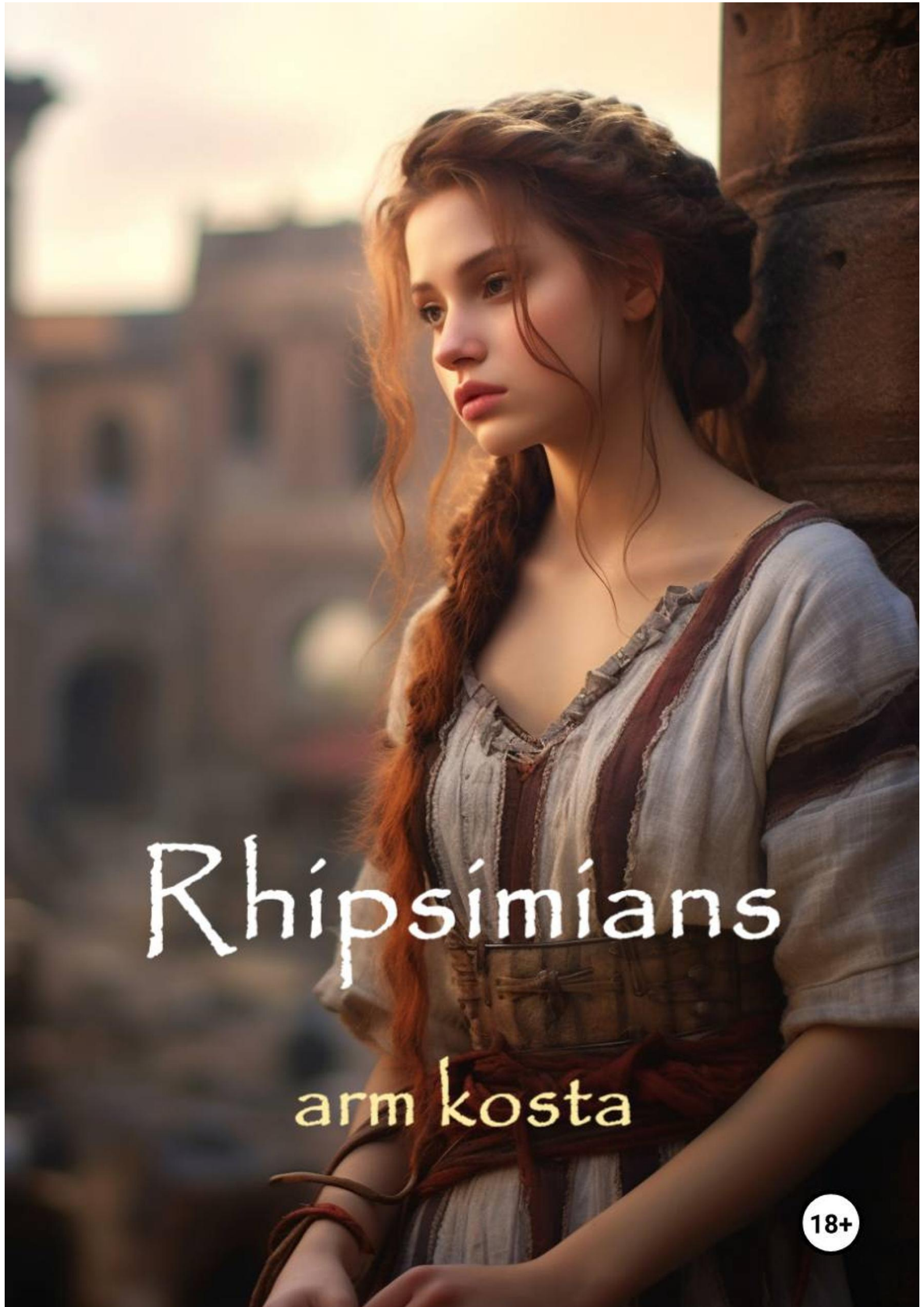


A movie poster featuring a young woman with long, wavy red hair, looking off to the side. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly linen, dress with a dark red sash. The background is a blurred, warm-toned scene of a city or town at sunset or sunrise. The title 'Rhipsimians' is written in a large, white, serif font across the middle. Below it, the name 'arm kosta' is written in a smaller, yellow, sans-serif font. In the bottom right corner, there is a white circle with the text '18+' inside.

Rhipsimians

arm kosta

18+

Арм Коста

THE RHIPSIMIANS

«Автор»

2026

Арм Коста

THE RHIPSIMIANS / Арм Коста — «Автор», 2026

The year is 300 AD. The Roman Emperor Diocletian is inflamed with passion for the young Hripsime. Fleeing his unwanted advances, the girl takes refuge in a Christian monastery lost in the mountains. But even there she is not destined to find peace. By order of the emperor, legionaries set fire to the holy cloister. The nuns are forced to flee — their path leads to Alexandria. Yet fate has a new trial in store for them. At the end of their wanderings, they fall into the hands of a ruler no less cruel than Diocletian. This is a story of the souls who turned the pagan world into a world of faith in the One God.

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Аpm Коста

THE RHIPSIMIANS

CHAPTER I. THE MONASTERY

The sun had only just begun to rise, and its fine, almost invisible orange-crimson rays touched the earth at first with caution, with shyness, and then enveloped all living things around. The sky bore gashes, as if from a dagger: deep, fierce, almost bleeding... The morning star clung to the edges of the snow-white clouds, straining to grasp one last hope of remaining upon the horizon.

Gradually, the first golden gleam shifted to the peaks of the stone masses — the astonishingly mighty, high, and sheer Alban Mountains — which stretched from the southeast of Rome and reached as far as Antium. In the early morning, nothing could be heard in the mountains: no birdsong, no cry of wild roe deer. A complete silence, mute, in which the firs and spruces slept a deep, untroubled sleep.

Encircled by three nameless crags stood the Monastery of St. Paul: built of stone, wood, and clay, it was plain and poor on the outside, yet at the same time adorned the mountain massif with its presence. The enormous, broad cupolas seemed ready to collapse at any moment, dragging the walls and gates down with them. The monastery looked incredibly old; in places, water seeped through the crimson-grey stone... Yet for many years it had stood majestic and proud, had received many a novice, granting them peace, strength, and purity of thought, and had healed many of life's wounds.

Gayania, the abbess of the Monastery of St. Paul, approached the gates and, lifting her head to the sky, whispered something softly with her parched lips; then, lowering her face to the earth in submission, she froze for several minutes, closing her eyes.

Her regular features seemed a gift from above for a pure soul: pale pink, thin lips with tiny cracks; cheekbones as sharp as the mountain slopes; deep eyes blacker than the blackest Roman night, in which calm could be read, and only in their corners were tears visible. The abbess's long hair was concealed beneath a veil, but one unruly lock had nonetheless broken free, fluttering in the wind and trembling like an autumn leaf.

Gayania woke earlier than her disciples. Without drinking even a sip of icy water, she robed herself in her garments and immediately set out for her walk — a conversation with the Creator. A dialogue about truth, love, faith, and other worldly matters she conducted at the very edge of the precipice. It seemed that there, where neither human foot nor beast's paw had trodden, where the wind found its utter freedom, there was God, and He saw her, a small woman, a small human being; He could listen to her, come to her in the form of a speck of dust, a drop from the sky, to teach, to guide, to bless.

At last, the abbess stepped out of the monastery: the impossibly heavy doors groaned painfully, weeping after the one who was leaving their walls; white mountain dust rose beneath her bare feet. Having crossed the threshold of the holy abode, the nun slowly set out for her walk. She passed by the ponderous pines, their roots clinging to the earth like hands, and she felt the pure scent of pine needles and a cold that cut to the bone — but this only heartened her.

She came almost to the edge of the world, sank to her knees, and crossed her arms over her chest. The wind, howling like a jackal, pierced her thin body. Gayania felt a shiver run through her, and her palms grew damp and cold.

Storm clouds thickened above the precipice where the abbess stood bowed — the sky became so each time a human being attempted to speak with the Almighty. The trees began to roar, their trunks cracking and groaning under the powerful flow of air; Gayania kept whispering — nothing disturbed her prayer. The wind tore at her paraman, lashed her cassock; dust flew into her eyes, and from them streamed hot tears.

It seemed as if all living things — and even the earth itself — feared the wrath of the Lord. In her prayer, the nun begged for human souls to be cleansed, for understanding, acceptance, compassion to be breathed into them — that which this world so desperately needs; she thanked God for the chance to wake each morning alive and in good health, to learn, to teach, to labour for the good of mankind.

All fell silent around: the trees returned to their carefree sleep, the dust dissolved into the air as though it had never existed at all; the grey clouds resumed their pilgrimage eastward — where these pilgrims were bound, no one knew.

The abbess was in no hurry to re-enter the monastery; something seemed to hold her there... It was always so after the dawn walk: God's grace overflowed the woman, and she longed to share it with her disciples. She stood before the gates and gathered the knowledge from Him into a single sermon; she stood between two worlds: the world of nature and the world of man, a world in need of a new Word. Through her lips, God Himself whispered the message that must be delivered to the other nuns. The abbess invariably left the monastery walls with a prayer, and with a prayer she re-entered them, and only after did she conduct the morning service for the novices.

«The road is mastered by the one who walks it,» uttered Gayania, taking a step into the holy abode.

The heavy wooden gates immediately closed behind her, reminding the abbess to leave all worldly things out there in the mountains, to forget all sorrows, griefs, and joys, accepting peace in the House of God.

A narrow path, paved with wooden blocks, divided the monastery grounds into two equal parts: on the right stood a small annexe — dark grey, with a single window and small double doors, entwined with the green stalks of grapevines. It seemed as though the secret place of the nuns was deliberately hidden from the evil eye, and one could not overhear their thoughts or the words spoken alone with themselves and the Lord.

Beyond the dark-grey annexe rose the monastery itself: on the ground floor was the prayer hall — spacious, wide; beyond it lay the refectory, and the door at the end of the long corridor led to a modest infirmary. On the second and third floors, the cells spread out like tiny rivulets — small, austere chambers; only one little room, with a tiny window, stood empty, and no one knew why.

The abbess would always say to the virgin novices: «The cell is dark, cold, and damp so that each of you may understand what awaits you at the end of life's journey. No one should live in luxury, like a spoilt child of fortune, gorging oneself as a spider gorges on a hapless fly — for we can take nothing with us into the Kingdom of Heaven. Before the Lord, all are equal: to Him we bring only what we have done or left undone — our deeds, whether righteous or not. The cell is a place where

we draw nearer to God, a place where there is neither rich nor poor, neither beautiful nor ugly. The cell is a mysterious place for our souls, a place of their purification.»

Adjacent to the rear of the monastery was the Library of St. Paul. The repository of books was a rectangular building with stained-glass windows. The glass played in the sunlight with bright colours — the mosaic shimmering in shades of green, blue, and yellow.

Inside the house of books stood tall, rough-hewn shelving, among which Gayania loved to wander. Opening the ancient pages, yellowed by time, she would thoughtfully study every written word about the greatest rulers, elder sages, healers and herbalists, gods and deities. The abbess treated the books with reverence and great love; in them she drew wisdom, inspiration, and the possibility of transporting herself to another world — the world of past centuries.

One book occupied a special place in the library — it lay upon a cloth adorned with embroidered patterns, precious stones, ribbons, and lace. Beside it on the table there always stood a clay vase with tea roses, wildflowers, and fir branches. The novices of the monastery treated this book with veneration: within it one could find answers to all questions; in days of despair and anguish, the book granted peace to the soul and mind, thoughts became instantly pure and bright, and a warmth and grace were felt within the body. They called it the Book of Books. And within it was contained more wisdom than in all the sages of Babylon. And within it was more love than in a mother's heart for her child.

A little way from the shelves stood a row of old oak tables, with benches beside them. On one of these, the novices often saw the chronicle kept by the abbess. She wrote of the days spent within the walls of the House of God, recorded prayers and sermons, and recounted her visions of the Lord.

The walls of the library were painted, the ceilings laid with mosaic. Here light and stillness always reigned. «Truth and wisdom cannot abide noise,» Gayania would repeat. «Cognition comes to the one who knows how to find what matters within the noise, and within the silence — to understand it. Never will he be heard who shouts and cries at another; only a half-tone — be it a prayer or a blessing, words of great Love or a petition — shall be heard by your neighbour. That is why it is quiet in the library and in the church — one must come to knowledge and to God in silence.» The abbess loved the library with all her heart and filled its shelves with rare, precious books. They were precious not because their covers were adorned with gold or silver, but because these books were brought by lost wanderers, philosophers, healers, and teachers, who gave them in gratitude for a night's shelter, a meal, and a kind word. Gayania helped as many souls, exactly as many, as there were books in her collection.

Roses grew on the monastery grounds, but near the reading hall they were especially abundant. Gayania once told the maidens a beautiful but sad story about them.

«Once, a Roman legionary stole a flower from the garden of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius in order to give it to a beautiful girl living in the mountains. But when the emperor, during a walk, was counting the flowers in his garden, he found one missing. By order of the enraged Marcus Aurelius, the thief was found and publicly executed, and the girl who had received the flower was given over to torture until she returned the treasure she had been given. Day after day, the legionary's beloved was lashed with a whip, drenched with icy water; on her lovely young body, burgundy stripes appeared from the red-hot metal with which the unfortunate girl was tormented... The girl died, never submitting to the emperor's will. On the very spot where she was tormented, a flower grew

— the very same as the one stolen from the imperial garden — and then another, and another, and another... And they named it after the perished beauty — the rose, and those flowers required neither water nor sun. Later, there where those immense, thorny, yet entrancingly fragrant flowers grew, the Monastery of St. Paul was erected.»

The abbess slowed her pace and sat down beside a stream that flowed through the garden of olive trees. Where the stream began, no one knew, nor where it emptied. It wound like a broad ribbon, filled with water of an emerald hue. The abbess leaned over the moisture, stretching out her hands toward it, and pressed her wet fingers to her parched lips, feeling the strength return to her once more.

«It is time to go,» the nun reminded herself.

She finished her morning walk, hastening back to the monastery, to her thirty-five disciples.

Almost all the novices had already gathered in the prayer hall. Their hair, which once fell upon their shoulders and elbows, was now hidden under apostolniks — head-coverings that evenly covered the chest and back; the girls' slender bodies were drowned in their under-cassocks, only their fingers showing white against the long dark garments.

