "The letters are Greek," he said.

Maximilianus nodded. "Yes. Most of this trash is set out in Greek. It is the language of magic, here."

"The letters are Greek," said Menandros, "but not the words. Listen. And he read out in a rolling resonant tone: 'BORKE PHOIOUR IO ZIZIA APARXEOUCH THYTHE LAILAM AAAAAA IIII OOOO IEO IEO IEO "' Then he looked up from the scroll. "And there are three more lines, of much the same sort. What do you make of that, my friends?"

"I think it is well that you didn't read any more of it," said Faustus, "or you might have disappeared right before our noses."

"Not without employing the beetle-dung and the owl's eye and the rest," bar-Heap observed. "Nor is that dawn's first light coming down that shaft, even if you would pretend that this is Apollo's temple."

“IO IO O PHRIXRIZO EOA,” Menandros read, and giggled in pleasure, and rolled the scroll and put it in his purse.

It did not appear likely to Faustus that the Greek was a believer in this nonsense, as his earlier eagerness to visit this marketplace had led him to suspect. Yet he was an enthusiastic buyer. Doubtless he was merely looking for quaint souvenirs to bring back to his Emperor in Constantinopolis—entertaining examples of modern-day Roman gullibility. For Menandros must surely have noticed by this time an important truth about this room, which was that nearly all the sorcerers and their salesmen were citizens of the Eastern half of the empire, which had a reputation for magic going back to the distant days of the Pharaohs and the kings of Babylon, while the customers—and there were plenty of them—all were Romans of the West. Surely spells of this sort would be widely available in the other Empire. This stuff would be nothing new to Easterners. It was an oily place, the Eastern Empire. All the mercantile skills had been invented there. The East's roots went deep down into antiquity, into a time long before Roma itself ever was, and one needed to keep a wary eye out in any dealings with its citizens.

So Menandros was just trying to collect evidence of Roman silliness, yes. Using bar-Heap to beat the prices down for him, he went from booth to booth, gathering up the merchandise. He acquired instructions for fashioning a ring of power that would permit one to get whatever one asks from anybody, or to calm the anger of masters and kings. He bought a charm to induce wakefulness, and another to bring on sleep. He got a lengthy scroll that offered a whole catalog of mighty mysteries, and gleefully read from it to them: “You will see the doors thrown open, and seven virgins coming from deep within, dressed in linen garments, and with the faces of asps. They are called the Fates of Heaven, and wield golden wands. When you see them, greet them in this manner—” He found a spell that necromancers could use to keep skulls from speaking out of turn while their owners were using them in the casting of spells; he found one that would summon the Headless One who had created earth and heaven, the mighty Osoronnophris, and conjure Him to expel demons from a sufferer's body; he found one that would bring back lost or stolen property; he went back to the first booth and bought the infallible love potion, for a fraction of the original asking price; and, finally, picked up one that would cause one's fellow drinkers at a drinking party to think that they had grown the snouts of apes.

At last, well satisfied with his purchases, Menandros said he was willing to move on. At the far end of the hall, beyond the territory of the peddlers of spells, they paused at the domain of the soothsayers and augurs. “For a copper or two,” Faustus told the Greek, “they will look at the palm of your hand, or the pattern of lines on your forehead, and tell you your future. For a higher price they will examine the entrails of chickens or the liver of a sheep, and tell you your *true* future. Or even the future of the Empire itself.”

Menandros looked astonished. “The future of the Empire? Common diviners in a public marketplace offer prophecies of a sort like that? I'd think only the Imperial augurs would deal in such news, and only for the Emperor's ear.”

“The Imperial augurs provide more reliable information, I suppose,” said Faustus. “But this is Roma, where everything is for sale to anyone.” He looked down the row, and saw the one who had claimed new knowledge of the Sybilline prophecies and foretold the imminent end of the Empire—an old man, unmistakably Roman, not a Greek or any other kind of foreigner, with faded blue eyes and a lengthy, wispy white beard. “Over there is one of the most audacious of our seers, for instance,” Faustus said, pointing. “For a fee he will tell you that our time of Empire is nearly over, that a year is coming soon when the seven planets will meet at Capricorn and the entire universe will be consumed by fire.”

“The *greatekpyrosis*,” Menandros said. “We have the same prophecy. What does he base his calculations on, I wonder?”

“What does it matter?” cried Maximilianus, in a burst of sudden unconcealed rage. “It is all foolishness!”

“Perhaps so,” Faustus said gently. And, to Menandros, whose curiosity about the old man and his apocalyptic predictions still was apparent: “It has something to do with the old tale of King Romulus and the twelve eagles that passed overhead on the day he and his brother Remus fought over the proper location for the city of Roma.”

“They were twelve vultures, I thought,” said bar-Heap.

Faustus shook his head. “No. Eagles, they were. And the prophecy of the Sibyl is that Roma will endure for twelve Great Years of a hundred years each, one for each of Romulus's eagles, and one century more beyond that. This is the year 1282 since the founding. So we have eighteen years left, says the long-bearded one over there.”

“This is all atrocious foolishness,” said Maximilianus again, his eyes blazing.

“May we speak with this man a moment, even so?” Menandros asked.

The Caesar most plainly did not want to go near him. But his guest's mild request could hardly be refused. Faustus saw Maximilianus struggling with his anger as they walked toward the soothsayer's booth, and with some effort putting it aside. “Here is a visitor to our city,” said Maximilianus to the old man in a clenched voice, “who wants to hear what you've to say concerning the impending fiery end of Roma. Name your price and tell him your fables.”

But the soothsayer shrank back, trembling in fear. “No, Caesar. I pray you, let me be!”

“You recognize me, do you?”

“Who would not recognize the Emperor's son? Especially one whose profession it is to pierce all veils.”

“You've pierced mine, certainly. But why do I frighten you so? I mean you no harm. Come, man, my friend here is a Greek from Justinianus's court, full of questions for you about the terrible doom that shortly will be heading our way. Speak your piece, will you?” Maximilianus pulled out his purse and drew a shining gold piece from it. “A fine newly minted aureus, is that enough to unseal your lips? Two? Three?”

It was a fortune. But the man seemed paralyzed with terror. He moved back in his booth, shivering, now, almost on the verge of collapse. The blood had drained from his face and his pale blue eyes were bulging and rigid. It was asking too much of him, Faustus supposed, to be compelled to speak of the approaching destruction of the world to the Emperor's actual son.

“Enough,” Faustus murmured. “You'll scare the poor creature to death, Maximilianus.”

But the Caesar was bubbling with fury. “No! Here's gold for him! Let him speak! Let him speak!”

“Caesar, I will speak to you, if you like,” said a high-pitched, sharp-edged voice from behind them. “And will tell you such things as are sure to please your ears.”

It was another soothsayer, a ratty little squint-faced man in a tattered yellow tunic, who now made so bold as to pluck at the edge of Maximilianus's toga. He had cast an augury for Maximilianus just now upon seeing the Caesar's entry into the marketplace, he said, and would not even ask a fee for it. No, not

so much as two coppers for the news he had to impart. Not even one.

“Not interested,” Maximilianus said brusquely, and turned away.

But the little diviner would not accept the rebuff. With frantic squirrelly energy he ran around Maximilianus's side to face him again and said, with the reckless daring of the utterly insignificant confronting the extremely grand, “I threw the bones, Caesar, and they showed me your future. It is a glorious one. You will be one of Roma's greatest heroes! Men will sing your praises for centuries to come.”

Instantly a bright blaze of fury lit Maximilianus's entire countenance. Faustus had never seen the prince so incensed. “Do you dare to mock me to my face?” the Caesar demanded, his voice so thick with wrath that he could barely get the words out. His right arm quivered and jerked as though he were struggling to keep it from lashing out in rage. “A hero, you say! A hero! *Ahero!*” If the little man had spat in his face it could not have maddened him more.

