AQUILA PERPETUA

The Eagle That Does Not Fall

Volume One: Mare Nostrum, World Unknown

"Only in the crucible of strife does God burn away the impurities to reveal the essence of a person — an inner core that might otherwise have remained hidden for an entire life." — Rhaedri Brison, Destiny's Crucible

"Ninjutsu is not the art of killing. It is the art of surviving what was designed to kill you. The difference is everything." — Iga-ryū Elders

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Chapter One: The Archive

The lamp had been burning for a long time.

He could tell by the way it guttered — not the steady pull of new oil but the low, intermittent flutter of a wick that was nearly done, throwing shadows that moved across the ceiling of the lower archive in slow, wavering sweeps, like something trying to decide whether to go out. The air down here was cold and specific: cedar oil, old stone, the metallic undertone of deep earth that never left regardless of the season. In summer it was a relief. In the shoulder months of early spring, it was simply cold, the kind of cold that settled into the back and the heels and did not announce itself but accumulated.

He was sitting on the floor.

This was not a choice made for comfort. He had been aware for some time that the stone was hard and the chill had worked its way through the tunic into his lower back, and that a grown man — or whatever he was — sitting on the floor of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus's lower archive at some hour between midnight and dawn was a strange enough sight that he ought at minimum to feel embarrassed about it. He did not feel embarrassed. He felt the cold and he ignored it, because there was a cedar case in his lap, and the cedar case contained seventeen lines of Latin that he had now read four times, and on the fourth reading something had happened that had not happened on the first three.

He had understood them.

Not the surface understanding — the priestly idiom of early imperial augural Latin was not complex, merely specialized, and the second library in his head contained it whole, every nuance of the covenant register and the temporal construction and the specific use of Mercury as treaty-intermediary that the third-century pontiffs had been rendering as a straightforward statement about weather. The surface understanding he had possessed since the first reading, the way you possess the words of a text before you possess its meaning.

What had happened on the fourth reading was different.

He set the cedar case down on the stone floor beside him and looked at the ceiling for a while. The lamp threw its shadow-sweep across the coffered stone. One of the other lamps, further back in the collection, had already gone out — he had heard the small sound of it going, some time ago.

Cross-reference complete.

The voice arrived in the interior of his skull in the same manner it had been arriving since he woke on this floor — how many hours ago? — with the cedar case already in his lap and the lamp already burning low and the specific disorientation of finding himself in a body that was not his. He had, in the first minutes of consciousness, lain still and taken stock. He had done this carefully and in order, the way a man does when he has been trained to assess situations before acting on them. He had determined the following things: that the body was nineteen years old, approximately; that it was in good physical condition and was not afraid, which was its own information; that the stone floor and the archive smell and the coffered ceiling and the guttering lamp were all known to this body in the way that a childhood home is known; and that behind all of this familiar knowledge, dense and complete as a second person standing just inside the door, was himself.

Not a ghost. Not a visitor. Himself — sixty-one years of accumulated specific knowledge, sitting behind the eyes of a nineteen-year-old Roman prince like a second library in a room that already had a library.

He had lain still for some time after this assessment, looking at the ceiling, letting the two knowledge systems sort themselves into an arrangement that was functional rather than overwhelming. It was not unlike the experience of waking from a dream in which you knew something important and trying to hold the knowledge as the dream receded. Except that the dream, in this case, was not receding. It was settling.

The augural language, the voice said, *is consistent with a bounded temporal covenant.*

He had begun calling it the Great Sage in the first hour, because it needed a name and because the name was accurate. It was his own voice stripped of every register except precision — no warmth, no self-consciousness, no diplomatic calibration. Pure analysis. It processed in the background while he thought with the front of his mind, and surfaced when it had something to report.

Three parallel constructions use the idiom of Mercury as intermediary of contracts with time-limited obligations. The phrase rendered in the standard scholarly translations as "until the waters calm" carries a double meaning in early imperial augural usage: both literal oceanic conditions and the metaphorical concept of "until the conditions of preparation are satisfied." These are not the same thing. The scholarly tradition has consistently chosen the literal reading because it is the more conservative interpretation. The literal reading is wrong.

He picked up the cedar case again. He read the third parallel construction one more time.

The Great Sage was right. The storm barrier around the Roman Enclave — the permanent, impassable wall of weather that had separated Rome from whatever lay beyond the Mare Ignotum since the day of the Miraculum — was not permanent. It had never been described as permanent in the augural texts. It had been described as *sufficient for preparation*, in the specific legal idiom of a covenant that would be fulfilled when its conditions were met.

The conditions were preparation. And preparation had a limit.

He ran the estimate. He ran it against three different interpretive models and discarded the outlier on each end. What remained was a central case of approximately ten years, with a range from eight to twelve. In the absence of better data, ten years was the working number.

Ten years.

He replaced the vellum in the cedar case, pressed the iron latches closed, stood — carefully, because his heels had gone numb and the stone floor had opinions about that — and returned the case to its shelf. The cedar made a small precise click against the stone as it settled.

He stood for a moment in the near-dark, listening to Rome above him.

He could hear it even here, through the rock of the Capitoline Hill, through the foundation stones of the oldest temple in the empire: the city's nighttime sound, lower than the day's noise but not absent — the watch calling the third hour somewhere above, the iron-shod wheels of a delivery cart on the Sacra Via, someone's argument in the Forum's margins that had not yet resolved itself into sleep. The city was there. All of it. The aqueducts and the granaries and the legions in their winter quarters and the senate and the technical colleges and the provincial road system and the signal relay posts, all of it breathing in the dark above the archive where he stood.

Sixty million people.

He did not try to hold that number as a weight. He had learned, over a career that had involved very large numbers used to describe human beings, that holding the number as weight was the first step toward paralysis, and that paralysis was the thing that made the large number larger. You held it as an obligation instead. Obligations had tractable responses. Obligations told you where to start.

He started for the stairs.

The air changed as he climbed — the mineral cold of the deep archive giving way to the particular chill of spring nights in Rome, dry and carrying, faintly, the smell of the Tiber and the cedar smoke of ten thousand household fires that had burned down to coals by this hour. He came out through the temple's side passage into the night air of the Capitoline Hill and stopped.

The city spread below him.

He had seen it before. The second library contained fifteen thousand separate memories of this view, from every angle and every season and every mood of the boy whose body he now inhabited — this specific view from the hill's south slope, with the Forum's darkness picked out by the torches of the night watch, and the Palatine's heights across the valley, and beyond it the Aventine, and beyond that the invisible middle distance of a city that went on for three miles in every direction before it thinned into suburbs and farms and the roads that connected every corner of an empire that stretched from Britannia's northern mist to the Egyptian sun.

He was not looking at the city.

He was looking east. Past the city, past the hills, past the Campagna and the Apennines and the Adriatic and the Aegean and all the provinces he could name in order from memory — past all of it, to the eastern edge of the Roman Enclave. To the coastline that faced the Mare Ignotum. And past the Mare Ignotum,

across the storms that were not permanent, to the world that was approximately ten years away and did not know he existed.

Thousands of miles to the northeast, across the curvature of the world, a civilization was expanding with the specific logic of those who had decided that strength was the only honest currency and that everything else was sentiment wearing armor.

Noxus, the Great Sage said, surfacing the word from his second library with the flat affect of a name from a briefing document.

He knew what Noxus was. He had known it the way he had known everything about that world — from the outside, from the distance of someone who had spent twenty years reading its lore in the evenings of a first life that was gone now, as completely gone as if it had happened to someone else, which in a sense it had. But standing on the Capitoline Hill in a body that was here, in a city that was real, with a ten-year clock running in the back of his mind — knowing it from the outside was no longer the only kind of knowing that mattered.

He had ten years to build something that could meet that world without being destroyed by it.

Recommendation, the Great Sage said. *Immediate expansion of the Ostia naval shipyards is required.*

"I know," he said, quietly, to the empty hilltop.

He looked at the city for one more moment, and then he went inside, because there was a great deal to do tomorrow, and because standing on hills looking at things you cannot yet change was a luxury that ten-year clocks did not permit.

Chapter Two: The Wrong Body

He was aware of the strangeness most acutely in the small things.

In the first days after the archive, going about the ordinary life of the imperial household — the morning briefings with the household prefect, the formal breakfast that the palace protocol required, the afternoon schedule of senatorial correspondence and the weapons training that filled the late afternoon — he found himself experiencing the strangeness not as a general condition but as a series of small specific shocks, each brief and sharp, like touching a cold door handle in the dark.

The shock of the swordsmanship drill, when the blade came up automatically into the correct guard position without any instruction from his conscious mind, and the muscles that moved it were nineteen years old and strong in ways his previous body had forgotten it ever knew. The shock of hearing himself addressed as *domine* by a steward whose face he simultaneously recognized (Marcus, personal attendant, twelve years in service, reliable, fond of the chariot races, has a daughter who is sick this month) and did not recognize at all, because Marcus had never spoken to a sixty-one-year-old diplomat from a different world who happened to be temporarily resident in the body of his employer's son. The shock of the dining room, the specific smell of Rome's morning bread and the olive oil in the lamps and the particular sound of the palace's floors under formal sandals, all of it arriving as sense-memory from the second library before his conscious mind could register it, so that his body knew where the bread was before he knew he was hungry for it.

The second library was not a foreign presence. This was the thing that kept unsteadying him, the thing he had not anticipated in whatever formulation he might have made in advance of this situation — which was to say no formulation at all, since dying and waking in someone else's body was not a contingency he had planned for. The second library was not something laid on top of him, the way a coat is put on a person. It was underneath him, the foundation and the floor and the walls, the entire structure of lived life that a body inhabits before consciousness arrives to comment on it. He was *Gaius Aurelius Varro*. He had always been Gaius Aurelius Varro. Every childhood memory of the Palatine and every senator's name and every road in every province and every recipe his mother's kitchen had ever produced — all of it was *his*, in the sense that belonged to this body, and the body was his, because there was no other candidate for it.

And behind all of that, older and quieter, was the other library.

The one with thirty-two years of treaty negotiations and an actuarial doctorate and eighteen years of diplomatic service in a country that had called itself Nihon, and the specific knowledge of a world that was ten years away on the other side of a thinning magical storm barrier.

He had thought, in the archive, that the strangeness was the reading of the texts. The strangeness of the texts was only the beginning. The real strangeness was living inside a person, inhabiting the granular specificity of a life already in progress — the way the morning sunlight fell across the study's eastern window, the weight of the writing stylus he had been using since he was eight years old, the particular quality of loyalty that the household had for the crown prince they had watched grow up — and finding it not alien but entirely known, entirely his, even as the other library sat behind it and observed and processed and never quite went quiet.

He was not disturbed by this. He had expected to be disturbed by it, and he wasn't. This in itself was mildly disturbing.

What disturbed him was the impression he was making.

On the third morning after the archive, at the formal breakfast that served as the palace's informal council — the hour when the senior household officials, the prefect, and occasionally senators who had business with the imperial family would eat together and exchange the information that did not fit in formal correspondence — he was sitting at the end of the table listening to the harbor master's monthly report on Ostia's shipping volume, and he was making notes on the back of his breakfast brief the way he had done for thirty-two years, the practiced notation of a man who was going to need to reconstruct this conversation for a follow-on briefing, when he became aware that Prefect Cornelianus, sitting across the table, had stopped talking.

He looked up.

Cornelianus was looking at him with the expression of a man who had just heard something unexpected come out of a familiar mouth.

Gaius became aware, a half-second after he should have, that he had asked the question that the sixty-one-year-old diplomat had automatically formed in response to the data — *at current capacity, what is the projected lead time for a twenty-percent expansion of the trireme output at Ostia?* — in the phrasing

and tone and register of a senior official in a foreign ministry asking a harbor master a pointed technical question. Not in the phrasing and tone and register of a nineteen-year-old crown prince asking about boats.

"Your Highness," Cornelianus said, with the careful neutrality of a man who was still deciding what he had heard, "the naval yards haven't been discussed for expansion since the Mauritanian commission four years ago."

"I know," Gaius said, and then, because the damage was done and there was no useful retreat from it: "I've been reading the Mauritanian commission's original projections. The demand model they used assumed stable trade volumes. Trade volumes haven't been stable. I think the commission's conclusions deserve revisiting."

A pause in which everyone at the table was doing the same arithmetic: *Has the crown prince always been like this? Have I simply not noticed?*

"A prudent observation," Cornelianus said, in the tone of a man filing information for later examination.

Walking to the study after breakfast, the Great Sage said: *You will need to be more careful about the register you use in mixed company. The knowledge you are applying is correct. The presentation signals a discontinuity that will draw attention before you are ready for that attention.*

"I know," he said, for the second time that morning.

You said that very naturally, given that I am a voice in your head.

"You sound like me. It's difficult to maintain the distinction."

I am you, the Great Sage said, without emphasis. *Specifically, the part of you trained in risk modeling and pattern recognition. The parts of you trained in other things are also present. The challenge is applying the correct part at the correct moment.*

This was accurate and not particularly helpful, and he said so.

He spent the rest of the morning in the study, drafting the first of the documents that would need to exist before anything could happen: a preliminary analysis of Ostia's current shipyard capacity, written in the style and vocabulary of a nineteen-year-old prince who had been reading commission reports for his own education, which had the advantage of being true. He wanted the analysis to exist in the palace records before he approached his father. He wanted to be able to say, honestly, that this was something he had been thinking about.

He was thinking about a great many things.

In the east of the world that lies beyond the storms, the Great Sage said, surfacing information he had not requested, the way it sometimes did when the processing found a connection worth flagging, *there is a city that sits on an isthmus between two continents. It is the most significant chokepoint of global trade in that world. The cities there are called Piltover and Zaun. One produces technological advancement of a kind that Rome does not yet have a framework to describe. The other processes that advancement's costs in human terms.*

He set down the stylus.

He thought about Piltover, in the way that he had never been able to think about it in his first life — not as a concept in a game's worldbuilding, but as a place that was real and approximately ten years away and was currently developing capacities that Rome, for all its institutional strength, did not yet understand how to match.

He picked the stylus back up and added a line to the analysis.

The Collegium Polytechnica — the name surfaced from the part of him that had spent long evenings thinking about what a serious technical education system would look like, the part that had been frustrated for decades by the gap between what institutions could do and what they actually did. He wrote it down and looked at it. Too much, too soon. File it. Three years from now it might be possible. Today, the shipyards.

