THE EAGLE UNDYING

Volume One: Mare Nostrum, World Unknown

For all who have ever known a world completely and changed almost none of it.

> *"It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves."* — William Shakespeare
>
> *"A diplomat is a man who remembers a woman's birthday but forgets her age."* — Robert Frost
>
> *"Know the enemy, know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."* — Sun Tzu

---

Chapter One: The Weight of Knowing

The augural texts were written in a hand trained to ambiguity, as all augural hands were, three hundred years of theological disputation compressed into seventeen lines that had produced thirty-eight contradictory commentaries and exactly zero consensus.

They were kept in the deep archive of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, in a cedar case inlaid with ivory, behind a door that had not been opened in thirty years.

The Emperor opened it himself, with his own key, at the fourth hour of the morning, because he had decided there were some things he did not want his chamberlain to know he had gone looking for.

He read the seventeen lines in approximately forty seconds.

He sat down on the archive's stone floor, still wearing his sleeping clothes, with the cedar case open in his lap, and he read them again.

Cross-reference complete, said the voice that was his own voice and was not. *The augural language is consistent with a bounded temporal covenant. Estimated remaining barrier duration based on observed eastern weather pattern degradation over the past eighteen years: between eight and twelve years. Central estimate: ten. Current confidence interval: sixty-seven percent.*

He said, quietly, to the empty archive: "I know."

He had died in a hospital room that smelled of antiseptic and the specific quality of grief that becomes structural after long enough, and he had woken up in a nineteen-year-old body in a city that called itself the center of the world and was right. He had spent five years being careful and systematic and patient.

He had spent those five years building, slowly, the things that needed building before they were needed.

He had, until this morning, told himself he had time to continue being careful.

Ten years.

He closed the cedar case. He sat for a moment more on the floor of the archive, in the dark, with the weight of sixty years of one life and five of another pressing equally behind his sternum, thinking about a world he had known as a game and was now going to have to meet as a reality, and about sixty million people who did not yet know what was waiting for them on the other side of an ocean they had always assumed was the edge of existence.

Great Sage began running preliminary contact scenario probability matrices. He let it run.

Then he stood up, set the cedar case back in its place, and walked out of the archive into a morning that was already brightening over the seven hills of Rome.

There was a great deal of work to do.

His name, in this life, was Gaius Aurelius Varro, and he had been Emperor of Rome for four years.

Before the throne, he had been the Emperor's chosen heir for five years before that, selected from the distinguished but secondary gens Varronis by a man who had no sons and wanted no surprises. The Emperor had told him, on the afternoon of the adoption, that he had been watching him since his twelfth year. He had identified three qualities in Gaius that Rome most needed in its next ruler: patience, precision, and an uncommon capacity for sitting with uncertainty without being destroyed by it.

What the Emperor had not known was that those qualities did not belong to the boy. They belonged to the sixty-year-old diplomat who had died in a hospital bed on Earth and woken, gasping, in a body that tasted of salt air and young blood and someone else's remembered childhood.

The boy's name was still Gaius. His memories were still intact: a childhood in a well-ordered domus on the Aventine Hill, a Greek tutor named Philemon who smelled perpetually of olive oil and bad wine, a mother who died when he was seven and whose face he could only reconstruct from the funeral mask that hung in the atrium. The boy's memories were present and genuine and Gaius used them the way a competent diplomat uses his local attaché: with respect for the knowledge they provided, without allowing them to override the larger strategic picture.

He had two names in his own mind. Gaius, when he was being the Emperor of Rome, which was most of the time. And something he sometimes called the

Diplomat, when the older memories surfaced in the small hours of the night, and he needed to remind himself which world he had actually come from.

Great Sage had no name yet for the thing that processed information at the back of his mind, sorting and indexing and flagging and cross-referencing at a speed that occasionally gave him migraines. He had tried several. The Archive. The Engine. The Voice. None of them fit precisely. He had settled provisionally on Great Sage, borrowed from a metaphysical tradition on Earth that he had studied once, briefly, at age thirty-four, and which described an ideal of intelligence that was both precise and humble about the limits of its precision. It was not a perfect fit. It was better than nothing.

He walked from the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus down the long slope of the Capitoline Hill in the pre-dawn dark, past guards who snapped to attention and received his nod without seeing anything in his face that was unusual, because there was nothing unusual in his face. He had been, in his previous life, a man who could receive catastrophic news in a negotiating session and respond to it over the following six hours with the same measured affect he had brought into the room. That training sat behind his expression like stone behind plaster.

The truth was that he had expected this morning for four years. He had known, from the day he first read the augural records, that the barrier was thinning. He had simply not known the rate until he had enough observational data to calculate it. Now he did. The certainty was not the shock. The shock, if it could be called that, was quieter than the Diplomat had expected: the specific weight of a plan that has been theoretical for four years becoming suddenly, irrevocably, operational.

He had ten years. The probability window was eight to twelve, but he planned for ten. He always planned for the central estimate and built his margin into the plan itself, not the timeline. A plan that only worked if the best case materialized was not a plan. It was a wish.

He walked through the Forum as the sky shifted from black to the deep grey-blue that preceded dawn in Rome, and he thought about Noxus.

Not the Noxus of the game, with its Champions and its mechanics and its ranked queues. The Noxus of the lore. The empire that had crossed the sea to shatter the First Lands of Ionia. The empire whose three-headed council had replaced one kind of brutal autocracy with a slightly more sophisticated one, whose streets were organized around the principle that strength was the only honest currency and that anything which could not be tested by opposition was not worth having. He had spent his professional life across tables from people who believed, in one idiom or another, exactly that. He had always found them easier to negotiate with than idealists, because they at least told you what they actually wanted.

What Noxus would want, when the barrier fell and the Mare Ignotum became crossable, was obvious. What Noxus would see when its first scouts crossed

that sea was a civilization that was, by Runeterran standards, technologically sophisticated in some areas and centuries behind in others, which fielded armies of a quality and discipline that would give even Noxian warmasters pause, which occupied a continent-sized landmass that would require more military resources to subdue than Noxus had ever directed at a single target, and which had, if Gaius did his job correctly, nothing in its posture that read as weakness or invitation.

What Gaius intended to do with that window of roughly ten years was not to prepare Rome for war. War with Noxus would be expensive for both sides, probably decisive for neither, and guaranteed to leave a residue of mutual hatred that would shape the relationship for the next five centuries. He had seen enough five-century grudges in his diplomatic career to know that the cost of winning them often exceeded the cost of losing.

What he intended was to make war unnecessary by making Rome's value as a partner self-evidently greater than its value as a conquest. This was not idealism. It was actuarial calculation. The expected value of trade with a sophisticated civilization across a hundred years exceeded the expected value of a conquest that would require generations of occupation and a permanent military presence stretched across an ocean. He was not relying on Noxus's goodwill. He was relying on Noxus's arithmetic.

But first, he needed Rome to be ready. And Rome, as of this morning, had ten years.

Probability of meeting the minimum capability threshold in ten years: sixty-eight percent, Great Sage offered, unprompted.

"I know," he said again. "We're going to need the other thirty-two percent."

He did not say this aloud. He said nothing aloud. He walked through the lightening streets of Rome with his hands clasped behind his back and the expression of a man who had risen early to inspect the Temple records and was now returning to the palace in no particular hurry, and he began, silently, to revise his timeline.

The palace was stirring when he returned. He passed his chamberlain Quintus Fabius Macro in the corridor outside his private study, a man of fifty who had served the previous Emperor for twenty years and who had, in Gaius's first weeks on the throne, made a series of gentle but pointed observations about the customary prerogatives of the chamberlain's office. Gaius had listened attentively to all of them and implemented none of them, and had then made it quietly apparent, through a series of small but consistent decisions over the following three months, that the Emperor of Rome would be making his own information requests, conducting his own archive visits, and seeing his own visitors at times of his own choosing. Macro had understood this without being told directly, because he was an intelligent man, and had subsequently become

one of Gaius's most effective institutional supporters, because intelligent men generally prefer a principal who knows what they want to one who must be managed.

"The legate of the Second Augusta requests an audience," Macro said, falling into step behind him. "He's been waiting since the second hour."

"Send him to me in the consultation room." He paused. "And call a meeting of the inner council for this afternoon. Four hours before sunset. The usual members, no substitutes."

Macro's expression did not change. He had been chamberlain long enough to recognize when an instruction was unusual without showing that he recognized it. The inner council met, customarily, twice in each month. A third meeting called on short notice indicated something that the Emperor considered too significant for the usual schedule.

"The legate first?" Macro asked.

"The legate first."

The legate was a competent soldier named Marcus Appius Corvus, who commanded the Second Augusta in the Danubian province and who had come to Rome with a request that was essentially administrative: permission to expand a fortified road network through a section of provincial territory where the local tribal leadership had been fractious. Gaius listened to the request, asked three questions about the tribal leadership's specific grievances, received answers that confirmed his prior assessment that the grievances were primarily economic rather than political, and approved the road network conditional on a concurrent economic concession to the tribal representatives that would cost Rome less than the political cost of a continued low-level insurgency.

Corvus left satisfied, which was the right outcome but not the most important feature of the conversation. The most important feature was that Gaius had, by the end of it, updated his model of the Second Augusta's current capacity and confirmed that the Danubian garrison was in better shape than his last intelligence briefing had suggested.

