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I

The Terrace Steps

AQUILA halted on the edge of the hanging woods, looking down. Below him he could see the farmstead under the great, bare swell of the downs: the russet-roofed huddle of buildings, the orchard behind, making a darker pattern on the paleness of the open turf, the barley just beginning to show its first tinge of harvest gold, the stream that rose under the orchard wall and wandered down the valley to turn the creaking wheel of the water-mill that ground their corn.

Almost a year had gone by since the last time that he had stood here and looked down, for it was only last night that he had come home on leave from Rutupiae, where he commanded a troop of Rhenus Horse—Auxiliary Cavalry; there had been no regular legions in Britain for forty years now—and every detail of the scene gave him a sharp-edged pleasure. It was good to be home. And really, the place didn't look so bad. It was not what it had been in the good old days, of course. Kuno, who was the oldest man on the farm, could remember when there had been

vine terraces on the south slope; you could see the traces of them still, just below the woods here, like the traces of the old fields and the old sheep-runs that had had to be let go back to the wild. It was the Pict War that had done the mischief, so long ago that even Kuno couldn't remember, though he swore that he could, and, when he had drunk enough heather beer, used to tell everybody how he had seen the great Theodosius himself, when he came to drive out the Saxons and the Painted People. But though Theodosius had swept Britain clear, the damage had been done and the countryside had never been the same again. The great houses had been burned, the slaves had revolted against their masters, and the big estates had been ruined. It hadn't been so bad for the small estates and farms, especially those that were not worked with slave labour. Kuno was very fond of telling—and the hearing of it always made Aquila feel humble, though he was sure that it should make him proud—how in the bad time, the Killing Time, when the slaves revolted, the free men of his own farm had kept faith with his great-grandfather.

Because he was seeing his home again for the first time in almost a year, he was piercingly aware of it, and the things it stood for, and aware also how easily it might be lost. Old Tiberius's farm, not many miles farther seaward, had been burned by the Saxon raiders last year. When you thought about it, you realized that you were living in a world that might fall to pieces at any moment: but Aquila seldom thought about it much. He had lived in that world all his life, and so had at least three generations of his kind before him, and it hadn't fallen to pieces yet, and it didn't seem likely that it would do so on this rich and ripening day with the powdery whiteness of July lying over the countryside.

There was the sound of flying feet behind him, and a

brushing through the undergrowth and Flavia his sister was beside him, demanding breathlessly, 'Why didn't you wait for me?'

Aquila turned his head to look at her. 'I got tired of propping up the wall of Sabra's cot, being stared out of countenance by that yellow-eyed cat of hers, while you chittered inside.'

'You could have stayed inside and chittered too.'

'I didn't want to, thank you. Besides, I wanted to get back here and make sure the farm hadn't run away since breakfast.' It was an odd thing to say, born of his sudden, unusual awareness, and they looked at each other quickly.

'It is queer how one feels like that sometimes,' the girl said, grave for the moment. And then the shadow passed, and she was sparkling again. 'But it hasn't run away—and oh! it is so lovely that you are home again, Aquila! And look, here's honeysuckle with crimson tips; and here's clover, and blue scabious, as blue as a butterfly. I shall make a wreath for myself for dinner as though it were a banquet; just for myself, and not for you or father at all, because men look silly in banquet wreaths, especially if they have galley-prow noses like yours!' And while she spoke, she was down on her knees, searching among the leaves for the tough, slender scabious stems.

Aquila leaned against a tree and watched her, making a discovery. 'You have grown up while I have been away.'

She looked up, the flowers in her hands. 'I was grown up before you went away. More than fifteen. And now I'm more than sixteen—quite old.'

Aquila wagged his head sadly. 'That's what I say. I don't suppose you can even run now.'

She sprang up, her face alight with laughter. 'What will you wager me that I do not reach the terrace steps ahead of you?'

'A new pair of crimson slippers against a silver buckle for my sword-belt.' Aquila pushed himself from the tree-trunk as she swooped up the skirt of her yellow tunic with the flowers in its lap.