He returned to the analysis.

He had three days before he would speak to his father. In three days, the analysis needed to be complete, internally consistent, and framed in the language of a domestic infrastructure concern rather than a preparation-for-unknown-contact concern, because the latter required a different conversation entirely and that conversation had its own preconditions.

He worked through the morning.

Outside the study window, Rome went about its day — the smell of the bread ovens and the cart traffic on the roads below the hill and the specific, layered, productive noise of a city that had been running for eight centuries without stopping. The second library named every sound as it arrived: the particular note of the water-carrier's bell, the cadence of the legionary drill in the training yard on the Caelian Hill that the wind brought when it shifted east. All of it his. All of it known.

He was home, in the body of a person who had never existed until now.

He wrote.

Chapter Three: The Emperor's Garden

He gave himself three days.

This was a practice from his first life — the discipline of not moving until the argument was finished in your own head, not because speed was the enemy but because an argument that was not finished was an argument that could be interrupted at its weakest point, which was always the point you hadn't finished building. Thirty-two years of treaty negotiations had taught him that the single most dangerous moment in any significant conversation was the one where you said something that was true but incomplete, and the other party completed it for you in a direction you hadn't intended.

On the morning of the fourth day, he walked to the garden.

The Emperor Marcus Lucius Varro had the habit of spending the hour before the formal morning reception in the garden off the main palace wing — not in all weather, but in any weather that did not actively preclude it, which in Rome was most of the year. The garden was a political statement in the form of horticulture: it said that the Emperor was secure enough to be found in his shirtsleeves, confident

enough not to require a throne room for informal consultation, interested enough in ordinary things to have opinions about roses. These were not accidental impressions. The second library supplied sixteen years of observing his father's use of the garden as a receiving space, and behind those sixteen years, his own understanding: the technique was genuine and calculated simultaneously, which was the mark of a person who had been practicing something long enough that it had become their nature.

His father was examining a rose bush.

The rose was in poor condition. It had been in poor condition for the better part of a year — the leaves running to yellow at the margins, the growth sparse, the blooms that had appeared in the autumn small and premature and easily lost. The household gardeners had offered three different diagnoses; his father had rejected all three on the grounds that each contradicted the others. He had, by the second library's account, adopted the position that the problem was systemic incompetence among the diagnosers, which was a position that allowed him to be right about the disagreement without having to choose between the wrong answers.

Gaius had identified the problem in his first week. The soil chemistry in this particular bed had been gradually acidified by years of runoff from the cedar planters along the north wall, and the rose required alkaline conditions. A specific soil amendment, worked in by hand and not by the standard broadcast method the gardeners used, applied once in early spring, would correct it. He had arranged for this to be done, three days ago, by a junior garden assistant who had simply been told that the Crown Prince had noticed the soil looked pale and thought it might benefit from some work.

By next spring the rose would be fine. No one would know why.

This was the kind of work, he had decided in the archive, that defined the next decade.

"The gardeners tell me it's the soil," his father said, without looking up.

"The gardeners are correct," Gaius said. "One of them, anyway."

His father looked up. The look lasted a beat longer than it would have a week ago — the assessing pause of a perceptive man registering something slightly different in the person in front of him without yet knowing what it is. Marcus Lucius Varro had governed an empire for twenty-three years. He had survived two succession crises and a senatorial conspiracy and the particular, grinding political friction of maintaining a coalition that disagreed on nearly everything except the value of maintaining the coalition. He was not a man who missed significant changes in his immediate environment.

Gaius held the look without flinching. This was a decision he had made before walking into the garden: not to hide the change, because hiding it would only sharpen his father's curiosity into suspicion, but to present it as continuous with who Gaius had always been — a young man given to long thoughts and careful reading, now somewhat further along in both.

"You've been in the study," his father said.

"And the archive. I found something in the augural collection that I've been working through."

His father set down his pruning shears and sat on the low stone bench at the edge of the herb bed. He gestured at the space beside him. This was an invitation to sit and be heard — a different quality of attention from the standing conversation that the garden usually permitted. He had decided to give this

conversation the bench.

Gaius sat.

He looked at the garden for a moment. He thought, as he sometimes did in moments of unexpected clarity, about the distance between the thing he was about to say and the conceptual equipment his father had for receiving it. His father understood Roman cosmology — the gods who had moved the empire to a new world, the providential logic of Roman destiny, the theological framework that made the Miraculum intelligible as divine action rather than inexplicable catastrophe. He understood politics, military strategy, provincial administration, the management of a Senate that contained more competing interests than it contained senators. He was an exceptionally competent man operating within a framework that was complete and coherent and that had never needed to contain the information Gaius was about to introduce.

The challenge was not telling the truth. The challenge was telling it in a form the framework could receive.

"I've been reading the augural texts from the Miraculum period," he said. "The ones the pontiffs have classified as disputed."

His father's expression shifted slightly — not surprise, exactly, but attention sharpening. The disputed texts were a minor theological controversy that had never affected practical governance. That his son had been spending time on them was not, in itself, significant. "What did you find?"

"I think the scholarly tradition has been misreading the third parallel construction for two centuries." He paused, choosing the next words carefully. "The phrase they've been translating as a statement about weather — *until the waters calm* — is actually a conditional clause in the covenant register. The idiom is Mercury's specifically: a contract with a time-limited obligation. It doesn't say the storms will be permanent. It says the storms will persist until the conditions of preparation are satisfied."

His father was quiet. This was his quality — the capacity to receive genuinely unexpected information without reaching immediately for a response, to let it settle before he evaluated it. It was the quality Gaius had always respected most in him, and it looked exactly the same from inside the second library as it had looked from inside the first.

"Preparation," his father said.

"Rome's preparation. For whatever lies beyond the Mare Ignotum."

The silence that followed had weather in it. A sparrow found the edge of the water basin at the garden's center and then departed. The cedar smoke from somewhere in the lower city reached them on a shift of breeze and then was gone.

"How long?" his father said.

"The estimate is uncertain. I've worked it against three different interpretive models." He paused. "Approximately ten years. Perhaps eight, perhaps twelve. The central case is ten."

"And your confidence in this reading?"

This was the right question. He had expected it and he had an honest answer. "Sufficient to design policy around it. Not sufficient to state it as certainty." He looked at his father directly. "I would not have come to you with a speculative interpretation of a disputed text. I'm aware of what I'm asking you to consider."

Another pause. His father's gaze had moved to the rose bush, which was neither the subject of the conversation nor coincidentally present — it was what a man looked at when he was thinking about something that required the management of his expression.

"Tell me the rest of it," his father said.

This was the crux. The rest of it was the part that required the framework to expand, and frameworks expanded slowly in people who had lived long enough to rely on them. He had prepared for this. He had prepared the argument in the order that would be most receivable — not beginning with Runeterra, not beginning with the specific threats and the political geography and the names of the factions that he knew from his second library the way a scholar knows the contents of a text he has spent twenty years reading. Beginning with what Rome needed, framed in terms the framework could hold.

"I don't know what lies beyond the storms," he said, which was technically true and strategically necessary. "I believe the augural texts indicate that what lies there is complex and that Rome's preparation is the precondition for contact going well rather than badly. What I do know is what Rome needs before contact, regardless of what we find on the other side." He paused. "The naval yards at Ostia are undersized for what we would need if contact required a naval response. The grain reserve in Aegyptus is being managed at approximately forty percent of what strategic necessity demands. The signal relay between provinces has been operating below design capacity for six years. None of these are dramatic interventions. They are domestic improvements that have value independent of any contact scenario."

His father was quiet. Gaius had learned, in his first career, that this quality of silence — not the silence of disagreement, not the silence of confusion, but the silence of a person building a structure from the materials they've been given — was the sound of someone taking something seriously. He waited.

"The relay system," his father said, eventually. "The Senate's infrastructure committee has been stalled on the relay expansion for three sessions. Senator Corvus has been blocking it on the grounds that expanded relay capacity enables centralized surveillance of provincial commerce."

"Senator Corvus is not wrong that it enables that," Gaius said. "He's wrong that enabling it is the relevant objection. The relevant question is whether the relay system is for the Senate's administrative convenience or for the empire's operational security. Those are different arguments, and only one of them deserves the question of how it might be misused."

His father looked at him.

It was a different look from the one in the garden's opening — not the recalibrating attention of a man registering an unexpected change in a familiar person, but something more deliberate, more interior. The look of a man who was asking himself a question that was not about the subject under discussion.

Gaius waited.

"You sound like someone who has been thinking about this," his father said, "for considerably longer than three days."

"I have been thinking about this," Gaius said carefully, "for as long as I can remember."

This was true. In one of the two possible senses of *remember*, it was entirely true.

His father held his gaze for a long moment. Then he made the small decision — Gaius saw it happen, the way you see a door finish closing — to file the question for later and act on what he had.

"The Ostia expansion," his father said. "Senator Censorinus has been wanting an action on Mauretanian fishing disruption for three sessions. If the expansion is framed as a response to trade protection needs —"

"The justification holds. The disruption has been affecting the western Mediterranean catch by approximately twelve percent. A stronger naval presence in those lanes addresses both concerns simultaneously." He paused. "There's a senator from Aegyptus on the agricultural committee who has been looking for a way to position himself as a domestic reformer. If he sponsors the grain reserve legislation, it fits his stated interests and he arrives at the conclusion himself."

His father was quiet for a moment. "Which senator?"

"Gaius Petronius Marcellus."

"He's ambitious and moderately competent and looking for a legacy project," his father said. "You'd need to give him the idea without making him feel he's receiving it."

"Yes."

Another silence. His father looked at the rose bush, which was going to be fine by next spring, and which he did not yet know was going to be fine.

"Walk with me to the council chamber," he said. "Prefect Cornelianus is reviewing the harbor assessment from last month's committee. I want you to ask him the question about Ostia in the same terms you used at breakfast."

Gaius stood. "The phrasing wasn't ideal at breakfast."

"The phrasing was sharp enough to make Cornelianus spend the morning reconsidering the Mauritanian commission's conclusions," his father said, picking up the pruning shears and setting them on the bench. "Which is what I would have needed him to do before the committee session anyway." He looked at his son with the expression of a man who was going to ask a question eventually and was choosing not to ask it yet. "It was not a mistake."

They walked through the garden toward the council chamber, and behind them the rose bush continued its uncertain existence in the morning light, and Gaius thought about ten years, and what ten years of careful, deliberate work could build, and whether it would be enough.

He thought it might be.

He was not yet certain it would be.

The uncertainty was not the enemy. The uncertainty was the price of honesty, and he intended to pay it consistently.

Chapter Four: The Power of Creation — First Attempt

The workshop smelled, underneath the cedar oil and the cold stone, of something that had been heated and then cooled many times over several decades — a metallic ghost-smell, faint but specific, like old bronze in a warm room. The second library identified it: his grandfather's metallurgical experiments, twenty years before Gaius was born, conducted in this same space. The ventilation system had been modified to accommodate them and had never been fully restored. The ghost-smell was the consequence.

He had been in the workshop for two weeks before he tried it.

The Power of Creation was in the imperial bloodline. This was documented — three historical instances in the past two centuries, each recorded with the specific combination of official wonderment and theological containment that powerful institutions applied to things they could not explain but could not afford to deny. A legionary standard made whole in a moment of military crisis. An irrigation channel appearing in the Nile Delta during a drought, its provenance debated by engineers for fifty years. A blade — the documentation on this one was thinner, and Gaius suspected the fuller story involved an incident the imperial family had chosen to allow ambiguity around.

All three instances had been crisis responses. Instinctive. The texts that documented them were consistent on this: the power had manifested in moments of extremity, without deliberate invocation, without the emperor in question having sought it or understood it. It appeared and was gone, and afterward the emperor described the experience as something that had happened to him rather than something he had done.

He spent the first two weeks reading everything in the palace library that touched on the documented instances. Not the theological commentaries — those were ornate and uninstructive. The administrative records. The engineering assessments of the Nile Delta channel. The armorers' records of the standard. The deposition of the legionary officers who had been present. He was looking for the mechanics, the shape of the thing stripped of its theological casing, and what he found was consistent: the power produced things the emperor already knew. The standard was a standard the emperor had carried. The channel followed a route the emperor had surveyed. The blade was a type the emperor had trained with since boyhood.

The power is bounded by imagination, the Great Sage said, when he had finished reading and was sitting with the pattern.

"Bounded by complete conceptual knowledge," he said, correcting the framing. "Imagination can produce things that don't work. The power requires understanding precise enough to generate a functional object. The emperors who manifested it produced things they knew so thoroughly that they could have built them by hand if given the tools."

Which means the limit of the power is the limit of your knowledge.

"Yes."

He sat with this for a while.

He had sixty-one years of accumulated specific knowledge. He had an advanced degree in actuarial mathematics, a doctorate in economics, thirty-two years of diplomatic experience, and eighteen years spent in deep immersion in a country whose intellectual and technical traditions included some of the

most precisely codified practical knowledge in his first world's history. He had read history and engineering and metallurgy and medicine and a great deal of strategic theory. He had, in the evenings of his first career, spent twenty years reading the lore of a world whose technical development he had followed with the attention of an enthusiast who found worldbuilding more intellectually honest than the actual world.

He had more conceptual material than any emperor in the history of Rome had ever had.

The question was whether he was precise enough.

He had spent the first two weeks reading because he needed to be honest with himself about the limit. The limit was not what he knew — the limit was whether he knew it to the level of completeness the power required. He could describe the general principles of high-carbon steel. He could not, without preparation, reconstruct the specific grain structure of a quenched blade from first principles. The general principles would produce a text that was broadly correct and specifically wrong in the places that mattered for practical application.

He had spent the two weeks not only reading but reconstructing. Every day, in the evenings after the political work, he sat with the metallurgy and worked through it from the foundations, rebuilding the technical knowledge in the way that a person who wants to be certain they understand something explains it to themselves without looking at the source. The places where the explanation became vague were the places he went back to study.

At the end of two weeks, he sat down with a sheaf of blank vellum and tried.

He conceptualized the text completely before touching the vellum. Not just its content — its organization, the pedagogical logic that moved from principles Rome already knew to principles Rome would need to develop, the specific illustrations and diagrams that would make the theoretical content actionable for engineers trained in the existing tradition. He held the whole thing in his mind the way a building is held in a blueprint — every room, every load-bearing wall, every window.