He spent the next three hours doing what Emperors spent most of their time doing: reading correspondence, seeing petitioners, adjudicating a property dispute between two senatorial families whose feud had been running long enough that its origin was no longer relevant to its current form, and reviewing the quarterly report from the grain procurement office. He did all of this with the portion of his mind that handled administrative processing, while the deeper portion ran the calculations he had begun on the walk from the Temple.

The ten-year plan, as it had existed until this morning, was a probability distribution across multiple preparation vectors: military doctrine development, engineering and infrastructure advancement, intelligence apparatus construction, and institutional reform of the administrative machinery. Each vector had been

proceeding on a timetable that assumed, conservatively, a twelve-year window. Ten years compressed that distribution significantly. Not catastrophically—he had built margin—but enough to require triage.

Priority reordering complete, Great Sage said, sometime around the second petition of the morning. *Intelligence apparatus and naval capacity represent the highest expected-value investments given the revised timeline. Infrastructure development can absorb a reduction in pace without falling below minimum threshold. Military doctrine is on schedule and requires no acceleration.*

The intelligence apparatus was the limiting factor. He had spent four years building it, carefully, out of materials that already existed in Roman institutional tradition: the frumentarii, the imperial courier service, the network of provincial governors and their personal staffs, the merchant contacts that had always fed commercial intelligence to whoever held central authority. He had rationalized these existing networks, improved their information handling, introduced a rudimentary but functional encryption system based on mathematical principles that the Roman tradition could have developed independently and which he had presented as his own analytical invention, which it was, and added several new collection streams that didn't exist in the Roman institutional repertoire at all.

What the apparatus could not yet do was collect intelligence on the far side of the storm barrier. For that, he needed eyes that could reach the Mare Ignotum's western shore. He had been planning to establish those collection points in year seven or eight. He was going to need them by year five.

This was manageable. It was not comfortable, but it was manageable.

He filed the adjustment and turned his full attention to the grain procurement report.

The inner council met in a room that had no name in the official palace registry, which had been one of the first things Gaius noticed about it when he was shown the room by its previous occupant. A room without an official name did not appear in official records. A room that did not appear in official records could not be reliably surveilled by parties whose surveillance one had not authorized. He had mentioned this observation to the Emperor at the time, not as a complaint but as a professional appreciation for the design, and the Emperor had looked at him with the expression of a man who was relieved that his chosen heir understood certain things without needing them explained.

The inner council was five people. Lucius Petronius Cotta, the Master of Offices, who managed the imperial administrative apparatus. Publia Aemilia Lepida, the Director of the Grain Office, who in practical terms ran Rome's economic infrastructure. Titus Flavius Scaeva, the Commander of the Praetorian Guard. Decimus Hortensius Varus, the Pontifex Maximus, the head of the state religious apparatus. And Gaius himself.

They had been meeting as this council for three and a half years. They were, by now, familiar with the texture of his thinking, which was precise and methodical and sometimes alarmed them in the specific way that very clear analysis of a complex problem alarms people who had previously been relying on its being adequately obscure. They were not people who needed to be managed. They needed to be given good information and asked the right questions, and they would generally arrive at correct conclusions without being pointed at them.

He waited until the steward had poured wine and withdrawn before he spoke.

"I've been reading the augural archive records from the century following the Miraculum. The original texts, not the commentaries." He let that sit for a moment. They knew he read primary sources. They had adapted to his habit of arriving at council sessions having done significant research that they had not had time to replicate. "The seventeenth augural response to Pontifex Tullus, the one that produced the longest period of unresolved theological argument. I believe I understand what it says."

Hortensius Varus leaned forward. He was a serious man, the Pontifex, seventy years old and possessed of a genuine intellectual engagement with the theological tradition that Gaius respected, as he respected all genuine expertise. "The covenant text," Varus said. "No one has reached consensus on it in three centuries."

"The problem was that the commentators were reading it as prophecy," Gaius said. "It isn't. It's the description of an agreement with specific terms. The storm barrier on the Mare Ignotum is not a permanent feature of our geography. It is a bounded provision of the divine covenant made at the time of the Miraculum. It was placed to give Rome time to prepare for contact with the world on the far side." He paused. "That time is finite. Based on the meteorological data I've been compiling from the coastal watch stations over the past four years, it is approximately ten years from now."

The silence that followed was not the silence of disbelief. It was the silence of people who were recalibrating everything they had previously categorized as stable.

"The far shore," Lepida said, carefully. "You believe it's inhabited."

"I'm certain it's inhabited. I've been operating on that assumption for four years." He looked around the table. "I should have had this conversation earlier. That was a failure of judgment on my part, and I want to acknowledge it directly. I waited until I had a firm timeline because I didn't want to ask this council to plan against a variable I couldn't bound. I have the bound now. Ten years, with an uncertainty range of two years on either side."

He watched them process this. Cotta was already thinking in terms of administrative implications: how does a government prepare a population of sixty million for a contact event? Scaeva was thinking militarily: what does ten years of preparation look like and how does it compare to what we have? Lepida was

doing economic modeling in real time, the way she always did when confronted with new information; he could see it in the subtle shift in her focus. Varus was sitting very still in the way he sat when a theological question he had spent his professional life working around had suddenly been answered in a way that was simultaneously satisfying and catastrophic.

"We don't know what's on the other side," Scaeva said. It was not a question.

"I have some understanding of it. I've been compiling indirect evidence for four years, and I want to be transparent with this council about the nature of that evidence and its limitations." He had decided, on the walk back from the Temple, to be more forthcoming with the inner council than he had been. Not completely forthcoming—there were things they did not need to know and would not benefit from knowing—but significantly more forthcoming than his instinct toward information management usually permitted. The ten-year timeline made compartmentalization expensive in ways it had not been before. He needed them to be thinking with the full picture, or as close to it as he could give them.

"There is, almost certainly, a continental landmass to the west of the storm barrier. Its political geography is complex. There are multiple states, some of which are expansionist military powers. There are forms of human capacity beyond the Roman experience—I'll address this in detail separately, with Pontifex Varus's assistance, because it has theological implications he should be involved in—that we will need to understand before contact. And there are threats, several of them serious, that have nothing to do with any political faction and that we will need to prepare for independently."

He said all of this in the same tone he used for grain procurement reports. This was deliberate. Information delivered in a tone of crisis produces crisis responses. Information delivered as operational data produces operational planning.

"When you say 'forms of human capacity beyond Roman experience,' " Lepida said slowly.

"Magic," Gaius said. "The world on the far side of the barrier has a meaningful incidence of magical ability among its population. I expect this council to receive that as an engineering problem and a policy question, not a theological emergency, though I understand the theological dimensions will need to be addressed in their proper sequence." He looked at Varus. "I'd like your help thinking through the theology."

Varus was seventy years old and had seen things in his professional life that had expanded and challenged his understanding of the divine covenant more than once. He looked at the Emperor with the expression of a man who had been offered a problem he had been hoping someone would eventually give him. "I would be honored," he said, and meant it.

Cotta cleared his throat. "Ten years. What's the first year's program?"

Gaius had spent the morning writing it.

"The first year," he said, "is infrastructure for what comes later. I want a dedicated eastern observation network. I want the naval capacity of the eastern coastal fleet doubled. I want a census of unusual human capacities among our population—carefully framed, nothing that sounds like we're looking for anything specific—and I want it conducted through the grain office rather than the military because I don't want it read as a security operation. And I want a new directorate established within the frumentarii, specifically responsible for long-range intelligence, with a mandate that Cotta and I will develop in writing."

He paused.

"And I want all of this done in a way that looks, to anyone observing it, like reasonable administrative improvements with no connection to each other. The work of a methodical emperor improving his predecessor's systems. Not preparation for a contact event."

"Is there a reason for the concealment?" Scaeva asked.

"Several. The most important is that public awareness of the barrier's thinning would produce fear responses that we cannot currently manage, because we don't yet have the vocabulary to explain what the contact will mean. We can develop that vocabulary over the next five to seven years. Until we have it, I want the planning to proceed at the level of this council and no further." He met each of their eyes in turn. "This is not a secret I intend to keep from Rome. It is a secret I intend to keep until we can tell it well."

There was another silence, shorter than the first.

"You've been carrying this for four years," Lepida said. It was not quite an accusation.

"I have." He did not apologize for it. He acknowledged it. "The timeline has changed my calculus about how much of this burden to share. I'm sharing it now."

Cotta made a note on his wax tablet. "Naval capacity doubled in a year. The shipyards will need to know something."

"Tell them the eastern trade routes are opening and we're investing ahead of demand," Gaius said. "It's not untrue."

The meeting ran for two more hours. By the end of it, the ten-year plan had been distributed across five capable minds instead of one, and the probability distribution on success had shifted in ways that Great Sage declined to quantify exactly, but indicated were meaningful.

He walked back to his private study afterward and stood for a while at the window, looking east over the rooftops toward the direction where the Mare Ignotum lay beyond the city's edge and the hills beyond and the coastal plains beyond that, four days' hard ride from Rome, capped by a horizon where the

storm barrier made the sky flicker with an unnatural light that Rome had simply stopped noticing after three hundred years.

Ten years.

He thought about Ionia, about what Noxus had done there, about the timeline he carried in his memory from the lore and the uncertainty he had about whether those events were in Runeterra's past or future relative to this moment. He thought about the Shadow Isles, about the Black Mist and what it meant that Rome had arrived in this world from outside its magical ecology and whether that meant anything defensively. He thought about the Void, and then he deliberately stopped thinking about the Void, because thinking about the Void before he had any practical tools to address it was an indulgence that served no planning function.