When Gayania entered, absolute silence reigned in the hall. The maidens rose to greet the abbess, then sat down again upon the benches. The service that she conducted resembled not so much a strict prayer service as words of guidance, instilling faith in Christ. The morning prayer served for the novices as a gulp of cool water in time of thirst, a piece of soft, fragrant bread in time of hunger — they always flocked to Gayania's words like moths to a light, listening to the abbess's kind, tender voice. The abbess wished to impart to them all the wisdom, all the visions that came to her, to protect them from an evil fate:

«And the Lord said to me this day: „A soul shall come ashore upon your shore, a soul in need of faith and hope — and still more of love. And it shall be your duty to nurture this sinner — set her upon the true path, grant her the chance to save her own soul, and accept her will, whatever may come!“ And I asked of God, who gives all and asks nothing in return: „Will I and my novices have enough wisdom to grow a seed of faith within a lost soul? Will I have the strength, without doubting, without fearing, to receive her into these monastery walls?“ And God answered me: „Doubt not, my daughter, for doubt is a sea wave that washes away everything in its path. He who doubts himself and his neighbour — cannot receive anything from the Lord.“»

The abbess lowered her eyes and began to pray softly: her words, spoken in the silence, echoed through the walls of the prayer hall, flew like a bird into every corner, and struck like an arrow into the hearts of the novices. The maidens did not know who would wash ashore at their monastery, who was in need of help, but within them ripened seeds of compassion and mourning, of mercy and love for one's neighbour — without doubt, they were ready to help the wanderer, ready to follow after him if need be, and to follow Gayania — should she ask it. «I have come to You, Lord, just as I am. I wait humbly, and now my novices too, for Your further word. I beg, direct us to the true path, tell us what to do next, from what direction to await Your disciple, man or woman. Forgive us our sins and our doubts; let a new person enter our life, and let the monastery be home to him or her, and may he or she discover the Lord within himself or herself. We pray for that person. We beseech You to save and preserve their life. Let the lost soul be kept alive and shielded from evil, falsehood, and temptation.»

The prayer ended. The abbess rose first and made for the exit, but almost at the door, her hand was seized by the novice Mania, who flew into the prayer hall.

«Mother, forgive me, but during your hour of morning prayer, while I was labouring in the yard, someone knocked insistently at the gates. Fear overcame me; I thought it was one of the imperial messengers come to take our souls. Then I thought perhaps it was a homeless man or a philosopher who had lost his way. This wanderer sits still now upon the ground by the gates, does not go away, asks for nothing...»

«Let him into the monastery. Feed him. If necessary — give him shelter for as many days as he needs. The Almighty Lord forewarned me of the soul that would come to our abode. Cast aside, Mania, all your worries and fears about legionaries, the homeless, thieves — cease your fretting and fear nothing, for as long as we are in the monastery and God is with us — nothing is frightening. Contradictions in your soul are enemies of faith; they keep you from receiving a true answer from Christ.»

The maiden bowed to Gayania and ran out of the hall: the black mantle of the novice rustled in the air and vanished from sight in the same instant.

Mania opened the monastery gates and addressed the traveller in a kind voice:

«Whoever you may be — whether you mean us good or ill — we bid you enter, accepting as a gift our kindness and love for you, wanderer. Share our Lenten meal this day and stay within the walls of our home. Everything that is ours — is now yours. God Himself has led you to St. Paul. God be with you. Enter, then.»

The wanderer answered. His voice sounded thin, like a trembling harp string.

CHAPTER II. RHIPSIMIA

Rhipsimia was fair of face; it seemed that no maiden more wondrous could be found in all the world: upon her skin, the colour of sea foam, a blush would bloom, turning rosier still in the bright sunlight and from shyness — a shyness she felt each time men's intent gazes were fixed upon her. Her full, crimson lips, like the sweetest Greek peaches, would have driven, perhaps, a dozen kings to madness. Such beauty was the dream of any Roman woman, any Egyptian, even any Greek, yet she, a modest maiden, hid her girlish figure beneath a grey, sack-like garment that disfigured her, turning her into a vagabond or a drunkard — a wretched, soiled creature.

From the long and torturous journey, the leather straps of her sandals bit painfully into Rhipsimia's tender soles. In her hands, the maiden held a bundle of coarse cloth. Within it lay some meagre provisions: a couple of grain flatcakes, garum in a clay bottle, a little carrot, garlic, cucumbers, small vessels of red wine and olive oil, and a tiny pouch of spices. And beneath them all, gold lay hidden.

«Do not drive me away — I have nowhere to go; do not drive me away, I am utterly alone. They have hunted me as if I were a wild boar. Here,» Rhipsimia pointed to the bundle, «is all that I possess. There is gold, much gold and precious ornaments, gifted by my father. Take it all, only I beg you — let me stay.»

In Rhipsimia's eyes, the thirst for life had yielded to fear. The girl was greatly frightened, and it seemed to her, plainly, that no one could come to her aid, that no one sought to understand from what she fled, nor whither.

«Come in, I beg thee, O maiden! Surely thou hast misheard!» Mania uttered in confusion. «I am not driving thee away! Be calm, and enter quickly.»

Rhipsimia glanced about her swiftly and warily. Mania smiled and with a gesture showed that here there was nothing to fear. Beyond the gates lay a different life entirely — a life without lust and debauchery, without judgement and reproach. There, in Rome, chaos reigned, where the clever man was devoured by the cunning and the treacherous, where innocent maidens were delivered to filthy, brutal legionaries who demanded to be pleased all night long with no right to rest; where the power of golden coins, the thirst for bread and circuses held dominion over simplicity, humanity, and order, and where Cupid's arrows pierced the amorous hearts of emperors several times a day.

Rhipsimia came from a noble line. Her father had attained the rank of consul, and her mother was the personal physician to the prefect. The girl grew up as the only child in the family, which meant that, from infancy, all attention was bestowed upon her. When she was but newly born and they laid her, utterly defenceless, upon her mother's heart, it was clear at once: in time she would grow into a beauty whose grace and countenance would ruin not only men, but herself as well.

Rhipsimia lacked for nothing, yet she grew into a kind, caring, merciful girl.

«The day will come, daughter, when you shall be the wife of an emperor!» her father would say — at first in jest, and then with stern insistence. «A wife such as you can only be dreamt of. In Rome and beyond its borders there are crowds of women, but they are all faceless and dull. Fair of face, yet in their heads — the north wind. What occupies them? Wine and gowns? They are but ornaments to the bedchambers of magistrates, nothing more. But you, my life — you are another matter: astonishing, singular, wise... Your wisdom would suffice to build libraries across all Egypt, and your warmth — to thaw frozen seas.»

«Father, you know that I cannot and will not give myself to anyone without love and respect! Power and status are no comfort to me. What am I to do with an emperor? Hold debates about the next conquest of lands? Or support his desire to destroy the poor slaves? Or resign myself to the fact that in our bed will sleep some woman brought to him from the street? No, Father, alas, I cannot do this to myself. My body I may wash clean of shamelessness and falsehood, but what of my soul — will you advise me there?»

«The soul, daughter! — that is demagoguery. Where have you read of it, my dear — in books? Well, there let it remain: in the treatises of philosophers and windbags, in myths — but not now, not here, not in this age. Understand, my love, that great deeds must be done, not endlessly pondered. You may weigh for an eternity whether it be good or ill to be the wife of a great Roman; you may spend days on end discoursing upon your soul and your destiny... and while you are thinking, someone else is already seizing everything you are worthy of. One must not gape, my dear — your happiness may be snatched away from under your very nose.»

«Dear Father, of all the suitors who have come to ask for my hand — not a single one does my heart incline to, do you understand? I cannot trespass against myself; I cannot share my days and nights with a man I do not love! Even Mother used to say...»

«Your mother, like you, was raised on foolish myths — what could she possibly tell you?» her father's voice erupted like thunder from a clear sky. «No one asked her and me whether we desired this union or not; we, still so very young, were simply thrown into each other's arms! Do not dare to say that you cannot trespass against yourself — what, are you marching to murder or to battle? Do not dare speak to me of love!» he cried in fury. «Do you know that for the first half-year of our life together, your mother could not endure the very sight of me? She asked for a separate bedchamber, shunned my kiss, would not even let me touch her!» A note of chagrin flickered through the consul's harsh voice.

«But Mama loves you now, and had she not loved you, I simply would not exist in this world!»

«She loved her learning, her craft, but in no way me! This debate is ended, my love.»

Her father departed, and with him went Rhipsimia's hope of being heard, of being understood by him. The person dearest to her had not merely shown her his back; he had truly betrayed her. Rhipsimia's father was gentle and indulgent with her, but rather firm and stubborn in his dealings with the high officials of the state. By duty, he was obliged at times to lull his kindness to sleep, becoming harsh and severe even with women. He was often and long absent from home, and his wife and daughter would pine for him beyond measure. But in that hour, to Rhipsimia, he was an insufferable tyrant!

«I will not surrender without a fight!» she defied him. «Another life is destined for me by fate, Father! If you will not accept my right — others will!»

The girl's hot blood rebelled and seethed. The Vesuvius of her thoughts poured lava through her veins, reaching her heart. There, an idea had long been ripening: to cast everything aside and set out across the world in search of her own fate — a true fate, one not imposed by society or by her ancestors. Rhipsimia was weary of being a figurine that people came to gaze upon in the hope of purchasing — all displayed the vile desire to snatch up a luxurious specimen. Continually, in the courtyard of her house, there scurried either the young and foolish sons of Roman patricians or their aged fathers. And all, as one, promised to cast at her feet the riches of the world, trophies, palaces... yet what is a soap bubble, when within it is hollow? There is nothing more loathsome than a man who can offer only gold. And nothing but gold.

In moments of sorrow and hopelessness, the girl would often recall her wet nurse — warm and dear to the point of tears. Rhipsimia never knew the name of the one who had nourished her with her own milk. The milk of Rhipsimia's mother — Agapia — had dried up at once after the birth, for she wept often and fell asleep to the clatter of arms; her husband, as a perpetual consul and a man of immense wealth, was the constant target of slander by magistrates rising to power. Someone had once framed him, slipping a ring stolen from the emperor into the pocket of his mantle. The procurator had saved the consul from execution at the last moment, presenting the Roman ruler with a series of proofs... Yet his trust could no longer be regained.

What milk in a young mother's breast could there be, if the clang of swords served as a lullaby for her child? Thus, the parents of little Rhipsimia decided to summon a wet nurse to their house, one who would keep their beloved daughter sated and calm.

Agapia at once set forth a number of strict requirements regarding the wet nurse: anyone who so much as offended the second «mother» of her daughter with a glance or a word would be sent to prison that very hour. If anyone frightened the helper or caused harm to her health — that person would be killed at once. The wet nurse who suckled Rhipsimia at her breast would be provided for until the end of her days, and should any misfortune befall her, or should she grow feeble and weak — she would be taken into the consul's house and cared for as if she were blood kin. Such was Agapia's decree.

«I wish her to be a young, healthy maiden, with a reputation as clean as a bedsheet,» Agapia pronounced with importance. «I do not wish, nor can I afford, to lose my only daughter on account of a sickly wet nurse. Her hair must be exclusively dark — like my own. The milk of blondes is unsuitable; it is tasteless and colourless, much like their locks. And redheads are not to be admitted into the courtyard at all — they are not of this world.»

Though Agapia was famed for her own beauty, she was troubled over her husband's fidelity. Thus, she wished the helper to be comely, yet not a mythical nymph who could eclipse all reason — for who knows what lies in the heads of Roman husbands? Crowds of women — those who had lost their children in childbirth, or those who gave their newborns away to other families or into the care of their own parents — thronged in the courtyard of Agapia's house. To be a wet nurse in so influential a family — was sheer happiness. Yet not a single candidate found favour with Rhipsimia's mother.

«Agapia, have mercy on these women at last!» her husband entreated her. «Our child is underfed, while you conduct an auction as if buying a gladiator. Choose a wet nurse quickly, and let that be the end of it.»

Agapia resolved to obey her husband's word and to take the first wet nurse who came her way. Yet, by a twist of fate, the very one who knocked was kind and gentle; she carried with her a warmth and the scent of tender lavender blossoms.

«May I see the child?» the young woman began. «My daughter died barely having come into this world. And I never managed to see her eyes, nor to know the happiness of motherhood. Permit me to suckle your daughter — I have milk in abundance. I need nothing from you, save perhaps to allow me to be, for a little while, a mother to your babe.»

That very day, the wet nurse entered the consul's house. Agapia absented herself more and more often on medicinal matters — the prefect was unwell, and later he took to his bed altogether with an internal affliction, and only his physician could ease his days with medicines and potions. The young mother was torn before the choice: to refuse the prefect aid meant to destroy herself and her family. But to leave her child, or, far worse, to take the child with her — was impossible.

«Mistress, go, do not torment yourself,» the wet nurse counselled in an even voice. «You are a physician, like Galen, irreplaceable.»

«Are you in earnest? Upon whom shall I leave Rhipsimia?» Agapia answered in confusion.

«Be at ease; nothing will befall her. I have already studied the little one as one studies a book. She is a most gentle and good child. She will be fed, and clean, and smothered with kisses.»

Soon the little beauty found a true «second mother.» The wet nurse entertained and occupied the child in every way: Rhipsimia would stretch out her tiny hands toward her and babble something in her infant tongue; the wet nurse would kiss the baby's milk-white cheeks and tell her amusing tales — of the world, of people, of nature — and the little girl would laugh and listen to them with interest.

The wet nurse served in the consul's house not only as a wet nurse, but as a nanny as well: a grave responsibility was laid upon her — to teach the child to know the world; besides, her milk truly helped Rhipsimia: the sickly thinness vanished from the little body — and that was a great happiness for her parents. For there is no greater joy for a mother and father than healthy, sturdy children.

In her nanny's eyes, Rhipsimia saw the love that at times she did not see from her parents: her father remained, as ever, long and often absent from home. Of course, he was proud of his daughter and never tired of repeating that no lovelier, dearer child existed on earth nor under the earth; he would briskly kiss the hands of little Rhipsimia — and immediately depart the house. Honour and duty always steal time and strength; they steal what is most important, most precious and needful: love, family, friendship, sleep.

Much time had passed since those days.

Now grown, Rhipsimia gazed longingly out of the window: high up, birds flew, and she envied them — no one hunted them in the sky; they owed nothing to anyone, they cared for nothing save freedom. She would have gladly turned into a bird and flown high into the mountains, but she had no wings. Her childhood memories were interrupted by an unceremonious knock at the door, returning Rhipsimia to reality. The girl opened the door and saw a crowd of men — all of them staring at her, making no effort to hide their curiosity and heated eagerness.

«We have come to the house of the consul by order of the Emperor Diocletian,» spoke one man from the crowd. «Word has reached him that the consul's daughter is uncommonly beautiful, and he wishes to see the loveliness of Rhipsimia with his own eyes and to make her his second wife. Clearly, you are Rhipsimia; we must paint a likeness of you, and then take you with us! For disobedience we are commanded to cast you into prison, and to warn you that after prison there shall follow an even crueller punishment — and the brand of a traitress!»