But the soothsayer persisted. “Yes, my lord, a great general, who will shatter the barbarian armies like so many empty husks! You will march against them at the head of a mighty force not long after you become Emperor, and—”

That was too much for the prince. “Emperor, too!” Maximilianus bellowed, and in that same moment struck out wildly at the man, a fierce backhanded blow that sent him reeling against the bench where the other soothsayer, the old bearded one, still was cowering. Then, stepping forward, Maximilianus caught the little man by the shoulder and slapped him again and again, back, forth, back, forth, knocking his head from side to side until blood poured from his mouth and nose and his eyes began to glaze over. Faustus, frozen at first in sheer amazement, moved in after a time to intervene. “Maximilianus!” he said, trying to catch the Caesar's flailing arm. “My lord—I beg you—it is not right, my lord—”

He signalled to bar-Heap, and the Hebrew caught Maximilianus's other arm. Together they pulled him back.

There was sudden silence in the hall. The sorcerers and their employees had ceased their work and were staring in astonishment and horror, as was Menandros.

The ragged little soothsayer, sprawling now in a kind of daze against the bench, spat out a tooth and said, in a kind of desperate defiance, “Even so, your majesty, it is the truth: Emperor.”

It was all that Faustus and the Hebrew could manage to get the prince away from there without his doing further damage.

This capacity for wild rage was an aspect of Maximilianus that Faustus had never seen. The Caesar took nothing seriously. The world was a great joke to him. He had always let it be known that he cared for nothing and no one, not even himself. He was too cynical and wanton of spirit, too flighty, too indifferent to anything of any real importance, ever to muster the kind of involvement with events that true anger required. Then why had the soothsayer's words upset him so? His fury had been out of all proportion to the offense, if offense there had been. The man was merely trying to flatter. Here is a royal prince come among us: very well, tell him he will be a great hero, tell him even that he will be Emperor some day. The second of those, at least, was not impossible. Heraclius, who soon would have the throne, might well die childless, and they would have no choice but to ask his brother to ascend to power, however little Maximilianus himself might care for the idea.

Saying that Maximilianus would become a great hero, though: that must have been what stung him so, Faustus thought. Doubtless he did not regard himself as having a single iota of the stuff of heroes in him, whatever a flattering soothsayer might choose to say. And must believe also that all Roma perceived him not as a handsome young prince who might yet achieve great things but only as the idle wencher and gambler and dissipated profligate rogue that he was in his own eyes. And so he would interpret the soothsayer's words as mockery of the most inflammatory kind, rather than as flattery.

“We should quickly find ourselves a wine-shop, I think,” Faustus said. “Some wine will cool your overheated blood, my lord.”

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Indeed the wine, vile though it was, calmed Maximilianus rapidly, and soon he was laughing and shaking his head over the impudence of the ratty little man. “A hero of the realm! Me! And Emperor, too? Was there ever a soothsayer so far from the truth in his auguries?”

“If they are all like that one,” said bar-Heap, “then I think there's no need to fear the coming fiery destruction of the universe, either. These men are clowns, or worse. All they provide is amusement for fools.”

“A useful function in the world, I would say,” Menandros observed. “There are so many fools, you know, and are they not entitled to amusement also?”

Faustus said very little. The episode among the sorcerers and soothsayers had left him in a mood of uncharacteristic bleakness. He had always been a good-humored man; the Caesar prized him for the jolly companionship he offered; but his frame of mind had grown steadily more sober since the coming to Roma of this Greek ambassador, and now he felt himself ringed round with an inchoate host of despondent thoughts. It was spending so much time in this underground realm of darkness and flickering shadows, he told himself, that had done this to him. He and the prince had found only pleasure here in days gone by, but their time these two days past in these ancient tunnels, this mysterious kingdom of inexplicable noises and visitations, of invisible beings, of lurking ghosts, had made him weary and uncomfortable. This dank sunless underground world, he thought, was the true Roma, a benighted kingdom of magic and terror, a place of omens and dread.

Would the world be destroyed by flame in eighteen years, as the old man said? Probably not. In any case he doubted that he would live to see it. The universe's end might not be approaching, but surely his own was: five years, ten, at best fifteen, and he would be gone, well before the promised catastrophe, the—what had the Greek called it?—the *greatekpyrosis*.

But even if no flaming apocalypse was really in store, the Empire did seem to be crumbling. There were symptoms of disease everywhere. That the man second in line for the throne would react with such fury at the possibility that he might be called upon to serve the realm was a sign of the extent of the illness. That the barbarians might soon be battering at the gates again, only a generation after they supposedly had been put to rout forever, was another. We seem to have lost our way.

Faustus filled his cup again. He knew he was drinking too much too fast: even his capacious paunch had its limits. But the wine eased the pain. Drink, then, old Faustus. Drink. If nothing else, you can allow your body a little comfort.

Yes, he was getting old. But Roma was even older. The immensity of the city's past pressed down on him from all sides. The narrow streets, choked with dunghill rubbish, that gave way to the great plazas and their myriad fountains with their silvery jets, and the palaces of the rich and mighty, and the statues

everywhere, the obelisks, the columns taken from far-off temples, the spoils of a hundred Imperial conquests, the shrines of a hundred foreign gods, and the clean old Roma of the early Republic somewhere beneath it all: level upon level of history here, twelve centuries of it, the present continually superimposing itself upon the past, though the past remains also—yes, he told himself, it has been a good long run, and perhaps, now that we have created so much past for ourselves, we have very little future, and really are wandering toward the finish now, and will disappear into our own softness, our own confusion, our own fatal love of pleasure and ease.

That troubled him greatly. But why, he wondered, did he care? He was nothing but a licentious old idler himself, the companion to a licentious young one. It had been his lifelong pretense never to care about anything.

And yet, yet, he could not let himself forget that he had the blood of the prodigious Constantinus in his veins, one of the greatest Emperors of all. The fate of the Empire had mattered profoundly to Constantinus: he had toiled for decades at its helm, and ultimately he had saved it from collapse by creating a new capital for it in the East, a second foundation to help carry the weight that Urbs Roma itself was no longer capable of bearing alone. Here am I, two and a quarter centuries later, and I am to my great ancestor Constantinus as a plump, sleepy old old cat is to a raging lion: but I must care at least a little about the fate of the Empire to which he pledged his life. For his sake, if not particularly for my own. Otherwise, Faustus asked himself fiercely, what is the point of having the blood of an Emperor in my veins?

“You've grown very quiet, old man,” Maximilianus said. “Did I upset you, shouting and rioting like that back there?”

“A little. But that's over now.”

“What is it, then?”

“Thinking. A pernicious pastime, which I regret.” Faustus swirled his cup about and peered glumly into its depths. “Here we are,” he said, “down in the bowels of the city, this weird dirty place. I have always thought that everything seems unreal here, that it is all a kind of stage-show. And yet right now it seems to me that it's far more real than anything up above. Down here, at least, there are no pretenses. It's every man for himself amidst the fantasies and grotesqueries, and no one has any illusions. We know why we are here and what we must do.” Then, pointing toward the world above them: “Up there, though, folly reigns supreme. We delude ourself into thinking that it is the world of stern reality, the world of Imperial power and Roman commercial might, but no one actually behaves as though any of it has to be taken seriously. Our heads are in the sand, like that great African bird's. The barbarians are coming, but we're doing nothing to stop them. And this time the barbarians will swallow us. They'll go roaring at last through the marble city that's sitting up there above us, looting and torching, and afterward nothing will remain of Roma but this, this dark, dank, hidden, eternally mysterious Underworld of strange gods and ghastly monstrosities. Which I suppose is the true Roma, the eternal city of the shadows.”

“You're drunk,” Maximilianus said.

“Am I?”

“This place down here is a mere fantasy world, Faustus, as you are well aware. It's a place without meaning.” The prince pointed upward as Faustus just had done. “The true Roma that you speak of is up there. Always was, always will be. The palaces, the temples, the Capitol, the walls. Solid, indestructible, imperishable. The eternal city, yes. And the barbarians will never swallow it. Never. *Never*.”



That was a tone of voice Faustus had never heard the prince use before, either. The second unfamiliar one in less than an hour, this one hard, clear, passionate. There was, again, an odd new intensity in his eyes. Faustus had seen that strange intensity the day before, too, when the prince had spoken of Emperors as freaks and monsters. It was as though something new was trying to burst free inside the Caesar these two days past, Faustus realized. And it must be getting very close to the surface now. What will happen to us all, he wondered, when it breaks loose?