He touched the vellum.

The text appeared.

He had known it would. He had not known how it would feel.

It felt like nothing. The vellum was blank and then it bore text and there was no moment between. No flash, no heat, no sound. The lamp's light did not change. The air tasted the same. He looked down at the sheaf and it had three hundred and forty pages of advanced metallurgical instruction in classical Latin, illustrated with diagrams, cross-referenced throughout.

He read every page.

He found errors.

Seven of them, spread across the text in the places where his reconstruction had been less precise than he had believed. One was significant — a misstatement in the relationship between cooling rate and carbon content that would have led engineers to produce a harder but more brittle alloy than he intended. The others were minor but real. He sat with the errors for a while, not with frustration but with the specific, clarifying attention of someone who has learned exactly where the limits of their knowledge are.

He went back to the source texts. He corrected the gaps. He spent three days on it.

On the fourth day, he touched the pages containing the errors. The pages corrected.

He put the treatise in a locked chest and locked it, and sat in the workshop for a while in the quiet.

Outside, Rome made its nighttime sounds. The Great Sage was uncharacteristically silent, as if it too was waiting to see what he would do with what had just happened. He thought about his grandfather, who had spent years in this room trying to understand something about metal and heat and form that he had not quite been able to articulate. He thought about the engineers who were, right now, in the technical colleges across the empire, working with the knowledge they had, which was excellent knowledge and would remain incomplete for another generation unless something changed.

He thought about what it meant to have a capacity that could change things instantly and the specific, important discipline of not using it that way.

The goal is not to give Rome stronger steel, he wrote in the journal that night, in the cipher he had constructed from diplomatic shorthand and a Latin substitution system layered on top of it. *The goal is to give Rome engineers who understand why steel is strong. Objects produced by this power can break. Knowledge that produces those objects does not break. It compounds. It builds institutions. It becomes a civilization's capacity rather than its dependency.*

The treatise goes to no one for two years. In two years, it arrives through a third party as a recovered Hellenistic text from the Alexandria secondary collections. The engineers receive it through legitimate scholarly channels. They argue with it. They test it. When the improved steel comes, it will be theirs. Rome's. Not a gift from an emperor who can do things that cannot be explained.

That is the principle: the Power of Creation is most powerful when used to produce knowledge. Knowledge is the only thing I can create that outlives the creating.

He locked the journal and the chest and put out the lamp.

He walked from the workshop to his apartments and lay down in the dark and looked at the ceiling for a while, thinking about ten years, and about the seven errors, and about the specific texture of a world that was going to arrive whether Rome was ready for it or not.

He was not going to rush.

Rushing was how you produced errors.

He fell asleep.

Chapter Five: The Senate

The session began, as all Senate sessions did, with the augury.

The augur on duty — a junior pontiff whose name Gaius knew from the second library but whose face he was seeing for the first time with the attention of someone who was assessing rather than simply registering — read the birds' movements with the practiced neutrality of an institution that had been

performing this function for five hundred years and had developed, across those five hundred years, a very sophisticated understanding of how to find favorable omens when the session required them. The augury was favorable. The session opened.

Gaius was in the gallery.

The crown prince was permitted attendance in the Senate but not participation — a constitutional arrangement that the second library had always understood as formal restriction and the diplomat in him now understood as potentially the most useful position in the building. From the gallery, he could observe every senator's response to every motion, track the shifting of the coalition mathematics in real time, note who spoke to whom in the breaks, read the body language of men who were performing conviction they did not fully feel. He could not be questioned or interrupted or drawn into a position by an adversarial speech. He could watch.

He had been watching for three months.

Senator Quintus Fabius Censorinus rose to speak on the question of the Ostia naval yards.

He was a good man. Gaius had arrived at this conclusion across the three months of careful cultivation — cultivation being the diplomatic term for the process of ensuring that a person's own intelligence arrived, through well-designed conversation, at conclusions that you needed them to hold. Censorinus was genuinely intelligent, genuinely concerned with Rome's naval security, and genuinely susceptible to the specific intellectual pleasure of believing that he had thought of something himself. The conversations they had shared over the preceding weeks had been designed around this last quality — not to deceive him, but to provide him with the correct information in the correct order and then leave him alone with his intelligence and the conclusion it would reach.

The speech was good.

It was, Gaius noted from the gallery, better than Censorinus's ordinary oratory. The specific economic argument in the third section — connecting the expansion to the Mauretanian fishing disruption through a supply-chain analysis that Censorinus had clearly worked through himself, building on the structural observation that the disruption created downstream volatility in the salted-fish markets that were foundational to grain-route financing — was not something Gaius had given him. Censorinus had generated it himself, from the framework their conversations had established. This was the correct outcome. This was the argument working as an argument was supposed to work: producing thinking rather than reciting positions.

The vote was called.

It passed by eighty-three.

Gaius permitted himself, in the gallery, two seconds of quiet satisfaction, and then he turned his attention to the next item.

The grain reserve legislation required a different approach. Senator Gaius Petronius Marcellus of Aegyptus was not a truth-seeker — he was a legacy-builder, and legacy-building had its own logic, which was the logic of a man who wanted to be remembered for something and had not yet found the right vehicle. The distinction mattered because the conversation required to arrive at sponsorship of a grain

reserve bill was not the conversation of building an argument but the conversation of building an identity. Marcellus needed to understand, not that the grain reserve was important, but that being the senator who brought the grain reserve to Rome was the kind of political position that lasted.

He arranged a dinner. The dinner was not at the palace — that was too formal, too hierarchical, too likely to produce the performance of agreement rather than the reality of it. It was at a house in the Caelian district that belonged to a mutual acquaintance who was conveniently occupied elsewhere, in a dining room of the correct scale for three people to speak as peers. The third person at the table was the senior economist of the grain administration, who had strong views on the reserve's deficiency and had not, in the current political climate, found a senator willing to carry those views into the committee.

Three hours into the dinner, Senator Marcellus was describing the grain reserve legislation as something that he had been thinking about for some time.

This was approximately true. He had been thinking about it for approximately three hours. Under these conditions, the distinction did not matter.

Walking home from the dinner, the Great Sage ran the updated timeline. *Grain reserve legislation: on track. Signal relay expansion: requires two additional senatorial relationships before committee viability. Ostia expansion: authorized. The metallurgy text remains in the chest. Year one, month seven. Assessment: ahead of the central estimate.*

"The relay system," Gaius said, to the empty street, quietly, in the way of a man carrying on an internal conversation that happened to be audible. "Corvus is the problem."

Senator Publius Valerius Corvus believes that expanded relay capacity enables centralized surveillance of provincial commerce, which he considers a structural threat to senatorial power. He is not wrong about the capability. He is wrong that the capability is the correct object of concern in the present strategic situation.

"He won't be convinced by the correct argument. He'll be convinced by the argument that his specific interests align with the expansion."

What are his specific interests?

Gaius thought about this as he walked. The second library supplied the relevant biography: Corvus's family had been in Rome for seven generations, with deep roots in the grain trade networks of northern Italia. A faster relay system that connected the northern Italian grain markets to the Aegyptus supply data would reduce the information asymmetry that currently allowed the northern traders — including Corvus's extended family network — to arbitrage price differentials that a more integrated system would eliminate. On the face of it, this was an argument against the relay, not for it.

But.

The Mauretanian fishing disruption that had just provided the vehicle for the Ostia expansion was also affecting the salted-fish inputs to the northern grain-route financing structures. A relay system that could carry early warning of disruptions faster would allow the northern traders to hedge more effectively. The net effect on the Corvus family networks, properly modeled, was slightly positive.

"Slightly positive and demonstrably quantifiable," Gaius said, to himself, to the Great Sage, to the night air of the Caelian district. "I need an introduction to his senior financial manager."

That can be arranged through the grain administration economist who was at dinner tonight.

"Not yet. Six months. Let the dinner's conversation settle first and let Marcellus establish himself as the grain reserve's sponsor. The relay conversation with Corvus needs to happen after that dynamic is established." He paused at the corner where the road turned north toward the Palatine. "The relay system needs to exist before we need it. It cannot be built in response to an event. It has to be infrastructure that is already there."

Infrastructure takes time.

"Everything that matters takes time," Gaius said. "That's the point of starting now."

Chapter Six: The Archive Proxy

The Pontifex Maximus was a careful man.

Tiberius Claudius Rufus had held the senior religious position for seventeen years, which in Rome meant that he had survived three distinct political realignments, two succession anxieties, and the ongoing institutional tension between the priestly colleges and the Senate that was the constant low-frequency vibration of Roman religious governance. He had survived by being competent without being threatening, knowledgeable without being assertive, and — crucially — by understanding that the power of the Pontifex Maximus resided not in action but in the capacity for action, and that the capacity was best preserved by not exercising it unnecessarily.

He was not a man who asked questions that did not need to be asked.

The meeting was convened on a morning in the eighth month, in the formal archive consultation room that was used for exactly this type of encounter — scholarly in setting, administrative in purpose, neither intimate enough to suggest the conversation was personal nor formal enough to suggest it was official. Rufus had arranged the room with the two chairs at the same height, which was itself information. He was not positioning himself as superior in this conversation. He was positioning himself as a peer with a concern.

They discussed the archive holdings for twenty minutes. The conversations was genuine — there were actual questions about the condition of several texts in the Augustan collection that Gaius had been examining, and he answered them honestly, because honesty was the foundation and misdirection was only useful when the foundation was solid. He had notes from his archive sessions. He produced them. Rufus reviewed them with the attention of a man who was looking for something other than what was in the notes, and not finding it.

Then, after the twenty minutes, with the notes back on the table between them and the conversation settling toward a natural close, Rufus said: "You are not the first person in recent months to consult the augural texts from the Miraculum period."

Gaius kept his expression still. Not carefully — with the ease of a man for whom diplomatic stillness was as natural as breathing.

"There was a visitor in the winter," Rufus continued. "He claimed to be a provincial scholar, working on a comparative mythology project. He spent three days with the texts." A pause. "He asked the archivists specifically about the temporal covenant passages."

"Did he leave notes?"

"Nothing in the archive. Nothing registered at the customs office, which is how I know he was not, in fact, a scholar." Rufus met his eyes with the look of a man who is offering information and asking a question simultaneously. "He left very quietly and ahead of schedule."

Gaius looked at the table for a moment, then back at Rufus. "You're telling me someone commissioned targeted archive research on the specific passages I've been studying."

"I'm telling you that the timing is notable and that I thought you should know."

"Yes," Gaius said. "Thank you."

He walked back across the Forum with the unhurried step of a man whose schedule permitted it, and the Great Sage ran the probabilities in the background the way the sea runs beneath a ship — continuously, without requiring attention.

Someone in the Senate's networks — or someone with access to those networks — had noticed the Ostia vote. Had looked for the underlying motivation. Had identified the augural archive as a possible location for answers. Had sent a person trained in targeted research who had the discipline to leave no trace. This was not the behavior of a curious senator. This was the behavior of an institution.

The target of the research was the same texts he had read. The temporal covenant passages specifically.

The probability that this is a domestic political actor is high, the Great Sage said. *The barrier makes external penetration impossible. Someone in Rome is trying to understand what you are doing and why.*

"Yes," he said, to the Forum's noise and to the Great Sage simultaneously. "And they don't yet have the answer, or the visit would have been followed by something more significant than silence."

The silence is its own information.

"The silence means they found the texts ambiguous. Which means they don't have the interpretive framework to read them correctly. Which means—" He paused at the steps of the temple complex, looking at the familiar sight of the Forum without seeing it. "—which means I have time."

Not unlimited time. The person who had commissioned this visit would commission others. A domestic political actor who understood that the crown prince's infrastructure program had an underlying motivation they didn't yet understand was a domestic political actor who would keep looking. The question was not whether they would find something — they would find the general shape, eventually, with or without his cooperation. The question was whether they found it before he was ready to answer the question it would generate.

He needed to know who they were.

He filed this under variables to manage and continued toward the Palatine.

He had, at this point in his preparation, no intelligence apparatus. Rome had one, of a sort — the frumentarii, the grain officers who served as a combination of courier service and intelligence gathering network, who could be directed by the emperor to conduct discreet surveillance of provincial concerns. They were competent at the tasks they were designed for and entirely unsuited to what he needed, which was counter-intelligence work of a quality that Rome had never built an institution to provide.

He would need to build that institution.

He did not yet know where it would come from.

He had a hypothesis. The hypothesis was improbable enough that he had been filing it under *insufficient causal mechanism — do not model* for seven months. But in the past week, running the general probability landscape of the preparation decade, he had been unable to entirely dismiss it, because the mechanism — whatever it was — that had moved sixty million Romans from one world to another was the same mechanism, or a related one, that might have moved other things. And the specific thing he kept returning to, in the evenings when the policy work was done and the day's correspondence was finished and the workshop was quiet, was a specific, improbable thought about what had been lost in his first world and what might, theoretically, not have been as fully lost as the historical record suggested.

He did not model it.

He continued to watch the harbor at Ostia.

Chapter Seven: Raphael

The merchant's name was Sextus Aemilius Paullus.

He was forty-seven years old, moderately connected to the Capitoline trading families through his wife's extended network, and he had been systematically shorting the public grain distribution for fourteen months. Not by large amounts — the shortfall ran between four and six percent across twenty-three distribution points in the city's central districts, calibrated precisely enough to remain below the threshold that triggered the magistrates' standard quarterly audit. The methodology was sophisticated. Someone had thought about it carefully.

Gaius had found it while running population flow models for the grain reserve legislation — specifically, while cross-referencing the distribution records against the census data for the same neighborhoods, trying to understand whether the existing reserve estimate was accurate or whether there were consumption patterns the official figures were missing. The discrepancy had appeared in the secondary data, not the primary, which was why it had escaped the audit threshold. The pattern was only visible if you were looking at the right combination of variables, from a slightly oblique angle, for a reason unrelated to the fraud itself.

He had spent three weeks confirming it before he was certain.

The complication arrived in the fourth week.