«I would gladly pose before you upon a canvas, but, to my misfortune, I am not Rhipsimia. You see, that girl is a beauty the like of which cannot be found upon this earth. And I? My legs are crooked and scrawny — I am forced to hide them beneath long robes! You cannot look upon the ribs protruding from my sides without tears — the emperor would only cut his fingers on them... My womanly health is the worst gift my parents bestowed upon me. I am weak and feeble. Do not look at my face because it is somewhat pleasing — by nightfall it grows hideous. In this house, I am merely the helper of the physician Agapia. You may, of course, ask her to confirm my words, but my mistress even now sits at the bedside of the prefect — he is unwell.»

«Where then is Rhipsimia?»

«Rhipsimia departed this house long, long ago, and whither — none of us knows.»

Thus did Rhipsimia — wise beyond her years — dismiss the imperial messengers.

«Sooner or later, all that is secret will become plain,» the beauty whispered uneasily. «I fear the deception will soon be uncovered, and I and my family may be punished for it. I must flee!»

She flew into her bedchamber and snatched all the jewels from their casket.

«This can serve as coin. And these,» she cast a scornful glance upon the stately gowns, «shall be needed no more. No more at all.»

Then Rhipsimia took from the triclinium such provisions as might suffice for the first part of her wanderings. She would not die of hunger. She threw the jewels and the victuals onto a thick piece of cloth and bound it tightly into a bundle.

Forgive me, Father, that I cannot fulfil your will, nor justify your expectations and demands. I also forgive you for your sternness. Mother, understand me! — wrote Rhipsimia on a scrap of paper.

Having donned a garment that resembled an old sack, and her sandals, and having slipped quickly out the door, the girl set forth in search of a new place, where one need not fear being torn apart by lions or tigers, or hanged for disobedience. For want of love.

Past her flitted now dry shrubs devoured by the heat, now picturesque vistas that bewitched the gaze. Rhipsimia walked long, ever farther from Diocletian — he must not have her, neither alive nor dead. Insulae appeared in view and vanished, hiding among the trees like timid hares. And later they hid themselves altogether, and before the fugitive lay bare, naked earth. The girl stood in the midst of a barren desert — there was nothing here save dry red earth, needles and twigs that tore the wanderer's feet with their thorns.

«From where has the wind brought this refuse? Perhaps it falls from the mountains? If there are needles here, it means pine grows nearby... How it hurts... I have no strength to go on.»

Droplets of blood from the cuts trickled like little serpents down the girl's white legs. Dust flew into her eyes, heralding a mighty storm. And the maiden had no shelter from the foul weather. There was nothing left but to run. Loud peals of thunder rang out. The sky turned black; the thin, feathery clouds were replaced by asperatus — dreadful stormclouds that frightened Rhipsimia; she cried out upon seeing them.

«Faster!» the girl urged herself.

She ran with all her might. If Rhipsimia grew soaked — her body, from weariness and cold, would simply not endure, and she would fall in the middle of the road. The only way to escape the rain was to find shelter... Dust flew into her eyes, and it was impossible to see what awaited ahead or what lay behind. Tiny grains, like salt, stung her forehead, her cheeks, crunched on her teeth, tangled in her hair. The hood that Rhipsimia had drawn over her head flew back as she ran. Before the wanderer's eyes, lightning blazed; thunder followed at her heels. For the first time, the girl felt such violent fear, and the only thing that saved her were the words she tried to shape into a plea to be left alive.

«If only I could reach some refuge, or a little tree — please, is it so much that I ask? It is foolish, so foolish to die of a storm or a downpour. If not by the hand of Diocletian, then by the elements... Weather, have mercy on me! Rain, I beg thee, do not pour down; wait a little — see, I have washed

my feet in blood; wait a little, have mercy! A little longer, I beg, a little longer!» Rhipsimia sought to charm the storm.

But the elements did not hear her. Ahead lay emptiness, stupid and monotonous; behind her shoulders — the clouds, a noise that snatched away her breath, and a fierce wind that now drove into her back, shoving and goading her on, now struck her full in the chest and face. The sandals weighed down Rhipsimia's feet. She removed her shoes and ran barefoot, thinking thus to escape the terrible storm more swiftly. The girl quickened her pace, yet it seemed she had not moved from the spot; the earth beneath her feet crunched dryly and cracked without end or limit. Blood flowed from the blows of prickly balls, from dust, from strain. Her legs refused to go on. Rhipsimia sobbed, yet she ran, hoping that soon this hell would cease. But it did not cease. And the girl fell. The wind cast her down, weak and exhausted, and she had not the strength to rise. She lay in the midst of the wild land, alone, almost disbelieving in the rightness of her flight, despairing and spent, feeling the thunderclaps strike painfully against her temples.

The sky began to weep. Softly at first, like a babe waking in fright, and then harder and harder, like a beast wounded by a spear. Large, cold drops streamed down Rhipsimia's garments. She felt the unpleasant moisture; her hair grew sticky and wet; the earth turned to a clayey mire — red, foul-smelling, loathsome, and only her face did the rain cleanse of the dust and tears that had left dirty trails upon her skin. For a moment, the girl closed her eyes and... could not open them again. One might have thought she had fallen asleep after a long and wearisome road, but no — she lay rigid in exhaustion.

Meanwhile, the foul weather raged on: around the prostrate Rhipsimia, lightning struck, and from the blows the earth split open like a nut dashed against the ground. The rain poured mercilessly upon the girl, leaving not a single dry spot upon her. How long did it last? How long was the high judgement over the fugitive being carried out? She lay. Beside her there was no dear, kind wet nurse, her nanny, who might have sheltered, as with a wing, the little girl, the defenceless, pure Rhipsimia; there was no father who could in an instant resolve all his child's cares; there was no mother who knew all the remedies in the world for ailments of the soul and of the body. There was no one. Absolute emptiness, and she, pinned to the earth.

But all things pass, and this too passed.

The storm slowly retreated. The clouds spread languidly across the sky; here and there, like the first edelweiss, sunbeams broke through, warming the earth. Rhipsimia lay for a day, perhaps more. She heard nothing around her and responded to nothing... Calm and carelessness reflected upon her sweet girlish face. She seemed not to be breathing. The bundle with the provisions from home lay carelessly beside her. Who needs your gold, if you are dead? Now the tangled twigs, the fir needles and thorns no longer troubled Rhipsimia's feet. Nothing troubled her at all now — her damp garments gradually dried; the wind blew about the folds of the sack-like cloth. The girl cried out something in her sleep and awoke from her own voice. Nothing recalled the storm just past — the ground was dry, and scarred in places with fissures.

Rhipsimia tried to rise, but she plainly lacked the strength — the long road had worn her out, her legs would not bend, and the fingers of her hands trembled like dry leaves in the wind. With horror the fugitive realised that for more than a day she had eaten nothing. With difficulty, she unwrapped her bundle, drew out a flatcake, and bit off a small piece. Her body sensed the familiar aroma of baked bread and could not contain its joy: «Life continues; I must go on!» At last, Rhipsimia managed

to get to her feet. She took up her burden and moved forward. She stepped across the bare earth: no thoughts, no feelings — only steps toward the unknown. The sun rose ever higher: one moment, and it was already at its zenith. It was hot, and beads of sweat coursed down Rhipsimia's face. The picture before the maiden's eyes blurred; she thought she was walking through some desert.

«The weather shows its temper. Now it wants to weep, now to dance. A maiden's character... Someone has deeply offended you, if you seek to destroy a human being! Someone has offended...»

Rhipsimia even smiled a little. The road grew more winding and steep; the girl climbed higher; her breathing became heavy and ragged. She was thrown now into heat, now into cold; a weakness came over her; she wanted to weep, but Rhipsimia continued to walk... She turned around and saw that she was following a road that resembled a serpent: this path led into the mountains.

«Diocletian does not walk here,» Rhipsimia murmured weakly, yet happily. «You have a wife, beautiful and stately — what need have you of another? Can love be divided among three?»

To Rhipsimia's right stretched a ribbon of tall pines. Huge, mighty, ancient dwellers of the mountain massifs, it seemed as though they knew and remembered all. To the left of the girl — a chasm. Here the road ended and the precipice began: one glance downward, and the earth would swim away from under one's feet. Frightening and high. Below rustled the crowns of the trees — they seemed miniature, unreal. Birds alighted upon them, and then flew off with a cry, leaving an echo behind. Opposite the precipice, grey crags stood in stillness; in their depths a tiny light glimmered and at once went out. Could there truly be people there? To climb up there would mean to meet a swift and inevitable death. Rhipsimia gazed long at how the clouds sliced through the mountain peaks, and yet she resolved to draw a little nearer to those crags; perhaps she might discern what the tiny ray of light had been that had flickered there.

It was dangerous to walk — dusk was falling, and the girl feared to tumble down, tripping over a stone. But difficulties only heartened Rhipsimia; if she had not submitted to Diocletian, then even less would she submit to grief. The girl thirsted to know what was up there. Were there people there? What were they like? Could one live out one's years among the mountains without fear... Now the path narrowed beneath the girl's feet, now, on the contrary, it broadened. Stones threw themselves beneath her swollen toes, and the straps of her sandals once more pulled painfully across her soles. And once more a bite of flatcake for sustenance, and once more — onward. Rhipsimia tried not to stop, lest deep night take her unawares.

«I must go faster,» the fugitive told herself, «perhaps I shall have the good fortune to find shelter there.»

Anxious thoughts of being seized by Diocletian's guards pursued her, giving birth to horrifying visions: here came men in armour — Diocletian had given them the order to find and kill the cunning wench; here sat her parents before the emperor, and he was deciding their fate: to cast them into prison to rot, to give them over to be devoured by wild, hungry beasts thirsting for flesh, or to have their heads publicly struck off for having raised a worthless daughter, a liar.

A terrible fear took hold of Rhipsimia. Never before had she so feared that her deception would be uncovered, that Diocletian would learn all, grow enraged, and destroy her — for to kill a woman for insubordination was, for him, a most pleasant pretext to arrange another feast. To him, a human

life was equal to the life of a moth. Today you live, and tomorrow — you do not. The clash of weapons Rhipsimia could feel even now, and from it, a chill ran between her shoulder blades.

The paths now branched, now narrowed into a grey road leading to nowhere. For fugitives and pilgrims, the road serves as home; wanderers yearn for it when they settle in one place; yet for one who is ever in haste, the wish is for the journey to end the sooner.

At last, Rhipsimia came out onto a sloping stretch of land — night had overtaken the rebellious beauty. She laid her bundle on the ground, sitting down upon a fallen tree torn up by a hurricane. In the darkness, she nevertheless discerned a divine beauty: upon the crests of a chain of mountains lay white snow, covering the peaks as if with a cap; the branches of the trees rustled with luxuriant foliage; nature breathed with a full breast; the grass whispered in the wind. Rhipsimia's gaze lingered upon an eagle flying overhead: it flew steadily and silently, beating its wings — in the night, it goes out to hunt.

«How I pity the prey that falls to you...» sighed the fugitive. «I, too, like a mouse, hide from an eagle — only my eagle is more terrible than you, O bird. You, at least, will not torment your catch — you will swallow it, and that is the end; but me, they will torture, humiliate, and then grind me to dust, as though I had never existed at all, a mortal. We are all mortal. With this simple truth, questions are born in my mind: is there any meaning in anything, if the end is irreversible? What will remain after me, after all the other people who vanish from this world? What will I feel, if I know the date and the hour of my own death? And what, then, is happiness? A struggle? With oneself? With circumstances? With others? If I win this struggle against the emperor, the struggle of all women against forced love — shall I be happy? I think, yes. I shall be happy. I shall set an example of what it means not to obey a tyrant, not to be a beautiful object, not to be a thing yielded up to him by force.»

Time flowed, and so too did Rhipsimia's thoughts, in turbulent streams, granting her young head no rest, while only her heart sought peace, sought a separate world — without fear and pain, without sorrow and anguish. The wanderer sat and listened to the silence, and only somewhere behind her shoulders did weariness prowl, trying to catch her eye and ask her why she resisted it, why she would not invite it to her side, strike up a conversation, or be silent together. In the black distance, a rumble sounded — it was the mountains roaring, shouting down the wind... Suddenly the noise fell silent; stillness descended upon the earth, and darkness settled upon the girl's eyes.

«Are you alive?» someone spoke to her.

Rhipsimia started.

«Who is there? Is anyone here?!» she asked the silence.

«You are alone here, child; fear not. Rest after your long journey; fall asleep to the rustle of the earing grass, to the lullaby of the mountain river — it sings a tender, quiet song and runs, runs, runs... vanishing somewhere among the stone giants. You cannot catch it. You cannot seize it.»

In the morning, Rhipsimia awoke and froze in wonder: she had never seen structures that resembled either a house or a defensive fortress. She marvelled that anything could be built in so wild a place, where a person could scarcely walk.

«What is this? Can it be from here that the tiny light appeared to me? So that is what you are! Not a star, not a vision... So it was for your sake that I nearly caught death by the tail?! Who raised you? Could it have been Jupiter himself? Whatever this may be, I believe and I feel that here I shall be of use, and here I shall find refuge — I shall ask for help!»

With hope ripening in her breast, Rhipsimia sprang from the place where she had fallen asleep and made her way toward the edifice, from afar admiring its beauty. Gigantic gates guarded the peace of the wondrous house, keeping its harmony and order.

«Ah, how it smells here! What wondrous fragrance is this? It intoxicates and maddens!» the wanderer continued to marvel. «I shall knock — perhaps they will open...»

And she knocked thrice at the gates. The fleeing girl was so weary that the sound from her small, almost childlike fist came out muffled and weak. Throwing her bundle of provisions at her feet, she began to beat upon the gates with her fists more loudly, to slap them with her palms — no one opened. A pause. The girl gathered all her strength and drummed again. She did not retreat, yet it seemed that on the other side not a sound was heard. Rhipsimia sat down by the gates. From the weariness that had fallen upon the shoulders of the exhausted wanderer, and from the dawn that had descended upon the earth with mad haste, the beautiful girl, tormented by the long road, fell into a doze. She slept, leaning her back against the gates, her arms flung wide as if for an embrace. Her lovely face was relaxed; her long lashes timidly veiled her fathomless eyes. Rhipsimia felt nothing; only from time to time did her fingers seem to try to grasp something. Now and then she would sob, whisper her mother's name.