He closed his own eyes a moment, nodded, smiled. Let what will come come, he thought. Whatsoever it may be.

They ended their day in the Underworld soon afterward. Maximilianus's savage outburst in the hall of the soothsayers seemed to have placed a damper on everything, even Menandros's previously insatiable desire to explore the infinite crannies of the underground caverns.

It was near sundown when Faustus reached his chambers, having promised Menandros that he would dine with him later at the ambassador's lodgings in the Severan Palace. A surprise was waiting for him. Prince Heraclius had indeed gone to his hunting lodge, not to the frontier, and the message that Faustus had sent to him there had actually reached him. The prince was even now on his way back to Roma, arriving this very evening, and wished to meet with the emissary from Justinianus as soon as possible.

Hurriedly Faustus bathed and dressed in formal costume. The Numidian girl was ready and waiting, but Faustus dismissed her, and told his equerry that he would not require her services later in the evening, either.

"A curious day," Menandros said, when Faustus arrived.

"It was, yes," said Faustus.

"Your friend the Caesar was greatly distressed by that man's talk of his becoming Emperor some day. Is the idea so distasteful to him?"

"It's not something he gives any thought to at all, becoming Emperor. Heraclius will be Emperor. That's never been in doubt. He's the older by six years: he was well along in training for the throne when Maximilianus was born, and has always been treated by everyone as his father's successor. Maximilianus sees no future for himself in any way different from the life he leads now. He's never looked upon himself as a potential ruler."

"Yet the Senate could name either brother as Emperor, is that not so?"

"The Senate could name me as Emperor, if it chose. Or even you. In theory, as you surely know, there's nothing hereditary about it. In practice things are different. Heraclius's way to the throne is clear. Besides, Maximilianus doesn't *want* to be Emperor. Being Emperor is hard work, and Maximilianus has never worked at anything in his life. I think that's what upset him so much today, the mere thought that he somehow would have to be Emperor, some day."

Faustus knew Menandros well enough by now to be able to detect the barely masked disdain that these words of his produced. Menandros understood what an Emperor was supposed to be: a man like that severe and ruthless soldier Justinianus, who held sway from Dacia and Thrace to the borders of Persia, and from the frosty northern shores of the Pontic Sea to some point far down in torrid Africa, exerting command over everything and everyone, the whole complex crazyquilt that was the Eastern Empire, with

the merest flick of an eye. Whereas here, in the ever flabbier West, which was about to ask Justinianus's help in fighting off its own long-time enemies, the reigning Emperor was currently ill and invisible, the heir to the throne was so odd that he was capable of slipping out of town just as Justinianus's ambassador was arriving to discuss the very alliance the West so urgently needed, and the man second in line to the Empire cared so little for the prospect of attaining the Imperial grandeur that he would thrash someone half his size for merely daring to suggest he might.

He sees us of the West as next to worthless, Faustus thought. And perhaps he is correct.

This was not a profitable discussion. Faustus cut it short by telling him that Prince Heraclius would return that very evening.

“Ah, then,” said Menandros, “affairs must be settling down on your northern frontier. Good.”

Faustus did not think it was his duty to explain that the Caesar couldn't possibly have made the round trip to the frontier and back in so few days, that in fact he had merely been away at his hunting lodge in the countryside. Heraclius would be quite capable of achieving his own trivialization without Faustus's assistance.

Instead Faustus gave orders for their dinner to be served. They had just reached the last course, the fruits and sherbets, when a messenger entered with word that Prince Heraclius was now in Roma, and awaited the presence of the ambassador from Constantinopolis in the Hall of Marcus Anastasius at the Imperial palace.

The closest part of the five-hundred-year-old string of buildings that was the Imperial compound was no more than ten minutes' walk from where they were now. But Heraclius, with his usual flair for the inappropriate gesture, had chosen for the place of audience not his own residential quarters, which were relatively near by, but the huge, echoing chamber where the Great Council of State ordinarily met, far over on the palace's northern side at the very crest of the Palatine Hill. Faustus had two litters brought to take them up there.

The prince had boldly stationed himself on the throne-like seat at the upper end of the chamber that the Emperor used during meetings of the Council. He sat there now with Imperial haughtiness, waiting in silence while Menandros undertook the endless unavoidable ambassadorial plod across the enormous room, with Faustus hulking along irritatedly behind him. For one jarring instant Faustus wondered whether the old Emperor had actually, unbeknownst to him, died during the day, and the reason Heraclius was in Roma was that he had hurried back to take his father's place. But someone surely would have said something to him in that case, Faustus thought.

Menandros knew his job. He knelt before the prince and made the appropriate gesticulation. When he rose, Heraclius had risen also and was holding forth his hand, which bore an immense carnelian ring, to be kissed. Menandros kissed the prince's ring. The ambassador made a short, graceful speech expressing his greetings and the best wishes of the Emperor Justinianus for the good health of his royal colleague the Emperor Maximilianus, and for that of his royal son the Caesar Heraclius, and offered thanks for the hospitality that had been rendered him thus far. He gave credit warmly to Faustus but—quite shrewdly, Faustus thought—did not mention the role of Prince Maximilianus at all.

Heraclius listened impassively. He seemed jittery and remote, more so, even, than he ordinarily was.

Faustus had never felt any love for the Imperial heir. Heraclius was a stiff, tense person, ill at ease under the best of circumstances: a short, slight, inconsequential figure of a man with none of his younger

brother's easy athleticism. He was cold-eyed, too, thin-lipped, humorless. It was hard to see him as his father's son. The Emperor Maximilianus, in earlier days, had looked much the way the prince his namesake did today: a tall, slender, handsome man with glinting russet hair and smiling blue eyes. Heraclius, though, was dark-haired, where he still had hair at all, and his eyes were dark as coals, glowering under heavy brows out of his pale, expressionless face.

The meeting was inconclusive. The prince and the ambassador both understood that this first encounter was not the time to begin any discussion of the royal marriage or the proposed East-West military alliance, but even so Faustus was impressed by the sheer vacuity of the conversation. Heraclius asked if Menandros cared to attend the gladiatorial games the following week, said a sketchy thing or two about his Etruscan ancestors and their religious beliefs, of which he claimed to be a student of sorts, and spoke briefly of some idiotic Greek play that had been presented at the Odeum of Agrippa Ligurinus the week before. Of the barbarians massing at the border he said nothing at all. Of his father's grave illness, nothing. Of his hope of close friendship with Justinianus, nothing. He might just as well have been discussing the weather. Menandros gravely met immateriality with immateriality. He could do nothing else, Faustus understood. The Caesar Heraclius must be allowed to lead, here.

And then, very quickly, Heraclius made an end of it. "I hope we have an opportunity to meet again very shortly," the prince said, arbitrarily terminating the visit with such suddenness that even the quick-witted Menandros was caught off guard by his blunt dismissal, and Faustus heard a tiny gasp from him. "To my regret, I will have to leave the city again tomorrow. But upon my return, at the earliest opportunity—" And he held forth his ringed hand to be kissed again.

Menandros said, when they were outside and waiting for their litters to be brought, "May we speak frankly, my friend?"

Faustus chuckled. "Let me guess. You found the Caesar to be less than engaging."

"I would use some such phrase, yes. Is he always like that?"

"Oh, no," Faustus said. "He's ordinarily much worse. He was on his best behavior for you, I'd say."

"Indeed. Very interesting. And this is to be the next Emperor of the West. Word had reached us in Constantinopolis, you know, that the Caesar Heraclius was, well, not altogether charming. But—even so—I was not fully prepared—"

"Did you mind very much kissing his ring?"