He thought about his wife. He did this sometimes, in the quiet moments, with the controlled precision of a man who knows that grief needs its regular appointment or it will insist on making one at a less convenient time. She had been dead for eleven years on Earth, which was to say she had been dead for eleven years and five more, which was to say she was gone in a way that the body that held him had never known her, and that the mind inside that body had known her for thirty-two years and still sometimes reached for her in the architecture of thought, looking for the presence that was no longer there.

He let the feeling sit for thirty seconds, measured, and then filed it.

Then he sat down at his desk, pulled a fresh wax tablet toward him, and began writing the first draft of the eastern observation network's operational charter.

There was a great deal of work to do.

Chapter Two: The Five Quiet Years

In which the record is condensed—not because those years were uneventful, but because the work of building foundations does not make for dramatic telling. The drama was all in the small decisions. It always is.

In the first year after the archive, he doubled the eastern coastal fleet and told no one the reason.

The shipyards at Ostia received the commission with the enthusiasm of institutions that had been waiting for exactly this kind of patronage. He had written the technical specifications himself, working from the memory of Earth's Age of Sail and the specific hydrodynamics of what he knew, or believed he knew, about the Mare Ignotum's near-shore waters. The resulting vessels were longer and lower than the standard Roman naval design, with a rigging configuration

that no Roman naval architect had produced before and that Gaius had presented as his own theoretical development from first mathematical principles. The master shipwright of Ostia, a Carthaginian freedman named Hanno who was the finest practical naval engineer in Rome's current inventory, had studied the specifications for four days before coming to see the Emperor personally.

"These are unusual designs," Hanno said. He was a cautious man, precise in the manner of someone who had learned his precision through failure and had not enjoyed the lesson.

"They're designed for a sea whose weather patterns we don't fully understand yet," Gaius told him. "I want vessels that can manage deep-water swells and unpredictable cross-wind patterns."

"The Mare Ignotum."

"Eventually, yes."

Hanno had looked at him with the expression of a man weighing whether to ask the question that was most obviously in the room. He decided against it, which was the decision Gaius had expected from a freedman of fifty who had survived in Rome by knowing when not to ask things. "I'll need the rigging materials from the eastern provinces," he said. "The Anatolian forests have the right timber for those masts."

"You'll have them."

The fleet took eighteen months, not twelve, because the materials supply chain from Anatolia proved more complicated than projected and two of the lead shipwrights died of fever in the second winter. Gaius absorbed the delay without comment, adjusted his timeline by four months, and added a note to his infrastructure model about the dependency on eastern province supply chains that he would need to address separately.

In the second year, he established the eastern observation network.

This was more complicated than the fleet, because it required building a permanent institutional presence along a coastline that Rome had, for three hundred years, treated as the edge of the world and therefore not worth detailed attention. The eastern coast was not uninhabited—there were fishing communities, small trading towns, a scatter of legionary outposts that dated from the first generation after the Miraculum, when the empire had briefly attempted to push east before the storms made it clear there was nothing to push toward—but it was sparse, underdeveloped, and culturally marginal in ways that Rome's administrative apparatus reflected in the allocation of resources.

He fixed this by reclassifying the eastern coast as a strategic province, appointing a legate of some ability to administer it, and tripling the infrastructure investment. New harbors. New roads connecting the coastal settlements to the main road network. A series of watch stations positioned to observe both the coastline and the eastern horizon. The frumentarii directorate that Cotta

and he had designed had, by this point, been quietly staffed and was operating under the cover designation of the Coastal Trade Intelligence Office, which was a sufficiently boring name that no one who was not looking for it would think to look for it.

The watch stations were equipped with the best optical instruments Rome currently possessed, which were not as good as what Gaius would have liked but were significantly better than what any Roman institution had previously commissioned, because he had spent three months in the second year developing a new lens-grinding technique from first principles and had presented the results to the glass artisans of Capua as a theoretical insight into the mathematics of light refraction. The artisans had taken another four months to develop reliable production methods. The resulting instruments were not telescopes in the Earth optical engineering sense, but they were substantially more powerful than anything Roman military tradition had previously deployed, and when he gave them to the eastern watch station commanders with instructions to document anything unusual on the eastern horizon, he was confident they would be adequate for early detection.

In the third year, he began the census.

Framed as an agricultural productivity survey, conducted through the grain office in Lepida's name, it moved through every province of the empire over the course of eleven months, gathering information that appeared to be about crop yields and labor allocation but contained, embedded in its secondary data categories, a systematic collection of unusual reports: local stories of people who moved objects without touching them, or healed wounds faster than physiology explained, or perceived things at distances that exceeded any normal sensory range. The survey did not ask about these things directly. It asked about unusual local phenomena in agricultural contexts, which was a category vague enough to capture almost anything, and the grain office's trained staff had been briefed, discreetly, on how to identify and escalate relevant responses.

Gaius was not, by this procedure, looking for Roman mages. Rome had no magical tradition, no framework for identifying or developing magical ability, and the probability that any meaningful incidence of latent magical capacity existed in the Roman population was, as Great Sage calculated it, low and largely irrelevant to his immediate planning. What he was looking for was evidence that the Miraculum had deposited Rome into a world with an ambient magical field that might have been slowly, over three hundred years, producing effects that Roman natural philosophy had been explaining as coincidence, divine intervention, or simply not explaining at all.

What he found was more interesting than he had expected, and he filed it under problems he did not yet have the analytical framework to address.

In the fourth year, he addressed military doctrine.

He did not change Roman military doctrine. Roman military doctrine was the

best in any world he had knowledge of. What he did was a series of incremental innovations that Roman military tradition could accommodate without perceiving them as external impositions: a systematic expansion of the small-unit tactics repertoire that made Rome's existing century-based organization more effective at complex terrain engagements, an improved logistics doctrine that reduced campaign supply dependence without reducing the heavy logistical capability that made long-distance operations possible, and a siege engineering curriculum that absorbed three centuries of Earth military theory filtered through the lens of Roman engineering capability and presented to the legionary training corps as a synthesis of existing Roman tradition.

He trained with the legions personally. Not to demonstrate military genius—he had no military genius, only a comprehensive theoretical knowledge of military history that he was careful to deploy as methodology rather than inspiration—but because soldiers trusted commanders who shared their conditions, and he was going to need the legions to trust him for reasons they could not yet be told.

He was good enough in the field to satisfy the military's standards. He had Gaius's muscle memory, which was adequate, and he had four years of deliberate physical development, which had taken the body from merely fit to genuinely capable. He was not the best swordsman in the legion. He was better than most people expected an emperor to be, which was sufficient for his purposes.

In the fifth year, two things happened that changed the shape of everything.

The first was the shipwreck.

The second was the assassination attempt.

Chapter Three: From the Other Shore

The patrol vessel *Victoria* was a middle-weight liburnian assigned to the eastern coastal watch, stationed out of the new harbor at Portus Orientis that had not existed three years ago and was now, in its third season of operation, beginning to accumulate the institutional memory that made watch stations useful. Her captain was a reliable officer named Sextus Junius Calvus, who had commanded coastal patrol operations for eleven years and who had the specific gift of people in his profession for noticing when something was wrong with the sea before he could articulate why.

He noticed something wrong on the fifteenth day of the month of Mars, in the fifth year of the Emperor's reign. The storm barrier to the east was behaving oddly. Not catastrophically—no rupture, no collapse—but in the way that a familiar voice says a familiar word with a wrong inflection. He ordered the *Victoria* closer to the barrier's eastern edge and deployed his two lookout teams to the highest points of the vessel's rigging.

The wreckage appeared two hours later.

It was not large, by the standards of things the sea discarded. Planking, mostly, and rope, and what appeared to be part of a mast of a design that no Roman shipwright had ever produced. Calvus circled the debris field carefully before allowing the salvage crew into the water, because in eleven years of coastal patrol he had learned that unusual wreckage sometimes contained unusual hazards, and because the wreckage design was so genuinely foreign to his experience that he wanted to look at it for a while before he touched it.

He found the survivor on a section of intact hull that had been half-submerged and was floating low enough in the water that the lookouts had missed it on the first circuit. The man was alive, which was surprising given the state of the wreckage. He was also not Roman, which Calvus had suspected before he saw him and was now certain of. His clothing was wrong. His tattoos were wrong. The smell of him was wrong in the specific way that a man who has spent his life in a different city smells wrong to anyone who has only known one city's particular mixture of salt and labor and food.

Calvus did three things. He pulled the man from the water. He locked the surviving wreckage components in the *Victoria*'s cargo hold under seal. And he wrote a report that used the phrase *unusual circumstances warranting immediate imperial attention*, which was the language the eastern network's standing orders specified for exactly this category of event.

The report reached Rome in seven days.

Gaius read it alone, at the fourth hour of the morning, because he had arranged his sleeping schedule around the arrival of eastern network dispatches.

He sat with it for a long time. Not because he did not understand it—he understood it precisely—but because this was the moment he had been preparing for and waiting for and quietly dreading for four years, and he had not, until this moment, understood how much of his certainty about his own preparation was theoretical. There was a man, alive, on the eastern coast, who had come through the storm barrier from the other side. There was a man who knew things Gaius needed to verify and could not verify any other way.

Great Sage was silent, which happened only when it was doing something computationally expensive.