In her dream, Agapia smiled at her daughter, kissed her tenderly on the forehead, braided her hair into a plait, and asked but a single question: «Why did you run away from home, without speaking, without explaining, without asking advice? Foolish, foolish little daughter, you grew frightened...» Wheels creaked — a cart stopped before the house, and from it stepped her father in a long ivory-coloured mantle, in tall black sandals. Her father was tall, handsome, and, for some reason, very young. He held out to his daughter a little pouch, in which sparkled earrings adorned with river pearls. This was a gift for returning home after so many days of wandering. The girl threw herself upon her father's neck, begging forgiveness for her hasty decision, for her fear, for her betrayal. The scene of family idyll shifted to another: men in iron chain mail and helmets, holding pilums, gladii, spathae — they had not come in peace, but to attack. With one thrust of a pilum to the heart, a warrior struck down her father... Her mother was dragged away to the lupanarium — to give love to wedded Roman citizens for a single sestertius. Rhipsimia fell to her knees; she kissed the feet of the legionaries, cried out that she would do anything at all, if only her mother might be left in peace.

«Leave her, leave her, I beg you! Listen — tell Diocletian that I will do whatever he wishes! That I... I love him! I ran away not because I was afraid, but because I did not wish to be a second wife!»

«You lie, you filthy wench!» the legionary struck Rhipsimia across the face so hard that a fiery mark remained upon her cheek. «Have you heard what the emperor does with such as you? You have not? How dared you deceive the emperor? Do you think yourself cleverer than he? Now you and your mother will be sent far away — only not to prison, no; you shall be harlots, sitting in filthy little rooms with placards and receiving guests! There is where you shall display your cunning and your wisdom! And if you serve someone poorly and complaints are made against you — you'll die like a worm, and no one will speak your name...»

Rhipsimia awoke in a cold sweat from her own cry — the vision had pursued her again, and this time it had felt true. She felt chilled, but the rising sun warmed the face of the drowsy girl. Somewhere in the distance, birds sang — their thin notes enchanted her. For a moment, she listened, entranced, and then began anew to knock at the gates. She knocked and knocked, and after yet another failed attempt, she sank down to the ground.

«To him who knocks, it shall be opened!» the wanderer repeated to herself.

And indeed, she was heard. The enormous gates swung open.

CHAPTER III. MAY IT BE RENDERED UNTO THEE FOR THY FLIGHT FROM THY FATHER'S HOUSE

A maiden in dark garments led the fugitive into a small house, where the wanderer might warm herself and rest. Within, it was nearly dark; a small hearth burned in the northern corner, and a bench of olive wood stood opposite. The paintings upon the walls struck Rhipsimia with wonder: across a blue sky, clouds sailed, and beneath them a woman stood motionless. Her face expressed immeasurable kindness and calm. Her long, fair hair, like ears of wheat, fell in waves upon her shoulders, and in her eyes of pale green, love and all-forgiveness were mirrored. Her head was crowned with a diadem — massive, of gold, studded with precious stones as crimson as blood.

«How beautiful she is...» Rhipsimia uttered aloud. «I have never yet seen so enchanting a woman.»

«Some wanderer, struck by the beauty and majesty of the princess, resolved to immortalize her image here. When I first entered this room, her countenance, just as with you, caught my eye — I marvelled at how alive she was, and how wondrously fair. They say she perished for her faith in God... But now you must warm yourself and try to sleep.»

«And how long may I remain in this room?»

«One night. Here, one is permitted to grow warm and to doze after the road. This room is set aside especially for wanderers, that they might abide awhile in warmth.»

«What am I to do next? I beg you, give me hope that I may stay within the walls of your house!» Rhipsimia looked deep into the eyes of her new acquaintance.

«The House of God casts no one out, nor ever has — all who come here of their own will are desperate and destitute souls, who have nothing left to lose, yet who still long to find something. And they do find it. Know this: if you remain here, you will keep a number of rules; you will perform work. It may seem to you like penal labour or torment, but only through faith and toil will you find happiness and find yourself.»

«The gods themselves have led me to you!»

«A person cannot worship all gods — God is one. One hypostasis, and one nature has He — the God-man. In the beginning He was a man, but later He was crucified for the sins of each one of us.» The girl bowed her head, placed together the first three fingers of her right hand, and touched her forehead, her stomach, her right shoulder, and her left.

«What is this sign? What does it symbolize?» Rhipsimia asked in alarm. «Does it concern me? Does death await me?»

«It is the sign of the cross. Later you will see, wanderer, what it means. Here you will be taught to speak with God, to thank Him, to entreat Him, to reveal Him to others. But only if you so desire. It is impossible to force one to receive teaching, to accept it, and to understand.»

«Until now, I have thought that we are ruled by Jupiter and Juno, by Neptune and Ceres...» Rhipsimia uttered in disappointment. «Why were we always told that Jupiter punishes us, and that all the dead pass to Pluto?»

«Later you shall learn all. All roads will open when you open your heart to God. If you have come here, if you have found the monastery that stands upon the steepest mountain — then God was with you; He Himself led you hither. He wished to show you that there is another life — in humility, in stillness, in conversations with oneself and with God, in labour and in peace.»

The novice departed the warm room: Rhipsimia was to sleep after her hard journey. No one asked her who she was or whence she came, nor with what intent she had knocked at the monastery gates — here, no questions were posed, no one cried out, no one cast sidelong glances. Here, all was otherwise than everywhere else.

«Who is He, then? Who is this God?» With these words, the wanderer fell asleep upon the wooden bench.

Marvellously, Rhipsimia slept a deep, untroubled sleep. Nothing frightened her; nothing tormented her thoughts or feelings. She slept as though she were at home, in a cradle — warm and sheltered. Only her eyelids would, at times, part slightly, as if the silhouette of a figure flickered before her eyes: from behind his back, two wings peered out — white, tender, downy.

«In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Have mercy, O Lord, upon the soul of the wanderer. Preserve her soul beneath Thy protection, shelter her from the most wicked enemy and from cunning deeds; grant her compunction and sound, peaceful sleep. Peaceful sleep, peaceful sleep — let her sleep. Let Thy love, O Lord, ever follow not ahead of her, nor behind her, but beside her. Amen.»

«Who are you?» the maiden murmured through her sleep.

«I am he who will be beside you, who will show you the way and ever remain upon your shoulder. You may count upon my aid: in days of hardship and in days of ease, in suffering, in misfortune, in goodness — I will offer you my wing; I will shed light where you ask it. Upon your path there have been, and shall be, cunning ones; there shall be temptations — do not grant them power over you; do not be deceived.»

Rhipsimia's long, deep sleep was broken by a quiet voice, already familiar.

«Greetings, wanderer. Forgive me, a sinner, that I have woken you. I see how worn out you are. Soon it will be the hour for the evening meal. Tell me, are you hungry? Here, in the monastery, other maidens dwell; I think they are of an age with you. You may converse during the repast, learn

something from them; they might tell you of us, of who we are and what our mission here is. And in the morning you shall go with all of us to prayer.»

«Forgive me — sloth overcame me, and I sank into the kingdom of sleep; I truly was very weary. I will gladly share the meal with you and share all that I have. I should like to give you some very precious things — they are not stolen, yet neither are they earned by labour. They are gifts from my parents. Take them, I beg you, in gratitude for permitting me to cross the threshold of your house, for giving me shelter for the night.»

«The abbess Gayania has sent you glad tidings: if you feel that here is the place where you shall find your very self, the place from which you need no longer flee nor dread every step and sound — if here you find kindred souls, kin perhaps not by blood, but by deed — then stay forever. Your precious gifts you may keep for yourself — no one compels you to anything here. In all your deeds — your will; in all that passes here — God's will.»

«Someone came to me, only he had bird's wings behind his back, very large ones. I have never seen the like. Was it a dream, or perhaps a malady of the soul?»

«From the heavens, an angel descended to you — the guardian of your life, of your soul, and a messenger of God. Usually he comes to those who have received the mystery of baptism, but I cannot explain why he appeared to you before your time. Did he speak with you?!»

«He said that I should not yield to temptations — that is all I remember from my dream.»

«Come, I will show you the place where we keep the mystery of the evening meal.»

Rhipsimia's companion was a woman of few words, yet she nonetheless showed interest in the guest: she asked from what direction she had come, why she had chosen the long and thorny path hither, whether she had blood kindred, parents. The girl answered every question truthfully; she told of the dreadful design of Diocletian, and how, through deception, she had managed to escape being forced to become his second wife.

«I cannot judge you, wanderer, for I myself do not wish to be judged; but that you have chosen another path — to devote yourself not to a sovereign, but to a cause — is a righteous deed. The truth shall be revealed to you in discourse with the Mother Abbess, with God's blessing.»

The long corridor stretched beneath Rhipsimia's feet like skilfully woven Persian carpets: the mosaics that adorned the walls and floors of the monastery seemed geometrically perfect in their design. To lay out a pattern — even the simplest — required the labour of more than one man: one would level the surfaces, making them smooth and flawless; later, another master would plaster the walls or floors; a third would draw the designs or the composition that would be filled with mosaic.

«Those who created here, without doubt, possessed a gift from God. Each pattern — do you see? — is a tale of earthly life: in this image, a girl gathers olives from a young tree and lays them in a basket, smiling benignly. The work brings her happiness and joy. And here,» the novice's finger pointed to a mosaic picture, «God created the mountains and the sea.»

«And why do I not see Him?»

«With your eyes, you cannot see God. He can be discerned only with the heart. Could a man have created such things? A boundless sea, and high mountains stretching to the very heavens. And God looks upon His creations and rejoices. And together with Him, we too rejoice.»

The girls found themselves in a spacious hall. Upon a long, dark wooden table, supper stood: bread — fragrant and fresh, still warm — a little cheese and sour cream, mushrooms, olives, olive oil, and preserves. There was no meat in the monastery; it was forbidden to kill animals or birds. In small bowls, honey shimmered like gold — God's grace, sweet and wholesome.

«Before we begin the evening meal, we pray. You will hear words of thanksgiving to God. We thank Him for sending us our daily bread. All that grows upon the earth, all that serves us as food — is His mercy. With us at the hour of the repast, there is present also the one who appeared to you. It is important to thank Christ for simple things — such as a gulp of water or a crust of bread; it is important not to forget to take joy in the meal. Our need is to commune with the Heavenly Father, to gather at one table, to pray all together. In prayer, we are one.»

«And do you not forget, every day, to thank God for your meal?» asked Rhipsimia.

«You do not forget to open your eyes each morning, do you? So we, too, never forget to thank Christ.»

To Rhipsimia's right sat her companion. Gayania, at the head of the table, began the prayer:

«„Lord Jesus Christ, our Lord, bless our evening meal, our food and our drink. We thank Thee, Lord, that with Thy generous hand Thou sendest us, Thy disciples, this repast, which gives us strength and happiness. Amen.“»

Rhipsimia diligently pronounced every word after the other maidens; during the mealtime prayer, the girl felt an extraordinary surge of strength and a gratitude for that which lay before her upon the table, for the hospitality shown her. Of weariness, not a trace remained; hunger, however, gnawed from within, and to look at the food grew ever more difficult; the hungry howl of her stomach crept up to her lips.

«We eat in order to live, but we do not live in order to eat. You feel a fierce hunger, do you not? A wolf's hunger! And the meal tempts you. Look upon it not with a wild, predatory gaze, but with an even, humble one — for you are above temptation. It is hard to begin living anew — not as you did before,» said the girl to her right. «I know — we all were once as you are, not understanding what it is to sleep in cold cells, to eat the simplest of victuals, to live by rules — not our own, but established from above.»

«We were told of you — or rather, that a guest dwelt within the monastery walls: a girl, wearied after a long road. Sister Mania will show you your cell after the evening meal,» a maiden sitting to the left addressed Rhipsimia. «It is safe and quiet there; the window looks out upon the flower garden, so you will ever breathe the fragrance of roses.»

«If you permit, I might tend to them,» Rhipsimia smiled. «I love flowers very much and know them well; besides, toil is no stranger to me — I saw how my parents laboured. I know but a little, yet I promise I will learn everything and do all that is needed for you and for the monastery. And I love handiwork, too; for instance, I make beads — ornaments for women who wish to shine before

honoured guests and draw attention to themselves. I could make beads and teach you — they could be sold at markets and in shops, and with the money earned, we might adorn the monastery or buy books.»

«You shall speak with the Mother Abbess, Sister, and tell her of your wish to labour and of your talent. God willing, you shall teach us, and we shall teach you all we ourselves know, and show you our way.»

«I bid you rise, O maidens!» the abbess addressed all those present in a loud and solemn voice. «This morning, a wanderer washed ashore at the monastery walls. This maiden climbed the slopes; thunderclaps and lightning frightened her; the rain poured mercilessly upon her body and her garments. Strength spent, she fell near the gates of our abode! God sent her to us, and if she accepts our faith in Christ — she shall be a sister to you, and to me — a daughter! Tell her of God; love her with your hearts, and help her!»

The maidens bowed three times and, crossing themselves, began the meal. Each of them took food with one hand, carefully and reverently — she did not eat her fill, for one must rise from the table with a light feeling of hunger. Rhipsimia placed at the centre of the table all that was in her bundle, saying:

«I know not how to begin rightly, but I should like to turn to you now, O good people: all that I possess, I share with you. There is no more «mine» here — there is only «ours.» All that belongs to me — belongs also to you! And one thing more: I wish to thank you, and I will be grateful to you until the end of my days — for shelter, for your kindness to me, for warming me and allowing me to share this meal with you. I have no sisters by blood; now I am alone in this world, yet — who knows? — perhaps you shall become my kin; perhaps, through your unity and your faith, I shall find a family.»

The abbess listened attentively to the girl's speech and moved her lips softly; then she made the sign of the cross in the air and smiled — and from her smile, in Rhipsimia's eyes, a fire of faith and hope kindled. She sat down upon the bench; the other girls, with a nod of their heads, thanked Rhipsimia.

No temptation! I am no savage! spoke Rhipsimia's inner voice. After satiety, disgust always follows. Besides, I am stronger than desire. That means Mania was right — I must be collected, judicious, and look upon the victuals simply.

Despite her fierce hunger, Rhipsimia ate very modestly, like a little field mouse, and learned within herself to say «no» to temptations and worldly needs.