"Oh, no, not at all. One expects, as an ambassador, to have to show a certain deference, at least to the Emperor. And to his son as well, I suppose, if he requires it of one. No, Faustus, what I was struck by—how can I say this?—let me think a moment—" Menandros paused. He looked off into the night, at the Forum and the Capitol far across the valley. "You know," he said at last, "I'm a relatively young man, but I've made a considerable study of Imperial history, both Eastern and Western, and I think I know what is required to be a successful Emperor. We have a Greek word—*charisma*, do you know it?—it is something like your Latin word *virtus*, but not quite—that describes the quality that one must have. But there are many sorts of charisma. One can rule well through sheer force of personality, through the awe and fear and respect that one engenders—Justinianus is a good example of that, or Vespasianus of ancient times, or Titus Gallius. One can rule through a combination of great personal determination and guile, as the great Augustus did, and Diocletianus. One can be a man of grace and deep wisdom—Hadrianus, say, or Marcus Aurelius. One can win acclaim through great military valor: I think of Trajan here, and Gaius Martius, and your two Emperors who bore the name Maximilianus. But—"

and again Menandros paused, and this time he drew in his breath deeply before continuing—"if one has neither grace, nor wisdom, nor valor, nor guile, nor the capability to engender fear and respect—"

"Heraclius will be able to engender fear, I think," said Faustus.

"Fear, yes. Any Emperor can do that, at least for a time. Caligula, eh? Nero. Domitianus. Commodus."

"The four that you name were all eventually assassinated, I think," Faustus said.

"Yes. That is so, isn't it?" The litters were arriving, now. Menandros turned to him and gave him a serene, almost unworldly smile. "How odd it is, Faustus, would you not say, that the two royal brothers are so far from being alike, and that the one who has charisma is so little interested in serving his Empire as its ruler, and the one who is destined to have the throne has so little charisma? What a pity that is: for them, for you, perhaps, even, for the world. It is one of the little jokes that the gods like to play, eh, my friend? But what the gods may find amusing is not so amusing for us, sometimes."

\* \* \* \*

There was no visit to the Underworld the following day. From Menandros came a message declaring that he would remain in his quarters all that day, preparing despatches to be sent to Constantinopolis. The Caesar Maximilianus likewise sent word to Faustus that his company would not be required that day. Faustus spent it dealing with the copious outpouring of routine documents his own office endlessly generated, holding his regular midweek meeting with the other functionaries of the Chancellery, soaking for several hours at the public baths, and dining with the little bright-eyed Numidian, who watched him wordlessly across the table for an hour and a half, eating very little herself—she had the appetite of a bird, a very small bird—and following him obligingly to the couch when the meal was done. After she had gone he lay in bed reading, at random choice, one of the plays of Seneca, the gory *Thyestes*, until he came upon a passage he would just as soon not have seen that evening: "I live in mighty fear that all the universe will be broken into a thousand fragments in the general ruin, that formless chaos will return and vanquish the gods and men, that the earth and sea will be engulfed by the planets wandering in the heavens." Faustus stared at those words until they swam before his eyes. The next lines rose up before him, then: "Of all the generations, it is we who have been chosen to merit the bitter fate, to be crushed by the falling pieces of the broken sky." That was unappealing bedtime reading. He tossed the scroll aside and closed his eyes.

And so, he thought, passes another day in the life of Faustus Flavius Constantinus Caesar. The barbarians are massing at the gates, the Emperor is dying day by day, the heir apparent is out in the forest poking spears into hapless wild beasts, and old Faustus shuffles foolish official papers, lolls half a day in a great marble tub of warm water, amuses himself for a while with a dusky plaything of a girl, and stumbles upon evil omens as he tries to read himself to sleep.

The next day commenced with the arrival of one of Menandros's slaves, bearing a note telling him that it was the ambassador's pleasure to carry out a third exploration of the subterranean city in mid-afternoon. He had a special interest, Menandros said, in seeing the chapel of Priapus and the pool of the Baptai, and perhaps the catacomb of the sacred whores of Chaldea. The ambassador's mood, it seemed, had taken an erotic turn.

Quickly Faustus dashed off a note to the Caesar Maximilianus, telling him of the day's plans and requesting him to summon Danielus bar-Heap the Hebrew once more to be their guide. "Let me know by the sixth hour where you would like us to meet you," Faustus concluded. But midday came and went with no reply from the prince. A second message produced no response either. By now it was nearly time for Faustus to set out for the Severan Palace to pick up the ambassador. It was beginning to look as

though he would be Menandros's sole escort on today's expedition. But Faustus realized then that he did not care for that idea: he felt too dour this morning, too cheerless and morose. He needed Maximilianus's high-spirited company to get him through the task.

"Take me to the Caesar," he told his bearers.

Maximilianus, unbathed, unshaven, red-eyed, wearing a coarse old robe with great rents in it, looked startled to see him. "What is this, Faustus? Why do you come to me unannounced?"

"I sent two notes this morning, Caesar. We are to take the Greek to the Underworld again."

The prince shrugged. Clearly he hadn't seen either one. "I've been awake only an hour. And had only three hours of sleep before that. It's been a difficult night. My father is dying."

"Yes. Of course. We have all been aware of that sad fact for some time, and are greatly grieved by it," said Faustus unctuously. "Perhaps it will come as a deliverance when His Majesty's long ordeal is—"

"I don't mean simply that he's sick. I mean that he's in his last hours, Faustus. I've been in attendance on him all night at the palace."

Faustus blinked in surprise. "Your father is in Roma?"

"Of course. Where do you think he'd be?"

"There were stories that he was in Capreae, or Sicilia, or perhaps even Africa—"

"All those stories are so much nitwit blather. He's been right here for months, since he came back from taking the waters at Baiae. Didn't you know that? —Visited by only a very few, of course, because he's become so feeble, and even the shortest of conversations drains his strength. But yesterday about noon he entered into some sort of crisis. Began vomiting black blood, and there were some tremendous convulsions. The whole corps of doctors was sent for. A whole army of them and every last one of them determined to be the one who saves his life, even if they kill him in the process." In an almost manic way Maximilianus began to list the remedies that had been employed in the last twenty-four hours: applications of lion's fat, potations of dog's milk, frogs boiled in vinegar, dried cicadas dissolved in wine, figs stuffed with mouse liver, dragon's tongue boiled in oil, the eyes of river crabs, and any number of other rare and costly medicines, virtually the whole potent pharmacopeia—enough medication, Faustus thought, to do even a healthy man in. And they had done even more. They had drawn his blood. They had bathed him in tubs of honey sprinkled with powdered gold. They had coated him in warm mud from the slopes of Vesuvius. "And the ultimate preposterous touch, just before dawn," said Maximilianus: "the naked virgin who touches her hand to him and invokes Apollo three times to restrain the progress of his disease. It's a wonder they could even *find* a virgin on such short order. Of course, they could always create one by retroactive decree, I guess." And the prince smiled a savage smile. But Faustus could see that it was mere bravado, a strenuously willed flash of the sort of cool cynicism Faustus was supposed to expect from him: the expression in the Caesar's red-rimmed, swollen eyes was that of a young man pained to the core by his beloved father's suffering.

"Will he die today, do you think?" Faustus asked.

"Probably not. The doctors told me that his strength is prodigious, even now. He'll last at least another day, even two or three, perhaps—but no more than that."

“And is your brother with him?”

“My brother?” Maximilians said, in a dumfounded tone. “My brother's at his hunting lodge, you told me!”

“He came back, the night before last. Gave audience to the Greek at the Hall of Marcus Anastasius. I was there myself.”

“No,” Maximilianus muttered. “No. The bastard! The bastard!”

“The whole meeting lasted perhaps fifteen minutes, I suppose. And then he announced that he would be leaving town again the next morning, but surely, once he found out that your father was so gravely ill—” Faustus, comprehending suddenly, stared in disbelief. “You mean you never saw him at all, yesterday? He didn't go to visit your father at any time during the day?”

For a moment neither of them could speak.

Maximilianus said, finally, “Death frightens him. The sight of it, the smell of it, the thought of it. He can't bear to be near anyone who's ill. And so he's been careful to keep his distance from the Emperor since he took sick. In any case he's never cared a spoonful of spider's piss for my father. It's perfectly in character for him to come to Roma and sleep right under the same roof as the old man and not even take the trouble of making inquiries after his health, let alone going to see him, and then leave again the next day. So he would never have found out that the end was getting very close. As for me, I wouldn't have expected him to bother getting in touch with me while he was here.”

