

-King of the Romans-

A Novel of Late Antiquity

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[Prologue](#)

Syagrius is a historical character, the last Roman ruler in Gaul, known to the tribes as "King of the Romans." His domain included much of what is today Northern France, with its capital at Noviodunum, modern Soissons. He held out there until 486 A.D., ten years after the official dissolution of the Roman Empire in the West, when he was defeated and crushed by Clovis.

The events and characters of Part Two are totally fictitious. The citizens of the Byzantine Empire did, however, refer to themselves as "Romans" long after the Eternal City had become a ruin.

Chapter One

PART ONE **GAUL**

Lucius always fell asleep after they made love. Even when it was morning with the daylight starting to stream through the east window and the first birds already singing, he would drop off with her in his arms, limp and spent. These were times Julia wished could last forever, the two of them united, hardly knowing where one began and the other left off, no world beyond their own clasped bodies.

Julia was glad to waken before him. She could lie in the stillness, imagining another life in another time, another place where he was just the man she loved, where they would have many more years together. She would give up all the gold, the pomp, the ceremonies for that life.

Only four summers out of fifteen had gone by, she thought, when her husband did not have to take the field against some invader. He did not think it right, he told her, to send others into dangers he did not face. Like so many women in the province, she had to watch her beloved march off with only the

certainty that he would return with his shield or upon it. She had come to yearn for winter, to dread the first warm breezes of May that stirred the curtains now.

On the old maps she had seen in the library, the frontier lay a hundred miles off. Then, any trespassers would have been surrounded and defeated long before they reached Gaul. Now, when spring came, and the snow melted, there was only Lucius and his legion to keep the darkness at bay. Twice, Noviodunum itself had been besieged with every door and window barricaded and everyone who could carry a weapon armed to the teeth.

When those blue eyes opened, he would be Lucius Publius Syagrius, King of the Romans, as the tribes called him, procurator of the last Roman province in Gaul, all that remained of the Empire in the West.

What was to become of him, of them? Clovis was marching south, with a force some said was larger than Attila's horde. The tribes east of the Somme were joining him - if he gave them the chance - before he fell upon them and slaughtered them. Sooner or later, he would cross the river, a direct challenge to Lucius and all he'd fought so long to defend.

The man who lay beside her feared

nothing. Yet, with so many others so frightened, it was hard not to be troubled. Even Pendra, his friend since boyhood, had sent no word from the old Roman fort.

Was Marius all right? She understood why Lucius had sent the boy to Pendra to be trained in arms, safe from his father's enemies. He was their only child, and the faint scar below her navel told her there would be no others.

At fourteen, their son was sturdy, quick and strong, much like the man Julia envisioned he would become. But she still feared for him and wished she had him near. God willing, he would rule

one day in his father's stead and ride at the head of his Romans. If something should happen to him....

Lucius stirred, and she moved closer to him, opening the clasp on her robe to show her small, firm breasts. Whenever they slept together, Julia wanted to be the first thing his gaze fell on when he woke.

Lucius awakened with a start, his eyes darting everywhere, as though he were in camp and heard the enemy close by. As always, it took him a moment to realize he was safe with her.

He smiled up at her and drew her to him, tossing aside the covers and pressing the

length of her body to his. When the warm weather came, he liked to sleep naked. Since he was king here, he'd told her, he'd wear as much or as little clothing as suited him, at least in his own bed chamber. She had always been a bit shy, not with him, but for fear that some messenger might start pounding on the door. Lucius, especially if he was still half asleep, might revert to his campaign habits and order the courier to enter at once, whether Julia had got her robe on or not. It had happened often enough, now that Clovis was on the move.

Fifteen years she'd shared his bed. Yet the lean, hard lines of his body still excited her. Even the scars that marked

him were places to touch and kiss. Some of those wounds, she had dressed herself. Only with the caress of her hand and her lips could she smother thoughts of what might have been, had one of those blows struck a bit higher or lower or gone deeper.

He stroked her black hair and nibbled on her ear.

"You'll go and see Marius today?"

"As soon as the morning council meeting is over," Syagrius replied, rolling over and getting out of bed.