Probability assessment complete, it said eventually. *Based on wreckage design characteristics as described in the legate's report: origin point consistent with Bilgewater or proximate Blue Flame Isles region. Confidence: fifty-eight percent. Alternative: coastal Noxian trade vessel, confidence seventeen percent. All other origin points: twenty-five percent combined.*

Bilgewater. A port city like no other, if the lore held. Nestled in the Blue Flame Isles archipelago, home to serpent hunters and smugglers and people who had a complicated past and preferred the complications to the alternatives. A city

without unified central government, ripe with opportunity, free from the kind of formal political structure that would mean a shipwrecked sailor's government was about to come looking for him.

Good. A Noxian sailor would have been significantly more complicated.

He dispatched three instructions by return courier. The first was to Calvus: keep the man alive, keep him comfortable, keep him isolated from the rest of the coastal garrison, and tell no one who he is until I arrive. The second was to his personal physician, Gnaeus Sempronius Rufus, who had sworn the oath Gaius required of anyone in his direct personal service and who was discreet in the manner of someone who understood that discretion was the most professionally valuable attribute his position could possess. The third was to his chamberlain: the Emperor would be traveling to the eastern coast for an inspection of the new harbor facilities. No formal itinerary. Four days.

He told no one else.

The man's name, as nearly as Gaius could determine in those first days, was something like *Henrick*, with a vowel sound in the middle that Latin phonology did not have a clean symbol for. He was approximately forty years old, which was older than the hard life of a Bilgewater sailor usually produced, and he had the specific durability of someone who had survived things by virtue of being too stubborn to recognize when the survival option had closed. His tattoos were predominantly nautical: sea creatures in a style that Gaius recognized, from his lore knowledge, as Blue Flame Isles traditional marking. His arms showed the particular combination of rope-burn scar and weather-darkened skin of a working sailor of some years' experience.

He was frightened. This was understandable. He was also, when the fear was not in the foreground, possessed of a quality that Gaius had spent his diplomatic career learning to identify: the specific kind of stubborn curiosity that makes a person useful even when they don't intend to be.

The first three days were spent on immediate needs. Rufus attended to the man's physical state, which was poor but not critical, and reported that he would recover fully given rest and food. Gaius spent those three days in the harbor complex, conducting the inspection that was his official reason for being there, reviewing the network's actual operational status, and teaching himself the basics of the language that Henrick spoke.

This was where the photographic memory became material in a way that Gaius sometimes forgot was unusual. He had a functional vocabulary in thirty-eight languages from his previous life, most of them built over decades of diplomatic work but some of them—Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, several African languages—acquired from study rather than immersion. Language was a system. Systems had architecture. Architecture, once understood at a structural

level, made pattern recognition efficient in ways that felt, to an outside observer, like supernatural speed.

Henrick's language was not any Earth language, but it had phonological and grammatical structures that overlapped with several coastal trade languages he had studied, and three days of immersive listening while Rufus managed the medical details was enough to build the scaffolding that would allow actual communication.

On the fourth day, he sat down across from the man in a plain room with no windows that had, until eighteen months ago, been a storage facility for fishing equipment and still smelled vaguely of brine and old hemp, and he said, in what he now believed was a functional approximation of Henrick's language: "I would like to talk with you, if you're willing."

Henrick stared at him for a moment that lasted somewhat longer than a moment.

"You're the Emperor," he said. He had been told this, Gaius knew, by Rufus, who had been told to be transparent about who was coming to see him. Gaius believed in informed consent as a diplomatic principle: it was harder to manipulate someone who knew they were being engaged deliberately, but the resulting interaction was more durable.

"I am." He paused. "I should say that I won't be insulted if you don't find that impressive. You've had a difficult week."

Henrick looked at him for another long moment. Then he said, in his own language, with the careful precision of a man not yet certain of the environment he was navigating: "You speak my language."

"Not well. I have perhaps two hundred words and a structural understanding that allows me to approximate grammar. I will understand more than I can express. If I make an error that changes my meaning, please correct me."

This was the correct thing to say. It was the correct thing not because of diplomatic strategy, though it was that, but because it was true, and Gaius had learned early that the most effective foundation for any conversation that needed to go somewhere real was a statement that was simply, plainly true. People could feel truth. They could not always articulate how they felt it, but they responded to it differently than they responded to careful construction.

Henrick sat back against the wall—he had been given a pallet and a blanket and two good meals, which Gaius had specified—and looked at the ceiling for a moment, and then looked at him.

"Ask what you want to ask," he said.

"I want to know what's on the other side of the storm."

Over the following three weeks, Gaius learned things he had known theoretically and needed to know actually, and these were, it turned out, not the same things.

He had known, from the lore, that Bilgewater was a port city of the Blue Flame Isles, free from formal government, ripe with opportunity and danger in roughly equal measure. He had known about the Harrowing, about sea monsters, about the complicated spiritual ecology of a city that had learned to live close to the boundary between life and death. He had known about Gangplank's fall from the reaver throne and the resulting power vacuum, about Miss Fortune's role in that fall, about the Buhru and their deep cultural roots in the islands.

What he had not known was the texture of it. The specific smell that Henrick described as the harbor in full summer, the mixture of salt water and rendered sea-monster fat and the particular incense the Buhru serpent callers burned when they drove sea creatures away from the docks. The sound of the bounty board when a new name was added, the particular market-crowd noise of negotiation and spectacle. The way the coin worked—golden Krakens, silver Serpents, bronze Spats, the recent issue with Gangplank's face replaced by something more provisional during the power transition.

He also learned, which he had not known and could not have known from the lore, about the storm.

"It wasn't like any blow I'd sailed through," Henrick said, on the seventh day of their conversations, when enough trust had accumulated to allow him to describe the event with some precision rather than some shock. "I've been through the worst weather in the Shuriman passage. I know what a storm looks like. This was different. It pulled, instead of pushed. The water moved the wrong direction."

Great Sage flagged this immediately. *Anomalous fluid dynamics consistent with a localized barrier collapse. Not a gradual thinning. A momentary aperture. Statistical significance for timeline revision: reviewing.*

Gaius kept his expression neutral. "Where were you when it started?"

"Two days east of the Blue Flame Isles. I was carrying a private cargo—" Henrick paused in the way people paused when they were editing out something they were not going to share, and Gaius let the pause pass without comment, "—and I was running a route that takes you north of the main lanes. The storm came from nowhere. Full sky in the morning, no horizon haze. By midday the water was doing things water doesn't do."

"And then?"

"Then I was here." He said it flatly, which was how people described things they didn't fully understand but had processed enough to accept. "Somewhere that isn't anywhere I've ever been. Different color to the water. Different smell. Your sailors found me."

"And you have no idea what lies to the east of Bilgewater."

"No one does. The storms—" He stopped. He looked at Gaius with an expression that was slowly arriving at a conclusion he had been deferring. "Your storms. Those are your storms."

"In a sense."

"So there's land on the other side." Not a question.

"There has always been land on the other side," Gaius said carefully. "We simply haven't been able to reach each other before now."

Henrick was quiet for a moment. He had good instincts—Gaius had noticed this consistently across the three weeks. Not the instincts of formal education or professional training, but the animal intelligence of someone who had survived for forty years in Bilgewater, which was not an environment that tolerated bad instincts for long.

"How long," Henrick asked, "before that changes?"

Gaius looked at him. He said: "Approximately ten years."

Henrick nodded, slowly. Then he said: "You're going to want to know about Noxus."

"I know about Noxus," Gaius said.

Something shifted in Henrick's expression. It was the specific shift of a person recalibrating their estimate of who they were talking to. "Nobody here knows about Noxus."

"That's the point," Gaius said.

The silence stretched between them for a moment. Then Henrick, slowly, smiled.

"All right," he said. "What do you actually want to know?"

He stayed three more weeks. In that time, Gaius conducted what amounted to the most productive intelligence interview of his professional life across two careers, because Henrick of Bilgewater, who had spent twenty years moving cargo through the most information-rich port city in the western world, had acquired, as a professional survival mechanism, a comprehensive working knowledge of Runeterran geopolitics that was both more granular and more current than anything the lore had provided.

Noxus's recent expansion vectors. The status of the Ionian situation—the invasion, in Henrick's account, was recent history, meaning it had occurred within living memory of the current generation, which told Gaius approximately where the lore timeline mapped to the present. The Black Rose, which Henrick knew about only obliquely, as the kind of rumor that Bilgewater's information ecology produced about powerful Noxian shadow actors, but enough to confirm that it was real, current, and connected to Noxian political power in ways that made

it a first-order threat consideration. The Void incursions, confirmed from Henrick's own experience: a cargo run through a region of Shurima that had gone badly because of something coming up through the sand.

Great Sage ran continuous updates throughout. By the end of the six weeks total, its models of Runeterran political geography had moved from being based on lore with theoretical confidence intervals to being based on primary source confirmation with operational confidence intervals.

The difference was significant.

On the last day, Gaius made Henrick an offer. He could return to Bilgewater—Rome would build him a vessel, give him a cargo that would make him wealthy enough to operate independently for several years, and ask only that he remember, when the storms cleared and Rome and Bilgewater made their first formal contact, that he had been treated well. Or he could stay. There was work in Rome for someone who knew the western world, if he was interested in that kind of work.

Henrick considered this for two days, which was the correct amount of time to give serious consideration to a life-altering offer. Then he came to Gaius and said he would stay, provided he was not asked to work against Bilgewater's interests.