“He should be summoned back to Roma again,” Faustus said.

“Yes. I suppose he should be. He'll be Emperor in another day or two, you know.” Maximilianus gave Faustus a bleary look. He seemed half addled with fatigue. “Will you do it, Faustus? Straight away. Meanwhile I'll bathe and dress. The Greek is waiting for us to take him down below, isn't he?”

Thunderstruck, Faustus said, “You mean you want to go there now—today?—while—while your father—?”

“Why not? There's nothing I can do for the old man right now, is there? And his doctors solemnly assure me that he'll last the day.” A kind of eerie iciness had come over the Caesar suddenly. Faustus wanted to back away from the chill that emanated from him. In a fierce, cold voice Maximilianus said, “Anyway, I'm not the one who's going to become Emperor. It's my brother's responsibility to stand around waiting to pick up the reins, not mine. Send a messenger off to Heraclius to tell him he had better get himself back here as fast as he can, and let's you and I and the Greek go off and have ourselves a little fun. It may be our last chance for a long time.”

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On such short notice there was no way of finding the Hebrew, so they would have to do without his invaluable assistance for today's outing. Faustus felt edgy about that, because spying on the chapel of Priapus was not without its risks, and he preferred to have the strong, fearless bar-Heap along in case they blundered into any trouble. Maximilianus, though, did not appear to be worried. The prince's mood seemed an unusually impetuous one, even for him, this day. His fury over his brother's absence and the strain of his father's illness had left him very tightly strung indeed, a man who gave every indication of being on the verge of some immense explosion.

But his demeanor was calm enough as he led the way down the winding ramp that entered the Underworld beside the Baths of Constantinus and guided them toward the grotto where the rites of Priapus were enacted. The passageway was low-roofed and moist-walled, with splotchy gray-green fungoid stains clinging to its sides. Menandros, as they neared their goal, displayed such signs of boyish anticipation that Faustus felt both amusement and contempt. Did they no longer have any such shady cults in Constantinopolis? Was Justinianus such a stern master that they had all been suppressed, when Justinianus's own wife Theodora was herself a former actress, said to be of the loosest morality imaginable?

“This way,” Maximilianus whispered, indicating an opening in the cavern wall, the merest sliver of an entrance. “It takes us up and over the chapel, where we'll have a very good view. But be absolutely quiet in there. A single sneeze and we're done for, because this is the only way out, and they'll be waiting for us here with hatchets if they find out we've been spying on them.”

The passage slanted sharply upward. It was impossible for men as tall as Maximilianus or Faustus to stand upright in it, though Menandros had no difficulty. The nimble young Maximilianus moved easily there, but Faustus, slow and bulky, found every step a challenge. Quickly he was sweating and panting. Once he banged his lantern against the wall and sent a reverberant thump down the length of the passage that drew an angry hiss and a glare from Maximilianus.

Before long came confirmation that a service was in progress: a clash of cymbals, the booming of drums, the hoarse screech of horns, the high jabbing of flutes. When they reached the place from which the scene below could best be viewed, Maximilianus gestured for the lanterns to be laid to one side where they would cast no gleam that could be spied from the shrine, and moved Menandros into position for the best view.

Faustus did not even try to look. He had seen it all too many times before: the wall covered with gaudy erotic murals, the great altar of the god of lust, and the seated figure of Priapus himself with his enormous phallus rising like a pillar of stone from his thighs. Half a dozen naked worshippers, all of them women, were dancing before that fearsome idol. Their bodies were oiled and painted; their eyes had a wild, frantic shine; their nostrils were distended, their lips were drawn back in toothy grimaces, and the dancers' swinging breasts bobbed freely about as they leaped and pranced.

Chanted words came up from below, harsh jabbing rhythms:

“Come to me, great Lord Priapus, as sunlight comes to the morning sky. Come to me, great Lord Priapus, and give me favor, sustenance, elegance, beauty, and delight. Your names in heaven are LAMPTHEN—OUOTH OUAETHEN—OUTH I OAMENOTH—ENTHOMOUCH. And I know your forms: in the east you are an ibis, in the west you are a wolf, in the north you have the form of a serpent, and in the south you are an eagle. Come to me, Lord Priapus—come to me, Lord Priapus, come—”

One by one the women danced up to the great statue, kissed the tip of that great phallus, caressed it lasciviously.

“I invoke you, Priapus! Give me favor, form, beauty! Give me delight. For you are I, and I am you. Your name is mine, and mine is yours.”

There was a tremendous demoniacal clatter of drumming. Faustus knew what that meant: one of the worshippers was mounting the statue of the god. Menandros, avidly staring, leaned much too far forward. At this stage of the ceremony there was little risk that any of the impassioned celebrants would

look upward and catch a glimpse of him, but there was some danger that he might go tumbling down into the cavern below and land amongst them. It had been known to happen. Death was the penalty for any man caught spying on the rites of the adherents of Priapus. Faustus reached for him; but Maximilianus had already caught him and was tugging him back.

Though covert surveillance of these rites was forbidden, men were not entirely excluded from the chapel. Faustus knew that five or six stalwart slaves were lined up along the wall of the chapel in the shadows behind the statue. Soon the priestess of Priapus would give the signal and the orgy would begin.

They practically needed to drag Menandros away. He crouched by the rim of the aperture like a small boy greedy to discover the intimate secrets of womankind, and even after the event had gone on and on long beyond the point where even the most curious of men should have been sated by the sight, Menandros wanted to see more. Faustus was baffled by this strange hunger of his. He could barely remember a time when any of what was taking place down there had been new and unfamiliar to him, and it was hard to understand Menandros's passionate curiosity over so ordinary a matter as orgiastic copulation. The court of the Emperor Justinianus, Faustus thought, must place an extraordinarily high value on chastity and propriety. But that was not what Faustus had been told.

At last they got the ambassador out of there and they went on to the next place on his list, the pool of the Baptai. "I'll wait for you here," said Faustus, as they arrived at the steep spiraling stairway that led down into the pit of utter blackness where the rites of this cult of immersion occurred. "I'm getting too fat and slow for that much clambering."

It was, he knew, an enchanting place: the smooth-walled rock-hewn chambers bedecked with iridescent glass mosaics in white and red and blue, brightened even further by splashes and touches of vivid golden paint, the scenes of Diana at the hunt, of cooing doves, of cupids swimming among swans, of voluptuous nymphs, of rampant satyrs. But the air was damp and heavy, the interminable downward spiral of the narrow, slippery stone steps would be hard on his aging legs, and the final taxing stage of the long descent, the one that went from the chamber of the mosaics to the fathomless black pool that lay at the lowest level, was beyond all doubt much too much for him. And of course the mere thought of the ascent afterward was utterly appalling.

So he waited. A tinkling trickle of laughter drifted up to him out of the darkness. The goddess Bendis of Thrace was the deity worshipped here, a coarse lank-haired demon whose devotees were utterly shameless, and at any hour of the day or night one generally could find a service in progress, a ritual that involved the usual sort of orgiastic stuff enlivened by a climactic baptismal plunge into the icy pool, where Bendis lurked to provide absolution for sins just committed and encouragement for those yet to come. This was no secret cult. All were welcome here. But the mysteries of the cult of Bendis were no longer mysterious to Faustus. He had had baptism in those freezing waters often enough for one lifetime; he did not seek it again. And the skillful ministrations of his Numidian playmate Oalatheia were gratification enough for his diminishing lusts these days.

It was a very long time before Menandros and Maximilianus returned from the depths. They said little when they emerged, but it was clear from the flushed, triumphant look on the little Greek's face that he had found whatever ecstasies he had been seeking in the shrine of the Baptai.

Now it was time for the place of the Chaldean whores, far across the underground city near the welter of caverns below the Circus Maximus. Menandros seemed to have heard a great deal about these women, most of it incorrect. "You mustn't call them whores, you know," Faustus explained. "What they are is prostitutes—sacred prostitutes."