'Done! Are you ready?'

'Yes. *Now!*'

They sprang away side by side over the short downland turf, by the level-and-drop of the old vine terraces, by the waste strip at the head of the cornland where the plough team turned, skirting the steading yard on flying feet. Flavia was half a spear's length ahead of him as they reached the steps of the terrace before the house and whirled about under the old spreading damson tree that grew there. 'Well? Can I still run? I can run faster than you can now, and I'm a girl!'

Aquila caught her by the wrist. 'You have sharp, hollow bones like a bird, and it is not fair.' They flung themselves down on the step, panting and laughing, and he turned to look at her. He loved being with Flavia again, he always had loved being with her, even when they were small. She was two years younger than he was, but Demetrius, their Greek tutor, declared that they had been meant to be twins and something had gone wrong with their stars to bring about the two years that one must wait for the other. Flavia's hair had come down and was flying about her shoulders; hair as black and harsh as a stallion's mane, and so full of life that she could comb sparks out of it when she combed it in the dark. He reached out and gave it a small, brotherly tug.

'Brute!' Flavia said happily. She drew up her knees and clasped her arms round them, tipping up her head to the sunshine that rimmed the damson leaves with gold and made the little dark damsons seem almost transparent. 'I do love being alive! I love the way things look and feel and smell! I love the dustiness of July, and the dry singing the

wind makes through the grass, and the way the stones are warm to sit on, and the way the honeysuckle smells!'

There was something almost fierce under her laughter; but that was always the way with Flavia: the fierceness and the laughter and the sparks flying out of her hair. She turned to him with a swift flash of movement. All her movements were swift and flashing. 'Show me the dolphin again.'

With an air of long-suffering, Aquila pulled up the loose sleeve of his tunic and showed her, as he had showed her yesterday evening, the dolphin badge of their family rather inexpertly tattooed on the brown skin of his shoulder. One of the Decurions at Rutupiae had learned the trick from a Pictish hostage, and during the bad weather, when there was not much else to do, several of them had let him try his skill on them.

Flavia ran a finger-tip over the blue lines. 'I'm not sure that I like it. You're not a Pict.'

'If I had been, I'd have had stripes and spirals all over me, not a nice neat little dolphin . . . It might come in very useful. If I were away from home for a long, long time, and when I came back nobody knew me again, like Odysseus, I could take you quietly aside and say, "Look, I've got a dolphin on my shoulder. I'm your long-lost brother". And then you'd know me again, like the old slave when she found the scar of the boar's tusk on Odysseus's thigh.'

'Maybe I'd say, "Oh stranger, anyone may get a dolphin tattooed on his shoulder". I'd be more likely to recognize you by your nose, however long that had been away.' She turned to the tangle of honeysuckle and small, downland flowers in her lap, and began to arrange them for her garland. 'Are you as glad to be home as we are to have you, even though it is only one year and not twenty, like Odysseus?'

Aquila nodded, glancing about him at the familiar scene. From close quarters one could see more clearly that the farm had known better days: the out-houses that needed re-roofing, the wing of the house that had once been lived in and was now a grain-store, the general air of a place run without quite enough money, without quite enough men. But the pigeons were paddling in the sunlight below the terrace steps, and a flicker of brilliant blue showed where Gwyna was coming up with a milk-pail; and he was home again, sitting on the sun-warmed steps where they had sat as children, talking nonsense with Flavia.

Something moved in the farmyard, and Flavian their father came out from the stable, talking with Demetrius. Demetrius, who never smiled himself, said something at which their father laughed, flinging up his head like a boy; then he turned and came striding up towards the terrace, with Margarita his old wolf-hound at his heels.

Aquila half-rose as he drew near. 'We're sitting on the terrace steps; come and join us, sir.'

And their father came and sat down on the top step, with Margarita between his knees.

'Aquila owes me a pair of crimson slippers,' Flavia said, reaching up to lay an arm across his knee. 'He said I was grown up and couldn't run any more.'