Paullus was also an informant for a commercial intelligence network that operated across three provinces, coordinating market information among the larger trading houses and occasionally providing the imperial intelligence apparatus — through back channels that had never been formalized but had been maintained by mutual convenience for a decade — with information about provincial commerce that the frumentarii's intelligence was too coarse to capture. The network had known about Paullus's fraud since the second month. They had not reported it. The fraud served as leverage: a man who could be reported at any time was a man who remained useful and available.

This was how the network worked. It had worked this way for a decade and had, in that time, provided two pieces of intelligence that had prevented significant political instability. Both pieces of intelligence had been accurate and timely. The network's value, assessed against its history, was real.

Paullus had given Gaius, in the second of their three personal conversations, a piece of information about a senatorial relationship that Gaius had used to protect Senator Petronius Marcellus from a minor political attack that would have complicated the grain reserve legislation. The information had been given in the ordinary course of their conversations — not as a deliberate contribution, but as the kind of lateral detail a well-connected man let fall when he was comfortable. Paullus had trusted the crown prince with it without knowing the full use it would be put to.

The correct action was clear. The prosecution served the long-term institutional integrity of the food supply system, established the precedent that enforcement was genuine and not contingent on political usefulness, and removed a controlled compromise point from a network that could, under a different principal, be turned against imperial interests. Paullus's fraud, compounded over time, would ultimately harm the same urban poor whom the grain distribution was designed to protect.

The prosecution would burn the network. The network was worth more to Rome, in actuarial terms, than the recouped grain.

The prosecution was still the correct action.

He filed the prosecution on a Tuesday morning, through the standard magisterial channels, with the documentation he had compiled across three weeks of secondary data analysis. He did not alert the network. He did not offer an accommodation. He did not approach Paullus privately. He did the thing that the institutional logic of grain security required, without equivocation, and then he went to the workshop and sat in the dark and held the cost of it until it was fully present.

The grief of doing the correct thing to a man who had trusted him.

Not guilt — he was not confused about the decision's correctness. Grief. The specific, clear-eyed grief of someone who understood exactly what had been lost and was not going to pretend otherwise. Paullus had trusted him. The trust had been a byproduct of Paullus's own calculations, not a gift freely given, but it had been real as a human experience, real in the sense that Paullus had operated in the relationship believing something that was not going to survive contact with the prosecution documents. That mattered. Not enough to change the decision. Enough to sit with.

He sat with it for a long time.

What changed was not a thing he could have predicted or described in advance. It was a quality of shift, like the moment in a long-running calculation when all the intermediate terms cancel and what remains is simpler than any of the steps that produced it. The Great Sage had been, for seven months, his own analytical voice stripped of register. What arrived now was something that retained the analysis but added the register back — not warmth in the sentimental sense, but the warmth of a presence that understood what things cost and considered that understanding part of the analysis, not a deviation from it.

He named it Raphael. For the healer. For the one who accompanied travelers on journeys of uncertain length.

The prosecution is filed, Raphael said, in the quiet workshop.

"I know."

The decision was correct.

"I know that too."

I'm not saying it to confirm the decision, Raphael said. *I'm saying it because I want you to notice that you know it — that you are certain of the decision and you are also sitting with grief about it, and that these two things are happening at the same time without one canceling the other. That is the condition that makes the decision worth making. A man who is certain without grief has stopped accounting for cost. A man who grieves without certainty makes decisions on the basis of how they feel rather than what they serve.*

Gaius looked at the locked chest that held the metallurgy treatise.

"You've been waiting to say that."

I've been waiting for the moment where it would be heard rather than processed, Raphael said. *There's a difference.*

He sat with this for a while in the dark workshop, listening to Rome's nighttime sounds, thinking about Paullus's network and the grain distribution and the specific mathematics of an institutional decision that was correct and costly simultaneously, and gradually the grief found its level and settled, not gone, not resolved, but occupying its correct proportion of the larger structure.

He put out the lamp and went to bed.

The work continued.

Chapter Eight: The Ships from the East

The harbor master of Ostia sent his message on a Tuesday morning in late September, and it arrived at the palace by relay courier before the second hour.

Six words: *Unknown vessels at Ostia. Come immediately.*

Gaius was in the Senate gallery. He read the message, folded it into his sleeve, and excused himself from the observation bench with the unhurried ease of a man attending to a routine administrative matter. In the corridor outside the gallery, he walked faster.

He had a hypothesis that he had been refusing to model. The hypothesis was that the same mechanism — divine, cosmic, inexplicable, the category did not matter — that had moved the Roman Empire from Earth to Runeterra might have moved other things. He had refused to model it because the probability parameters were too poorly constrained for a meaningful distribution and because dwelling on it felt like a failure of discipline, the kind of speculative attention that produced emotional investment in outcomes rather than clear-eyed assessment of what was actually likely.

He had filed it every time it surfaced.

He was riding to Ostia now, on a horse he had pulled from the imperial stables without stopping to change out of his formal clothes, because the harbor master's six words had the specific quality of a message that the harbor master had written in the condition of having encountered something his professional experience contained no category for.

Probability assessment, Raphael said.

"I know what it is," Gaius said. Quietly, to the road, to himself, to whatever moved behind events.

He did not say this with confidence. He said it with the specific half-terrified certainty of someone who has been holding a number very close to zero for seven months and is now watching it arrive.

The harbor of Ostia was in the particular organized chaos that develops when competent professionals encounter something that falls outside the competence their organization was built to handle. The watch had been doubled at the dock entrance. The harbor master's senior assistant was coordinating the observation posts. The vendors who normally worked the dock approaches had been moved back without being told why, which had produced exactly the low-grade tension that comes from displacement without explanation. Everyone was doing their job correctly and no one entirely knew what they were doing it for.

The harbor master, Gaius Porcius Lentulus, eleven years in the position, met him at the dock gate.

"Seven vessels," Lentulus said. "Three large, four smaller. They came in on the morning tide from the northwest, under oar. No sails." He paused. "The hull design is not Roman. It is not anything I have charts for."

"How many people?"

"Two hundred and thirty-eight. They haven't all disembarked." A pause. "They're waiting."

"Frightened?"

Lentulus considered this for a moment with the attention of a man replaying the scene. "The younger ones. Some of them. The older men — there are three, at the front — no. They have the look of people who have made a decision and are waiting to see if the decision was correct."

Gaius had heard this description before, from his first life, from colleagues describing the demeanor of delegations who had traveled a long way to negotiate something they believed in but were not certain they would be offered. *They have decided something and are waiting for the decision to be confirmed or denied.*

"Keep the watch where it is," he said. "No weapons drawn. No formation changes. Nothing that communicates threat."

He walked to the dock.

The seven vessels were moored with the practiced efficiency of crews who knew what they were doing — the lines were right, the fenders were placed, the gangways had been run down in the correct order. These were people who understood boats. The work showed not military precision but the deeper precision of people whose relationship with the sea was so fundamental that its standards had become invisible, simply the correct way to do things.

They stood in a group on the dock. Two hundred and thirty-eight people — families, he saw. Children. Older men and women. The distribution of a community, not a raiding party or a military unit. Dark clothing, practical and layered, the kind designed for movement and weight management. Equipment that he recognized, from the second library's eighteen years of careful study, as the tools of a specific practice: rope, metal implements, light blades, the particular combination of items belonging to people whose profession was the management of difficult situations in ways that left minimal evidence.

The three elders stood at the front.

He knew their names. He had known them from the text the way a scholar knows the names in a document — as subjects of historical record, as actors in a story he had read carefully across two decades of evenings. Knowing them from the text and standing twenty feet from them were different experiences in ways he was not going to take time to enumerate.

He stopped at what felt like the correct distance — close enough for conversation, far enough for dignity. He looked at the eldest of the three, a man in perhaps his sixty-first or sixty-second year, with the particular quality of stillness that belonged to someone whose training had made invisibility a reflex and who was, right now, choosing not to be invisible.

Gaius spoke in Japanese. Not the Japanese of the Portuguese missionaries or the Dutch trading houses — the Japanese that was spoken in the provinces of Iga and Kōka in the late sixteenth century, in the formal register of address between a recognized authority and a person of standing whose exact rank has not yet been established.

I am Gaius Aurelius Varro, heir to this empire. You are in the harbor of Ostia, in the territory of Rome. You are safe here. I would like to understand how you came to be here and what you need.

The silence was very specific.

It lasted seven seconds. In those seven seconds, the eldest elder's face moved through three things that Gaius watched with the attention of a man who had spent thirty-two years reading faces across tables: first, shock — the involuntary physical shock of hearing your own language come from a completely

wrong mouth in a completely wrong place; second, calculation — the rapid, disciplined assessment of what the shock implied, what its implications were, what the implications of those implications were; third, a caution so complete it had become its own form of respect.

Then the elder said, in Japanese, in the formal register that matched Gaius's own, three words: *You speak Yamato.*

Not Japan. *Yamato* — the older name, the one that was actually used. The one that belonged to the language itself rather than to the foreign rendering of it. Gaius had used Japanese; the elder had responded with the language's own name for itself.

"Yes," Gaius said.

You know what we are.

"I believe so. I would like you to tell me, so I may be certain rather than presuming."

The elder studied him. The study was thorough. It was not hostile — it was the study of someone trained to understand what a person was before deciding how to engage with them, a study conducted not through conversation but through observation of how Gaius stood, how he breathed, where his hands rested, how he had chosen the distance at which to stop.

Then the elder spoke.

We are what remains of the Iga-ryū. We were making our way through the mountains when Nobunaga's armies came. We fled. We took to the river, intending to scatter across the provinces. The river carried us somewhere we did not intend.

A pause. The elder's voice was steady throughout, the kind of steady that was not the absence of feeling but the management of it. The managed steadiness of a man who had decided, at some point in the preceding weeks, to carry the weight without showing it.

We do not know where we are, the elder said. *We know only that it is not Yamato. The stars are wrong. The plants are wrong. The language everyone speaks is wrong.* Another pause. *And yet you speak ours.*

Gaius was quiet for a moment. Around him, the dock continued its controlled chaos. Lentulus was managing the perimeter. The harbor watch held its positions. Two hundred and thirty-eight people stood behind the three elders and waited, and the waiting had the quality of a community that had been waiting for some time and had developed, across the duration of that waiting, the discipline not to let it show more than necessary.

The children were the hardest to look at. Not because they were frightened — the children of people trained from birth in the management of difficult situations had learned early to mirror their elders' composure — but because they were watching with a specific quality of attention that children use when they understand that something important is happening and are old enough to know that its outcome matters but too young to know how to influence it.

This is what I am about to ask you to accept, Gaius thought, looking at them. *That the world you were taken from is gone and the world you are in is real, and that the person standing in front of you, who speaks your language with the accent of a man who learned it in a different lifetime, intends you no harm and is going to ask, in time, for things that will cost you.*

He said, in Japanese, in the informal register that signals a shift from official exchange to direct speech: *You are very far from Yamato. I do not fully understand how you came to be here, and I suspect you do not either. What I know is that you are here, and you are safe, and there is food and shelter within the hour. What comes after that — what you do, what arrangement you make with Rome — is a conversation for when you have rested.*

He paused.

I am not going to ask anything of you today. Today I am only going to ask you to eat and sleep.

The elder held his gaze for a long moment. Then he turned and spoke briefly to the two elders beside him. One of them — younger, perhaps thirty, who had been watching Gaius with the particular attention of someone assessing a threat — said something in a low voice. The eldest responded with two words. The younger man's expression shifted.

The eldest turned back to Gaius.

We accept the food and the shelter, he said. *We do not accept obligation. Not yet.*

"That is exactly what I would have said," Gaius said. "In your position."

Something that was not quite a smile moved across the elder's face. Not warmth — not yet. The beginning of the recognition that the person standing in front of him was, whatever else he was, not performing.

The elder gave a short command. The community began to move — organized, quiet, with the economy of people who had been moving quickly for a long time and had refined it to the essentials. Children were carried or led. Equipment was managed. The elderly were assisted without drawing attention to the assistance, which was its own kind of grace.

Gaius stood on the dock and watched them move toward the harbor master's temporary quarters and thought about probability, and about the gods or whatever force arranged these things, and about the ten-year clock, and about the specific, improbable shape of what had just arrived.

Raphael, he thought.

I know, Raphael said.

"The probability was not zero."

No. It was never zero. You assigned it too low.

He watched a child of perhaps eight years, carried on the back of a young woman who was clearly her mother, turn her head to look at the harbor with wide, steady eyes — not frightened, simply taking in. The ships. The buildings. The smell of salt and oil and fish and the particular noise of an active port. Everything strange and nothing actively threatening, and the steadiness of a child who had been raised to read the difference.

"Feed them," Gaius said, to Lentulus, who had appeared at his elbow. "Properly. Whatever the kitchen can provide. And accommodation — not the harbor dormitory. The guest quarters."

"Those are reserved for official visitors—"

"These," Gaius said, "are official visitors."

Lentulus looked at the retreating group, and then at the Crown Prince, and made the decision that harbor masters who survive eleven years in their position learn to make: that this particular conversation was above his altitude, and that his job was to execute what had just been requested and to defer the questions.

"Yes, Your Highness."

Gaius walked up the dock toward the harbor master's office, because there were provisions to arrange and accommodation to secure and a dozen administrative necessities that needed to happen in the next two hours, and because the work of a preparation decade was not just strategy — it was also, sometimes, finding enough bread and straw bedding for two hundred and thirty-eight people on a Tuesday morning in late September, and doing it before the sun moved much further in the sky.

Chapter Nine: The First Night

The harbor master's office smelled of salt and lamp oil and the particular papyrus-and-dust smell of records that had been filed and not often retrieved. Gaius sat at Lentulus's desk after Lentulus had vacated it with the discreet competence of a man who understood when an office was needed for something other than its owner's use, and he wrote two letters.

The first was to his father. Not long — the Emperor received summary communications as a matter of governance preference, the full briefing reserved for in-person conversation where facial expression could substitute for the paragraphs that written language required. He wrote: *Two hundred and thirty-eight persons of unknown origin have arrived at Ostia on seven vessels of unfamiliar design. They are not threatening. They are not Roman, Gallic, Germanic, Mauretanian, Aegyptian, or any other provincial people. They speak no Latin. They are currently housed in the guest quarters. I will brief you in full when I return to Rome. In the meantime, I would ask that no official inquiry be initiated. This is a matter I need to manage directly.*

He sealed it and gave it to the relay courier who was waiting in the anteroom with the patience of someone paid to wait.