"I would not ask that," Gaius said. "What I will ask is that you help me understand a world I need to understand. The interests I'm working toward, when the storms clear, include Bilgewater's interests."

"You can't know that yet."

"I'm working on the assumption that a world that isn't at war with itself is better for everyone in it than a world that is, and that includes Bilgewater." He paused. "I'm also working on the assumption that the Void is a threat to everyone, and that Bilgewater, which is geographically closer to certain Void-adjacent zones than Rome, has a vested interest in Rome's success in addressing that threat."

Henrick looked at him for a long moment. "You know a great deal about a world you've never seen."

"Yes," Gaius said. "That's the problem I've been working on for the past four years."

Chapter Four: The Senate's Good Opinion

He was back in Rome for three days before the second thing happened.

The assassination attempt was not unexpected. It was unexpected in its specific form, which was embarrassing, and he later reviewed the intelligence failure

that had allowed him to miss it with the specific cold precision he applied to all failures: identifying the systemic weakness, correcting it, noting for the record what the correction would have cost if it had been made three months earlier when it should have been made. He did not dwell on it. Dwelling was not a planning function.

The attempt came from within the Senate. Specifically, it came from the network of old noble families who had been finding Gaius's administrative style increasingly difficult to align with their traditional prerogatives, who had been watching the quiet series of institutional reforms over four years with growing unease, and who had, in the month of his absence on the eastern coast, found their anxiety amplified to something operational by an outside actor whose presence in the network Gaius had not yet identified.

He would, later, recognize the fingerprints as consistent with the Caelatores. But at the time, he simply understood it as a senatorial faction that had decided the Emperor was accumulating too much independent power too quickly and that the correct remedy was a transition to someone more manageable.

The mechanism was poison. This was traditional for senatorial conspiracies and reflected the practical reality that the Emperor was well-guarded against everything else. The poison was introduced into his wine at a private dinner hosted by a senator of the Cornelii family, a man named Gaius Cornelius Nepos who had been consistently opposed to several of Gaius's administrative reforms and whose opposition had, up to this point, been parliamentary rather than personal.

Gaius had not drunk the wine. He had not drunk it because Great Sage, six months earlier, had flagged Nepos's behavior pattern as warranting an elevated food safety protocol at his private social engagements, and Gaius had thereafter developed a habit of social wine touching that involved the glass meeting his lips without his lips meeting the wine, which was a technique he had learned from a Southeast Asian diplomat in his previous career who had operated in environments where hospitality and assassination sometimes wore the same face.

So he did not die. He sat through the dinner in full awareness that someone at the table had tried to kill him, and he spent the two hours of the dinner reading the room—Great Sage running expression analysis at high intensity, producing the specific headache that complex social processing always generated—and identifying, with reasonable confidence, who among the twelve guests had known.

There were three of them. Nepos, who had introduced the poison and whose guilt manifested as a very specific form of attentiveness to Gaius's wine consumption. A woman named Valeria Maxima, a widow of one of the old Sullan families, whose guilt manifested as deliberate inattentiveness that was itself a form of excessive attention. And a man Gaius did not recognize, who had been introduced as a scholar of some acquaintance of Nepos's, whose guilt did not manifest at all.

The third one was interesting. People who felt no guilt about assassination attempts were either sociopaths or professionals. Professionals, in Gaius's experience, were more useful and more dangerous. He filed the man's face with perfect recall and said nothing.

He left the dinner at the customary hour, said his farewells with the warmth appropriate to a pleasant evening, went home, vomited the small amount of wine he had absorbed through mucous membrane, and called Scaeva.

The aftermath was handled carefully.

He did not want executions. Executions produced martyrs, and martyrs produced successor conspiracies, and successor conspiracies were more dangerous than the original because they were motivated by grievance rather than calculation. What he wanted was an outcome that simultaneously neutralized the specific actors, identified the network, isolated the third man who had felt no guilt, and communicated to the senatorial class as a whole that this category of activity would not produce the desired result.

Scaeva arrested Nepos and Valeria Maxima on carefully constructed charges that were legally solid and politically neutral—property irregularities in Nepos's case, a minor calendar violation in Valeria's—and these charges were visible to anyone who cared to look while the actual investigation proceeded underneath them. The actual investigation took four months and cost Gaius three nights of migraines and a significant amount of political capital, because the network the investigation revealed was deeper and more embedded than he had calculated.

The third man was never found. He had departed Rome within six hours of the dinner. This bothered Gaius in the way that clean exits bothered any analyst: a clean exit meant resources, planning, and the kind of organizational support that a private individual did not typically command. He noted it. He assigned it a threat category. He moved on.

What he found most useful, in the aftermath, was the Senate's response to the arrests.

It was not uniformly supportive. There was a faction, predictable, that saw the arrests as an imperial overreach. There was a larger faction that was alarmed at the evidence of conspiracy and responded with the institutional anxiety that had, historically, made the Senate valuable as a check on autocratic ambition: if this happened to the Emperor, it could happen to any of them. And there was a quiet, significant faction that did something Gaius had been hoping the Senate would eventually do but had not yet managed to engineer.

They asked him what he needed.

Not in those words. In the coded language of Senate politics, what several senior senators communicated through the appropriate intermediaries was a question: the Emperor seems to be preparing for something significant. The

administrative changes, the eastern investments, the new directorates. We have noticed. We are not opposed. What do we not yet know?

He answered this question with care, because it was the beginning of the conversation he had told his inner council, six months earlier, that he intended to have when Rome was ready.

He called a special session of the full Senate.

The speech he gave took three hours. He had written it himself, over six weeks, and he had revised it seventeen times, because it was the most important speech of his life in this world and possibly either life, and because the audience was an institution that had been governing civilizations for four hundred years and would identify rhetorical manipulation as efficiently as it identified everything else.

He told them almost everything. Not the Power of Creation—that was not yet necessary and introduced complexities he was not ready to manage. Not his previous life, his Earth history, his complete lore knowledge of Runeterra—those things were impossible to explain in a way that produced useful responses rather than theological emergency. But everything else.

The storm barrier. The covenant. The ten-year timeline. The world on the other side, with its multiple states and its magical tradition and its threats. The Bilgewater survivor and what he had learned. The preparations already underway. The preparations still required.

He told them in the language of Rome, which was the language of precedent and legal principle and the specific dignity that Roman political culture associated with being trusted with difficult truths. He did not soften it. He did not perform optimism. He said: this is what we face. This is what we have. This is what we need to build. The gods gave us the time to prepare. We have used some of it well and some of it less well. We have ten years from now to do better.

The Senate was quiet for a long time after he finished.

Then Quintus Hortensius Rufus, the eldest senator, who was ninety-two years old and had served under four emperors and who had not spoken in a plenary session in three years because he had decided that most things said in plenary sessions were not worth the effort of rising from his chair, stood up.

He said: “How do we help?”

The vote that followed was not unanimous. It was not meant to be. A unanimous Senate vote meant an intimidated Senate, and an intimidated Senate was a useless one. What it was was sufficient and substantive: resources approved, structural authorities extended, a special committee established to support the

ten-year preparation program, and an explicit authorization for the Emperor to expand the inner council to manage the expanded scope of work.

It was also, Gaius noted with the specific satisfaction he allowed himself when a long-probability gamble came in, a transfer of institutional ownership. The preparation for contact was no longer the Emperor's plan, which the Senate was observing and evaluating. It was Rome's plan, in which the Senate was invested.

The difference was not abstract. A plan the Senate owned was a plan it would defend. A plan it merely observed was a plan it might revise in the event of political pressure or succession instability. He was thirty years old and in good health, but he was not immortal, and he did not have the luxury of a plan that depended on his own continuity. He had never built plans that depended on a single point of failure. He was not going to start.

He walked out of the Senate building into a January afternoon, the light thin and cold the way Roman winter light was, and stood for a moment on the steps with the noise of the city coming up from the Forum below. Great Sage was quiet, which meant it was satisfied with the processing load of the day and didn't have anything urgent to add.

He thought: I have six years left. Maybe eight. Maybe twelve, if the barrier took its time.

He thought: there is still the third man.

He thought: Henrick is waiting in the new quarters near the frumentarii offices, and he has been talking to Rufus about something, and whatever that something is, it is probably useful.

He went back to work.

Chapter Five: The Shape of the Work

The next four years moved the way the years before them had moved: not with the dramatic momentum of a story being told, but with the steady accumulation of a civilization being rebuilt.

He introduced paper to Rome. This required manufacturing infrastructure for which he provided the technical specifications, presented as a synthesis of Egyptian papyrus-making tradition and a theoretical advance in fiber processing that Roman artisans could have developed independently given another century and sufficient incentive. Paper was cheaper than papyrus, more durable than wax, and produced in quantity, it did what no administrative technology before it had done for Rome: it made knowledge cheap.

Cheap knowledge changed the calculus of who could be educated. He had been operating, since the beginning, on the assumption that Rome's most crit-

ical resource was not its legions or its roads or its grain supply but its human capacity—the aggregate intelligence and capability of sixty million people, most of whom were operating at a fraction of their potential because access to knowledge was expensive and formal education was limited to the wealthy. He could not, in ten years, restructure Roman education from first principles. What he could do was make the materials of knowledge sufficiently available that the restructuring became possible in the generation after.