Their father smiled. 'And you aren't, and you can. I heard the two of you skirling like curlews all the way down from the top woods. Mind you keep him up to paying his wager!'

He was fondling Margarita's ears, drawing them again and again through his fingers, and the freckled sunlight under the leaves made small, shifting sparks of green fire in the flawed emerald of his great signet ring with its engraved dolphin.

Aquila twisted on his lower step to look up at him. It was hard to realize that Father was blind. There was nothing to show for it but the small scar that the Saxon arrow had made in his temple; and he came and went about the farm with that quick, sure stride, never seeming at a loss to know where he was or in what direction he wanted to go. Now he turned to his son and asked, 'How does the farm look to you, after a year away?'

'The farm looks good to me,' Aquila said, and added with perhaps a little too much vehemence, 'It looks so sure—as though it had been here as long as the downs have been here, and must last as long as the downs remain.'

'I wonder,' their father said, suddenly grave. 'I wonder how long it will last—just how long any of this life that we know will last.'

Aquila shifted abruptly. 'Oh, I know . . . But the worst never seems to happen.' Yet the worst happened to Tiberius, last year, said something in his mind, and he hurried on, as much to silence it as anything else: 'When Vortigern called in that Saxon war band and settled them in the old Iceni territory to hold off the Picts, five—no, six years ago, everyone wagged their heads and said it was the end of Britain. They said it was calling the wolf in over the threshold; but Hengest and his crew haven't done so badly. Settled quite peacefully, seemingly; and they *have* held off the Picts, and left us free to concentrate what Auxiliaries we still have along the Saxon shore to hold off their pirate brothers. Maybe Vortigern wasn't such a fool after all.'

'Do you really think that?' his father said very quietly, and his fingers checked on Margarita's ears.

'It is what quite a lot of the others at Rutupiae think.'

'The temper of the Eagles has changed since my day. Do *you* think it?'

There was a moment's silence and then Aquila said, 'No, I suppose not, really. But it is more comfortable to think that way.'

'Rome has done too much of thinking what is comfortable,' his father said.

But Aquila was not for the moment listening. He was looking away down the valley to where a small figure had just come into sight on the wagon-way that led up from the ford and the ancient track under the downs. 'Sa ha,' he said softly, 'someone coming.'

'Who is it?' said his father.

'No one I know. A little bent man—looks as though he's carrying a basket on his back.'

He thought that both his father and Flavia were suddenly alert in a way that he did not understand. He thought that there was a feeling of waiting about them. A few moments went by, and then his father asked, 'Can you see yet what it is that he carries?'

'Yes. It is a basket. And something else—a lantern on a pole. I believe he is one of those wandering bird-catchers.'

'So. Stand up and signal to him to come to me here.'

Aquila glanced at his father in puzzled surprise, then stood up and waved his arm above his head until the small, trudging figure saw the signal and flung up an arm in reply. 'He is coming,' he said, and sat down again.

A short while later a small, earth-coloured man with a sharply pointed face like a water-rat's came round the corner of the out-buildings and stood before the terrace steps, swinging the great reed basket from his shoulders almost before he had come to a halt. 'I greet my lord. My lord would like some fine fat quails, only caught this morning?'

'Take them up to the kitchen,' Flavian said. 'It is a long time since you were here last.'

'I have had a long walk since I was here last,' the man returned, and something in his rather hurried voice suggested that the reply was a thing arranged beforehand. 'It is all of two hundred miles from Venta to the Mountains.'

As he spoke the words, he glanced aside out of doubtful dark eyes at Aquila, and Flavian, seeming to sense the swift, uneasy glance, said, 'Nay, there is nothing that need make you ill at ease, friend. My son is quite to be trusted.' He took a slim wax tablet from the breast of his tunic. 'The quails up to the kitchen. My steward will pay you. And this to the usual place.'

The man took the tablet without looking at it, and stowed it in the ragged breast of his own tunic. 'As my lord bids me,' he said. He made a wide gesture of farewell that took in all three of them, and shouldering his basket again, turned and trudged off round the corner of the house towards the kitchen quarters.