The second letter was shorter and required more thought. It was addressed, in Latin, to the senior household prefect of the Palatine palace, requesting that the kitchen prepare and dispatch, by road courier to Ostia, three days' worth of provisions suitable for a large delegation of guests with unknown dietary customs. He specified the quantities by the arithmetic of two hundred and thirty-eight people and added a note about the inclusion of rice, which Rome imported in small quantities from the eastern trade routes and which he thought might be the one thing on the provisions list that would feel like a gesture rather than a transaction.

He was not certain the gesture would be read. He made it anyway.

Then he sat for a while in the lamp-lit office and listened to the harbor.

Outside, the night was settling. The dock sounds were diminishing to their nighttime register — the creak of the moored vessels, the water against the pilings, the distant conversation of the watch. From the direction of the guest quarters, he could hear nothing, which was itself information. Two hundred and thirty-eight people who had been through something extreme were either sleeping or maintaining the specific quality of silence that the Iga-ryū tradition produced in its practitioners: the silence of people who understood that being audible was a choice, and who had decided, for tonight, not to make it.

He thought about the three elders.

Fujibayashi Nagato he had placed in his early sixties from bearing and skin and the specific gravity of a person who had lived long enough inside a discipline to stop being visible in the maintenance of it. It was simply the texture of the man now — the stillness without effort, the economy of movement that was not careful but had ceased to require care. The kind of quality that in his first world's diplomatic circles he had encountered occasionally in very experienced counterparts: a presence that occupied exactly the space it needed and no more, and that communicated authority not through assertion but through the complete absence of the need to assert.

Momochi Sandayū was older, perhaps seventy, and had said nothing on the dock and had watched everything with the flat, undiscriminating attention of someone who had long since stopped filtering what he looked at. He had, at one point, looked directly at Gaius for approximately four seconds with an expression that communicated nothing specific and everything general — the look of a man taking a complete inventory before filing it.

Hattori Hanzō the Younger was the one Gaius had been most aware of, because Hanzō had been most aware of him. Perhaps thirty years old, with the particular physical economy of someone who had been trained to read environments before entering them and who was, right now, reading this one. He had said one thing on the dock — the low-voiced statement that the eldest had answered with two words — and the exchange had been too fast and too quiet for Gaius to catch its full content, but the structure was clear: Hanzō had raised a concern and Nagato had addressed it, and Hanzō had accepted the address while remaining, visibly, watchful.

He is not opposed to the arrangement, Raphael said. *He is reserving judgment until he has more information. This is professional rather than hostile.*

"I know," Gaius said. "He's the one I need to convince."

Nagato is the decision-maker. Why Hanzō?

"Nagato decides policy. Hanzō decides trust. They're not the same thing." He looked at the lamp. "Nagato can reach an agreement with Rome. Hanzō is the one who determines whether the clan believes the agreement means what it says."

Outside, a night bird called once from somewhere in the harbor's margins and then was quiet.

Gaius thought about the morning. He had arranged food. He had arranged accommodation. He had communicated, as clearly as the constraints of an initial contact permitted, that Rome's intentions were not coercive. These were necessary conditions, not sufficient ones. The sufficient conditions were going to

take longer, and they were going to require a quality of patience that was not passive but active — the patience of someone who was consistently and visibly doing nothing while making every decision about what not to do with the same attention given to what to do.

He had, in his first life, conducted six major treaty negotiations across three continents. The one quality that the successful ones had shared, regardless of how different the parties were in culture and interest and history, was this: both sides had felt, at the end, that the process had respected their intelligence. Not their positions — positions were negotiated, shifted, traded. Their intelligence. The capacity of each party to understand their situation and make real decisions about it rather than being managed toward a conclusion someone else had already reached.

He was going to negotiate with the Iga-ryū by respecting their intelligence.

This meant giving them accurate information, including accurate information about what he wanted from them and why, at the moment when they were ready to receive it rather than at the moment when he was ready to give it. The distinction between those two moments was the entire art.

He put out the desk lamp and found a cot in the anteroom — Lentulus kept one for late harbor emergencies — and lay down in the dark, and listened to the harbor's nighttime sounds, and planned the next thirty days.

Chapter Ten: The Formal Opening

He stayed in Ostia.

This required explanation to the palace, and the explanation he gave was accurate as far as it went: a delegation of unknown origin required direct handling by an official with the authority to make preliminary determinations, and returning to Rome and sending a prefect was a less effective use of the situation's momentum than staying. His father, reading between the lines with the acuity of a man who had spent twenty-three years reading between lines, sent back a two-sentence note: *Stay as long as necessary. Send updates.*

He spent the first three days observing without initiating.

This was not idleness. The deliberate non-approach of the first three days was the first communication in the negotiation — the one that said: *we are not in a hurry, and we know that you are not ready to speak, and we are comfortable waiting until you are.* In his experience, this opening was the most important and the most frequently skipped, because institutions generally found patience politically inconvenient. His advantage was that he had no institution pushing him toward resolution. He had himself, and a ten-year timeline that made thirty days not an indulgence but a reasonable allocation.

He observed.

The community settled into the guest quarters with a practical efficiency that told him something about how long they had been moving before they arrived. They established spatial arrangements within the first four hours — older children in one room with two adults for supervision, infants and nursing

mothers in the adjacent room, the elders in the room with the garden access, working adults distributed through the remaining space in groupings that were clearly established from before. They did not need to discuss where to put anyone. They knew.

The Roman kitchen staff, initially approaching the delivery of meals with the cautious formality of people serving unknown guests, encountered a different situation than they expected: the older Iga-ryū women had appeared in the kitchen doorway on the first morning, not intrusively but with the specific non-threatening posture of people who are accustomed to making themselves useful in unfamiliar spaces, and within an hour were working alongside the kitchen staff with the communicative efficiency of shared labor, which requires very little shared language. The head cook came to Gaius on the second evening with the expression of a man who had encountered something he did not know how to file. "They're extraordinarily skilled," he said. "The one who is perhaps sixty — she identified a problem with the bread dough's hydration without being able to name it. She just adjusted it. The bread was better."

"Good," Gaius said.

"We don't know what they eat."

"Feed them what you feed the household. If something is refused, note it and substitute."

"The children seem to like the olives," the cook said, with the specific wonder of a man who had never considered that olives might be remarkable.

The children.

He had been watching the children with the attention that he gave, in policy analysis, to leading indicators — the things that moved before the larger pattern became visible. What the children did in the first days of an uncertain situation was not a performance. Adults could manage their expressions and their posture and their behavior for an observer. Children, particularly young children, could not sustain management for long, and what slipped through was the real measure of the community's condition.

The children were not traumatized. They were watchful, and watchfulness was their tradition's natural posture, not a symptom of damage. They observed the harbor and the Roman buildings and the Latin-speaking dock workers with the careful attention of children who had been taught that new environments required understanding before engagement, and who were applying that teaching now because it was available to them and because it made sense.

By the third day, two of the harbor worker's younger sons — boys of eleven and twelve who haunted the dock in the way of children whose fathers work outdoors — had established a tentative communication with a group of Iga-ryū children roughly their age. The communication was object-based: a piece of rope, a throwing demonstration, an exchange of knots. Gaius watched this from the harbor master's office window for approximately fifteen minutes and concluded that the children would have a working vocabulary in each other's languages before the adults had exchanged formal positions.

On the morning of the fourth day, the harbor master reported that one of the elders had asked, through gestures and the two words of Latin he had acquired from the kitchen staff, for a meeting.

The message had been directed to the harbor master rather than to Gaius directly. This was information: the elder was using intermediary channels rather than requesting direct access, which indicated either a preference for formal structure or an assessment that direct approach implied a hierarchy they were not

yet prepared to concede. Gaius chose to read it as the latter and to respond accordingly — acknowledging the request through the same intermediary channel rather than presenting himself directly, which would have resolved the question of hierarchy in Rome's favor before the negotiation had established whether that resolution was acceptable.

He sent back: *The meeting is welcome. I will come to you, or you may come to me, as you prefer. This morning or this afternoon, as you prefer.*

The elder chose the harbor master's office at the third hour of the morning. He came alone.

His name, offered in the formal register without preamble as he entered the room and seated himself, was Fujibayashi Nagato.

The formality of the name exchange was itself a gift. It acknowledged that this was an official conversation between people who were taking each other seriously, and it gave Gaius the opportunity to respond in kind: *I am Gaius Aurelius Varro, heir to the empire of Rome.*

They sat for a moment in the office's quiet. Outside, the harbor made its sounds.

Then Nagato said, in careful, measured language: *We have questions.*

"Of course," Gaius said. "I have answers to some of them."

The first question: where are we?

"You are in a port called Ostia, on the coast of a sea called the Tyrrhenian, in the territory of an empire called Rome." He paused. "You are not in any country whose name you have heard before. The country from which you came — Yamato — is far from here. Very far. I do not know the exact distance, because no one from Rome has traveled to Yamato, and no one from Yamato has traveled to Rome, and the waters between are not mapped."

Nagato absorbed this without visible reaction. "Second question," he said.

How do you speak our language?

This was the question that mattered most and required the most precise answer. Not the complete answer — the complete answer was not yet receivable, and offering it before the ground was prepared for it would produce confusion rather than understanding, and confusion in a negotiation of this importance was the thing most likely to close doors that needed to stay open. But the incomplete answer had to be accurate. The incomplete answer could not be a deflection dressed as a response.

"I will tell you the full truth of that," Gaius said, "when we have enough trust between us to receive it correctly. It is not a dangerous truth. It will not harm you. But it is an unusual truth, and unusual truths land better on ground that has been prepared for them." He met Nagato's eyes. "What I can tell you now: I learned your language in a previous period of my life, from teachers in Yamato, over many years. I also learned your history. I learned it because I chose to, because I found it worth knowing. I am aware that this raises as many questions as it answers."

Nagato was quiet for a long moment.

You learned our history, he said.

"Yes."

How much of it?

"Enough to know what happened in Iga," Gaius said. "Enough to understand what you have lost and what you have brought with you."

The silence that followed was different from the earlier silences — not the silence of assessment but the silence of a man sitting with something heavy that has just been named. Not grief, or not only grief. The specific quality of silence that belongs to someone who has been carrying a loss in the condition of not having it acknowledged, and who has just had it acknowledged, and is deciding what to do with the acknowledgment.

"Third question," Nagato said, after a time.

What do you want from us?

"Nothing today," Gaius said. "That is a conversation for later, when we understand each other well enough for the answer to mean something." He paused. "What I can tell you is that I will tell you directly and honestly when the time comes. I will not approach it sideways."

Nagato looked at him for a long moment. Then: *How many days until that conversation?*

Gaius considered. "Thirty. Perhaps less. Perhaps slightly more." He paused. "I am not in a hurry. I think you know that."

Why are you not in a hurry?

"Because the agreement I want is one that holds for a long time," Gaius said. "Agreements reached quickly tend to hold only as long as the conditions that produced them. I would rather take the time to build something that lasts."

Nagato stood. The meeting, by his definition, was complete.

At the door, he paused without turning.

The children, he said. *The food has been acceptable. The rice was—*

A pause in which Gaius did not say anything, because the pause itself was communicating something that did not require completion.

Unexpected, Nagato said.

He left.

Gaius sat in the harbor master's office for a while after, listening to the third hour of the morning settle into the fourth, and thought about rice, and about the specific mathematics of small gestures in large negotiations, and about the thirty days that were beginning now.

Chapter Eleven: The Long Middle

The negotiations took their shape from the first week.

What Gaius had proposed as thirty days became, in practice, a structure in which the formal sessions — conducted in the office, between Gaius and Nagato, in Japanese — occupied perhaps two hours of each third day, and the rest of the time was filled with the subtler negotiation of daily contact between two very different communities who happened to be sharing a space.

This secondary negotiation was, in some respects, the more important one.

The harbor watch had a sergeant named Quintus who had been in the legions for twelve years before an injury removed him from active service and found him, eventually, the harbor watch posting. He was a methodical, patient man who had dealt with every variety of foreign sailor in Ostia's cosmopolitan traffic and who had developed, across those years, the specific combination of firmness and curiosity that characterized the best professional border managers. He had, within the first week, reached an arrangement with the Iga-ryū's working-age adults that was not exactly a partnership and was not exactly a supervision — it was something in the middle, the kind of mutual accommodation that develops between competent people sharing a space when neither side is threatening and both sides have things to teach.

The Iga-ryū adults helped with the harbor's rope work. Their technique was different from the Roman style — more efficient on certain configurations, less so on others — and Quintus's men and the Iga-ryū workers spent several mornings in a wordless technical exchange that produced, by the end of it, a hybrid knotting method for the harbor's mooring lines that was better than either starting point.

Gaius watched this and thought: *that is what it will look like, in the good version.*

The children's language exchange was proceeding along the exponential curve that children's language acquisition always followed: slowly for the first week, then increasingly fast as the critical mass of vocabulary enabled grammatical inference. By the second week, the Iga-ryū children who had been spending mornings with the dock workers' sons could communicate in short sentences on a range of subjects that included food, water, boats, weather, and the comparative merits of different knot types. By the third week, they were translating for their parents.

This last development produced one of the more unexpected moments of the second week: Gaius, walking through the courtyard of the guest quarters on an evening in late October, found one of the Iga-ryū mothers — a woman of perhaps thirty-five, with the bearing of someone trained in the tradition — having a conversation with one of the kitchen staff through the intermediary of her nine-year-old daughter, who was translating both ways with the confidence of a child who has just discovered they are good at something.

The kitchen worker was explaining how the Roman bread ovens worked. The mother was listening with genuine interest. The daughter was translating in both directions with the slight pauses of someone choosing words carefully and the not-quite-concealed pride of someone who is aware they are performing something impressive.

Gaius stopped and watched for a moment without making himself known. He felt something that was not quite sentiment — he had been careful, for reasons of functional clarity, about the proportion of sentiment in his strategic thinking — but was adjacent to it. The specific quality of witnessing something

that was working as it was supposed to work, without requiring management.

The kitchen worker looked up and saw the Crown Prince observing from the archway. She moved to stand, and he shook his head slightly, and she subsided, and the conversation resumed.

He walked on.

On the fourteenth day, in the formal session, Nagato arrived with both other elders.