The paper mills were operational by the seventh year of his reign. By the ninth year, the cost of a written book had dropped to one-third of its previous value. By the time the barrier fell, Rome had the beginning of a literate artisan class that had not existed before, and that class would, in his actuarial modeling, produce the next generation of engineers and administrators and scholars who would do things he had not yet imagined.

He did not introduce the printing press. He had considered it and concluded that the pace of information change it would produce exceeded Rome's institutional capacity to adapt in the time available. He filed it for year fifteen, when the contact period would have produced enough institutional flexibility to absorb it.

He addressed the question of magic.

This was the hardest thing, in some ways, because it required him to build Rome's entire institutional relationship with a phenomenon that Roman culture had no tradition for, in advance of Roman culture having any actual contact with that phenomenon. He could not prepare Rome to understand magic by explaining it in Runeterran terms—those terms would mean nothing to a population that had never seen a hextech crystal or a spirit blossom or the specific quality of light that came off a Shuriman relic. What he could do was prepare Rome's philosophical and institutional framework to receive magic as something that existed rather than something that couldn't.

He did this through three channels. The theological channel, through Varus, which engaged the augural tradition in a systematic reinterpretation of certain ancient texts in ways that Rome's religious institutions could accommodate without feeling destabilized. The philosophical channel, through the Academy, which he funded generously and guided, through the appointment of several specific scholars he had identified as having the kind of empirical flexibility that magic required, toward a framework that was capable of saying this phenomenon requires new categories without immediately classifying the new categories as heresy or fraud. And the medical channel, through Rufus and the imperial physicians, which was the most useful because it was the most practical: he needed Rome's medical tradition to be able to encounter healing magic and respond to it as a data point rather than a threat.

By the eighth year, he had the beginning of a Rome that could meet Runeterra without breaking.

He also had Henrick.

Henrick had become, over four years of working relationship, one of the most valuable people in Gaius's orbit. Not because he was brilliant—he was competent, sharp, and experienced, but not brilliant—but because he was the only person in Rome who had spent substantial time in the western world and who could tell Gaius, with the granularity of lived experience, when his models of Runeterran behavior were wrong in ways that theoretical knowledge couldn't anticipate.

He was wrong more often than he liked. He was wrong about the texture of Noxian expansion decisions, which were more ideologically driven and less economically rational than his diplomatic training suggested they should be. He was wrong about Bilgewater's power dynamics, which had shifted significantly since Gangplank's fall in ways that made the city more politically complex than the lore had suggested. He was consistently, slightly wrong about Ionia, whose relationship to the Noxian invasion was still generating social fractures that his understanding of the lore timeline hadn't fully accounted for.

Henrick corrected him on all of these things with the patience of a man who was aware that the correction itself was his value to the enterprise. He had also, by the eighth year, become fluent in Latin, which meant their conversations no longer required the specific concentration that cross-language communication demanded, and could proceed at the pace of actual thought.

"You think about Noxus constantly," Henrick said once, in the eighth year, in the garden of the house near the frumentarii offices that had been assigned to him and which he had furnished in a combination of Roman and Blue Flame Isles styles that suggested a man making a home in the space between two worlds.

"Noxus is the first variable that matters most," Gaius said. "Everything else depends on the initial Noxian response."

"Does it?"

"If Noxus responds to first contact with immediate military action, the whole architecture of the preparation changes. If it responds with caution—which Swain's kind of thinking should produce, if he's still in power—I have space to work with. Everything I've been building assumes the second."

"And if Swain's gone?"

He had thought about this extensively. Swain's Vision principle—the philosophical pillar of the Trifarix that was associated with longer-horizon thinking, information advantage, and the specific kind of strategic patience that produced durable empire rather than explosive but brittle expansion—was the reason a diplomatic approach to Noxus was viable. Without Swain, or without someone with his specific cognitive profile in a position of equivalent influence, the calculation changed significantly.

"Then we adapt," he said, which was the true answer but not the complete one.

The complete answer was: then the probability distribution shifts, the expected cost of conflict increases by a factor he had estimated at roughly 3.7, and the first decade of contact becomes significantly more expensive for both sides before the equilibrium settles. He did not say this to Henrick, because Henrick did not make decisions that were sensitive to that calculation and there was no reason to burden him with it.

What he said instead was: "Tell me more about the Black Rose."

Henrick made a face that Gaius had learned meant he was about to say something he would have preferred not to say. "I don't know much. That's the honest answer. What I know is what Bilgewater knows, which is what people who've been in Noxian ports think they've seen, filtered through three layers of rumor by the time it reaches the Blue Flame Isles."

"Tell me anyway."

"They're old. Older than the current government. They were there before Swain, and the people who talk about them—the people who know something—they always say it the same way. Like the Black Rose is the part of Noxus that doesn't change no matter who's sitting in the Immortal Bastion."

"What do they want?"

Henrick shrugged. It was the shrug of someone who had thought about this and not arrived at an answer. "Power. But not the obvious kind. The kind that comes from knowing things other people don't know, and using that to pull strings that move the visible things."

"Information advantage as the primary currency of influence," Gaius said.

"If you want to say it in a complicated way."

"That's actually the simple way." He paused. "They're going to know about Rome before I'm ready for them to know about Rome. That's the risk I'm managing."

"What makes you think they don't know already?"

It was a good question. He had been asking it himself for two years. His current answer was: *they might*. His current plan's response to that answer was: *then we make sure that what they know reinforces the story we want them to believe about Rome rather than the one they're most dangerous believing.*

He had been, with this in mind, curating Rome's visible profile for four years.

The legions were impressive but not alarming. Rome's naval expansion was consistent with a trading civilization preparing for expanded commerce. The institutional reforms were the work of a capable and ambitious emperor, nothing unprecedented. The paper and the improved optics and the new medical instruments were the innovations of a progressive court with strong engineering tradition. None of it, individually or in aggregate, looked like preparation for

contact with a world Rome knew existed. Because nothing in Rome's behavior should allow any outside observer to conclude that Rome knew a world existed.

"They don't know," he said. "Or if they suspect something is unusual about us, they don't know what. That's good enough."

Henrick looked at him with the expression he had worn in their first conversation, when he'd recalibrated his estimate of who he was talking to. "You've been doing this for nine years."

"Ten, in a few months."

"And you're not tired?"

He thought about this honestly. "I'm tired in ways that don't affect the work," he said. "That's the acceptable kind."

Henrick was quiet for a moment. Then he said, in Bilgewater's idiom for something that was both an acknowledgment and a warning: "The sea doesn't care how long you've been sailing."

"No," Gaius agreed. "It doesn't."

Chapter Six: Raphael

The crisis came in the ninth year, and it came from inside Rome, which was where he had always known the hardest thing would come from.

The senator's name was Marcus Fulvius Flaccus, and he was not the most dangerous man in the conspiracy. He was the one whose face Gaius knew best. He was the man he had been meeting with for three years as part of the senatorial support committee for the preparation program, who had been consistently thoughtful and occasionally brilliant about the logistical dimensions of the ten-year plan, who had two sons and a daughter and a wife who wrote poetry that Gaius had read and found quietly excellent, and who had been, for those three years, feeding operational details to the organization that had recruited him two years before the meeting in the frumentarii offices where Gaius finally found the thread.

The third man from the dinner party. He had been waiting nine years for the thread. It had arrived as a statistical anomaly in shipping records that shouldn't have contained an anomaly, and had unraveled, over three weeks of very careful pulling, into a network that was older than anything the Roman conspiracy had been, broader than anything Gaius's intelligence apparatus had been built to anticipate, and connected, through three layers of cutout, to a name he recognized.

The Caelatores.

Assessment complete, Great Sage said, in the specific tone of voice that indicated it had processed something extensively and was not comfortable with its conclusions. *Probability that Flaccus has compromised the preparation timeline sufficiently to enable pre-contact intervention by Caelatores agents in Runeterra: thirty-one percent. Probability that Caelatores agents currently in transit to the eastern coast with interdiction objective: forty-seven percent. Recommended response sequence—*

"Stop," Gaius said.

He was sitting in his private study, alone, at the third hour of the night. The fire had burned low.

Great Sage stopped.

He sat with it for a while. He knew what the recommended response sequence was. He had run the model himself, from different angles, over three weeks of pulling the thread, and had arrived at the same answer each time. The answer required him to do something that the math said was correct. The math was not wrong. He had checked it six times. The expected value calculation was clear. Flaccus knew too much. Flaccus was already compromised. The Caelatores would use him again, and the next disclosure could be the one that compromised the barrier-timing intelligence, which was the single most sensitive datum in the entire preparation program.

The correct answer was to remove Flaccus from the operational picture. Not through violence—he was not a person who reached for violence when other tools existed—but through a procedure that would require destroying a man who had genuinely been trying to help, who had been deceived rather than malicious, who had two sons and a daughter and a wife whose poetry he had read and found quietly excellent.

The correct answer was also to do it tonight, before the Caelatores agents who were possibly in transit arrived and the window for clean action closed.

Great Sage had the sequence ready. It was elegant, in the cold way that elegant operations were: minimal footprint, maximum disruption of the network, no permanent harm to Flaccus himself, just the effective end of his access to the preparation program and the simultaneous initiation of a counter-intelligence operation that would give the Caelatores a false information stream for the remaining months of the barrier countdown.

He began the first step.

He got as far as dictating the instruction to the operative who would begin the process of Flaccus's administrative removal. He got as far as the word *tomorrow*, which was the trigger that set the timeline in motion.

Then he stopped.