«The body will take only so much food as it requires, just as the earth takes only so much rainwater as it needs; but all those viands eaten beyond your measure — will do no good; that is human greed, gluttony, a sin,» the new acquaintance instructed the guest as she accompanied her to her cell. «In life, it is the same: take only as much as is appointed to you; be content with what you already have. In the Monastery of St. Paul, food — as with all that is customary in secular life — is treated modestly, at times with indifference. The novices have enough of a roof over their heads, a meal twice a day, and sleep — not long, but sound. Some think it is easy to enter a monastery, that it will open its doors hospitably to everyone and give all that is needed for a happy life. But that is not so. Within the monastery walls, people seek and receive forgiveness; they live here not because ordinary life has wearied them, but because they save their souls. And they turn to God. If you do not

wish to speak with Him, nor seek to; if you do not desire to tame yourself and your temper; if you go against the commandments, show pride and haughtiness, rebelliousness — you simply will not be able to remain here; you will break. Different maidens live in the monastery: some fled from other lands — far-off, hot lands; some are orphans altogether; some were nearly destroyed by tyranny — and only within the monastery walls did such a soul begin to live, and not in fear, but in peace with herself and with others. Would the novices of the monastery gossip about you? Perhaps, in secular life, they would have judged you, ridiculed you, beaten you — a fugitive — simply because you are not like them, not pleasing to them. But within these walls, each one understands and accepts another with all her life's stumbles and errors, with her lies, her unrighteous life, her sins. And each maiden helps another — not to correct, perhaps, but to atone for her sins before God, just as He once, upon the cross, atoned for the sins of all mankind. People think that to enter a monastery is tantamount to death, that you will never again leave its walls, that you bury yourself alive. Yes, a monastery is another life, not like life in mighty Rome or Athens. Here, it is different. Here, life is full, interesting — if you look beyond the tip of your nose, if you carry God in your soul, if you teach others to open themselves to Him, to trust and rely upon His will — you will find joy here, and you will wish for no other existence. Does God compel you to serve Him? No! If you go to serve Him freely, at the call of your heart — it means you go to serve the Truth. Of course, you are now bewildered; thoughts are whirling like a whirlwind in your head; you have seen much today, do not understand much now — but I will try to explain everything to you. No doubt you wish to know: to whom do we address ourselves? Why do we utter these speeches during the evening meal?»

«It is called a „prayer,“ is it not?»

«It is. A prayer is those words which open our hearts; they draw us nearer to God. You must tell Him of your needs, confide to Him your cares and worries — the Lord will surely hear you. And do you know who taught people to address God in prayer? Jesus. He was the first to speak with Him. And in conversation with God, Jesus found consolation, joy, relief. The Lord is grieved when we forget to speak with Him, for He is ready to pour out upon us the light of His blessing, to listen to us, to give us His love, to give more than we think. The most terrible thing, wanderer, is that people neglect communion with God — and from that, their life grows dark.»

«And how does it grow dark? Through temptations?» Rhipsimia asked thoughtfully. «That silhouette that came to me — he said that I must not yield to them...»

«Yes, and even the smallest temptation will lead to irreversible consequences and to sin. Prayer guards you from unnecessary thoughts, from breaking the commandments, from crossing over to the evil side — for Satan, who is absolute evil, waits for nothing else. In your room, you may read, if you wish — but I beg you, speak with the Lord without fail: as you go to sleep, in the morning — the moment you open your eyes — and in your daily labours, pray as well. Evil will not come to you, if God has made His dwelling within your heart.»

After the long talk, the novice threw open the door of the cell meant for the guest. Inside the small room, it was uncommonly beautiful: from the high ceiling, adorned with decorative wooden slats and gradually narrowing into a cone, a hesychia lamp hung down.

«In every cell, there are shelves for books,» she pointed to a small shelf standing by the bed. «These are the books of our monastery; now, they are yours, too. You see, we also know how to share: you — with your daily bread, and we — with our spiritual bread. By the by, in these books

you will find writings about our religion — about Christianity — and, of course, in the library, you will see the most important book of all — we call it the Book of Books.»

The cell pleased Rhipsimia greatly: she began to examine the books, carefully turning each page.

«Can you stay with me? I should like to speak of God, and to learn what I must do tomorrow.»

«In the morning, I will come for you, to lead you to the morning prayer — we gather in the prayer hall to speak with the Lord. Also, our Mother Abbess is present with us at prayer — you saw her at the evening meal. With her, you may speak of all that troubles or interests you; she will bless all the deeds you undertake within the monastery walls. Then, after the prayer service, we go to breakfast, and afterward — to our obedience. It will help you to overcome a foul temper and the passions — and only in obedience can you find freedom, keep God's commandments, and draw nearer to the Kingdom of Heaven. Do you know what we call maidens who, like you, come to the monastery of their own free will? Novices.»

«So obedience is a kind of discipline?» Rhipsimia asked with curiosity.

«Not entirely. What is discipline? Submission to rules invented by another person, is it not? That is, one person submits to another, carrying out some earthly tasks. But obedience is the renunciation of one's own ego. When you understand that you must live not only for yourself — that besides you there are other people, and you can make them happy by helping them — then your soul, and body, and spirit will be transformed. Our abbess is not a ruler, not an emperor holding absolute power in her hands. The Mother simply loves us; she loves the monastery; she helps the maidens to set out upon the righteous path; she teaches us to trust. For every maiden living here, it was hard to trust another — for who knows when a knife will be thrust between your ribs? But the Mother continually repeats that only through good deeds can one earn the trust of another.»

«And what if I fail to earn your trust, and the Mother's trust? Will I be driven from the monastery?»

«No one can drive you out of the House of God, maiden. For now, you are a guest among us — you have been here but a single day, yet you already show interest in our life, in God; you share your last with us, and you wish to help us — you have already entered into obedience, and all will go well with you; upon all your deeds rests God's will. Tell me, wanderer — will you not be averse to our calling you by something other than your name? My name is Mania, but I have grown so used to «Sister» that gradually the name given me at birth fades from my memory.»

«I am Rhipsimia. But if you all call me «Sister» — I will be only glad. It sounds warm and pleasant — especially so.»

«Because here, all are one, and all resemble one another. Rest, Sister. Until tomorrow!»

Mania left the cell, leaving Rhipsimia alone with herself. Rhipsimia lay down upon the bed, a book in her hands. The first thing the girl read was a parable about an old man, the father of a daughter who did not love her father:

«Once, somewhere not far from Hygiea, there lived a daughter with her father. The father, while he was young, pampered his daughter; all the work he did himself — his child knew not what it meant to labour daily in sweat and blood. The years passed — and they, unhappily, spare no one, nor do they beautify. The father grew old — and the daughter began to be ashamed of him. Her beloved father, who had always gladdened her and spoiled her, carried her in his arms and denied her nothing — had now become a burden. The daughter grew vexed when her father, with trembling hands, took hold of her own; she could not look calmly upon how he held a spoon with his dry, wrinkled fingers, or drank from a cup; and their heart-to-heart talks no longer amused her.

«Do not be angry with me, my little daughter. I know you feel revulsion for an old man — forgive me that I cannot be forever young, gladdening you with flowers and catching you up in my arms. You see, labour has made a man of me — though, it is true, a very old and feeble one. If you feel hatred and spite toward me — endure it. All will come right. All things pass.»

And the daughter wept, because she did not wish to look after her aged father, and she could do nothing about it, for he was the only soul kin to her in her life. And she tossed in desperation: after all, she was young, fair of face — why must she squander her young years upon her father? He would die soon enough, would he not — so why must she be his nursemaid, why care for him, sit by his bedside for days on end? And her grey-haired father would repeat to her: «Endure, daughter, endure.»

And she endured, day after day.

The father continued to love his only child, answered her rudeness with tenderness, and sought to please his daughter in every way. And in return, he received reproaches of her lack of love for her father, of her hatred.

«How sick I am of you! I hate you! You doom me to torment, Father! How much longer must I fuss over you? Bring you water, food, wash you! You have wearied me with your feebleness!» the daughter cried mercilessly.

«It is not my daughter who speaks in you now, but temptation — your enemy. Do not give it free rein, my blood! Endure! If you did not love me, you would not weep so desperately and bitterly. Do you speak to some stranger of what torments you, my daughter?»

«No, Father — only to you. I do not gossip about you. I complain to no one. For you are my burden — who will carry it for me? Who will understand my sorrows?» the daughter answered her father with chagrin, unwillingly.

«There, you see — you still love your father. For only an unloving soul can complain and slander his own kin; but you do not do this — you speak sincerely, the truth. I beg you, do not let your anger rule over you!»

And somehow, imperceptibly to the daughter, her anger and hatred toward her father departed: every day she came to him to complain that it was hard for her to care for him alone — and from others, no help was to be expected. Her father, in reply, only kept telling her that one must simply wait, that at times it is difficult and unbearably painful. Not a day passed that the father did not console his child, did not speak to her words of love and support: then calm and humility would come to his daughter — she understood that she did not hate her father, but felt compassion for him, accepted his old age, which had crept up on him, like a cunning fox, unseen and swift.

«Forgive me, Father, for all my words and all my tears of hatred toward you! I envied my peers, their happy lives, full of joy, love, and blessings — they fall in love, they meet the sunsets over the sea, they dance, make merry, sew beautiful clothes — and what of me? I must sit with an old man, feed him with a spoon, and distract him from dark thoughts. But it turned out that it was you who distracted me, you who supported me, believed in me. Forgive me, Father — forgive me for everything: the minutes with you are more precious than anything in the world.»

The father listened to the girl, his eyes half-closed, and then, stirring his thin lips almost inaudibly, he uttered:

«Do you remember how I told you that you are not chained to me forever, that you are not obliged to watch over me eternally? That hour has come, my own blood, when the fetters shall fall and you, at last, may meet the sunsets over the sea — while I may go peacefully from this world into another. Now you know what faith is, and patience, and a parent's all-forgiving love — and most important of all: you obeyed me. Obedience is the first step toward forgiveness, toward acceptance, toward relief. And the chief thing — is openness. Be open, and be obedient.»»

Rhipsimia read all that was written in the book; an unknown thirst for words had taken hold of her. On one of the pages, a phrase stood out: The greatest wealth of a man is wisdom.

«What a pity that all this time, the measure of my fortune has been my ornaments — and yet the chief thing, I did not have,» the girl spoke with chagrin.

She raised her eyes and saw upon the wall a fresco painted upon the plaster: the colours made the image true, real, alive. A woman in white garments held an infant in her arms. Beside the mother and child stood a man — the father, in simple clothes; his face was kind and happy. At the Virgin's feet lay lambs; behind the father's back, an ass stood meekly, gazing at the babe with kind, kind, intelligent eyes, like two black beads. In the sky, a bright star blazed — one alone — pouring its light upon the earth, lighting the way for people in rich attire, riding upon camels.

From the picture painted on the wall, grace and love flowed through the body. A true joy.

CHAPTER IV. LOVE CANNOT BE TAKEN BY FORCE

«Could you ever have imagined that you and I would be drinking wine in the Colosseum, Maximian?» Diocletian addressed his friend, a silver cup in his hands. The vessel, adorned with ornamentation of plant and animal motifs, gleamed in the sunlight.

«I wish to drink to the son of slaves who managed to become emperor. Thanks to your golden hands, your sharp mind, and your endurance, you have achieved your goal, my friend! Thanks to you, Rome has blossomed and become one!»

«I think you have drunk rather a lot, my friend!» laughed Diocletian. «Simply put, a druidess's prophecy came true — and to think I had already decided the accursed woman had lied, and wanted to find her and have her beheaded. No, it all came to pass. I did kill a boar, after all! Can you imagine? She told me that I would kill a boar and become a ruler! Ha-ha-ha! I thought I would finish off an animal. But it turned out to be a man. Though I must tell you, that man was a rare swine indeed!»

The sun was already hiding beyond the horizon. Diocletian rose from his throne, and grasping the railing with both hands, he uttered:

«This is yours, Diocles. This is yours.»

The Emperor of Rome, whose true name was Diocles, came from a family of slaves: his mother laboured in the kitchen of noble folk, and his father was a simple scribe. A son was born to them, and they were obliged to teach him everything — for who could know what work awaited him? It was needful to know all, so as to serve the masters and earn a crust of bread.

The son grew, and in a single moment, a stately youth stood before his parents: his broad back, with muscles hard as stone, hid his mother's tiny figure — behind him she stood as behind a wall; Diocles's face expressed cold-blooded calm; his wide chest resembled the breast of a vulture, and his legs the paws of a tiger, just as massive and heavy. And Diocles chose for himself the military path: with ardour he entered the army as a common soldier and rose to become an elite cavalry warrior of the Emperor Carus. Faithfully and dutifully did Diocles serve his commander: in the ranks of the army, it was said that the young man was the emperor's right hand, a devoted aide who, fearing not death, had marched to war with Persia. In the heat of battle, a lightning bolt struck Carus — killing both horse and rider. The legion mourned; it refused to submit to Carinus, the fallen emperor's heir: laying down their arms, the warriors refused to go on the offensive, wishing to see Diocles as their ruler.

«I am proud that you have entrusted to me the most important task — to defend the rights of every inhabitant of our state! I vow to be judicious in my deeds and honest toward the citizens, to sow the seed of truth and root out evil and impiety! We are a great empire, and all who dwell within her are a great people! I shall do all that the people, circumstances, and time demand of me! And may Jupiter help us!» With this solemn speech, Diocles answered the Military Council's decree appointing him Emperor of the Roman Empire.

Now all power rested in the hands of Diocles: and the first thing he resolved to create was a majestic name for a ruler, for he did not like his own, which reminded him of his slave past. Diocletian — thus was the head of the empire now styled. Beautiful women and feasts distracted the emperor from the burdensome everyday toils aimed at reuniting the lands and suppressing local revolts, which broke out ceaselessly in all corners of vast Rome. There had been many women, as many as weapons, in Diocletian's life, yet one girl still managed to touch his heart — the fair Prisca. One day, she set off to the market to choose the finest fruits and vegetables, so as later to prepare from them the most delicious dishes for her mistress, the wife of a very influential man in Rome. The beauty bent over an enormous heap of vegetables: within this mountain, she wished to find the very best — the fairest and juiciest, the ripest and most fragrant. Her mistress would always say in jest that in the diet of every noble lady there must be exclusively fresh vegetables and fruits — then the complexion becomes lovelier, and the Caesars begin to cast glances. Suddenly, a few paces from the young maiden, a horse flew past: Prisca took fright, for the basket of vegetables had fallen from her hands. The girl wept bitterly — she would have to pay for the spoiled wares, and she would disappoint her mistress by returning with nothing.

«I will pay for all that you have dropped, and for all that my horse has trampled,» a man addressed her.

«Are you Jupiter?» the girl asked in bewilderment. «Where do you have so much money?»

«Ha-ha-ha! No one has ever called me that before! You shall be the first! Yes, Jupiter — that is my first name; I gave it to myself. And my second is Diocletian.»

«The Emperor!» the girl cried out.

That night she warmed the emperor's bed, and later became his mistress. Diocletian gave his heart to Prisca, but she had neither the title of Augusta nor any other privileges. Her name never adorned coins or inscriptions — formally, she was not considered the emperor's wife.

«If your name were listed in the documents, or indeed anywhere at all — I would be overthrown, destroyed,» Diocletian justified himself before his wife. «A scandal would erupt — if the emperor's wife is a Christian, why does he destroy her faith, why does he hunt down Christians and force them, under pain of death, to return to paganism?»