Aquila watched him go, then turned back to his father. 'And what did that mean, sir?' He thought Flavia knew.

Flavian gave a final pull to the old hound's ear, and released her with a pat. 'It means a message up to Dynas Ffaraon in the Arfon mountains.'

'So?' Aquila said. 'What message is that?'

There was a little silence, but he knew that his father was going to tell him.

'I am going back into ancient history,' Flavian said at last. 'Much of it you will know, but bear with me none the less, it is better to have the whole thing . . .

'When Theodosius came to drive out the Picts that old Kuno so dearly loves to talk about, his lieutenant was one Magnus Maximus, a Spaniard. And when Theodosius went south again, he left Maximus in command behind him. Maximus married a British princess, daughter of the

line that had ruled in the mountains of Northern Cymru since before we Romans came to Britain; and owing in part to his wife's blood, years later the British troops proclaimed him Emperor in opposition to Gratian. He marched to meet his fate, taking with him most of the Legions and Auxiliaries from the province; and his fate was death. That you know. But he left behind him a young son in Arfon—Constantine.'

Aquila moved abruptly, the tale suddenly laying hold of him. 'Constantine, who saved us after the last of the Legions were withdrawn.'

'Aye. When Rome could do no more for us, and was herself a smoking ruin—though she has recovered in some sort since—we turned to Constantine of Arfon; and he came down from the mountains with his tribesmen behind him, and led us and them to victory and a sweeping back of the Sea Wolves such as there had not been for twenty years before. For upwards of thirty more, with Constantine holding the reins from Venta, things went well for Britain, and the Saxons were driven back again and again from our shores. But in the end Constantine was murdered in his own hall. A Pictish plot, but there have always been many of us believed that Vortigern, who came out of the West as a mere Clan Chieftain of the Ordovices to follow him in his later days and married his sister Severa, was at the root of it. Maybe he thought that if a wife's lineage could raise her husband to the Purple once, it might do so again. Save that it wasn't the Purple he wanted, but power of another kind. Always he has been the spearhead of the hothead party which sees Rome as the Tribes saw her four hundred years ago, which has learned nothing in the years since, which is blinded by its dreams and sees the danger of the Saxon hordes as a lesser evil than the rule of Rome. So

Constantine died, and Vortigern contrived to seize the chief power in the land, though never the full power. But there were still Utha and Ambrosius, Constantine's sons in his old age.'

'Yes,' Aquila said, 'I remember. It caught my imagination because they were not much older than I was, and I must have been about eight when it all happened and they disappeared.'

'They were snatched away by a few of their father's household, back to Arfon, to the safety of the mountains; and for ten years Vortigern has held virtually all power in the province—if power it can be called, when he must rest his weight on a Saxon war band to hold off the Picts, *and* on the hated Auxiliaries of Rome to hold off the Saxons . . . ' He moved a little, putting out a hand to feel for the rough edge of the step beside him. 'Utha died a year or so since, but Ambrosius is now come to manhood.'

Aquila looked at him quickly, realizing the significance of that; that the wild Cymric princeling newly come to manhood among the mountains, to an age to bear his shield, was by right of birth the natural leader of those who held to the ways of Rome. 'And so——?' he said.

'And so—seeing that it was so, seeing also that the General Aetius, he who was Consul two years ago, was campaigning in Gaul, we sent to him, reminding him that we still held ourselves to be of the Empire, and begging him to bring us the help and reinforcements that we need, to rid the province both of Vortigern and the Saxon hordes, and resume it for Rome. That was last autumn.'

Aquila caught his breath. 'And that was the reply?'

'No,' his father said. 'As yet there has come no reply.'

'Then—what was the message that you sent?'

'Merely a short agreed passage from Xenophon, copied

out for me by Flavia. About the middle of each month the message goes through, by the hand of our friend the bird-catcher, or one of several others, to make sure that the signal route is still open.'