“This is a very subtle distinction,” said the Greek wryly.

“What he means,” said the Caesar, “is that they're all women of proper social standing, who belong to a cult that came to us out of Babylonia. Some of them are of Babylonian descent themselves, most are not. Either way, the women of this cult are required at some point in their lives, between the ages of—what is it, Faustus, sixteen and thirty?—something like that—to go to the sanctuary of their goddess and sit there waiting for some stranger to come along and choose her for the night. He throws a small silver coin into her lap, and she must rise and go with him, however hideous he is, however repellent. And with that act she fulfills her obligation to her goddess, and returns therewith to a life of blameless purity.”

“Some, I understand, are said to go back more than once to fulfill their obligations,” Faustus said. “Out of an excess of piety, I suppose. Unless it is for the simple excitement of meeting strangers, of course”

“I must see this,” Menandros said. He was aglow with boyish eagerness again. “Virtuous women, you say, wives and daughters of substantial men? And they *must* give themselves? They can't refuse under any circumstances? Justinianus will find this hard to believe.”

“It is an Eastern thing,” said Faustus. “Out of Babylonian Chaldea. How strange that you have none of this at your own capital.” It did not ring true. From all accounts Faustus had heard, Constantinopolis was at least as much a hotbed of Oriental cults as Roma itself. He began to wonder whether there was some reason of state behind Menandros's apparent desire to paint the Eastern Empire as a place of such rigorous piety and virtue. Perhaps it had something to do with the terms of the treaty that Menandros had come here to negotiate. But he could not immediately see what the connection might be.

Nor did they see the holy Chaldean prostitutes that day. They were less than halfway across the Underworld when they became aware of a muddled din of upraised voices coming to them out of the Via Subterranea ahead, and as they drew closer to that broad thoroughfare they began to distinguish some detail of individual words. The shouts still were blurred and confused, but what they seemed to be saying was:

“The Emperor is dead! The Emperor is dead!”

“Can it be?” Faustus asked. “Am I hearing rightly?”

But then it came again, a male voice with the force of the bellows of a bull rising above all the others: “THE EMPEROR IS DEAD! THE EMPEROR IS DEAD!” There was no possible doubt of the meaning now.

“So soon,” Maximilianus murmured, in a voice that could have been that of a dead man itself. “It wasn't supposed to happen today.”

Faustus glanced toward the Caesar. His face was chalk-white, as though he had spent his whole life in these underground caverns, and his eyes had a hard, frightening glitter to them that gave them the look of brilliantly polished sapphires. Those stony eyes were terrifying to behold.

A man in the loose yellow robes of some Asian priesthood came running toward them, looking half unhinged by fear. He stumbled up against Maximilianus in the narrow hallway and tried to shoulder his way past, but the Caesar, seizing the man by both forearms and holding him immobilized, thrust his face into the other's and demanded to know the news. “His Majesty—” the man gasped, goggle-eyed. He had a thick Syrian lisp. “Dead. They have lit the great bonfire before the palace. The Praetorians have gone into the street to maintain order.”

Muttering a curse, Maximilianus shoved the Syrian away from him so vehemently that the man went ricocheting off the wall, and turned his gaze toward Faustus. "I must go to the palace," the Caesar said, and without another word turned and ran, leaving Faustus and Menandros behind as he vanished in furious long-legged strides toward the Via Subterranea.

Menandros looked overwhelmed by the news. "We should not be here either," he said.

"No. We should not."

"Are we to go to the palace, then?"

"It could be dangerous. Anything can happen, when an Emperor dies and the heir apparent isn't on the scene." Faustus slipped his arm through the Greek's. Menandros appeared startled at that, but seemed quickly to understand that it was for the sake of keeping them from being separated in the growing chaos of the underground city. Thus linked, they set out together for the nearest exit ramp.

The news had spread everywhere by now, and hordes of people were running madly to and fro. Faustus, though his heart was pounding from the exertion, moved as quickly as he was able, virtually dragging Menandros along with him, using his bulk to shove anyone who blocked his path out of the way.

"The Emperor is dead!" the endless chorus cried. "The Emperor is dead!" As he came forth blinking into the daylight, Faustus saw the look of stunned shock on every face.

He felt a little stunned himself, though Emperor Maximilianus's passing had not exactly come as a bolt out of the blue to him. But the old man had held the throne for more than forty years, one of the longest reigns in Roman history, longer even than Augustus's, perhaps second only to that of his grandfather the first Maximilianus. These Etruscan Emperors were long-lived men. Faustus had been a slender stripling the last time the Imperial throne had changed hands, and that other time the succession had been handled well, the magnificent young prince who was to become Maximilianus II standing at the side of his dying father in his last moments, and going immediately thereafter to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus to receive the homage of the Senate and to accept the badges and titles of office.

This was a different situation. There was no magnificent young heir waiting to take the throne, only the deplorable Prince Heraclius, and Heraclius had so contrived matters that he was not even at the capital on the day of his father's death. Great surprises sometimes happened when the throne became vacant and the expected heir was not on hand to claim it. That was how the stammering cripple Claudius had become Emperor when Caligula was assassinated. That was how Titus Gallius had risen to greatness after the murder of Caracalla. For that matter, that was the way the first of the Etruscans had come to power, when Theodosius, having outlived his own son Honorius, had finally died in 1168. Who could say what shifts in the balance of power might be accomplished in Roma before this day reached its end?

It was Faustus's duty now to get Justinianus's ambassador safely back to the Severan Palace, and then to make his own way to the Chancellery to await the developments of the moment. But Menandros did not quite seem to grasp the precariousness of the situation. He was fascinated by the tumult in the streets, and, feckless tourist that he was at heart, wanted to head for the Forum to watch the action at first hand. Faustus had to push the bounds of diplomatic courtesy a little to get him to abandon that foolhardy idea and head for the safety of his own quarters. Menandros agreed reluctantly, but only after seeing a phalanx of Praetorians moving through the street across from them, freely clubbing anyone who seemed to be behaving in a disorderly fashion.

Faustus was the last of the officials of the Chancellery to reach the administrative headquarters, just across the way from the royal palace. The Chancellor, Licinius Obsequens, greeted him sourly. "Where have you been all this while, Faustus?"

"With the ambassador Menandros, touring the Underworld," Faustus replied, just as sourly. He cared very little for Licinius Obsequens, a wealthy Neapolitan who had bribed his way to high office, and he suspected that under the new Emperor neither he nor Licinius Obsequens would continue to hold their posts at the Chancellery, anyway. "The ambassador was very eager to visit the chapel of Priapus, and other such places," Faustus added, with a bit of malice to his tone. "So we took him there. How was I to know that the Emperor was going to die today?"

"We took him, Faustus?"

"The Caesar Maximilianus and I."

Licinius's yellowish eyes narrowed to slits. "Of course. Your good friend the Caesar. And where is the Caesar now, may I ask?"

"He left us," said Faustus, "the moment news reached us underground of His Majesty's death. I have no information about where he might be at the present time. The Imperial palace, I would imagine." He paused a moment. "And the Caesar Heraclius, who is our Emperor now? Has anyone happened to hear from him?"

"He is at the northern frontier," Licinius said.

"No. No, he isn't. He's off at his hunting lodge behind Lake Nemorensis. He never went north at all."

Licinius was visibly rocked by that. "You know this for a fact, Faustus?"

"Absolutely. I sent a message to him there, just the other night, and he came back to the city that evening and met with the ambassador Menandros. I was there, as it happens." A look of sickly astonishment came over Licinius's jowly face. Faustus was beginning to enjoy this more than somewhat. "The Caesar then went back to his forest preserve yesterday morning. Early today, when I was informed of His Majesty's grave condition, I sent a second message to him at the lake, once more summoning him to Roma. Beyond that I can tell you nothing."

"You knew that the Caesar was hunting, and not at the frontier, and never reported this to me?" Licinius asked.