«But why do you destroy these people? What have they done to you? That they believe, as I do, in One God, and not in many? Can a man truly be beheaded simply because he sees this world otherwise than you do? Why will you not leave them in peace, Jupiter? I am your wife, and I am also a Christian — why, then, do you not kill me?»

«If an emperor shows weakness or gives rein to sentiment, if the circle of his confidants presses upon him — then that emperor is poor, weak, and it is easy to wrest power from his hands, for in the eyes of his subjects he will appear a spineless creature; and then, at one fine moment, he and his entire family will be slain by his enemies. The enemy waits for nothing else — your Christians too wait for me to loosen the reins, so that they may quickly subjugate all the people to themselves. Therefore, I will permit no other faith in Rome but the pagan one! So be it!»

It was impossible to placate Diocletian — the final word on the extermination of Christians remained with him. That which he repeated to his spouse about the undermining of power and the mistrust of those who carried Christian teaching and faith was a partial truth. Diocletian never revealed his ambitious and cunning designs to his subjects, even the closest, and kept his ear to the ground. The ruler told no one that he wished to be the last and permanent Roman emperor, to unite all lands, thereby confirming his own authority. To secure the support of all the gods, he commanded sacrifices to be brought to the pagan temple of the Pantheon. Slaughtered animals, the blood and tears of innocent maidens, the fruits of the earth — none of these, it seemed to Diocletian, satisfied the gods, and therefore he chose the ritual murder of those who did not believe in them. Warriors rounded up the wandering enlighteners and servants of Christian temples: abbots, novices, simple teachers of the religion, and other folk were first taken captive, then, under torture, offered the chance to return to paganism, and those who refused were killed — thereby offering up to the gods, as a sacrifice, citizens who were disobedient and unfit for Rome.

Diocletian's servants seized all, from young to old, and then sorted them into cages: women into one, men into a second, and into a third they sent the children. Women were beaten with leather whips across the neck, face, stomach, and soles of the feet; after this, their hair was torn out, their nails pulled, their ears cut off, their bones broken, and they were set on fire. Younger Christian women were violated. Men were beaten to death, and those who survived were impaled on spears or swords before the eyes of the other captives. The bodies of those who had perished for their faith were hung in the central squares of the city — first in Rome, and later in other cities as well. Those who saw the mutilated bodies of the dead gasped in horror, fear, and revulsion; passers-by grew sick from the stench of the decomposing corpses — all this was done by the authorities so that citizens would fear

even to utter the word «Christianity» or to think in any way of a god displeasing to the state. Through torture and murder, Diocletian sought to strangle the new faith, yet still, here and there, new Christian cells flared up: they spread like the branches of a young, sturdy tree reaching toward the sun. Almost no literature or icons not yet destroyed by the government remained, but diligent disciples of Christ found them, secretly guarded them, and copied them anew.

«I categorically cannot tolerate smoke, Maximian — I always ask the legionaries not to burn the enemy's insulae and temples. Why do they do it? By the by, have you spoken with the priests? Do they know anything of new secret gatherings of the filth-believers?»

«Processus told me that they are in the east. At night, one of our men saw a crowd in white robes making its way to a wooden structure. Our men could not discern precisely what they carried in their hands, yet I think it is their symbols and books — nothing else.»

«What symbols? What books?» Diocletian questioned zealously. «Crosses?»

«Yes, Emperor. Crosses.»

«Seek them out. Seize them.»

«As you command. And what of your consort — how does she receive this, your hunt for the Christians?» Maximian inquired with a barely perceptible smile on his lips.

«She loves me, and all else troubles her little. It suffices her that she is a Christian, and it suffices me that she does not compel me to accept her choice and her faith. Toward the faith of my Augusta I am indifferent, but when it concerns upheavals and deeds that circumvent the state's authority — that must be cut short. One must not, Maximian, spit in the face of the State; one must not spit upon the gods — one day they shall grow wroth and punish the people of the earth. And what do the Christians do? They spit upon the gods, upon Rome, upon you and me, in the end: they gather by night, they write or pass from hand to hand magic books — where has it been seen, to drive wickedness and infirmity from the body with words? Surely we have priests and physicians for that?»

«They take much upon themselves, Jupiter,» answered Maximian. «It must be rooted out.»

«Deeds are deeds, but on an empty stomach I cannot think at all, my friend,» said Diocletian, rubbing his palms together. «Today there will be roast meat and cheese with herbs.»

«I would not refuse a sea-wolf,» Maximian took a sip of wine. «By the by, my friend, did you know that in the consul's house lives a beauty such as the world has never seen? Rumours have reached me that she is fair beyond all possibility. Perhaps you might cast an eye upon her?»

«I know. I have already sent my men to the consul's house, and guess what I was told?»

«What?»

«She no longer dwells in that house.»

«Your men told you this?»

«A helper, in the consul's house.»

«Emperor, are you perchance unwell? Do you seriously believe that? Why, she has twisted you round her finger! In the consul's house there have never been other women, let alone helpers — save for a wet nurse, and that was many years ago. Their daughter opened the door and outwitted your men, and they were only too glad to try — taken in by the tricks of a cunning vixen!»

«How do you know it was she? Have you seen her, or have you already been with her?» Diocletian rose from his throne and looked seriously into Maximian's blue eyes, which recalled the sky. Only what was visible in them was not purity, but cruelty, greed, and falseness. Maximian exulted inwardly, for he had found the emperor's weak spot — an infatuation with a woman, and by this he could be manipulated.

«May Jupiter strike me down! Of course it was she — and no, I have not been with her! Yesterday at the baths, I overheard with half an ear the talk of a man close to the consul's family. Well, he was saying that the consul and physician's daughter had run away from home — can you imagine? And she did not return; she ran away without cause! I think she feared you would send men again, or come yourself. I'll stake a finger on it — it was she, it was she!»

«It was very clever of her to twist the emperor round her finger and then flee the house,» Diocletian laughed, and the wrinkles, like the imprints of power and endless wars, played at the corners of his eyes. «What is it about the emperor that she finds unlovable, Maximian — tell me? All lovely creatures find him lovable, yet to her he is repugnant.»

«Do you wish to find her?»

«Why not? A beautiful maiden is never out of place at the imperial court; and if she does not suit my taste, or if Prisca does not accept my choice, then one can always improve diplomacy with other lands with the help of this beauty — so to speak, present her as a gift after concluding an alliance.»

«Pure truth! Shall I order men sent after her?»

«Yes. I wish to find her, living or dead, and to ask whether she has anything against the emperor, and whether she is prepared to beg his forgiveness.»

«And what if she resorts to tricks again, or refuses to obey? What do you plan to do then?»

«I do not know. Time will tell. For now, my wrath is not yet so great as to cause her any evil; I am even astonished by her cunning and her nimbleness. My Prisca is not so quick-witted; she is excessively honest and down-to-earth — once that greatly won me over.»

«And now you thirst for the opposite?» Maximian burst out laughing, stuffing his cheeks full of grapes. «Oh, these emperors — so inconstant.»

«Did I imagine it, or did I command you to send legionaries after her?» Diocletian inquired with irritation of his friend. «Besides, revolts are ripening in the west — do you know that? You lie here, gorging yourself, while in Mediolanum, the citizens are slipping out of control. Restore order!»

Reluctantly, Maximian rose from the accubitus and made his way to the exit; he did not love attending to state affairs, just as he did not love carrying out the will of his close friend. Hercules — for so Maximian styled himself — had neither education nor trade from birth, yet among the legionaries he was considered a capable warrior and a talented administrator; if Diocletian pondered the next move at length and only then proceeded to execute his plan, then Maximian first acted and later analysed his conduct. A talent for negotiation, a gift of persuasion, and the ability to charm his way out of trouble had been passed down to him from his parents, who kept a shop in Pannonia, trading in everything that could be traded.

From childhood, Maximian was not marked by any particular intelligence; his peers often made sport of him, calling him dull-witted. Beside himself with fury and chagrin, with anger and resentment toward others, he made the decision to join the ranks of the army, where he became acquainted with Diocletian. And though Hercules was not clever, in military matters he had proved himself a desperate and faithful warrior, boldly advancing upon the enemy: mercilessly and swiftly, he crushed the army of the Bagaudae brigands, cleansing the Roman lands of cunning, greedy foes. Yet there was a reverse side to the coin: Hercules, just as Diocletian, hated Christians, and in his domains cruelly suppressed any manifestation of a dissenting opinion concerning faith. The poor were killed, while for the wealthy and influential Romans, another fate was prepared — they were stripped of all material goods and driven beyond the borders of Rome. For some time, Maximian had tried to dissuade the emperor from marrying a Christian woman; moreover, he urged Diocletian to murder his bride, for her blood was impure, and her mind clouded by magic. But Diocletian, seizing his sword, very nearly ran his friend through in his rage at these words. The friend apologised — the fear of a swift and inevitable end forced him to squeeze out: «Forgive me, Diocles.» But in the depths of his soul, there ripened a hope to kill Prisca, so that she might not hinder the sacred union and friendship of two gods — Jupiter and Hercules.

«Who are you, then?» Diocletian paced from corner to corner, pondering the unknown girl; curiosity, in tandem with anger, consumed him. Women had always flocked to him like moths to a bright flame; it cost him nothing to win the heart of even the most stubborn beauty — but here, all was different. «If you shall not be mine, then you shall be no one's. I will take you, sooner or later.»

Diocletian turned to his guards and gave the order to seek out and bring, willingly or by force, the prefect's personal physician and the consul. The only way to discover what the fugitive looked like and where she might be hiding was to seize her parents and force them to speak. The sky grew ever blacker. A storm was ripening. The emperor always suffered from a terrible, persistent migraine, importunate as a fly; he did not love it when the clouds gathered into a grey stain that stretched across the sky, and the wind rose such as before a war — gusty and blood-chilling.

Diocletian had always considered himself a god, mighty and invincible — he had cultivated in himself a sense of duty, responsibility, fearlessness, and courage. But here and now, a few hours before the pouring rain, he felt himself a man — helpless and unskilled. A cold compress of wine vinegar only slightly dulled the pain in his temples, and all that the best physicians and priests recommended helped for a time, but the pain always returned.

The emperor wished neither to drink nor to eat — only to lie in silence and think of nothing. When the rain began, the ruler felt an extraordinary relief, a surge of strength, and came alive again.

«I hear you are searching for the consul and his wife? Why? Is it something serious?» Prisca entered Diocletian's bedchamber. «There is a downpour outside; it seems a little more and half of Rome will be flooded.»

«Prisca, have you ever desired something you have never seen? And not wished it to fall to another?»

«But that is senseless, my love! Senseless and foolish,» laughed Prisca.

«Everything that does not concern you seems foolish to you, Prisca. Did you want something? My head aches fiercely — either tell me why you have come, or do not trouble me, I beg you. Today I belong neither to myself nor to you.»

«Why do you need the consul and his wife? Will you tell me or not? Do you think they are Christians? Do you wish to wipe them from the face of the earth as well?»

«No, they are not Christians. I need their daughter. And I will answer your question before you ask it: I need her for diplomacy; I wish to present her as a gift when sealing an alliance. They say she is beyond compare, and that serves my purpose — beautiful women are worth their weight in gold, wife; and if she has never known a man — that is a treasure for us.»

«But she fled, Jupiter! Where do you intend to seek her? She could be hiding anywhere — or perhaps she is dead altogether? She is still so young, and she never took a single step away from Agapia into strange parts!»

«Where do you know the name of my prefect's physician, and how do you know these details?» The emperor sprang from his bed with lightning speed and in an instant stood beside his wife. «You know much of the life of Agapia and her daughter?»

«Would you want her daughter only as a gift for others, or for yourself as well? I know how much you love divine pleasures, Jupiter!»

«She interests me. I should like to see her and to try her; I think she is beautiful, and she might be a second wife to me. If I am disappointed in her, then I will either sell her or rid myself of her; let her run farther, wherever her eyes may lead her.»

«That is to say, you wish to tell me that with a living spouse, you want another? I shall not permit another to occupy our marriage bed! There is I — and no one else!»

«Do you know anything more of this girl? Is she truly as beautiful as they say? How does she look?»

«Yes,» Prisca smiled, naturally enough. «She is very graceful, and your men would surely have broken their necks staring at her — and you, by the by, as well!» Prisca dissolved in loud laughter, unsettling the pain-weary Diocletian. «She has splendid, lustrous, long hair; I think it is not a matter of olive oil — she has good ancestral roots, and the beauty was passed down by inheritance. You know, I spend most of my time with her mother; she helps me with my womanly ailment. As for the daughter, I have seen her only a couple of times — beautiful, I can say nothing else.»

«So I was lied to, that she has a hideous face and legs?»

«An absolute lie. I will leave you alone; perhaps by morning you will change your mind and leave your new passion in peace, Jupiter. I still give you more of my love than you think — and besides, one cannot force anyone to love. I speak to you as a woman.»

«At this moment, I need her parents; only from them can I obtain her likeness, Prisca. Only parents can describe their child! When they tell me in detail how she looks and where she might hide, the search will be simplified. Right now, they seek her like a needle in the Nile, and I doubt they will find her.»

Prisca left her husband, leaving him alone with his thoughts: he pictured how they would bring her to him — the extraordinary beauty with a character as sharp as Eastern spices.

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The morning coolness, with the scent of roses, filled Rhipsimia's room, as though the two had conspired to delay her first awakening within the monastery walls.

«Sister, wake — it is time for prayer,» Mania touched Rhipsimia's shoulder. «You may sleep a little later. Come now; it is not fitting to grieve the Mother on the first day of your obedience. Let us go quickly!»

Rhipsimia awoke with uncommon lightness and swiftness; not a trace of the long road's weariness remained in her legs; the troubled dreams and visions no longer pursued her, and she was happy for it — all the most terrible things lay behind her. Mania seized Rhipsimia's hand, and the girls ran to the morning prayer — only a few minutes remained before it began.

The abbess glanced at Rhipsimia and smiled; the girl, in turn, bowed, smiling in answer. The prayer began. The maidens bowed their heads, repeating after the abbess — quietly, barely audibly, Rhipsimia prayed too. She had never heard how people address Christ, yet something within prompted her how to speak the prayer aright. The hall was drowned in the purest silence; only a bird, strayed among the downy boughs, tried to interrupt the maidens. Through the enormous, heavy windows, a sunbeam stole, playing upon the white marble floor and reflecting upon the painted walls. Here, grace and humility wafted abroad; it seemed that time itself had stopped, that nothing could trouble the old monastery that had seen so many a fate. At the end of the prayer, Rhipsimia approached the abbess; she wished to tell her of her fears and the visions that haunted her, yet the abbess already sensed with her heart that the guest of the monastery was ill at ease.