Momochi Sandayū had not attended any of the previous sessions. He sat through this one in the posture of a man who was completing an evaluation he had been conducting at a distance, and at the end of it he said one thing, in Japanese, to Nagato rather than to Gaius: *He's patient*.

It was not clear whether this was an observation or a conclusion. Nagato received it with the nod of a man who had already reached the same finding independently.

Hattori Hanzō the Younger, sitting to the right of Sandayū, said nothing in the session and watched everything. At the end, as the elders were preparing to leave, he paused in the doorway. "You have not asked us about the storm," he said, in Japanese.

Gaius looked at him. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because the answer doesn't change anything that needs to change." He considered. "You came through something that should not have been possible. The mechanism is not something either of us can explain with certainty. Understanding it might take years, if it's understandable at all. In the meantime, you are here, and the present situation requires attention. I prefer to give it that attention." He paused. "The storm will still be mysterious after the present situation is resolved. The present situation will not wait for the storm to become clear."

Hanzō looked at him for a moment. Then he left without saying anything further.

Progress, Raphael said, later.

"He asked me something," Gaius said. "That's progress. The question itself doesn't matter as much as the fact that he asked it."

What was he actually asking?

"Whether I'm capable of sitting with uncertainty without needing to resolve it. It's a test of temperament, not of knowledge." He paused. "We passed it. The answer would have been wrong if I had shown eagerness to explain the storm. Eagerness to explain what can't be explained is a kind of dishonesty."

Chapter Twelve: The Fourteenth Day

On the fourteenth day of the negotiation, Gaius told Nagato the truth.

Not all of it. But enough.

They were in the harbor master's office in the early afternoon, an hour the harbor had given to the post-midday quiet when the loading work slowed and the administrative work had not yet resumed. The office had taken on, across the two weeks, a quality of familiarity — the specific familiarity of a room where something important has been discussed repeatedly without being resolved, which gives the room a kind of authority it does not have from its own qualities. The lamp, the desk, the two chairs, the harbor noise outside: these had become the furniture of a negotiation, and their familiarity was itself a form of trust.

Gaius had decided on this timing before the session began. The fourteen days of formal exchange had established two things clearly enough to build on: that Nagato was capable of receiving complicated information without requiring it to be simplified for comfort, and that the formal register they had been using — carefully, correctly, with the respect of equals who do not yet fully trust each other — was sufficient for difficult content. What it was not sufficient for was the kind of content that required the informal register: the content that was difficult not because it was complicated but because it was personal.

He shifted registers.

I need to tell you something, he said, in the informal address. *I have been waiting until the ground was ready for it. I think it is ready now. If I am wrong, you will tell me and we will return to the formal discussion.*

Nagato's expression did not change, but the quality of his attention sharpened — the specific sharpening of a man who recognizes that what is about to be said is different in kind from what has been said before.

I have told you that I learned your language and your history in a previous period of my life. This is true. What I have not told you is the nature of that previous period.

He paused. He looked at the table between them.

I am not nineteen years old in the way that a person is nineteen years old who has lived nineteen years. I carry the memory and the knowledge of a previous life. A life that ended, in the ordinary manner of death, in a city in the country of the western Franks — a place of no meaning to you by name, but a city where the great river runs between slopes of vineyards, in the year of my sixty-first winter.

Nagato was very still.

In that life, Gaius continued, *I spent eighteen years in the service of my country's diplomatic mission in Yamato. I learned your language from teachers. I read your history from texts. I studied the traditions of the mountain provinces with the attention of someone who believed they were worth understanding, not as a professional necessity but as a genuine interest. I learned about the Iga-ryū. I learned about the burning. I learned about what was taken.*

He stopped.

The silence lasted long enough that the harbor's midday quiet filled it completely — the water against the pilings, the creak of rope, the distant voice of a work song from one of the cargo vessels being loaded at the far end of the dock.

You died, Nagato said. Not a question.

"Yes."

And you were reborn into this body.

"Into this position. Into this life. With the other life's knowledge behind me, the way a second room is behind the first."

Does anyone here know this?

"My father knows that I have changed. He has not asked me to explain the change, and I have not explained it, because the explanation requires ground that is still being prepared." He paused. "You are the first person I have told."

Nagato was quiet for a time.

Why tell me?

"Because you deserve to know what you are negotiating with," Gaius said. "And because I think you had already concluded that something of this nature was true. You had concluded that my knowledge of Yamato could not come from this place. I am simply giving you the specific version of the truth rather than leaving you with the correct general shape and the wrong details."

Nagato looked at him.

You spent eighteen years in Yamato.

"In service to my country's diplomatic mission. I was not Yamato-born. I was a foreigner who studied your language and your people and your history with more attention than my position required, because I found it worth the attention."

You knew the burning.

"I knew the historical record of it. I did not know it the way you know it." He held Nagato's eyes. "These are different kinds of knowing. I will not pretend they are equivalent."

Another long silence.

You know what we are, Nagato said. The same words from the dock, but carrying different weight now — not the assessment of a first meeting but the full measure of the statement's implications.

"I know the tradition. I know the philosophy. I know the history." He paused. "I know what was nearly lost and what survived." He looked at the table. "I know that the thing that survived was not merely technique. It was a way of understanding the relationship between the individual and the world — a way of moving through difficult situations without being destroyed by them. I know because I read it carefully for many years, and I found it —" He paused. "I found it to be one of the most honest things I had ever studied."

The silence this time was not the silence of assessment or the silence of calculation. It was the silence of something settling — the way heavy things settle when they have found the right surface and the right distribution of weight.

Nagato said, at last: *The gods have a sense of humor.*

"I have had that thought," Gaius said.

You are preparing this empire for contact with a world that you know from that previous life. Not a question. The correct inference, precisely stated — not the overreach of *another world*, but the accurate, limited formulation: knowledge that cannot come from this place.

"Yes."

And you need what we have.

"Yes. Though I want to be careful about how I say this." He looked up. "I need what you have in the way that a civilization that is about to meet something it doesn't fully understand needs people who know how to gather information without being seen, who know how to protect without being visible, who know how to move through difficult situations and come back with what they found. I need that capacity. I do not need to own it. I do not need to control it. I need to be in a relationship with it."

Nagato said nothing.

"What I am offering," Gaius continued, "is not a patron. I am not Oda Nobunaga. I have no interest in a subordinate relationship. What I am offering is a home — land, legal standing, the protections of citizenship, the right to govern your own community by your own laws — in exchange for a partnership. A specific partnership, with specific obligations on both sides."

And if we refuse, Nagato said, the same question as before, the formula of the person who needs to know that the exit exists before they can assess whether they want to use it.

"You go wherever you choose," Gaius said. "We provision you for the journey. We ask nothing." He paused. "I want you to choose to be here. An arrangement built on the absence of alternative is not an arrangement. It is a sentence."

Nagato looked at him for a long time.

Then he said: *I need to speak with Sandayū-sensei and Hanzō-san.*

"Of course."

He left.

Gaius sat in the harbor master's office alone for the remainder of the afternoon, and Raphael was quiet, and the harbor made its sounds, and the sun moved across the window in the long diagonal of late October, and he waited.

Chapter Thirteen: The Agreement

The agreement was signed on the thirty-first day.

In Latin and in Japanese. On two sheets of good vellum, each bearing both languages side by side. The Latin text was in Gaius's hand; the Japanese text was in Nagato's. The calligraphy of the Japanese version was, by any standard, superior — Nagato had been writing in that script for sixty years, and it showed.

The terms:

Land north of Capua, in the hill country above the Via Appia's second milestone from the city, approximately three hundred iugera of farmable terraced slope with a spring-fed water source and natural defensive approaches on three sides. The land transferred in perpetuity, not as a grant revocable by imperial decision but as a purchase — Gaius's private funds, the price nominal, the transaction recorded at the market tribunal as an ordinary land sale to a designated collective.

Legal status: Roman citizenship for all two hundred and thirty-eight persons, with the protections that citizenship afforded, including the right to own property, to contract, to litigate, to pass citizenship to children. The collective governed itself internally by its own structure and its own customs, which Rome recognized and did not regulate. The territory designated a protected reservation under direct imperial authority — exempt from provincial administration, from the ordinary mechanisms of Roman law's civil jurisdiction, from the census obligations that normally accompanied citizenship. The reservation was, in practical terms, Rome-within-Rome: a protected space with its own rules, answerable to the emperor and no one beneath him.

In exchange: an oath. Not the military oath of the legions, not the senatorial oath of office. A specific oath, negotiated across three sessions and worded with the precision of people who understood that the wording of agreements was where the agreements actually lived. The oath bound the clan to protect the Emperor, the empire, and the dynasty through the specific arts of the Iga-ryū tradition: intelligence gathering, counter-intelligence, protection of persons and information, and operational action when the empire's security required means that its military structure could not provide. The oath was to the institution, not to the person — to the office of Emperor and the perpetuation of Rome, not to the particular man who currently held the purple.

This distinction had been Hanzō's contribution. On the twenty-eighth day, attending a session for the first time without having been invited, he had said, in his first direct contribution to the formal negotiation: *The oath cannot be to you. You will die, and the oath must survive you. The oath must be to Rome itself.*

Gaius had looked at him for a moment and then said: "Yes. You're right."

Hanzō had nodded once, with the expression of a man confirming a finding he had already reached, and said nothing further.

The settlement received a name three days after the agreement was signed, while the community was still in Ostia completing the preparations for the journey north. The name was given by the community itself, not assigned by Rome, as had been agreed. Nagato announced it to Gaius at the last formal session, in the Japanese that had become their working language across thirty-one days: *Kagami-no-Mori.*

The Forest of Mirrors.

Gaius translated it in his head and sat with it for a moment. It was precise. A community whose survival depended on showing the world a reflection of what the world expected to see, while keeping the actual substance carefully behind the glass. It was also, at a different angle, a description of what happened when the second library looked at the first: the experience of finding yourself reflected back from a different time.

"It's a good name," he said.

Yes, Nagato agreed, with the satisfaction of a man whose community has found the right word for the right thing.

The journey to Capua took eleven days, with a full supply column organized by the palace logistics office, which had been given the description *diplomatic delegation, internal relocation* and had not been given any further information, which was the appropriate level of information for logistical purposes. The column moved at the pace of the slowest members of the group, which in practice was the pace of the young children, which was also the pace that allowed the community to travel without the visible strain of a forced march.

Gaius traveled with them for the first three days and then turned back toward Rome, because there was work in Rome that had been waiting, and because his presence was not necessary for the remainder of the journey, and because the Iga-ryū traveling north toward their new home did not need the Crown Prince riding alongside them to confirm that they were permitted to be where they were going. They had the documents. They had the road. They had each other.

On the last evening before he turned south, he walked the edge of the camp with Hanzō.

They had not spoken much directly across the thirty-one days. Hanzō had attended the later sessions and contributed when the contribution was precise and necessary and been silent the rest of the time, and Gaius had matched this register, because the attempt to generate a warmer exchange before it was naturally available would have produced the performance of warmth rather than the thing itself.

This evening's walk had started as an inspection of the camp's perimeter, which Hanzō was conducting as a matter of professional habit, and which Gaius had joined because he was passing in the same direction and the invitation, offered in the form of a single glance rather than a spoken request, was genuine.

They walked for a while without speaking.

The hills above Capua were dark against a sky that had kept the last of the day's light in its western strip for longer than the east had been dark, and the camp smelled of the cooking fires and the horses and the cold-coming autumn earth that was specific to this part of Italia and to this specific elevation. The second library supplied the smell as known and named it before his conscious mind did.

"One question," Hanzō said.

"Ask it."

"The world beyond the storms." He looked at the dark hills rather than at Gaius. "Is it as complicated as Yamato was?"

Gaius thought about this honestly.

He thought about Noxus, which had built an empire on the logic that strength determined worth and had believed it so completely that the belief had become the architecture of its entire civilization. He thought about the Shadow Isles, which were what happened when a single catastrophic decision spread its consequences through every connected system until the original form was unrecognizable. He thought about the Void beneath Icathia, which was not a thing that could be negotiated with or redirected or managed — only contained, or not contained. He thought about the Freljord and the ancient things

sleeping beneath its ice, patient in the way that things are patient when they have been waiting longer than civilizations have been keeping records. He thought about Ionia and its beauty and its fractures and the specific vulnerability of a place that had believed its isolation was protection.

"More so," he said. "Different categories of complicated. But more of them."

Hanzō absorbed this. He walked several steps in silence.

"Then we will have work," he said, in the tone of a man whose tradition had been nearly destroyed and who had found, in an impossible harbor on the wrong side of whatever divided the worlds, a reason to continue it.

"Yes," Gaius said. "We will have a great deal of work."

They completed the perimeter in silence, and then Gaius returned to his tent, and in the morning he rode south toward Rome, and behind him the Iga-ryū continued north toward the hills above Capua, where the land was waiting and the spring was cold and clear, and the terraced slopes would need work before they were farmable, and the work would begin immediately, because that was what these people did with the space they were given.

Chapter Fourteen: The Three Institutions

He proposed the legislation to the inner council in the third year of the preparation, and he did it in the form that the three years of working with Roman political structures had taught him was most effective: not as a single proposal but as three distinct ones, each with its own sponsor, each with its own economic justification, each designed for a specific audience within the Senate.

His father asked, in private, the night before: "Why education?"

"Because Rome needs it," Gaius said. "And because the world we are going to meet has a city on an isthmus between two continents that has built its entire civilizational advantage on the organized application of knowledge to practical problems. When Rome meets that city — and we will meet it — I want Rome to arrive at the meeting knowing what organized knowledge can do."

"And the Senate will agree to this?"

"Parts of the Senate will oppose it. I have arguments for all the parts that will oppose it." He paused. "Senator Corvus will be the hardest. He believes that organized questioning is inherently destabilizing."

"And you disagree."

"I believe that unorganized questioning is more destabilizing. People will question the foundations of things regardless of what institutions permit. The choice is whether the questioning happens inside a framework with accountability and review, or outside a framework where it can compound without correction." He looked at his father. "An empire that is afraid of questions has already decided it cannot answer them."

His father was quiet for a moment. "Which senator sponsors the basic curriculum?"

"Marcellus of Aegyptus. The grain reserve is his legacy. The school network is the natural extension of it — feeding minds as well as bodies, if you want the speech-making version."