She sat up. "Being 'King of the Romans' seems mostly a matter of meetings," she

mock-pouted. "When do you get to wear a crown? When do I get to put on all those wonderful robes I see in the pictures? When do people start falling on their knees when you pass and prostrating themselves before daring to speak to you? When do you get thirty valets to help you dress, like the Emperor in Constantinople - or maybe only fifteen? You're just a king after all. When do they put you and me in mosaics, surrounded by our abjectly grateful subjects?"

For years, her husband had forbidden anyone to utter that title in his presence. Roman citizens living in his domain never used it. Finally, he had

surrendered to the inevitable, at least when he dealt with the tribes. Now they could joke about it.

"Never, I hope. I was appointed procurator by the Emperor and confirmed by the Senate to govern this province for Rome, not to crown myself a tyrant like Clovis or Alaric. The seal I use on all my documents says I am procurator and will say it until I die, or another comes to take my place. If the Empire could spare a few legions to take Gaul back, I'd be the first to welcome them.

"What was I supposed to do anyway?" Syagrius mused as he dressed. "There's no Empire here in the West, hasn't been

for ten years, even on paper. Someone had to keep order, keep the roads open, keep the Saxons from plundering the coast, keep the Goths from swallowing up the rest of Gaul, keep the Franks from stealing everything in sight.

"What was I to tell my legion? 'It's all over now, men. No more Empire. Just go home and look after yourselves. That is, if you can get home over the roads we'll have without your patrols, and if the bandits don't kill you on the way. You'll get your back pay from Rome sometime or other. Just don't ask when.' Was that how their loyalty was to be repaid?"

"Lucius, Lucius," Julia interrupted,

seeing he was about to launch into his favorite speech, "you don't have to convince me or anyone else in the province. Your soldiers are the best troops in Gaul. They would follow you through the Pillars of Hercules and beyond. Men come a hundred miles or more to serve with you. Even when their enlistments are up, they don't want to go home. There's not another ruler in the West who has as many veterans in his army as you.

"The people respect you and trust you. The taxes are fair. The laws are just. Markets are open, trade is protected. The coast is safe. Anyone unhappy with your governing has only to look beyond

our borders to see what would happen without you and your legion."

Syagrius nodded and went back to shaving, something he insisted on doing himself. Barbers, he complained, were too talkative and too slow.

"And I love you so much it still frightens me sometimes," Julia confided, running her fingers slowly down his spine.

His eyes softened as he turned to look at her. He wondered sometimes if she understood how much of his own strength was drawn from hers. Without her, he thought, he'd not be half the man he was. He kissed her softly as she helped him on with his toga.

Julia stepped back to admire her husband as he adjusted the folds. He looked as Roman as any of the portrait sculptures she'd seen in the Forum, nose just slightly aquiline, enough to give him a commanding look, eyes sharp, mouth firm but not grim. In another time, she thought, he might have been an Emperor, one of the best, like Aurelius or Hadrian, able to restore Roman rule and Roman law to a world gone mad. Now he had only his legion and his courage.

"Let's get something to eat before the meeting starts," Syagrius said. "It will probably be a long one."

For years, Syagrius had kept the old Roman custom of having only a hunk of

dark bread dipped in sauce and a cup of water for his breakfast. But Julia had persuaded him over time to take something more, a dish of porridge, some fruit, even a glass of wine, so he wouldn't be so short with the counselors when they began to expand on whatever was troubling them that week.

She also tried to be present when he received petitioners. Some of the requests were more like prayers, better offered at an altar than before a procurator. Others were simply ridiculous. Until Julia had persuaded him to keep a rein on his temper and see the humor in the situation, those petitioners could count themselves

fortunate to escape without a fine or a flogging. But there were always some matters that were serious and needed as much attention as he could spare.

Tribes that had not been under Roman law for decades brought their disputes to him. The word of a Roman official had meant nothing to them until he had come to be procurator and taken the trouble to learn their languages. Most of the time, he needed no interpreter and was even able to apply his skill in rhetoric to these strange tongues. He had no authority to enforce any of his decisions beyond the border. Yet the tribes promised to do as he decided. If they broke their word, he would never hear any of their cases

again, and their feuds would have no end.

From the first, her husband had wanted her beside him at council meetings. In deference to the delegates, she said nothing, but heard and remembered everything. What Julia recalled was a better record of the proceedings than any scribe could make. Syagrius was always eager to learn from her what had actually been said and by whom. He was quick to anger but not vindictive. The counselors could speak as they wished. Still, there were sometimes nuances he had missed, but Julia had not.