'"It is all of two hundred miles from Venta to the Mountains",' Aquila quoted. 'That is how you know that it is the right person to give it to.'

His father nodded. 'I wondered whether you would pick on the password.'

'But it was last autumn that the word went out to Aetius, you say? And it is high summer now. Surely there should have come some reply long before this?'

'If it is coming at all, it must surely come soon,' his father said with a sudden weariness in his voice. 'If it does not come very soon, it may well be too late to come at all. Every day adds to the danger that Vortigern the Red Fox will smell what is in the wind.'

The sunlight faded while they sat silent after that, and the twilight came lapping up the valley like a quiet tide, and the sky above the long wave-lift of the downs was translucent and colourless as crystal. The scent of the honeysuckle in Flavia's garland seemed to grow stronger as the light faded, and a bat hovered and darted by, pricking the dusk with its needle-thin hunting cry. Old Gwyna came across the atrium behind them to light the candles, scuffing her feet along the floor just as she had done for as long as Aquila could remember.

Everything just as it always had been at the time of the 'tween lights; but he knew now that under the quiet surface the home that he loved was part of the struggle for Britain, menaced by other dangers than the chance raids of Saxon pirates.

Suddenly he felt the passing moment as something that was flowering and would not flower again. 'Though I sit

here on ten thousand other evenings,' he thought, 'this evening will not come again.' And he made an unconscious movement as though to cup it in his hands, and so keep it safe for a little longer.

But he could not keep it. Their father drew his long legs under him and got up. 'I hear Gwyna with the lights, and it is time to change for dinner.'

Even as Aquila sprang up also and caught Flavia's hand to pull her to her feet, he heard the beat of horses' hooves coming up the valley. They checked, listening, and Margarita pricked her ears.

'More comers. It seems that we are the hub of the world this evening,' Aquila said.

Their father nodded, his head at the alert, listening angle that was so much a part of him. 'Whoever it is, he has been riding hard and his horse is weary.'

Something held them there on the terrace, waiting, while the rider came nearer, disappeared behind the out-buildings and reined in. In a little, they heard voices, and the tramp of feet, and Gwyna came along the terrace with a man in the leather tunic of an Auxiliary behind her. 'Someone for the young master,' she said.

The man stepped forward, saluting. 'A message for the Decurion Aquila, sir.'

Aquila nodded. 'So—give it here.' He took the tablet that the man held out, broke the sealing thread, and stepping into the light of the atrium doorway, opened the two wooden leaves and glanced hastily over the few words on the wax inside, then looked up. 'Here's an end to my two weeks' leave, then. I'm recalled to duty.' He swung round on the waiting Auxiliary. If it had been one of his own troop he might have asked unofficial questions, but the man was scarcely known to him. 'Is your horse being seen to? Go and get a meal while I make ready to ride.

Gwyna, feed him and bid Vran to have Lightfoot and the bay gelding ready to start in the half of an hour.'

'Now I wonder, I wonder, what this may mean,' his father said, very quietly, as the man tramped off after Gwyna.

No one answered as they moved into the atrium. The yellow radiance of the candles seemed very bright, harshly bright after the soft owl-light of the terrace outside. Aquila looked at Flavia, at his father, and knew that the same thought was in all three of them . . . Could it be that this was anything to do with the appeal to Aetius in Gaul? And if so, was its meaning good—or bad?

'Need you go tonight?' Flavia said. 'Oh, need you go tonight, Aquila? You will get back no sooner in riding in the dark.' She was still holding her almost completed banquet wreath, crushed and broken in her hand. It would never now be finished.

'I can be at the next posting station before midnight,' Aquila said, 'ten miles on my way. Maybe I'll get my leave again soon and be back for our banquet. Put me up some bread and cheese, while I collect my gear.' He flung an arm round her thin, braced shoulders, and kissed her hurriedly, touched his silent father on the hand, and strode out towards the sleeping cell to collect his gear.

For Aquila, though he could not know it, the world had begun its falling to pieces.