Loftily Faustus said, "Sir, I was wholly preoccupied with looking after the Greek ambassador. It is a complicated task. It never occurred to me that you were unaware of the movements of the Caesar Heraclius. I suppose I assumed that when he reached Roma the night before last he would take the trouble to meet with his father's Chancellor and ascertain the state of his father's health, but evidently it didn't occur to him to do that, and therefore—"

Abruptly he cut his words short. Asellius Proculus, the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, had just shouldered his way into the room. For the Praetorian Prefect to set foot in the Chancellery at all was an unusual event; for him to be here on the day of the Emperor's death verged on the unthinkable. Licinius Obsequens, who was starting to look like a man besieged, gaped at him in consternation.

"Asellius? What—"

“A message,” the Praetorian Prefect said hoarsely. “From Lake Nemorensis.” He signalled with an upraised thumb and a man in the green uniform of the Imperial courier service came lurching in. He was glassy-eyed and rumpled and haggard, as though he had run all the way from the lake without pausing. Pulling a rolled-up despatch from his tunic, he thrust it with a trembling hand toward Licinius Obsequens, who snatched at it, opened it, read it through, read it again. When the Chancellor looked up at Faustus his plump face was sagging in shock.

“What does it say?” Faustus asked. Licinius seemed to be having difficulties forming words.

“The Caesar,” Licinius said. “His Majesty the Emperor, that is. Wounded. A hunting accident, this morning. He remains at his lodge. The Imperial surgeons have been called.”

“Wounded? How seriously?”

Licinius responded with a blank look. “Wounded, it says. That's all: wounded. The Caesar has been wounded, while hunting. The Emperor. —*He is* our Emperor now, is he not?” The Chancellor seemed numb, as though he had had a stroke. To the courier he said, “Do you know any other details, man? How badly is he hurt? Did you see him yourself? Who's in charge at the lodge?” But the courier knew nothing. He had been given the message by a member of the Caesar's guard and told to get it immediately to the capital; that was all he was able to report.

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Four hours later, dining with the ambassador Menandros in the ambassador's rooms at the Severan Palace, Faustus said, “The messages continued to come in from the lake all afternoon. Wounded, first. Then, wounded seriously. Then a description of the wound: speared in the gut by one of his own men, he was, some sort of confusion while they were closing in on a boar for the kill, somebody's horse rearing at the wrong moment. Then the next message, half an hour later: the Imperial surgeons are optimistic. Then, the Caesar Heraclius is dying. And then: the Caesar Heraclius is dead.”

“The Emperor Heraclius, should you not call him?” Menandros asked.

“It's not certain who died first, the Emperor Maximilianus at Roma or the Caesar Heraclius at Lake Nemorensis. I suppose they can work all that out later. But what difference does it make, except to the historians? Dead is dead. Whether he died as Heraclius Caesar or as Heraclius Augustus, he's still dead, and his brother is our next Emperor. Can you believe it? Maximilianus going to be Emperor? One moment he's wallowing around with you in some orgy at the pool of the Baptaï, and the next he's sitting on the throne. Maximilianus! The last thing he ever imagined, becoming Emperor.”

“That soothsayer told him that he would,” Menandros said.

A shiver of awe ran through Faustus. “Yes! Yes, by Isis, so he did! And Maximilianus was as furious as though the man had laid a curse on him. Which perhaps he had.” Shakily he refilled his wine-bowl. “*Emperor! Maximilianus!*”

“Have you seen him yet?”

“No, not yet. It isn't seemly to rush to him so fast.”

“You were his closest friend, weren't you?”

“Yes, yes, of course. And doubtless there'll be some benefit to that.” Faustus allowed himself a little smirk of pleasure. “Under Heraclius, I'd have been finished, I suppose. Pensioned off, shipped to the country. But it'll be different for me with Maximilianus in charge. He'll need me. He will, won't he?” The thought had only then occurred to him in any coherent way. But the more he examined it, the more it pleased him. “He's never cultivated any of the court officials; he doesn't know them, really, won't know which ones to trust, which to get rid of. I'm the only one who can advise him properly. I might even become Chancellor, Menandros, do you realize that? —But that's exactly why I haven't gone speeding over to see him tonight. He's busy with the priests, anyway, doing whatever religious rites it is a new Emperor is supposed to perform, and then the Senators are calling on him one by one, and so on and so forth. It would be too blatant, wouldn't it, if I turned up there so soon, his bawdy and disreputable old drinking companion Faustus, who by coming around the very first night would be sending an all too obvious signal that he's showing up right away to claim his reward for these years of hearty good fellowship the two of us have shared. No, Menandros, I wouldn't do anything so crass. Maximilianus is not going to forget me. Tomorrow, I suppose, he'll be holding his first *salutatio*, and I can come around then and—”

“His what? I don't know the word.”

“*Salutatio*? You must know what that means. In your language you'd say, ‘a greeting.’ But what it is in Imperial terms is a mass audience with the Roman populace: the Emperor sits enthroned in the Forum, and the people pass before him and salute him and hail him as Emperor. It'll be quite appropriate for me to go before him then, with all the rest. And have him smile at me, and wink, and say, ‘Come to me after all this nonsense is over, Faustus, because we have important things to discuss.’”

“This is not a custom we have at Constantinopolis, the *salutatio*,” Menandros said.

“A Roman thing, it is.”

“We are Romans also, you know.”

“So you are. But you are Greekified Romans, you Easterners—in your particular case, a Romanized Greek, even—with customs that bear the tincture of the old Oriental despots who lie far back in your history, the Pharaohs, the Persian kings, Alexander the Great. Whereas we are Romans of Roma. We once had a Republic here that chose its leaders every year, do you know that?—two outstanding men whom the Senate picked to share power with each other, and at the end of their year they would step down and two others were brought forward. We lived like that for hundreds of years, ruled by our Consuls, until a few problems arose and it became necessary for Augustus Caesar to alter the arrangements somewhat. But we still maintain some traces of that staunch old Republic of the early days. The *salutatio* is one of them.”

“I see,” Menandros said. He did not sound impressed. He busied himself with his wine for a time. Then, breaking a long silence that had developed between them, he said, “You don't think Prince Maximilianus might have had his brother murdered, do you?”

“*What?*”

“Hunting accidents aren't all that hard to arrange. A scuffle among the horses in the morning fog, an unfortunate little collision, a spear thrust in the wrong place—”

“Are you serious, Menandros?”

“About half, I'd say. These things have been known to happen. Even I could see from the very first what contempt Maximilianus had for his brother. And now the old Emperor is on his last legs. The Empire will go to the unpopular and inadequate Heraclius. So your friend the Caesar, either for the good of the Empire or purely out of the love of power, decides to have Heraclius removed, just as the Emperor is plainly sinking toward his end. The assassin then is slain also, to keep him quiet in case there's an inquest and he's put to the torture, and there you are—Heraclius is gone and Maximilianus III Augustus is in charge. It's not impossible. What became of the man who put the spear into Prince Heraclius, do you by any chance know?”

“He killed himself within an hour of the event, as a matter of fact, out of sheer chagrin. Do you think Maximilianus bribed him to do that, too?”

Menandros smiled faintly and made no reply. This was all just a game for him, Faustus realized.

“The good of the Empire,” Faustus said, “is not a concept upon which the Caesar Maximilianus has ever expended much thought. If you were listening closely to much of what he said when he was in our company, you might have perceived that. As for the love of power, here you will have to take my word for it, but I think he has not an atom of that within himself. You saw how enraged he became when that idiot of a soothsayer told him he was going to be a great hero of the Empire? ‘You are mocking me to my face,’ Maximilianus said, or words to that effect. And then, when the man went on to predict that Maximilianus was going to become Emperor, too—” Faustus laughed. “No, my friend, there was never any conspiracy here. Not even in his dreams did Maximilianus see himself as an Emperor. What happened to Prince Heraclius was mere accident, the gods making sport with us yet again, and my guess is that our new Emperor is having a hard time coming to terms with fate's little prank. I would go so far as to say that he is the unhappiest man in Roma tonight.”

“Poor Roma,” said Menandros.

\* \* \* \*

*Asalutatio*, yes, the very next day. Faustus was correct about that. The line was already forming when he got himself down to the Forum, bathed and shaven and clad in his finest toga, in the third hour after sunrise.