Chapter Two

II

The meeting that morning was more than a little turbulent. Reports of Clovis' approach had been verified. He had reached the Somme and was headed south along its east bank, ostensibly to solidify his alliances with the tribes east of the river, a tale no one believed. Clovis would cross the Somme. When he did, it would mean war.

Like Syagrius, most of the council

members seated at the long oak table, were wearing togas as a sign of their Roman citizenship. Only Lucan wore his cuirass as the mark of his rank as military commander of the legion. A delegation from the border towns was on hand, as were several of the chiefs, some in togas, some in tribal dress. What, they wanted to know, was Syagrius prepared to do?

"Clovis demands tribute: food, men, gold and obedience. He will let us keep our ways and our laws," the mayor of Aminium explained. "We need only pay and be baptized in his new religion."

"And if you refuse?" Syagrius asked.

"He will lay waste our land, make us all slaves."

Syagrius suppressed his amusement at the phrase, "new religion." Most of them were Christians already, followers of Arius, like Recared their bishop, who sat opposite him. Not quite the right kind of Christian, though, to suit Clovis, it seemed. Behold these Christians, the procurator thought. See how they slay one another! To him, it appeared as foolish as the worshippers of Jupiter making plans to murder those who preferred Apollo's temple.

"How many men does Clovis have?"
Syagrius wanted to know.

The question went around the room. Estimates ranged from thirty thousand on up to half a million.

"How many troops can you raise?" Syagrius asked one of the chiefs.

"My people are not fighters," the chief began.

"That's not what I asked," Syagrius interrupted. "You have been allowed to keep arms and train men since the time of Attila. Your taxes have been abated to provide funds for this purpose. I have only one legion here, and there will be no reinforcements from Rome or anywhere else. Without help from your tribe and the others, I will only be able

to hold Noviodunum and watch from these walls while Clovis burns your crops and loots your towns.

"When Clovis and his pack get tired of laying siege to this place, and winter comes, they'll wander off wherever they came from. I'll still be here. Rome will still be here. Where you and your people will be, I wouldn't care to guess."

"Then let us make terms with him," said Charius, chief of the Alesians.

Syagrius exploded. "You are allies of Rome. Some of you are citizens. All of you are living on Roman soil. Not one square inch of that soil will be given up to the Franks or anyone else while I sit

in this chair. If you want to join Clovis, pack up your wagons and go to him. See if he doesn't baptize you in your own blood!"

There was a long silence.

"If the King of the Romans will fight, so will I," Eborax, Chief of the Suesiones, said slowly, stroking his huge brown beard.

"And I," another chief cried.

"And I. And I," went around the room. But some were silent.

Recared spoke up in the measured cadences learned from Cicero and

Virgil. "The matter before us is a weighty one which should not be decided quickly. That many men move very slowly. We have time to make our decision wisely. It would be best," he added, catching Syagrius' eye, "that we wait until our procurator has visited Castle Pendra and has better information. Pendra has had dealings with Clovis, knows far more about him than we do."

"Very well," Syagrius conceded, controlling himself with an effort. "I am riding there this afternoon and will learn whatever I can."

Syagrius did not share Recared's faith in the new god or his distaste for the Holy

Trinity. The Christians could have three gods or as many as they wanted as far as he was concerned - if they'd just stop killing one another about it. But he did respect the bishop's learning and the wisdom that told him unnecessary haste was always a bad idea.

"Come back in three days time," Syagrius told the chiefs and the mayors. "I will have an answer for you. In the meantime, send out your couriers. Bring me word of how many troops you can raise, when they will arrive. If I am to protect anything beyond these gates, I cannot fight Clovis alone."

The chiefs and the mayors departed,

leaving Syagrius and his council to themselves.

Several wanted to discuss the crisis at once. Recared insisted that the day's agenda be attended to first. "There is always a crisis," he said. "We still have a province to govern."

Finally, an hour later, they turned to Clovis.

Lucan wanted to assemble the legion, cross the Somme and strike Clovis before the month was out. "Any delay," he warned, "only gives that boy time to raise a larger force and cause more trouble. Caesar," he reminded them, "crossed the Rhine and chased this

rabble back into the forest. Your father," he added, turning to Syagrius, "had no problem handling Childeric either."