«Does a weight of despair or anguish lie upon your soul, my child?» she addressed the girl. «Does something torment you? What gnaws at you?»

«I must tell you something, Mother. I am very afraid for the life of my parents, for my own life, and now for the life of the sisters as well. I am surely being sought by the Emperor Diocletian, for refusing to pose for his painters, for refusing to belong to him. When I was alone in the insula — my parents being absent on account of their endless duties — men knocked at the door: men with a beastly lust for flesh in their eyes; I was terrified. They came, supposedly by order of the emperor, to paint my likeness, for Diocletian had heard of my beauty and wished to assure himself of the truth

of the rumours. But I deceived his men, I deceived him, and now I fear that his wrath will destroy everything in its path.»

«So long as you are within the walls of the Monastery of St. Paul, you are under God's protection and in the care of us all. Fear nothing. Here, you will always be at peace; strangers do not come to us, for the monastery stands far from the Roman world. It is a miracle that God showed you the road into the mountains and that you met us.»

«And I should also like to ask you, Mother, to give me work — to bring some use to the abode and to thank you for your great heart, for the kindness with which you enfold me as though in a warm down cloak. A miracle has been wrought upon me: I wandered long and by a hard road, having lost all hope, but you saved me from the wild beast called despondency.»

«Toward what does your soul incline? Is there a labour that grants you joy?» the abbess asked with care. «A person is happy herself, and useful to others, when she is occupied with a beloved and interesting task. If you, my child, labour — no matter whether you have chosen a light craft or a heavy one — and you perform your work with ardour, with desire, with full devotion, you will be happy, and happy shall I be, and the maidens, and all the people around!»

«Yes, Mother, there is a task, and it brings harmony into my life. I told my sister earlier that I love flowers very much — caring for them is the best reward for me!» Rhipsimia exclaimed. «When I was very little, my nanny told me that flowers are the children of nature, and one must look after them, give them pure water to drink, speak with them, shelter them from the cold, and in no way cause them pain, nor wound them, nor cut them. To my sorrow, the image of my nanny has faded from my memory, but those words I remember to this day. There is a second task, too, which brings me joy: the plaiting of beads. First, one must gather the most beautiful stones, then join them with special threads. And thereafter — the nimbleness of the fingers and the fantasy of the craftswoman. When my parents were absent from home and I had to while away the days and nights alone, I kept my hands busy with work — small, yet pleasant and, I think, useful. I remember how once a woman came to my mother, a very wealthy woman; she saw the beads in my hands — the work was not yet finished, but it greatly delighted her, and she asked to buy the ornament from me!»

«Your labour brought you not only spiritual good, but material as well. The plaiting of beads may become a crust of bread for you in a dark hour, is that not so, my child?»

«It is so, Mother.»

«Then you may do the work which, in your opinion, will bring benefit to all of us. God be with you; He will bless you in good and useful deeds. The main thing is — do not lay your talent away in an old chest with unneeded things,» the abbess traced an invisible cross in the air with her fingers.

«Mother, what does it mean — 'do not lay your talent away in a chest'?»

«There is no doubt that a person is beautiful and useful when she does not squander her life in idleness and sloth, but is occupied with a good work. Yet what is labour? Simply to do as one is bidden? Then that is slavery. Only a bondsman will do something by order, while a free person will do it at the call of the heart. Then there is talent. That which you do well and with delight. That which is in you from birth — that is God's gift. For instance, God gave you the talent to plait beads, and in this you have no equal; another sister inspiredly paints the walls of our monastery, and a mere wave of

her hand suffices, and the images of the saints appear before us as if alive; yet another novice makes wondrous vessels of clay that adorn our refectory table... I will be grateful to you for your help to the monastery, and I will be a hundredfold more grateful if you share your talent with the sisters, if you teach them this fine and painstaking art; and we shall teach you all that may be of interest to you. Yes, my child — who knows? Perhaps you will teach us to create beauty, and it will help us in difficult hours. Who knows... Who knows...»

The abbess dismissed the maidens and remained alone in the vast prayer hall.

CHAPTER V. THE FATHER'S HOUSE

Agapia flew about the insula like a bird with a wounded wing; she cried out, cursed everything under the sun, smashed dishes, hurled cups at her feet — the walls shuddered from the mother's wrath. No one had ever dared to touch her child, and her beloved daughter had proved, for the umpteenth time, that she would not give herself up to just anyone without a fight.

«Did you see? How is this to be understood? This is your fault!» Agapia cried into the consul's face. «Our child has taken to flight! Where are we to seek her now? Whose doing is it that our only child has fled her own father's house?»

«Only do not shift blame from a sick head to a sound one, Agapia. What fault is mine? How was I to know that Rhipsimia would wish to flee? I think there must have been a reason for it.»

«But it is all because you kept bringing strange men to her! You led them in as though to a theatre — to look and to show off and boast! The heart chooses love, not you or I!»

«I was seeking her — of what do you accuse me? It is hard for me, too, to know that she is not here! Perhaps a love fever took hold of her, and she fled from an unrequited...»

The argument of Rhipsimia's parents was cut short by the pounding of horses' hooves: approaching the house of the consul and the prefect's personal physician were the emperor's warriors from the elite Praetorian Guard. The riders' faces were hidden by massive helmets that reached down to their collarbones, shielding the carotid artery; in their hands, sharp swords glittered.

«Consul Gordian!» cried the chief of the men who had come. «In the name of Diocletian, open at once! We know you are within!»

«Go to Pluto!» a woman's voice rang out from the house. «What do you want here?»

«The Emperor commanded us to deliver you to him! Either you open now, or we shall be forced to use force against the consul and his wife!»

«Agapia, I beg you — do not show your temper. Open to them; they will do nothing to you or to me. So long as we hold high ranks, nothing threatens us!» the consul addressed his wife, yet notes of alarm sounded in his voice. «Open to them, or it will be worse.»

Agapia made for the door, but at once was thrown back by a mighty blow — the door had been kicked in by one of the soldiers. The Praetorians did not care for long talk; unlike diplomats, their dialogues ended in the application of force and a demonstration of their superiority by means of the verbal oppression of their adversary. «To trample into the dirt» — that was what pleased Diocletian himself, and his army.

«He who bade me go to Pluto shall now pay him a visit himself!» The warrior seized Agapia by the hair and dragged her toward the exit. «Follow me, Consul!»

Before seating Agapia upon a horse, he threw the woman to the ground, striking her a few times with the iron toe of his sandal. Agapia found the strength to rise, but she felt everything darkening before her eyes from the blow.

«Where is your daughter?»

«I hope that soon we shall change roles, you filthy dolt! And you will be eating the earth, with an iron toe for a chaser!»

Agapia's face was drenched in blood. Nothing remained for the consul but to watch the beating of the woman he loved. He who most resisted the state's power became its enemy, and any manifestation of disaffection toward the emperor was punished by Roman law, and very cruelly. Agapia was known as an indomitable and wilful woman, and for that no less respected; she defended her house in every way from strangers, and later, when they had left her insula and it seemed victory was hers — she would weep loudly and long, shuddering at every sound.

«Strong for all, and weak for myself» — so she would say to her daughter, guarding her peace. But against Diocletian, it was impossible to stand — he was interested only in Rhipsimia and her place of dwelling.

«It is well that you fled, daughter,» flew from the lips of the beaten mother.

«I am inclined to believe your daughter will come to a bad end,» began the eldest of the imperial messengers. «She deceived the men sent by the emperor himself; she said she was not your daughter! I doubt she will manage to hide from the hand of justice.»

«Your business is to watch the road!» Agapia hissed through clenched teeth. «Can you grant me a gift? Spare me from your empty babble.»

«And your business, you dolt, is to bear heirs and spin wool — and to keep silent; better still — to tell your daughter what is good and what is evil. But plainly, the role of wife and mother has come to you but poorly. Do you wish to wash in blood again, or will you sit quietly this time?»

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Diocletian was beside himself with joy and anticipated victory: he would become the possessor of the most precious thing a maiden had, and so long as Rhipsimia's parents were under his control, she would be dependent upon him.

At last, the consul and his wife stood before the great emperor: Rhipsimia's father was thoroughly weary, while her mother stood with head proudly raised and shoulders squared, like a warrior woman ready to charge into the attack. The silence was broken by Diocletian:

«You are very beautiful, Agapia. Now I understand why your daughter gives men no peace. Were it not that I have a wife, and you a husband — I would take you for myself.» Diocletian gave

a smirk, showing his sharp white teeth. «I see upon your white skin the traces of your temper. I am very sorry that you were beaten; but you were not beaten without cause, is that not so?»

«I do not know where my daughter is! What do you want from her?»

One of those who had brought Rhipsimia's parents to the emperor, seizing the moment, struck the woman across the legs, and she fell to her knees. The warrior added menacingly:

«One may not address the Roman sovereign in a disrespectful tone, nor prove one's rightness without his leave.»

«Do you wish to know why you were dragged here, such busy and important personages?» Diocletian asked with feigned politeness. «I hold your husband in deep respect; he has done a very great deal for Rome. I respect you, Agapia, for helping not only the prefect to stand firmly on his feet, but also my wife in her womanly affairs. You would continue to receive my grace, had it not been for your daughter. I wished to make her happy, to take her as a wife and give her a carefree life — was this not what you desired for your child? But your daughter turned out to be a traitress. Any other would have had her beheaded in an instant — but not I. I will give her a chance. To give her a chance, Consul — what do you think?»

«I beg you — my child was, in all likelihood, frightened by the men who came to our insula: fear paralysed her reason, and she made an error — she resorted to deceit. I beg you to believe me, for I speak the truth, and nothing but the truth.»

«What to do with you — that is another question. To punish you for errors in upbringing? You taught the child to lie — and what is more, to Jupiter himself! The highest god is now simply obliged to chastise you! Yet so be it; today my mood is most satisfied. Sit, and tell me everything of your daughter. For disobedience to the emperor, or for falsehood, I shall be compelled to execute you — publicly or in secret — the choice is yours.»

«Our daughter is very beautiful. To our misfortune, my wife and I cannot describe her; it is needful that the Emperor see her with his own eyes. We were so long absent from our house that we did not notice how our child had managed to turn from a curious little girl into a sumptuous young woman.»

«Has the Emperor ever seen the dawn over the sea, when the smooth, turquoise canvas of water is now pale, now rich, bright, entrancing, and nothing can disturb its peace — neither the cry of gulls, nor the sleepy splash of a fish, nor the steps of a wanderer on the damp, yellow sand?» Agapia smiled and talked tirelessly of seascapes, trying to charm Diocletian, to divert his thoughts from her daughter.

The Emperor sensed that from these people he would not obtain, by kindness, the likeness of the girl, nor where she might be — they themselves did not know, and even if they did know, they would not confess it. He seized a stool in his hands and, with all his might, smashed it against the floor — the splinters flew in all directions, grazing the hands of the consul and his wife. Several of Diocletian's men rushed to him in that same second, but with a gesture he stopped them. The guards froze like stone statues.

«Inflict thirty blows upon the consul's back — on the ribs, the nape of the neck — and one blow upon his lips. The consul's wife may serve as a comfort to any warriors who desire a woman's

caress and body — let them use her body as much as they wish, and when she grows wearisome, they may deprive her of life by any convenient means,» the cruel ruler of Rome knew that there was nothing more humiliating and terrible for a man than violence against his woman.

«Stop! I beg you to release my wife — her guilt is in nothing, save perhaps a sharp tongue that she cannot keep behind her teeth. If you wish to find our daughter, then seek among the thin and slender girls with eyes the colour of the desert — in the morning, Rhipsimia's eyes are yellowish, transparent, like sweet honey from the first grasses and flowers, yet by evening they grow dark as night.»

«One of the painters I sent to your house managed to discern a few features of your beauty's face, but I wish to know more details.»

«Tell him nothing, I beg you!» Agapia cried between her sobs. «They will seize her and force her to belong to him! Say nothing; enough! Stop!» the poor, despairing woman pleaded, but her husband seemed not to hear her and continued to speak with the Emperor.

«Had she been seen in Hellas, a war would have begun because of her — because of beautiful women, not only men suffer, but whole states.»

«Gordian, I repeat: you are a respected man, faithfully serving the Roman state, and notwithstanding the old events that clouded your reputation, you have managed to justify your name, to keep your face before the people. Permit me to remind you of the stolen ring: do not let history repeat itself. Do not, this time, allow yourself to stumble a second time, for the procurator will no longer save you from instant death, even if you are innocent. Continue your account, and your wife — I release.»

Diocletian ordered Agapia released, but she did not hurry to leave the emperor's domain; on the contrary, she slowed her step and, turning, spoke:

«You will understand my pain, should something befall your child — then you will find no place for yourself, neither on earth nor under the earth! She fled Rome because she does not love you, and does not wish to be your concubine! You are not dear to her! Not dear, and not loved! Now my child, on account of your lust, is forced to wander the world! From this day, I cease the treatment of Prisca, and I wish to see neither you nor your beasts in my house ever again!»

«Let her go. Do not touch her. She has already received her due,» the Emperor addressed the senior warrior.

Diocletian followed Agapia with an indifferent gaze, but within him, Vesuvius seethed. The most terrible thing was that not a single woman had ever dared to speak such words to his face — and what was more, truthful ones.

The Emperor remained alone with the consul, and all that concerned the beautiful maiden became known to the Roman dictator from the lips of her own father.

«Well then, Gordian — you and your wife are fully absolved and free. You may continue to do as you did before. I shall not trouble you. Live your own life — yet be ready for the blows of fate. This is not the last.»

Consul Gordian left the Emperor without feeling the ground beneath his feet; his eyes seemed covered with a film; a trembling ran through his body. He hung his head, like a spineless slave who has received the rod across his neck; his legs refused, yet continued to walk. Tears streamed from his sorrowful eyes, and he had no power to stop them. The most precious thing he possessed was his wife and his daughter, and today, through his own fault, he had lost them both.

«Fool! Fool! Fool!» he lamented. «How vile you are! What baseness! To give your daughter up to the Emperor to save your own life? Why, that is the height of selfishness and cynicism! But I had no choice! He would have killed me and my wife both! What was I to do? What?» the consul suddenly cried out at the top of his voice. Passers-by turned around, staring wide-eyed at the consul as though he were a madman.

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Rhipsimia's father could find no place for himself: in every minute of his sleep, he died, and in the morning he awoke again from his own voice — shattered and frayed. It seemed his face was no longer of this world, so sombre had it grown, with deep furrows; grey hairs had in an instant transformed him into an old man. He peered into Agapia's eyes as into a mirror, and pain stabbed his heart with a thousand needles — the most beautiful of women, whom he loved and who had never been able to love him, was withered by time and by grief. Had it been in his power, he would have thrown himself at the feet of his wife and daughter, and, kissing them, would have begged forgiveness.