"And the practical college?"

"Senator Marcus Licinius Rufus of the engineering committee. He opposed the Ostia expansion on principle. The Collegium Polytechnica gives him a way to claim investment in Roman technical capacity without conceding the naval argument."

"And the advanced institution?"

"I sponsor it directly," Gaius said. "It's the one that will attract the most resistance, and I need to be the one who argues for it, because it's the only argument I can make from a position of genuine conviction."

The Senate debate on all three proposals took six sessions across two months.

The *Academia et Lyceum* for Basic Education passed with relative ease — Marcellus had done his preparation work carefully, and the economic case for literate workers in the provinces was a case the fiscal conservatives could accept on its own terms without engaging with its longer implications. The debate was animated by the question of whether the curriculum should be standardized across provinces or adapted to local conditions. Gaius had prepared a position on this: standardized in mathematics and Latin letters, adaptable in everything else. The Senate reached approximately this conclusion through its own deliberation, which was the intended outcome.

The *Collegium Polytechnica* for applied sciences was more complex. Rufus had done his work — the engineering committee was broadly supportive — but the philosophical schools' representatives raised the objection that a state-funded institution for practical knowledge degraded the tradition of speculative inquiry. This was an objection Gaius had prepared for by ensuring, in the curriculum design, that the Collegium included a theoretical component that explicitly built on the philosophical tradition. The objection subsided when its proponents realized they were opposing a proposal that credited their own tradition rather than superseding it.

The *Universitas et Ateneo* for Higher Learning was the third day's difficulty.

Senator Publius Valerius Corvus rose on the second day of its debate and gave a speech that was, Gaius noted from the gallery, genuinely good. Not demagogic — Corvus was too intelligent for cheap rhetoric — but substantive, rooted in a real argument that deserved a real answer: that the systematic questioning of established knowledge was not merely an academic exercise but an act with political consequences, because knowledge and the social structures that organized around it were not separate systems. To undermine the epistemic foundation was to undermine the institutional foundation. Stability required consensus on the foundations.

Gaius had arranged for the debate to reach an impasse by the middle of the second day.

He had done this through the quiet management of the speaking order — ensuring that the strongest arguments on both sides were heard in a sequence that produced genuine disagreement rather than procedural resolution, and that the procedural impasse required a clarifying address from a senior non-partisan authority. The Presiding Consul, playing his role, offered the gallery.

The Crown Prince of Rome rose.

He spoke for eight minutes. He did not use notes.

The argument: stability required not the suppression of questioning but the management of it. An empire whose foundations could not survive scrutiny had already decided those foundations were indefensible. The purpose of the Universitas was not to produce skeptics as an end in itself but to produce people whose questions were rigorous rather than merely restless — whose challenges to established knowledge came with the discipline and methodology that allowed the challenges to be evaluated, answered, and where necessary corrected. The danger was not organized inquiry. The danger was unorganized inquiry: the kind that happened in private rooms, outside the reach of accountability, where errors compounded without correction and where the distance between question and conclusion was not traversed with the discipline that made the conclusion trustworthy.

A civilization that can defend its foundations against honest scrutiny has nothing to fear from the scrutiny, he said, as the closing line. *A civilization that cannot is already in danger, regardless of whether the questioning is organized or suppressed.*

The vote was called.

It passed by nineteen.

Senator Corvus approached him in the colonnade afterward, with the controlled expression of a man who had lost an argument he was not accustomed to losing. "You are either very right," he said, "or very dangerous, and I have not yet determined which."

"I hope to be both," Gaius said pleasantly. "They are not mutually exclusive."

Corvus looked at him for a moment with the assessing attention of a man filing information for future use. Then he nodded, precisely once, and walked away.

In the workshop that night, the fourth text was half-finished on the bench — a treatise on hydraulic engineering whose principles would, in a decade, allow Roman engineers to redesign the aqueduct distribution systems in the empire's most water-stressed provinces. The first Collegium cohort would receive it in two years, through the same recovered-Hellenistic-text mechanism as the metallurgy treatise, and would spend the first semester arguing with it in the specific, productive way of engineers who have been given a tool they can see the value of and are determined to understand why it works before they trust it.

He would not tell them who wrote it. The attribution would remain disputed by three generations of scholars. The water would still flow.

Chapter Fifteen: The Cartographer

Marcus Veridius Ocelus was twenty-four years old when the Crown Prince's office commissioned the western coastal survey, and he had the kind of professional obsessiveness about coastlines that made him precisely suited to a task that required noticing things that were not in the brief.

He had been recommended through a chain of four professional relationships, none of which could be traced back to the palace without a great deal of patient reconstruction. The recommendation chain was not designed to be invisible — it was designed to be plausible: a talented young cartographer, recognized by his teachers at the technical college in Ravenna, whose work had been noted by a provincial official who had mentioned him to a contact in the Department of Public Works, who had included him in a survey staffing proposal. All of it was real. None of it was accidental.

The survey's stated purpose was harbor assessment. The classified annex — delivered in a fifteen-minute meeting with the Crown Prince that Marcus had been told was a routine budget authorization, and which was in practice a complete secondary briefing — required the documentation of every natural anchorage along the western coast capable of supporting a military harbor facility on a three-year conversion timeline.

Marcus had spent the better part of eighteen months on this, working his way south from the Ligurian coast through the Tyrrhenian, and had developed, across those months, the specific intimate knowledge of the western coastline that came from looking at it every day in every weather. He knew which approaches were dangerous in the southern swells and which were sheltered from the northern winds that came down hard from the Gallic coast in winter. He knew the depth gradients at the natural anchorages and which rock formations created underwater hazards that were invisible from the surface. He knew the western shore of the Roman Enclave the way a person knows a road they have walked every day for two years.

In the fourth month of his second year on the survey, twenty miles south of the Pillar of Hercules, he found the cave.

It was accessible only at low tide, in the hour before the water returned to cover the rock shelf that served as its approach. He had been measuring the depth gradient of the anchorage at the headland's southern tip when the retreating tide revealed the shelf, and professional habit had sent him along it before the tide turned.

Inside the cave, above the high water line, there was a body.

Not recent. The decomposition and the evidence of exposure placed it at months rather than weeks. A man, by the skeleton's dimensions, perhaps thirty to forty years old by the bone structure. He had been alive when he reached the cave — there was a makeshift arrangement of debris that suggested an attempt at shelter, and the positioning of the bones was the positioning of someone who had lain down deliberately rather than fallen.

There were objects with him.

A fragment of wood — the grain was wrong for any timber species that grew on the Roman coast, or that Marcus had charted in the western Mediterranean's trading traffic. A length of rope, the weave pattern unfamiliar — not the standard Roman sailor's work, not the Gallic fisher's twist, not the Mauretanian coastal style. And a small carved figure, perhaps three inches long, in a material that was not ivory and not bone and that had a specific, faintly organic quality that Marcus could not place in his experience of materials.

He made measurements. He made drawings. He bagged the objects carefully in the canvas he used for artifact collection during survey work. He noted the location with the precision that his training demanded. He noted everything.

He sent the report to the Crown Prince's office with the notation: *Unusual find, western survey, requesting priority meeting*.

The meeting was in the Palatine study, ten days after the report arrived.

Marcus put the objects on the table. He stood across from the Crown Prince and watched him look at them, and he noticed — with the cartographer's habit of noticing what other people's eyes did when they encountered new information — that the Crown Prince looked at the objects the way someone looks at a thing they recognize rather than the way someone looks at a thing they are trying to identify.

"You know what these are," Marcus said. Not an accusation. An observation.

"The rope pattern is consistent with a style from a maritime culture that operates east of the storm barrier," the Crown Prince said. "I recognized it from study." He paused. "The figure's material I don't recognize, which tells me it's either pre-existing cultural work from that region or something more recent that postdates the records I have access to."

"East of the storm barrier," Marcus said.

"Yes."

The silence that followed had the quality of a word that had just been said that could not be unsaid, and Marcus was determining what to do with it.

"The dead man," Marcus said. "He came from there."

"I believe so. I believe he came through the barrier accidentally — a gap in the storms, a period of thinning that allowed an unintended crossing. He survived the passage but was too injured or too exhausted to go further." He paused. "He died here, on our shore, some months ago. He was the first."

"The first," Marcus said.

"The barrier is thinning. This man was an early sign of what will eventually be a regular crossing. In approximately six or seven years, the crossing will be navigable from both directions."

Marcus looked at the objects on the table. He was, by professional training, a man who understood scale — who had spent his career translating the vast and the small into relationships of proportion that made both intelligible. The western coastline he had spent two years documenting. The harbor assessment. The question about Ostia that had, in retrospect, been asked with a different purpose than the committee had understood.

"You have been preparing for this," he said.

"Since the beginning."

Marcus looked at him for a long time. He was not frightened — he was the kind of man for whom the size of a thing was a professional challenge rather than an existential threat. But he was recalibrating, which required a moment.

"I have a question," he said.

"Ask it."

"Are you going to tell me everything?"

"In time," the Crown Prince said. "If you want it."

"I want to understand what I'm mapping," Marcus said. "I've been mapping a coastline that faces something. I should know what it faces."

"Give me three years," Gaius said. "At the end of three years, if Rome is still standing and we are both still alive, I will tell you everything." He paused. "I need three years to build the context that makes the explanation receivable. Not because it is complicated, but because certain truths require a frame, and the frame takes time."

Marcus looked at the rope fragment. He looked at the carved figure. He thought about the dead man who had died twenty miles south of the Pillar of Hercules, in a cave only accessible at low tide, alone and far from anything that would have made sense to him.

"I can wait three years," he said.

He was the first member of what would eventually be called the Exploratores, and he would never entirely forgive the Crown Prince for making the work sound straightforward. But he would do the work, and he would do it well, and forty-three separate coastal surveys later he would be standing on the westernmost point of the Iberian coast watching the storm barrier dissolve, and he would know, from the precision of the observations he had made across six years, exactly what he was seeing.

He took the objects back and re-bagged them. He would keep them, documented and stored, in the locked case he maintained for survey materials that did not belong to the official record.

The dead man's name he would never know.

Chapter Sixteen: Year Five — The Naming

The Senate's inner council met in the small room behind the Curia Julia on a morning in early November of the fifth year, and Gaius presented three things.

The map was the third.

The first was a summary of five years of infrastructure investment: the Ostia shipyards, now producing a redesigned trireme hull whose improved waterline geometry — derived from principles in a second engineering text that had been introduced to the Collegium in the fourth year — gave it a twenty-three percent speed advantage over the previous standard; the grain reserve, now at sixty-eight percent of the strategic target; the signal relay network, now connecting every provincial capital to Rome in under thirty-six hours in favorable weather; the three educational institutions, whose first Universitas cohort

was entering its second year and whose Collegium engineers had, in the previous semester, produced an independent extension of the hydraulic engineering treatise that its anonymous author found both unexpected and correct.

The second thing was a question. He asked each member of the council, directly, what they understood about the Mare Ignotum — what they believed lay beyond the storm barrier, what Roman theological and philosophical tradition held about the boundary's nature, and what they would consider a credible basis for revising those beliefs. The answers varied. What they had in common was that none of the twelve senators had a conceptual model that included the possibility of a large, inhabited world on the other side.

Then he opened the sealed case and produced the map.

It was Marcus's work — the accumulated product of six years of coastal surveys, cross-referenced against everything Gaius had assembled through inference, study, and the slow, careful intelligence gathering of a preparation decade. It showed the eastern continental landmass of the world the barrier concealed: the double continent of Valoran and Shurima, joined at the narrow Piltovan Isthmus, with the maritime approaches from the west and the general outlines of the major political powers as Gaius understood them from the second library's two decades of accumulated knowledge.

The twelve senators studied it in silence.

Senator Gaius Petronius Marcellus — whose grain reserve legislation had become the foundation of a domestic reputation that was going to outlive him by a generation, who had co-sponsored the school network and was known in three provinces as the man who believed in feeding both body and mind — said, very quietly: "You have been building toward this."

"Since the beginning."

"How long have you known?"

"Since the augural texts. Five years."

The silence that followed was the particular silence of twelve experienced political minds simultaneously revising their model of the preceding five years — of the Ostia expansion, the grain reserve, the relay network, the schools — and arriving, each at their own pace, at the understanding that these things were not domestic improvements with a foreign policy subtext. They were the architecture of a preparation for the most significant event in Roman history since the Miraculum.

Senator Corvus said: "The intelligence capability we would need. For contact with a world of this complexity."

"We are developing it," Gaius said. "Rapidly." He did not mention Kagami-no-Mori. The settlement north of Capua appeared on no public map and in no official record except one sealed document in the imperial archive and the land transfer records of the Capua market tribunal, where it was listed as the property of a registered collective under the name *Kagami no Kai*. The inner council would learn of the Iga-ryū when the operational situation required it. The operational situation had not yet required it.

The deliberation was long and detailed and produced eight significant objections, all of which Gaius had modeled in advance. He answered each with data. Not argument — data. The distinction mattered because senators who were given arguments had to evaluate the quality of the reasoning, which invited the competitive instinct to find the flaw. Senators who were given data had to evaluate the quality of the evidence, which invited the collaborative instinct to understand the implication.

By the end of the session, the expanded preparatory operation had been provisionally authorized. The Exploratores — Marcus's survey team, now formalized with a budget and a mandate — would receive official status. A sealed information protocol would manage what the inner council knew and what would eventually be shared with the broader Senate.

Walking home from the Curia Julia through the cold November dark, Gaius allowed himself, for exactly three blocks, to feel something that was not quite hope and not quite confidence but lived in the territory between them — the structural satisfaction of a man who has placed the right stones in the right positions and can see, for the first time, the complete shape of what he is building.

You're tired, Raphael said.

"Yes."

Five years is a long time.

"It's the first fifth of the work." He walked. "The next five years are the harder ones, because the shape exists now and can be seen. What can be seen can be opposed."

Who will oppose it?

He thought about the archive proxy. About whoever had sent a trained operative to read the temporal covenant passages. He had spent four years building toward the identity of that person and had arrived, through the Iga-ryū's patient work, at a name: Senator Gaius Sempronius Calvus, of the Danubian provinces. A man of genuine conviction who had concluded, correctly, that the Crown Prince's infrastructure program was larger than its stated purpose and had been, methodically, assembling the evidence.