"Caesar had a trained Roman army, ten legions, I believe," the bishop answered. "Aegidius had four, along with the Goths and most of the tribes in Gaul to help. We have only one legion in the whole province. Crack troops, I grant you," with a nod toward Lucan, "but not invincible."

"If our legion is destroyed," Tribune Claudius remarked thoughtfully, "it is truly the end of Rome in the West."

"We could take the border chiefs hostage when they return," Hortensius, the

merchants' delegate, offered. "Then their tribes would have to help us."

"How much would their aid be worth under that kind of duress?" Claudius asked. "If we lose, they'd be happy to help Clovis exterminate us. If we win, they'd be our enemies for decades, ready to support any troublemaker who came along."

"How many men can the tribes send?" Lucan inquired.

"We can count on Eborax for cavalry," Syagrius said. "But we will still need at least ten thousand foot besides our legion, if we are to take the field."

"What about Pendra?" Claudius wanted to know.

"He has barely enough men under arms to garrison his fort," Syagrius replied. "When I see him today, I will find out what force he can raise among his people."

The council decided to call for volunteers throughout the province. They would send for help to King Alaric at Toulouse, and to anyone else who might still be a friend of Rome or at least unwilling to risk arousing the procurator's wrath. Recared would draft the letters. His scribes would have them ready for Syagrius to sign within the hour.

After the counselors had left, Syagrius turned to Julia. Her face was lined with concern.

"Clovis has the border tribes terrified," she said. "They know how he dealt with the Franks who opposed him, and they were his own people. You can't rely on them for any real help. Whatever they send will be too little to make any difference. Any men Charius provides, you'd best keep close watch on.

"The towns and the other chiefs have more sense. They realize that Clovis will do whatever he wants with them, terms or no, once he doesn't have to worry about you and your Romans.

"Eborax hates Clovis for having his brother killed," she added. "He'll fight while he can breathe."

Syagrius' face darkened. "You know I've always believed that Childeric had my father murdered. Now his conniving son wants to do the same with me. Let him try - in the daylight and on a battlefield. I have never enjoyed killing anyone. In his case, I would make an exception."

"Alaric would probably help," Julia went on, "if he could see some advantage. That boy is not his grandfather and has none of his courage. Besides, the Goths have a treaty with Clovis."

"And with us."

"Clovis has more to offer than we do. If he wins, he'll share the loot - at least for now. If he loses, the Goths gain nothing."

"Once Clovis has me out of the way, they'll be next," Syagrius said. "You'd think they'd see that much, at least."

"They should. But their chiefs are a greedy lot. They might even kill Alaric, if he moved to help us."

Julia thought for a moment. "How good are the troops the chiefs and the mayors will send?"

Syagrius sighed. "Not very, I'm afraid. I

never pressed them. I didn't want them recruiting armies and getting ideas. I only used the militias for garrison duty when the legion took the field, kept everyone dependent on my Romans for any real fighting."

There was a long pause while Syagrius pondered.

"Rhyothamus," he continued, "was a brave and loyal man, a true king. I should have marched with him. His men joined with my legion would have been a match for three armies of Goths or Franks or Huns or anyone. Together, we might have built another Rome in the North. He will be honored forever in the

Britains. But I..."

"That was years ago, Lucius. It can't be helped now. You made a decision. All of us have to live with it."

"Aye."

Chapter Three

III

Syagrius saw the smoke first. It was too thick to be from a campfire, sharp and bitter, rising in a dirty cloud above the

trees just ahead. He ordered his escort to pick up the pace and ready their weapons.

When they topped the next rise, they saw the burning wagon lying on its side, the horses grazing nearby. Beside it lay two of Pendra's soldiers, their skulls crushed. At the approach of Syagrius and his party, a crowd of ragged men took to their heels. Another moment, and they would disappear among the trees.

Syagrius took a javelin from the nearest of his Romans and threw. The toss was a long one, from horseback too. The spear almost fell short. Only by luck did it strike one of the brigands in the calf and bring him down. He scrambled to his

feet. But the fall and the wound slowed him. Two of Syagrius' men overtook him and dragged him before their procurator.