Did he seek his daughter?

When Agapia showed him their daughter's farewell words, he was beside himself with fury: a handful of earth, a stone, dust, a leaf — the consul examined every patch of Rome; he gave coins to vagabonds, so long as they would recall whether they had seen a solitary girl walking alone.

«Where can I find you, my heavenly strength? Gods, why are you silent?»

But the gods did not answer.

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Diocletian wandered in the shade of eucalyptus trees, wrapped in a white toga. The Emperor loved this colour, which set off his porcelain face. The sultry day wearied him, and the ruler of Rome decided to hide from the hot air among the trees; there, a pleasant coolness and shadow reigned. The sunlight did not penetrate here.

«Have you time, Jupiter?» Maximian's voice was lost among the branches.

«I have everything! Power, coins, strength, nerves — and even time. Only when I ride to war, or take pleasure in a woman, have I little of it; but when I stroll alone in the garden or along the fir alley — I have much. What has happened, Hercules — do you wish to take it from me?» the Emperor laughed.

«I have come with tidings, Jupiter, and they will bring you little joy. Our search is senseless! Do you know how many beautiful girls there are in Rome, in Tibur, in Pompeii, and even in Tusculum? You could count and count and never finish! We are searching for a void, my friend!»

«Well, perhaps you are searching for a void — but I managed to speak with the girl's parents and to learn a good deal. Rhipsimia: slender, with brown eyes, slightly yellowish, like sand, and a narrow waist — her father told me that the beauty's figure can be encircled with two hands. Ah yes, I almost forgot! The hair! Glossy and neatly arranged — she parts it into two and curls it in the form of serpents. Her hair is long, dark, close to an earthy hue.»

«It seems to me, faithful friend, that we shall have a great feast! With the array of your reforms, Rome has simply blossomed! And the glimmer of light in the search for your love — that is truly a colossal success! Let us unite these great victories into a single celebration!» Maximian guffawed at the top of his voice with feigned mirth, and then Diocletian caught up his unnatural laughter.

...From the heavy breathing of the Emperor's men, it grew ever stuffier in Rome: the legionaries strode through the city and its outskirts, brandished their plumed crests, and spread across the land like ants. In their hands — a sword, with which they opened the doors of strange houses, peered into maidens' bedchambers, interrogated each one, and departed in disappointment with nothing. Here, the abductor of the Emperor's heart was not to be found.

«Are you Rhipsimia?» the warriors of Diocletian snorted as they approached one girl, then a second, then a third — but those simply rounded their eyes in fright.

The army marched along roads, passing bare fields and downy thickets of shrubs. In their attempts to find the missing girl, the legionaries entered houses, gladly spent the night with the mistresses of the insulae or with their daughters, and at the break of dawn set out once more upon their way — they could not return to the Emperor empty-handed.

CHAPTER VI. IN SAVING ONE LIFE, THOU SAVEST ALL UPON THIS EARTH

The sky hung overhead, stained with misshapen clouds, and only above the cupolas of the Monastery of St. Paul did the sun shine — bright, joyful, warming. Rhipsimia was tending the flowers: where a rosebush had spread and begun to resemble a shapeless ball, she carefully trimmed the superfluous stems; the faded buds she likewise removed from the bush. The novice loved to care for the flowers and to watch them; it seemed to her that these divine creations had been made tender and strong at one and the same time.

«How can this be? You touch with the tips of your fingers the finest, softest petals; you breathe the fragrance of the roses; you are enchanted by their very sight — yet the moment you touch the stem, the rose wounds you, and drops of blood appear upon your skin...» Rhipsimia murmured.

«So it is with love for a person, my child. When you treat your neighbour as tenderly as a rose, when you fear to wound him with a word sharp as a knife, so long as you care for him and come to him with good intentions — he will not offend, will not reproach, will not betray; he will give you all the fairest things that dwell within him. But the moment you turn to a person with force, disturb his existence, intrude into his world — he will put forth his thorns; he will defend himself, fight back, wage war,» Gayania approached Rhipsimia and began to speak with her. «Sometimes roses do wound, do they not?»

«Yes, Mother — but one cannot be angry with roses; they are so beautiful!»

«And a person need not be angry at all — not even with roses,» Gayania sat down upon the bench. «Would you like me to tell you a piece of wisdom?»

«Yes, Mother.»

«Once there lived two brothers — Cain and Abel. And they were friends, and loved one another, and helped one another. But one day, wrath crept into Cain's heart — fierce, unbridled, clouding the mind. And Cain killed his brother in the midst of the field, and left Abel dead. Wrath did not merely quarrel the brothers; it forced a man to commit a sin — to take away a life given by God.»

«What horror!» Rhipsimia cried out, but at once covered her lips with her palm. «Mother, what are we, the people of this earth, to do? How are we to struggle against wrath?»

«Do not let causeless wrath swallow you. We are all imperfect; the Lord created us so. Yet we must all strive toward purity, toward goodness and beauty, and care for the soul as you now care for the flowers.»

Gayania was filled with admiration at how everything around had been transformed: Rhipsimia tended the flowers impeccably; the earth around them was loose, alive, fresh; fallen leaves and mountain debris lay in little heaps beside each bush.

«The roses have been waiting for you,» Gayania addressed the industrious novice with tenderness. «It always seemed to us that they needed no care, that they grew of their own accord, required no attention, no guardianship, no love. It seems we were mistaken — everyone needs love as they need air. Once, a man told me that our faith in God, and God Himself, would die in the hour when all of us — believers in Our One Lord — die. That man hurled curses in my face; he cried out, „In whom will the Christians believe after God, and to whom will they be of any use?“»

Gayania gestured for Rhipsimia to sit and speak with her, to rest upon the bench, to tell of this day and of the morrow.

«And what did you answer to his words, Mother?»

«Nothing remained for me but to forgive him and to quit that land where he dwells. The earth, like the sky, is vast; it is enough for all. A place is appointed upon it for everyone: for the believer and the unbeliever, for the kind and the wrathful, for the miserly and the generous.»

Gayania's words grew ever quieter, and Rhipsimia could already scarcely hear what the abbess was saying — her voice was drowned out by a loud sound: metal clanged; beneath their feet, everything trembled as though a thousand horses' hooves had swept across the earth. The sound drew nearer, frightening all living things around the stone walls of the House of God. Evil itself, it seemed, had resolved to visit the abode: mighty fists beat against the wooden gates, but they endured valiantly, crying: «I shall hold fast to the last!»

«They have come...» was all the abbess of the Monastery of St. Paul could utter.

Rhipsimia seized Gayania's hand, squeezing her fingers tightly.

«Mother...» the girl whispered in terror.

Something was burning Rhipsimia from within: it stretched from her stomach, lingered somewhere near her solar plexus, then swiftly rose to her throat and cut painfully, tearing, searing it; her feet grew heavy, as though shackled with chains, rooted to the earth; her shins and calves trembled, quaked; every muscle contracted nervously, as though in convulsions; darkness gathered before her eyes — thus did the beauty who had fled Rome stand face to face with death.

Gayania took her mantle in both hands and, freeing her legs, ran to the entrance of the monastery, only casting a few words to Rhipsimia:

«My child, run quickly to Sister Nune — she knows the secret passage. Explain nothing to her — there is no time; only tell her to hide you in the underground chamber. Run to the hiding-place, for God's sake, I beg you — go quickly, do not stand there, save yourself!»

And then Rhipsimia seemed to awaken: if there was a chance, even a vanishingly small chance, to be saved — she must run, run at once to Nune.

«Where are you? Where?» Rhipsimia looked about her, rushing like a bird caught in a cage, darting from side to side, searching for Nune with her eyes. «Nune!» Fear paralysed her voice, and only a faint squeak escaped the novice's lips.

Rhipsimia dashed down the corridor, flew into the infirmary — but it was empty. The maiden ran upstairs; her under-cassock hindered her, tangled her legs, slowing the novice's flight. She burst into every cell, flinging the doors wide, and ran out again.

«Sister, stop! Halt! Stop!» Rhipsimia exclaimed, catching sight of a nun's silhouette from behind. «Nune!»

«What has happened? Are we under attack?»

«Sister, listen,» Rhipsimia clasped Nune's wrists, «ask nothing, I beg you — hide me! The Mother said you know where. Otherwise they will kill me!»

«Quickly — let us run! Quickly!»

The hiding-place lay beneath the prayer hall: the entrance to the underground chamber was concealed beneath heavy marble slabs. Nune threw herself to the floor and tried to shift them, but in vain. The novice wept from helplessness.

«Lord, our efforts are in vain! We shall not be in time!»

«We shall!» cried Rhipsimia and collapsed to her knees. She helped the despairing Nune to lift the slabs; the maidens' fingers had already turned blue from the weight, and in their backs, they felt an immense strain and pain.

«The first!» Nune exhaled. «I do not know what to do! Two more!»

«We shall manage! Come now!»

The second slab the maidens dragged aside with great difficulty — no time remained for rest.

«Do you hear?» Nune turned her head from side to side. «They have already entered the grounds!»

«The third!» With a wrenching effort, Rhipsimia pushed aside the last slab. The maiden bowed her head as though in prayer; her arms dangled like two threads; she had not the strength to rise.

«Quickly, climb in! Sit quietly; try to make no sound! Try!» Nune embraced Rhipsimia as though for the last time, and then opened the wooden lid, pushing the girl inside. «Sister, save your soul! All will be well! God be with you!»

«You cannot put the slabs back in place, Sister — alone you cannot close the entrance!»

«Hush, hush...» Nune implored Rhipsimia.

At the last moment, Nune sealed the entrance to the hiding-place with the slabs.

Into the prayer hall strode the Emperor's men.

Nune trembled and begged Christ that they might not notice, in the perfectly even floor, a crack — the last slab that closed the entrance to the refuge had settled unevenly.

«Who are you?» the highest-ranking warrior addressed the nun menacingly. «Your name!»

«Sister Nune.»

«Not a Roman?»

«Good man, Cappadocia was once my home, but I left those lands and washed ashore among pure and radiant maidens; now I speak with God, labour for the good of mankind, read of the healing arts, and have lived here for many years in peace and obedience.» Nune looked at the Roman warrior, hoping to catch his gaze. «Good man, does something trouble you?»

«How do you know what kind of man I am?» the commander of the troop asked with irritation. «Do you call everyone good? And who told you that some ailment troubles me?»

«But there are no evil people upon the earth!» Nune continued to study the leader of the warriors with her eyes. «There are unhappy people, sick, unloved — and because of that, they cause harm to others.»

«Ha-ha-ha!» the commander laughed. «Little you know of life, woman, and little you know of our Emperor! But as for my ailment — how did you guess?»

«Upon your palms, in their very centre, little drops of sweat are visible; they usually appear in those whom illness troubles or whom weakness torments. You need help, good man; come, I will hasten your recovery.»

«If you do not help, I will behead you!»

«I beg you, good man,» Nune pointed the way for the imperial warrior, «go first, for you are our guest, and I will follow.»

The centurion, broad as a boulder, turned his whole body toward his legionaries and, in a loud, fearsome voice that flew from his stony chest, gave the order: «Round up every last maiden here, and search whether the fugitive is among them!»

On the way to the infirmary, the centurion pressed for news of a beautiful girl from a noble Roman family who had dared not only to refuse the Emperor, but also to outwit his messengers. Nune only sighed compassionately and shook her head — she insisted that she knew of no Roman beauties here, still less of one who had managed to deceive the great ruler.

The novice opened the door to the chamber and let the centurion in. He marvelled at the quantity of remedies and potions in the cramped room, steeped in the scent of herbs and oils; yet even more did the books trouble him. Some were written in Latin, some in Greek, some in Egyptian. The warrior glanced with scorn upon the icons. The image of a gaunt elder with sunken blue eyes stared him full in the face. Nune asked whether the centurion would entrust his health to her, and whether he was ready, of his own will, to hear, to repeat, and to accept all that she would utter, recite, or pour for him. The man nodded his assent.

«„Show, O Lord, to Thy suffering servant, healing and forgiveness for his earthly sins. Deliver him, O Lord, from grievous malady, from bitter sicknesses. Save, O Lord, Thy servant from his deathbed, and from the deep wounds in his flesh. I send up glory unto Thee, O Lord — glory to Christ, our One Saviour. Save and preserve him, O Lord. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!“»

The centurion bowed his head wearily, like a small child worn out by study. The chief of the troop did not understand what this maiden was doing with him, yet somewhere within himself he felt relief — the pain was departing, and with it, the cold sweat upon his skin. A cough tormented the faithful imperial warrior: during one campaign, a downpour and hail had overtaken Diocletian's army; the senior commander had fallen ill, and the fire they kindled at halts did not save him — he was racked with chills, his joints twisted and ached, the soreness in his body would not leave him — he grew ever worse. He could not continue to fight; even rising from his bed cost him no little strength.

«You must drink this,» Nune addressed the commander imperiously. «I will give you this medicine to take with you; only do not forget to take it at one and the same hour. You will feel better. If your pain, if your ailment passes — thank God for the healing. And if you lose your strength entirely — then punish me.»

«„O Lord, Master of heaven and earth, Master of life and death! I beseech Thee: heal this man; grant him peace and sound sleep! I thank Thee, O God, for Thy love, for Thy mercy, for Thy kindness! Shield him, O Lord, from worldly sufferings, from the pains and the cough that oppress his heart! I magnify and bow before Thy power, before Thy gift of healing and of help to those in need! Thy life-giving, all-healing, and wonder-working hands do I kiss; upon my knees I stand before Thee; I bow my head! Help, O Lord! I thank Thee for Thy help to us, sinful souls; I thank Thee for Thy boundless compassion toward us sinners! Teach me, O Lord, to aid the needy, those chained to their beds by sickness and infirmity. Care for this man, O God; set him upon a path pure and harmless;

love him as a child; preserve his life, the soundness of his body, the clarity of his thoughts; teach him all that Thou didst teach Thy children — but above all, grant him health, that he may walk the righteous path and enter Thy Heavenly Kingdom with a pure soul and flesh. Amen.“»

Nune noticed how he looked at her uncomprehendingly, as though she had poisoned him. The centurion grew limp and began to yawn, and then collapsed altogether upon the bench.

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The legionaries seized the maidens by the arms and dragged them by force into the prayer hall: hatred toward the immaculate maidens of the Christian faith bred mockery and contempt among the legionaries.

«How do you like it in this lupanarium?» the warriors laughed. «It would be foolish not to make use of the wenches here, don't you agree?»

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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