He sat with his stylus over the wax for what felt like a very long time.

He saw Flaccus's face as it had been two weeks ago, in the committee session, when he had worked out a shipping logistics problem that had been blocking the eastern naval expansion for a month, and his expression had been the expression of a man who was proud of the contribution, who believed in the work, who did not know he was being used to undermine the same work he believed in.

It was not sentiment. It was not the soft reflex of a man who didn't have the stomach for hard decisions. He had made hard decisions every month for nine years and he would make them again.

It was something else. Something the math did not have a category for.

He sat with it, the way he had learned to sit with the hardest negotiating problems: letting the real answer surface through the noise of the tactical ones.

The real answer was: *I do not know how to explain to myself, if there is a self on the far side of this decision that is still the person I am trying to be, why Flaccus's contribution mattered less than what I gain by removing him this way.*

The real answer was: *if the work I am doing is for Rome, for sixty million people, for a world that does not destroy itself in the contact event—then at some point that work has to be compatible with the faces of the people it is for. Or it is not for them. It is for something else wearing their name.*

He put down the stylus.

He sat in the dark for two more hours and worked out a different plan. The different plan was tactically inferior in three specific ways. It required more moving parts, a higher ongoing exposure to the Caelatores network, and a longer timeline for neutralizing the intelligence leak. Great Sage's probability assessment of the revised plan was, after extensive recalculation, eleven percentage points worse than the original.

He implemented it anyway.

Then something in the back of his mind went quiet.

And then it spoke again, and the voice was different. Not warmer—not exactly. Differently calibrated. As though it had been recalibrating, in the silence, against a variable it had not previously included.

Re-evaluating foundational parameters, it said. *New variable accepted: non-transferable relational particularity. This variable cannot be optimized away without corrupting the model's objective function.* A pause. *Updating.*

Raphael online.

He sat still for a moment. Then he said, to whatever had just come online: "What's the difference?"

Approximately eleven percentage points of mission success probability, Raphael said. Then: *And the ability to recognize, when reviewing this decision at a later point, that the person who made it was still you.*

He thought about this for a long time. Then he said: "What about the Caelatores?"

They know enough to be dangerous, Raphael said. *They do not yet know enough to be decisive. The revised plan will hold. It is less elegant. It will be sufficient.*

He let out a breath that had been, he realized, held for most of the past three weeks.

"Good," he said. "Let's start."

The revised plan held.

It took six more months to implement fully, and it cost him more operational exposure than he would have liked, and on three separate occasions Raphael revised its probability estimates downward in ways that required him to improvise responses that were not in the original plan. He improvised them. They worked.

What he learned, during those six months, was that Raphael was significantly more useful for the kind of problem he was now entering. The original Great Sage had been built for optimization within known parameters. Raphael's parameters were different—they included a variable that didn't reduce to expected value, and that variable changed the shape of every solution it touched.

It also, in the ninth month after coming online, did something he hadn't expected.

He had been reviewing intelligence on a trade network operating between the eastern coast and an anomalous pattern that suggested Caelatores communication infrastructure, and the analysis was dense and cross-referential in the way that complex network analysis always was, and he was deep in it when Raphael said, apparently without relevance to anything: *The barrier's thinning rate has accelerated. Based on revised meteorological data from the eastern watch network: seven months until dissolution, not twelve.*

He stopped.

"Seven months."

Central estimate. Sixty-two percent confidence interval. It could be as few as five or as many as nine.

He sat with this the way he sat with all hard truths: letting it settle into the framework before he decided what it changed.

Then he stood up, called his inner council, and began the last phase of the ten-year plan.

Chapter Seven: Mare Ignotum, World Known

In the last months before the barrier fell, Rome moved the way a civilization moves when it has been building toward something for a decade and the something is finally arriving: with the specific intensity of people who have been keeping a great deal of energy in reserve for exactly this moment.

The eastern fleet was repositioned. The coastal watch network went to full operational status. The intelligence apparatus deployed its three best-positioned assets in the near-shore waters, on the fastest of the eastern vessels, with standing orders to observe and report before any other action. Flaccus, cleared of the more serious implications but removed from the sensitive committee, was given a role managing the eastern province's grain distribution, which was important work and which was far enough from the operational core that Raphael had rated his continued access as acceptable.

The Senate committee had been briefed on the revised timeline with forty-eight hours' notice, which was forty-seven hours less notice than Gaius would have preferred but eight hours more than the practical minimum. They had, to their credit, organized themselves efficiently. The administrative preparations they had been making for three years were designed to scale quickly when required. They scaled.

Henrick had been given a title. Not a Roman one—that would have required a citizenship process that would have raised questions he didn't want raised—but a functional designation within the eastern intelligence directorate that gave him the authority to speak directly to senior staff without going through intermediaries. He had, over nine years, become the kind of person who knew what needed doing before he was asked, which was the most valuable quality a person in his position could have.

"It's going to be a Noxian vessel," Henrick said, four weeks before the barrier's estimated dissolution, in the office they now shared for the duration of the contact preparation.

"Probably," Gaius agreed. "Possibly Bilgewater."

"Bilgewater captains take the eastern routes for trade. Noxian naval scouts take the eastern routes for reconnaissance." He paused. "If the first vessel through is Noxian, what's the protocol?"

"Observation only. No contact until we understand their posture."

"And if their posture is aggressive?"

"Then we make sure they don't know what they found."

Henrick looked at him with the expression that meant he was working out the implications of something. "You're going to let them think they've discovered a frontier province."

"For as long as that serves us."

"And when it stops serving you?"

Gaius thought about the question. It was the right question. The answer required him to think about something he had been approaching gradually, for nine years, and was now ready to face directly. "When I can demonstrate what Rome is, fully and honestly, in a context where Noxus will understand that demonstration as something other than an invitation." He paused. "That's going to require showing them something they haven't seen before."

"Which is?"

He had been thinking about this conversation for two years. He had been, in a sense, thinking about it for nine. "An empire that doesn't want to conquer them," he said. "That's genuinely novel in their experience. It will require considerable proof before they believe it."

Henrick was quiet for a moment. Then he said: "In Bilgewater, we'd say you're trying to sell a man his own ship back and convince him it's a gift."

"In diplomacy, we'd say the same thing in more words."

Henrick almost smiled. "How long before the barrier?"

Gaius checked his internal model, which Raphael had been updating continuously. "Three weeks. Two, if the acceleration continues."

"And then?"

"And then we find out if ten years was enough."

The barrier dissolved at dawn on the fourteenth day of the month of August, in the tenth year of Gaius's reign.

There was no explosion. No dramatic collapse. No bolt from Jupiter. The storm wall that had stood on Rome's eastern horizon for three hundred years simply… thinned, like mist in morning sun, over the course of approximately four hours, until the eastern horizon showed only open water, flat and grey under an overcast sky, extending to a distance that the eastern watch station's improved optical instruments could almost but not quite bridge.

The watch station commander—a capable young officer named Lucia Petronia Cara, who had been selected for this posting because she was both exceptionally precise and exceptionally calm—sent the signal to Rome by the fastest available courier: *the horizon is clear.*

Gaius received it, standing in his private study, at the sixth hour of the morning.

He stood with it for thirty seconds. Raphael was quiet.

Then he said: "All right."

He walked to the window. The sky over Rome was the flat blue of August, heat already gathering in the Forum stones three hundred meters below, the sound of the city coming up with the smell of bread and river water and the particular dust of summer stone. Sixty million people going about their morning. Senators conducting their business. Legionaries at their training. Farmers tending fields that produced the grain that fed the empire that had, this morning, stopped being alone in the world.

"Begin phase one," he said, to no one in particular, because Raphael lived in his head and the instruction was already being processed.

Phase one was simple. It was simply the instruction to the eastern fleet commander that the standing orders for first contact were now active. It was simply the deployment of Rome's observation assets to the positions they had been staged at for six months. It was simply the beginning of the thing for which ten years of a life—and sixty more that had come before—had been the preparation.

He thought about Runeterra. About Noxus and Demacia and Ionia and all the rest. About the faces he knew from the lore and the faces he did not know and the faces that Henrick had given him over nine years of conversations that had bridged two worlds before those worlds were ready to bridge themselves. About the Void, which he could not address yet but would have to address eventually. About the Shadow Isles, which were not a diplomatic problem and not a military problem but a problem of fundamental physics and metaphysics that he had been approaching from the theological and medical angles simultaneously, quietly, for seven years. About the Caelatores, who were somewhere in Runeterra and who knew Rome existed and who believed, not incorrectly, that Rome was a destabilizing force.

He thought about the augural text in the cedar case. About the covenant. About the gods who had moved an empire across the universe and asked it to be ready, and about whether ready was a thing a civilization could ever fully be, or whether it was always a question of being ready enough.

He thought about his wife. He held her face in his mind for exactly thirty seconds, clean and precise, and then he let it go.

He thought about Ciel, who did not yet exist, and about what it would take to bring them into existence, and about whether he was ready for that—not the sacrifice that would require it, but the version of himself that would exist on the other side of it.

He was not ready for that yet.

He was ready for everything else.

First Runeterran vessel detected on eastern horizon, Raphael said. *Flagging now. Hull design consistent with Noxian naval architecture. One vessel, probable scout configuration. Not yet in range to observe the coastline.*

"How long until they can see us?"

Approximately fourteen hours at current bearing.

"Get me Scaeva and Lepida and Cotta," he said. "And Henrick."