"Who are you?" the procurator demanded. "How dare you commit such a crime on Roman soil? Where do you come from?"

The bandit made no reply but only moaned from the pain of his wound from which the javelin still trailed. The decurion dismounted, seized him by the beard. "I'll squeeze it out of him, sir," the burly soldier offered.

"Let be," Syagrius ordered. "Pendra is better at that than we are. Pull the spear from his leg and bind the wound. Tie

him to one of the wagon horses and bring him along. Unless he's lost his tongue, Pendra will make him speak."

The Romans beat out the fire with their cloaks, distributed as much of the wagon's cargo as they could among their mounts, laid the two dead soldiers on the other draft horse and pressed on. Another hour's ride brought them before the gates of Pendra's castle.

The decurion sounded his horn and was answered by another from the walls. As they rode across the bridge and through the open gates, they could hear the shouted commands as Pendra's guards turned out to meet the procurator.

As military courtesy required, Pendra came down the stairs from the upper porch to meet Syagrius as he sat his horse in the courtyard. Watching him approach, Syagrius could not help thinking of the changes that had come over both of them since they had been children, playing at soldier in a world at peace.

Childhood had ended when they joined their fathers on the Catalonian Fields where Aetius had marshaled the last of Roman power to meet Attila and his Huns. Back to back, the boys had fought, surrounded by enemy horse, their shields feathered with arrows, their swords dripping blood, each too proud to

suggest to the other they retreat before they were ridden down and trampled. It seemed a miracle they lived to see Rome carry the day.

Both had grown. Their world had shrunk. In this one, "peace" seemed to be only a word for a half legendary time when Rome had ruled. Syagrius had set aside the meditative and introspective character he had inherited from his pensive mother to become a judge and a warrior like his father whose firmness and courage were the hope of his friends and the terror of his foes.

Pendra had followed a different path. When his father died, he had retired to this fort and to whatever pleasure and

prestige remained to the sole descendent of a sometime Count of the Empire. When his father's officers reproached him for laziness and even cowardice, he dismissed them and hired mercenaries in their place, enough to keep the people quiet and the taxes coming, but nowhere near the number needed to deal with a serious threat. For that, he relied on Syagrius.

The procurator knew Pendra's fort was not the best place for his son. But he could not bear the thought of Marius possibly falling into the hands of his enemies. Here, at least, the boy was safe.

All of these thoughts entered Syagrius' mind in one moment and left it in the next, as he dismounted to greet his old friend.

The two men saluted one another with the ease that comes of frequent meetings and partings. Pendra then turned his attention to the wretch that lay bound across the horse's back.

"And who is this?"

Syagrius gave a brief account of what had happened that afternoon.

"Yet he would say nothing?" Pendra inquired, half smiling. "This muteness is a disease I know how to cure."

Then, with an abrupt gesture to the guards, "Bring him below."

Pendra turned back to Syagrius as the man was led away. "You will excuse me, I'm sure. Marius is waiting for you at the north tower. His watch is nearly over. Both of you can join me for dinner."

Syagrius mounted the stairs that led from the courtyard to the parapet and walked swiftly along the wall to the base of the tower overlooking the gate. Marius came down to meet him, his Gallic long sword at his side.

Father and son embraced, stood back to look at one another. Whatever he thought

of Pendra as a leader and a soldier, Syagrius could not deny his son was thriving at the castle. Marius was tall and slender, tanned by the sun and hardened by every sort of martial exercise. From his mother, he had inherited dark hair and eyes, fine features and deft movements. From his father, he drew strength of will and a steadiness of hand and eye that made him expert in the use of arms.

Immediately, Marius asked the inevitable question. "When am I to leave the castle and join you at Noviodunum?"

Syagrius made the usual reply. "You are still young, Marius. There will be time enough for you to share some of my

burdens. Here you are safe and free of the troubles that will fill your life as they have filled mine."

"Father, you told me once a Roman boy can join the army at fourteen. At sixteen, he puts on his toga and becomes a citizen. Three months ago, I passed my fourteenth birthday. I am not a child any longer, and I know you need help. Pendra does not need me. He sits secure in this fort strong enough to hold off an army.