And there was Maximilianus, resplendent in the purple Imperial toga with the border of threads of gold, sitting enthroned in front of the Temple of Jupiter Imperator. A crown of laurel was on his head. He looked magnificent, as a new Emperor should: utterly upright of posture, a calm, graceful figure who displayed in every aspect an almost godlike look of the highest nobility far removed from any expression Faustus had seen him wear during his roistering days. Faustus's bosom swelled with pride at the sight of him sitting like that. What a superb actor the Caesar is, Faustus thought, what a glorious fraud!

But I must not think of him as the Caesar any more. Wonder of wonders, he is the Augustus now, Maximilianus III of Roma.

The Praetorians were keeping the line under careful control. The members of the Senate had already passed through, it seemed, because Faustus saw none of them in evidence. That was appropriate: they should be the first to hail a new Emperor. Faustus was pleased to note that he had arrived just in time to join the line of officials of the late Emperor's court. He caught sight of Chancellor Licinius up ahead, and the Minister of the Privy Purse, the Chamberlain of the Imperial Bedroom, the Master of the Treasury, the Master of the Horses, and most of the others, down to such mid-level people as the Prefect of Works, the Master of Greek Letters, the Secretary of the Council, the Master of Petitions. Faustus, joining the group, exchanged nods and smiles with a few of them, but said nothing to anyone. He knew

that he was conspicuous among them, not only because of his height and bulk, but also because they must all be aware that he was the dearest friend the unexpected new Emperor had, and was likely to receive significant preferment in the administration that soon would be taking form. The golden aura of power, Faustus thought, must already be gathering about his shoulders as he stood here in the line.

The line moved forward at a very slow pace. Each man in turn, as he came before Maximilianus, made the proper gestures of respect and obeisance, and Maximilianus responded with a smile, a word or two, an amiable lifting of his hand. Faustus was amazed at the easy assurance of his manner. He seemed to be enjoying this, too. It might all be a wondrous pretense, but Maximilianus was making it seem as though it were he, and not the lamented Prince Heraclius, who had been schooled all his life for this moment of ascension to the summit of power.

And at last Faustus himself was standing before the Emperor.

“Your Majesty,” Faustus murmured humbly, relishing the words. He bowed. He knelt. He closed his eyes a moment to savor the wonder of it all. *Rise, Faustus Flavius Constantinus Caesar, you who are to be Imperial Chancellor in the government of the third Maximilianus*, is what he imagined the Emperor would say.

Faustus rose. The Emperor said nothing at all. His lean, youthful face was solemn. His blue eyes seemed cold and hard. It was the iciest look Faustus had ever seen.

“Your Majesty,” Faustus said again, in a huskier, more rasping tone this time. And then, very softly, with a smile, a bit of the old twinkle: “What an ironic turn of fate this all is, Maximilianus! How playful destiny is with our lives! —Emperor! Emperor! And I know what pleasure you will get from it, my lord.”

The icy gaze was unrelenting. A quiver of something like impatience, or perhaps it was irritation, was visible on Maximilianus's lips. “You speak as though you know me,” the Emperor said. “Do you? And do I know you?”

That was all. He beckoned, the merest movement of the tips of the fingers of his left hand, and Faustus knew that he must move along. The Emperor's words resounded in his mind as he made his way across the front of the temple and up the path that led from the Forum to the Palatine Hill. *Do you know me? Do I know you?*

Yes. He knew Maximilianus, and Maximilianus knew him. It was all a joke, Maximilianus having a little amusement at his expense in this first meeting between them since everything had changed. But some things, Faustus knew, had not changed, and never could. They had seen the dawn in together too many times, the prince and he, for any transformation to come over their friendship now, however strangely and marvelously Maximilianus himself had been transformed by his brother's death.

But still—

Still—

It was a joke, yes, that Maximilianus had been playing on him, but it was a cruel one for all that, and although Faustus knew that the prince could be cruel, the prince had never been cruel to him. Until now. And perhaps even not even now. It had been mere playfulness just now, those words of his. Yes. Yes. Mere playfulness, nothing more, Maximilianus's style of humor making itself known even here on the day of his ascent to the throne.

Faustus returned to his lodgings.

For the three days following, he had little company but his own. The Chancellery, like all the offices of the government, would be closed all this week for the double funeral of the old Emperor Maximilianus and the prince his son, and then the ceremonies of installation of the new Emperor Maximilianus. Maximilianus himself was inaccessible to Faustus, as he was to virtually everyone but the highest officials of the realm. During the formal days of mourning the streets of the city were quiet, for once. Not even the Underworld would be stirring. Faustus remained at home, too dispirited to bother summoning his Numidian. When he wandered over to the Severan Palace to see Menandros, he was told that the ambassador, as the representative in Roma of the new Emperor's Imperial colleague of the East, the Basileus Justinianus, had been called into conference at the royal palace, and would be staying at the palace for the duration of the meetings.

On the fourth day Menandros returned. Faustus saw the litter bearing him crossing the Palatine, and unhesitatingly hurried across to the Severan to greet him. Perhaps Menandros would bear some word for him from Maximilianus.

Indeed he did. Menandros handed Faustus a bit of parchment sealed with the Imperial seal and said, "The Emperor gave me this for you."

Faustus yearned to open it at once, but that seemed unwise. He realized he was a little afraid of finding out what Maximilianus had to say to him, and preferred not to read the message in Menandros' presence.

"And the Emperor?" Faustus asked. "You found him well?"

"Very well. Not at all troubled by the cares of office, thus far. He has made an excellent adaptation to the great change in his circumstances. You may have been wrong about him, my friend, when you said he had no interest in being Emperor. I think he rather likes being Emperor."

"He can be very surprising at times," said Faustus.

"I think that is true. Be that as it may, my task here is done. I thank you for your good company, friend Faustus, and for your having enabled me to gain the friendship of the former Caesar Maximilianus. A happy accident, that was. The days I spent with the Caesar in the Underworld greatly facilitated the negotiations I have now completed with him on the treaty of alliance."

"There is a treaty, is there?"

"Oh, yes, most definitely a treaty. His Majesty will marry the Emperor Justinianus's sister Sabbatia in the place of his late and much lamented brother. His Majesty has a gift of some wonderful jewelry to offer his bride: magnificent gems, opals, quite fine. He showed them to me himself. And there will be military assistance, of course. The Eastern Empire will send its finest legions to aid your Emperor in crushing the barbarians who trouble your borders." Menandros's cheeks were glowing with pleasure. "It has all gone very well, I think. I will leave tomorrow. You will send me, I hope, some of that noble wine of Gallia Transalpina that you shared with me on my first day in Roma? And I will have gifts for you as well, my friend. I am deeply grateful to you for everything. In particular," he said, "for the chapel of Priapus, and the pool of the Baptaï, eh, friend Faustus?" And he winked.

Faustus lost no time unsealing the Emperor's message once he had escaped from Menandros.

*You said you thought our time of greatness was ending, Faustus, that day in the marketplace of*



*the sorcerers. But no, Faustus, you are wrong. We are not ended at all. We are only just begun. It is a new dawn and a new sun rises.*

M.

And there below that casually scrawled initial was the formal signature in all its majesty, Maximilianus Tiberius Antoninus Caesar Augustus Imperator.

\* \* \* \*

Faustus's pension was a generous one, and when he and Maximilianus met, as occasionally they did in the early months of Maximilianus's reign, the Emperor was affable enough, with always the amicable word, though they never were intimates again. And in the second year of his reign Maximilianus went north to the frontier, where the legions of his royal colleague Justinianus were assembling to join him, and he remained there, doing battle against the barbarians, for the next seven years, which were the last years of Faustus's life.

The northern wars of Maximilianus III ended in complete triumph. Roma would have no further trouble with invading barbarians. It was a significant turning point in the history of the Empire, which now was free to enter into a time of prosperity and abundance such as it had not known since the great days of Trajan and Hadrianus and Antoninus Pius four centuries before. There had been two mighty Emperors named Maximilianus before him, but men would never speak of the third Maximilianus otherwise than as Maximilianus the Great.

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