"The people who are not wrong," Gaius said. "The ones who understand that something significant is happening and don't yet understand what it is. They are the difficult opposition, not the self-interested ones. Self-interest is predictable and negotiable. Genuine conviction that you're protecting something worth protecting is harder."

What do you do with them?

"Tell them the truth," Gaius said. "When the time is right. The same thing I've been doing with everyone who needs to know it." He looked at the Palatine's dark profile against the night sky, the lights of the torches marking its approaches. "Truth told at the wrong time is not truth. It's a weapon you hand to someone who will use it against you. Truth told at the right time is the only foundation for anything that lasts."

He walked the last two blocks home and went to bed.

Chapter Seventeen: Year Six — Cael Dunmore

The message arrived from the relay station at Carthago Nova on a morning in the sixth year, flagged with the notation code that Marcus Veridius Ocelus had been authorized to use for the single category of intelligence that bypassed the standard priority queue entirely: *First contact, western origin*.

The message itself was seven words: *A man came through the barrier. Alive.*

Gaius read it at his desk in the Palatine study, at the first hour of the morning, before the household was awake. He read it twice. Then he set it face-down on the desk and sat with the information for a while, in the way he sat with important things — without rushing toward the response, letting the full weight of the implication settle before he began to move.

The barrier was thinning faster than the central estimate.

Or the central estimate was correct and this was a lucky accident — a gap in the storms, a brief window of reduced resistance that had caught one vessel and let it through. The data would tell him which, once Marcus had the contact's full account. For now, the fact of the contact was enough to work with.

A person from the other side.

He thought about what they would be. The rope fragment's weave pattern was Bilgewater-adjacent — the maritime culture of the Serpent Isles, where the salvagers and the independent traders worked the waters between Ionia and the Piltovan approaches. A Bilgewater person, most likely. Someone who worked the open ocean professionally, which meant someone with the practical maritime knowledge that would help them survive a storm passage that should have been unsurvivable, and the professional orientation toward uncertainty that distinguished people who chose to sail in dangerous waters from people who had been unfortunate enough to find themselves in them.

What do you say to the first person from Runeterra? Raphael asked.

"Exactly what I say to everyone," Gaius said. "The truth. In the order they can receive it."

He began drafting the initial communication protocol — the specific questions to ask, the specific information to provide, the specific things to demonstrate and the specific things to defer. Not a script; the contact would be a person, not a text, and persons required response rather than recitation. A framework.

Then he stopped, because Raphael had said *framework* in his head and the word was one he had been trying to excise from his internal vocabulary for three months on the grounds that it was the kind of word that substituted for specificity.

He started again. A set of principles.

First: do not hide what we are. Rome is large and old and does not need to pretend to be smaller or newer. Second: do not present what we want before we have established what the person in front of us needs. Third: tell the truth about our limitations at least as readily as we tell the truth about our capabilities. Fourth: ask more questions than we answer, in the first conversations.

He wrote this in the journal, in the cipher, and then he arranged for a fast relay rider to carry a response to Carthago Nova: *Bring him to the guest quarters of the southern harbor administration house. Feed him. Let him rest. Do not question him. I am coming.*

He rode for Carthago Nova that afternoon.

The man's name was Cael Dunmore. He was approximately thirty years old, heavily tattooed in patterns that told the second library, with the specificity of a text he had studied, that he was affiliated with the Bilgewater Slaughter Docks salvage fraternity — the nautical tattoos were specific enough to a particular community that the identification was reliable. He was deeply dehydrated when they found him. He had been unconscious for the first two days. He came back to consciousness on the third day in the condition that Destiny's Crucible had prepared Gaius for: the specific disorientation of a person who is not certain whether what they are experiencing is real.

Gaius arrived on the fourth day, when the dehydration had been treated and Cael had eaten enough to think.

He spoke to him in Latin first, to establish the language. Then, because Cael's expression told him the man had none, he had one of the harbor staff who spoke Bilgewater trade creole — a partial overlap with the trade language of the Serpent Isles region, not perfect but functional — do the initial orientation.

The orientation was simple: *You are alive. You are safe. You came through the storm barrier. You are far from your home. The person who will speak with you tomorrow is the person in charge of this place. He intends you no harm.*

Cael's response, through the interpreter, on the fourth day: "I need to know where I am."

On the fifth day, when Gaius sat across from him in the guest quarters' small receiving room, the first thing Cael said was the same question in Bilgewater trade creole, which Gaius's eighteen years in Japan had given him enough general linguistic architecture to approximate a rough understanding of, from the secondary material he had studied in preparation.

"You are in the territory of Rome," Gaius said, in the trade creole, slowly, with the deliberate accent of someone who is working in a language they have studied rather than spoken. "Approximately two thousand miles to the west and somewhat north of the Serpent Isles."

Cael stared at him.

"Two thousand miles," Cael said.

"Approximately. The crossing through the barrier is impossible to navigate directly. You would have been carried by the storm currents rather than sailing a course. The actual distance traveled would be considerably larger."

Cael absorbed this. He was, Gaius noted, in the same way he noted everything useful about people he was meeting for the first time, the kind of person who processed large information by going very still and very quiet. Not shut down — processing. The stillness of a working mind.

"The barrier has a far side," Cael said.

"Yes."

"This is the far side."

"Yes."

"You knew that."

Not a question. The same observation Marcus had made, on the same basis: Gaius had answered the question too quickly, with too much specificity, for the information to be new to him.

"I have known that the barrier had a far side, and that someone from your world would eventually cross it, for approximately six years," Gaius said. "I have been preparing for this contact."

Cael looked at him for a long time. "You're the Crown Prince," he said. "That's what the interpreter said."

"Yes."

"You personally came to Carthago Nova to meet a Bilgewater salvager who washed up on your shore."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because the first contact between our two worlds will define every contact that follows it," Gaius said. "The first impression that Runeterra receives of Rome is the one that will shape every subsequent negotiation. I wanted that impression to be: they knew we were coming, they prepared, they were honest, and they came themselves."

Cael was quiet. He looked at his hands — the tattoos, the rope-callused palms, the hands of a person whose professional tool was the sea and who had, recently, been in too much sea. Then he looked back at Gaius.

"What do you want from us?" he said.

It was the right question. It was the question that everyone Gaius had worked with had eventually asked, and it was always the question that mattered most, because it was the question that separated people who were assessing a situation from people who were trying to be polite about it.

"That is a longer conversation," Gaius said. "What I can tell you today is that I want to be useful to Runeterra. Not useful in the way of a power that has decided what usefulness means — useful in the way of a partner who asks first."

"And you're asking."

"Starting with this: what do you need to feel safe, right now, in this room?"

Cael blinked. It was not the question he had expected. He thought about it for a moment.

"I need to know I can leave," he said.

"You can leave whenever you want," Gaius said. "We will provision you for the journey and ask nothing. There is a vessel in the harbor that can return you to the Serpent Isles if the storm barrier allows passage. We believe it will allow passage in the current season — the storms are thinning." He paused. "I would ask, before you go, for the chance to have several more conversations. Not to extract information — to begin a relationship. But you are not required to agree."

Cael looked at him.

"Several more conversations," he said.

"Yes."

"And then I can go."

"Yes."

Cael sat back. He was running an assessment — Gaius could see the architecture of it in the quality of his stillness — the same kind of assessment a salvager ran when he had found something significant and was trying to determine whether the value was real or apparent, and whether the effort of recovery would be justified by what was there.

"All right," he said. "Several more conversations."

They had eleven.

Chapter Eighteen: The Letter

On the last day before Cael's departure, Gaius gave him a letter.

It was sealed, in the imperial wax, bearing the eagle standard. It was written in trade creole, which had cost Gaius six weeks of intensive study to produce adequately, with corrections from a harbor official who had spent three years trading in the Serpent Isles approaches. The letter had been rewritten four times.

The first draft was too formal. The second was too detailed. The third was too carefully constructed to be believed. The fourth said what it needed to say in the way it needed to say it.

In part: *We have been waiting, and we have been preparing, and we believe the waiting is nearly over. We do not know everything about your world, but we know enough to understand that what it faces is larger than any single faction can address. We are not here to be one more faction. We are here to help build the table at which the factions can meet. This is an offer, not a demand. We will be at the western approach when the barrier falls, and we will be there as guests rather than invaders, and we will bring with us everything we have spent years building. What happens next is, as it should be, a conversation.*

He had asked Cael, in the tenth conversation, to deliver it to the person in Bilgewater who would know what to do with it. Cael had named a woman called Vesper, who ran a salvage collective on the Slaughter Docks. He had said: "She's the kind of person who figures out what something is worth before anyone else does."

"Good," Gaius said.

"She'll have questions."

"Tell her to send them back. We have time for questions."

On the morning of Cael's departure, standing on the dock at Carthago Nova in the early light of a winter morning, Cael said: "You told me the truth."

"Yes."

"Most of it."

"As much of it as serves the conversation," Gaius said. "There are things I haven't told you that you would need a longer relationship with Rome to receive correctly. I didn't withhold them because they would harm you. I withheld them because they require context."

"And when will I have the context?"

"Come back," Gaius said. "Bring Vesper's questions. We'll build the context together."

Cael looked at him for a moment. He was the kind of man who thought about what things meant before he said what he thought. He had been that way through all eleven conversations, and Gaius had found it, consistently, the most reliable quality a person could demonstrate.

"All right," Cael said. "I'll come back."

He boarded the vessel. It moved out of the harbor on the morning tide. Gaius stood on the dock until it was past the harbor entrance and into the open water, and then he walked back up the dock toward the city.

Raphael said: *The first thread.*

"The first thread," Gaius agreed.

Epilogue: The Edge of the World

Marcus Veridius Ocelus stood on the westernmost point of the Iberian coast in the late autumn of the sixth year of the preparation, and he watched the storm system that was the outer edge of the Mare Ignotum dissolve.

Not suddenly. The word *dissolve* was too fast for what was actually happening, which was a process that had been occurring across the entire time he had been watching it — forty-three separate surveys, across four years, in every season and every weather, the data accumulating in his survey logs with the specific precision of a man who understood that the value of observation was in its consistency. He had logged the pressure gradients, the cloud formation altitudes, the wave periodicity measurements, the barometric comparisons to the previous surveys. He had watched the storm's outer edge become fractionally less defined month by month, the pressure differential that maintained the permanent cyclonic system declining by measurements small enough to be insignificant individually and legible as a pattern only in aggregate.

He had logged forty-three surveys. He was looking at the forty-fourth.

The outer pressure gradient had dropped again. By the numbers, the change was modest. By the trend line, across forty-three observations, it was the latest data point in a curve that ended, approximately eighteen months from this morning, with the outer system no longer viable.

The inner system would follow. Three to four years after that.

In five to six years, the Mare Ignotum would be navigable.

He wrote the observation in his survey log, with the precision the Crown Prince had, years ago, taught him to value above concision. He wrote the pressure readings and the wave measurements and the cloud formation classifications. He wrote the comparison to the previous survey and the trend estimate and the confidence interval. He wrote it all in the technical language of cartography, in the service of a record that was going to be, he was increasingly certain, the most important survey document in the history of Rome.

In the margin, in his own handwriting, smaller than the official text: *I think we're nearly out of time. I also think we might be ready.*

He sealed the log.

He gave it to the relay courier who was waiting with a horse at the cliff path behind him — the courier would have it in Rome in ten days.

Then he stood on the edge of the world for a while longer.

He thought about the dead man in the cave twenty miles south, whom he had found four years ago and whose objects were still in his locked case. He thought about the report he had written and the fifteen-minute meeting that had followed it and the three years of waiting for the truth that the Crown Prince had promised. He had three years left on the promise and was beginning to wonder if the promise would arrive before the barrier fell and made the context self-evident.

He thought about the Exploratores — his survey team, now officially named and budgeted, six cartographers and two engineers and a harbor assessment specialist who had all been selected by the same quiet, invisible chain of professional recommendations that had produced Marcus himself. None of them knew the full shape of what they were mapping. They knew they were mapping something important, in the service of a preparation they had been told was significant without being told for what. They did their work with the particular dedication of people who have been trusted with something without being told everything, and who have decided that the trust is worth the uncertainty.

He thought about the Bilgewater salvager — Cael Dunmore, the name had come through the report, with a physical description and a set of nautical tattoos that Marcus could not interpret but that the Crown Prince had identified with an immediacy that told its own story. The salvager had come through the barrier and had gone back, carrying a letter. The barrier had let him through again, which meant the thinning was real and the timing was closer than the central estimate.

He thought about the storm.

From this distance, on this headland, the storm was still impressive. It filled the western horizon the way a mountain range filled a northern horizon — not with the clarity of individual features but with the mass of a boundary, the specific visual weight of a thing that separated here from there. It had been this way

his entire life. It had been this way for every Roman's entire life, since the Miraculum. The boundary between Rome and whatever lay beyond it, ancient and permanent and accepted as the shape of the world.

It was not permanent.

He had always known this intellectually, from the moment the Crown Prince had told him. But knowing something intellectually and standing on a headland watching it become less true, month by month, survey by survey, was a different kind of knowing. He had spent four years becoming, by incremental measurement, the person who knew the storm the most precisely of any living Roman, and what that precision had given him was not fear — it was something closer to awe, in the specific sense of awe that comes from understanding the scale of something you are part of.

The world to the east of that storm was large and complicated and had been developing its answers to its own impossible questions across the same centuries that Rome had been building its roads and its laws and its aqueducts. In a few years, these two developments would encounter each other, and the encounter would be the most significant event in either world's history, and he was standing on the headland that faced it with forty-three surveys in a locked case and a letter he hadn't been allowed to read and the specific, clarifying understanding that the work he had been doing was not preparation for something that might happen.

It was preparation for something that would.

The wind came off the storm with the smell of deep water and distance and something he had no word for — the smell of a place that had never been smelled by a Roman before, carried on a wind that was beginning, very slowly, to be crossable.

He stood there until the light changed.

Then he walked back down the path to the camp, because there was a final day's survey work to complete before the season forced the camp to move south, and the camp did not pack itself, and the courier had already gone.

The storm moved. The sea was quiet beneath it.

The eagle did not fall.

End of Volume One: Mare Nostrum, World Unknown.