"You are surrounded, father, by enemies who would gladly do you any harm they dared. If I am ever to hold your staff, I must learn to rule. Fate has preserved

you up to now. May you live to see a son of mine commanding the legion! But a sudden arrow or a dagger thrust may end your life as it did grandfather's, leaving only an ignorant boy to take your place, bringing all your work to naught."

"I was much older than you are now when my father was killed."

"You had been at his side ten years," Marius countered, "watching and learning from him. You were with him on the Catalonian Fields.

"Mother was barely seventeen when she decided to come north. She told me herself. Besides," Marius added, departing from what he had prepared,

"Silvius tells me he has enlisted in the legion."

"Silvius is almost sixteen," Syagrius replied quickly.

"That's what he told the decurion. I know he is only two months older than I am. For that matter, I'd rather be one of your legionaries than command all of Pendra's mercenaries."

Syagrius fell silent. These arguments had become more and more frequent over the past year and harder to carry on. He knew, sooner or later, he must yield to his son and grant him his wish.

"Marius," he began, "all the threats I

face menace you as well. While we are apart, no enemy can be sure of dispatching us both at a blow. You are protected, not only by Pendra and your own sword, but also by the knowledge that any who harm you would find no place under heaven where they would be safe from my vengeance. So too, my enemies know that you would avenge my murder, even as I hunted down those who slew Aegidius, and they withhold their hands."

"And how should I avenge you, father? Who would follow a boy who has only given orders to the horse he rides? If any withhold their hands, it is from fear they might fail and find a swift death their

only reward."

The clattering of hooves on the drawbridge as a troop of Pendra's men rode out to bring in the wagon provided a welcome distraction. Syagrius knew in his heart that Marius was right. The boy could not remain with Pendra much longer.

When the noise died away, Syagrius gathered his thoughts for a reply. He was spared this effort by the arrival of a guard who came puffing up the steps with a message from Pendra.

"Your Excellency," he said to Syagrius, "Lord Pendra requests that you come at once to the keep. The robber you took

has found his tongue. My lord is anxious you hear his tale."

"Lead on," ordered Syagrius, turning on his heel to follow the portly messenger who was already on his way down the steps. He motioned Marius to follow. Now is as good a time as any, he decided, for my son to learn what awaits him beyond these walls.

The guard led the way down from the parapet, across the courtyard and through the oaken door that was the entrance to the subterranean corridors that lay beneath the castle. Here, in one vault, Pendra kept his store of gold and, in another, the hapless wretches who had committed some crime or otherwise

incurred his anger.

Syagrius had no liking for these places but had of necessity become inured to them. On Marius, the effect was far stronger. Indeed, his father could see that it was only with difficulty that the boy kept his feelings in check as the moans and shrieks of the half-mad prisoners reached his ears.

Finally, they passed through the narrow archway that was the portal to the room that served as a combination grain magazine and torture chamber for Castle Pendra. Syagrius steeled himself for a sickening spectacle. He was startled to see nothing more revolting than the

newly captured bandit sitting dejectedly on a rough hewn bench surrounded by Pendra's guards, obviously disappointed that the affair had come off so easily and anxiously awaiting the slightest sign giving them permission to avenge their comrades.

Pendra looked up as they came in. "I am sorry to have interrupted your meeting. I think you should hear this man yourself. His story bodes all of us no good. I had no trouble getting it out of him. The mere sight of the hot iron was enough to restore his power of speech." Then, turning to the prisoner, "Tell the procurator what you just told me."

The man raised his head and began in a

low voice. "I did not mean to become a robber, Excellency. I was born a farmer. I loved the land my father's fathers had plowed before me. One day, messengers came from Clovis, bidding us accept his new religion and send men, food and gold to his camp for a campaign to subdue all of Gaul. Our chief thought little of Clovis, told him he would consider his request. Two days later, our chief was poisoned. Two days after that, before we could choose a new chief, Clovis came, burned our homes and crops, drove us into the woods to starve.

"We did not want to steal or kill. We were hungry. No one would take us in anywhere. Just yesterday," he added

cautiously, "we were turned from these gates. This afternoon, we saw the wagon, loaded with food for the garrison. Only two soldiers. We had no weapons. We used stones.

"We were so desperate to get at the food, we tipped the wagon over onto the fire the guards had built for their lunch. The oil spilled, and it started burning."

The man stopped. There was a long silence while Syagrius pondered. "How far have you come since your lands were taken?"

"I do not know, Excellency. It was two weeks ago that Clovis burned our village. We have been running and

hiding ever since."

"And Clovis, which way was he heading?"

"South, along the banks of the river, Excellency. The tribes are submitting to him. Those who refuse, he makes outcasts like us, if they survive at all. Any who hope to save their lands and their lives are sending all that he demands."

"So," said Syagrius, "the son of that lecher Childeric, who never learned to rule himself and couldn't keep his hands from the wives of his own chiefs, now wants to rule Gaul. He's made a good start, I see."

"He claims not even the King of the Romans will dare..."

"Enough," Pendra interrupted. "Take him out and..." Pendra paused. Ordinarily, flogging to death or burning alive would have followed. In deference to his friend, Pendra finished with "lop off his head and put it on a pike. Let anyone else who's thinking of robbing my wagons see what happens to those who do."

Then, turning to Syagrius and Marius, "Let's go to dinner. We have much to talk about."

The three of them were joined at the table by the commander of the

mercenaries. He had a name, but everyone just called him Old Soldier from his grey locks and the white beard that shrouded his chin. Not until the servants had left, and the wine jug had made several rounds did Pendra ask the question that had been on everyone's mind since the bandit had spoken.

"Will Clovis cross the Somme?"

"He must," Syagrius replied. "He can't risk marching into Alaric's domain with my army at his back. Alaric would call me to help and move with his own forces too. Clovis would be outnumbered and trapped."

"If he moves against you first?"

"I can handle him. He's just another chief with a big head and not much in it. He's hardly past twenty. His 'army' is nothing but a marauding mob. I'm assembling the legion right now. I've already called out the militia and summoned my levies."

"Don't underestimate him," Pendra warned. "I've spoken to dozens of merchants and traders who have had contact with him. I met him myself once. He's loud, crude and cruel. Torture is his pastime. But he is also devious and cunning, even more so than his father. He is often heard to lament his loneliness at having no family, not even distant cousins. Any who reveal themselves, he has killed, so there will be no rivals for

his rule."

Syagrius resisted the temptation to wonder aloud why his friend had made so many inquiries. "How many men can you raise?"

"The people here are lazy and cowardly," Pendra replied. "The only real soldiers are in my garrison. I'll send out a call for volunteers, of course. But I suspect that every man who can run will disappear into the woods. After what Clovis has done to his enemies already, there won't be many who'll want to be numbered among them. You'll probably have the same problem raising recruits too."

"What do you advise?"

"Buy Clovis off. It's what Constantinople has been doing for a hundred years. Why do you think Attila wound up in Gaul and not in Greece? It's amazing what gold in the right hands can accomplish.

"I have plenty here. I'll lend you as much as you need. Send a few bags to Clovis and tell him he can have the rest after he brings you Alaric's head. That will keep him busy."

Syagrius looked at his friend, dumbfounded.

"If he loses, that's the end of him. You can use the rest of the gold to square

things with Alaric later. A stream of gold pieces will quench the fire of his anger, I'm sure.

"If Clovis wins, you attack him before his army can recover from fighting Alaric. Tell everyone you wanted to help. You got there too late to save Alaric but in time to avenge him."

The memory of Rhyothamus swept over Syagrius. "I am a Roman procurator," he said, "and I will not pay tribute to barbarians. Alaric is my ally, and I will not betray him."

"I doubt he has similar feelings toward you," Pendra countered. "I wouldn't be surprised if he's made some arrangement

with Clovis already."

"Whatever feelings he may have, I still have my honor."

"Lucius," Pendra said, "this is not a matter of honor, yours, mine or anyone else's. We're talking about survival. We're not dealing with some petty chief hungry for loot. Clovis has been planning this move for years. He means to rule all of Gaul, perhaps more. He has thousands of men and enough money to hire and equip thousands more. Not even your legion may be able to stop him."

"That savage will not trespass on Roman soil and live to tell of it," Syagrius declared. "My father ran his father off

into the swamps. I'll do the same for him. Let us speak no more of these schemes."

Pendra sighed and drained his wine cup. Marius gazed admiringly at his father. Old Soldier stroked his beard and nodded slowly as he looked into the distance.

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