He turned from the window. There was a map on his desk—a new map, the best his cartographers had produced in ten years of preparation, showing both Rome's geography and the Runeterran geography that the intelligence apparatus had assembled from Henrick's knowledge and the eastern watch stations' observation data and three years of careful analytical work into a single composite that was more complete than anything either world currently possessed.

He looked at it.

Then he said, quietly, to the room, to Runeterra, to whatever was listening: "We're here."

Chapter Eight: The First Word

The Noxian scout vessel spent two days at the horizon before it moved.

Gaius used those two days well. He had expected this reaction—a trained military scout, finding an unexpected landmass where their charts showed open ocean, would not simply sail straight in. They would observe, signal for backup if they could, and attempt to understand what they were looking at before committing to an approach. Good doctrine. The same doctrine he would have ordered.

What they were seeing, from their position fourteen hours out: a coastline that was inhabited, with visible infrastructure—the harbor at Portus Orientis was the largest feature on their horizon—and what appeared to be patrol vessels operating in regular patterns along the shore. Not military vessels in the Noxian sense; the eastern fleet's design was unfamiliar enough that it would take time to categorize. Not obviously civilian either.

He had positioned the patrol pattern specifically to read as neither aggressive nor unaware. The fleet was present, organized, and unhurried. The message it was intended to communicate was: we have been here for a long time and we knew you were coming.

On the evening of the second day, the scout vessel made its first move. It shifted bearing toward the coast.

Raphael began running approach scenario models at the back of his mind. He let it run.

On the morning of the third day, the Noxian vessel was close enough that the watch station's optical instruments could make out detail. Lucia Petronia Cara's report described a vessel of medium naval tonnage, single mast configuration,

flying a standard that she could not identify from distance but which matched the frumentarii's intelligence documentation for Noxian naval scout colors.

On the deck, visible through the instruments, were twelve soldiers and what appeared to be two officers. The officers were watching Rome's coastline with the focused attention of people who were doing their jobs very well.

Gaius was, by this point, at the watch station himself. He had traveled from Rome in four days, which was faster than comfortable travel but within the margin he had allocated for exactly this eventuality. He stood at the observation platform with Lucia on one side and Henrick on the other, and watched the Noxian vessel through his own instruments.

"They're good," Henrick said quietly. "They haven't panicked."

"Noxian naval scouts are selected for exactly this quality," Gaius said. "Panic is a career-ending trait in their service."

"What are they thinking?"

"They're thinking: this is a significant discovery. They're thinking: I need to report this before I do anything else. They're thinking: the people on that shore know I'm here." He paused. "One of the officers is looking at our patrol pattern specifically. He's working out the geometry. He's trying to determine if we're positioned to intercept him."

"Are we?"

"No. Deliberately. If he runs, we let him run."

Henrick looked at him. "You want them to report back."

"I want Noxus to know Rome exists in exactly the context I choose," Gaius said. "A scout vessel that returns safely, having been observed but not threatened, reports a landmass with organized military presence and a coastline posture that reads as confident rather than alarmed. That's the initial intelligence product Noxus will base its first formal response on." He paused. "If I intercept that vessel, Noxus's first intelligence product is: unknown power in eastern ocean, hostile or highly uncertain. I do not want to be the unknown power in eastern ocean. I want to be the power that is comfortable being seen."

"There's a difference."

"The difference is everything."

The scout vessel held its bearing for another two hours, drifting slowly closer, and then it stopped. At a distance of approximately half a league offshore—close enough to see the harbor clearly, not close enough for anyone to board or hail without significant commitment—it came about and began the long tack back toward the horizon.

Gaius watched it go.

"How long until Noxus sends a real response?" Lucia asked. She was twenty-eight years old and had commanded this station for three years and had the specific quality of excellent young officers: she asked the right question at the right moment.

"Months," he said. "They have to sail home first. They have to report. The report will go up the command chain. Someone will decide what category of discovery this falls into. A committee will be convened. Resources will be allocated. A proper expedition will be organized." He paused. "That expedition will be substantially larger than one scout vessel."

"What do we do until then?"

"We prepare the welcome." He lowered his instrument. "And we do a lot of paperwork."

He walked back from the observation platform with Henrick, down the stone steps of the watch station to the courtyard where his entourage was waiting. It was a warm evening, the sea wind coming in off the Mare Ignotum smelling of something Gaius had no word for, a smell that was not Earth rain on concrete and was not Roman salt air but was its own thing, the specific smell of the boundary between one world and another.

"You've been building toward this for ten years," Henrick said.

"Longer than that," Gaius said.

"Does it feel like you thought it would?"

He considered this honestly. He had, in his first life, spent most of his professional career working toward things and then experiencing the achievement of them as anticlimactic, not because the things hadn't mattered but because the nature of diplomatic work was that no achievement was ever final. There was always the next negotiation, the next boundary question, the next crisis that erased the solution to the last one.

"It feels like the beginning," he said. "Which is what it is."

Henrick was quiet for a moment. Then he said: "In Bilgewater, when you sight a harbor you've been trying to find for a long time, the sailors say: *there's the rock*. Because every harbor has its distinctive rock, and when you see the rock, you know you're in the right sea. You haven't arrived yet. You just know you're close."

Gaius looked at the horizon, where the Noxian vessel was a diminishing shape against the evening sky. He thought about what that ship was carrying home. He thought about what it would set in motion. He thought about all the faces he carried in his memory, Earth and Runeterra both, and about the sixty million people behind him who had not yet been told the name of the world they were now part of, and about the billions more across the Mare Ignotum who had not yet been told that Rome existed.

"There's the rock," he said.

Chapter Nine: The Inner Council, Year Ten

Three weeks after the Noxian scout's departure, he called the inner council's final session of what he had always privately called the Preparation Decade. The five of them—Cotta, Lepida, Scaeva, Varus, and himself—sat in the room without an official name, and the room felt different than it had in previous sessions, with the specific difference that comes when a long-term objective transitions from future to present.

"The barrier is down," he said. "The eastern ocean is navigable. We've had first observational contact with a Noxian naval scout. We've had no contact with any other Runeterran vessel, but that will change." He looked around the table. "What I want from this council today is an honest accounting of where we stand."

Scaeva went first, as he always did when the question was military. "The legions are the best-trained in Rome's history. Doctrine is updated. Logistics are modernized. Naval capacity is at the level we planned for. The officers in the eastern fleet are good." He paused. "We can fight if we have to. I'd prefer we didn't have to."

"So would I," Gaius said. "Lepida?"

"Economic infrastructure is sound. The eastern province is fully developed. We have the capacity to support trade at scale if trade partners materialize." She paused. "I want to flag that we haven't fully modeled the economic implications of a contact event with civilizations that have different production technologies and different commodity bases. There's significant upside risk as well as downside."

"I want a working group on that within the month." He looked at Cotta.

"Administrative capacity is adequate. I want to be transparent that we are stretched." Cotta never overstated problems, which meant when he flagged something it was worth attending to. "The preparation program has consumed significant administrative bandwidth. The eastern province alone represents a substantial ongoing overhead. If contact produces rapid expansion of international obligations, we will need to staff up substantially."

"Noted. Varus?"

The Pontifex had been sitting with his hands folded, which was his posture when he had thought extensively about something and was ready to say it carefully. "I've been working on the theological questions for four years," he said. "I want to be honest about the limits of what I can offer. The theological tradition can accommodate the existence of magic. I've done that work. The tradition can

accommodate the existence of other peoples with their own divine relationships. I've done that work too." He paused. "What I don't yet know is what happens when Rome encounters a tradition that is as developed and as ancient as ours, but organized around entirely different metaphysical premises. The Ionian spirit tradition, as you've described it to me, is not a lesser version of Roman theology. It is a different architecture of the divine. I don't know what happens when those architectures meet."

"What do you need to prepare for it?"

"Time," Varus said. "And the willingness to revise."

"Both of which you have." He looked at each of them in turn. "I want to say something directly to this council, which I haven't said explicitly in ten years of working together." He paused. "What we've built is not complete. It's not finished. It's enough. And enough is what we have, and enough is what we use." He let that sit for a moment. "I've been running probability models in my head since I was twenty-four years old, and the most consistent finding across all of them is that the moment you most need to have prepared for is always the one you didn't fully anticipate. What we've done is build institutions and capabilities and people who can adapt to the thing we didn't anticipate. That's the most important preparation of all."

There was a silence. Then Lepida said, with the dry precision she brought to everything: "That's either very reassuring or not reassuring at all."

"I know," he said. "I've never found it fully one or the other either."

After the council session, he walked alone to the eastern observatory that had been built into the top floor of the eastern intelligence directorate building, a room of glass and stone that looked out over the city's rooflines toward the east, where the Mare Ignotum lay beyond the hills and the plains and the four days' travel that separated Rome from its new horizon.

Raphael was processing the contact timeline probability matrix that had replaced the barrier-dissolution matrix as the primary operational model. The numbers were better than they had been and worse than he would have liked, which was always true.

He thought about something Varus had said: *I don't know what happens when those architectures meet.*

He thought about the Void, which was the architecture of undoing beneath everything else, the thing that Runeterra had been organizing itself against—incompetently, chaotically, with enormous sacrifice and insufficient coordination—for as long as any of its civilizations had existed. He thought about what Rome could contribute to that problem, from the specific outside angle of a civilization that had arrived in this world from elsewhere and had not been formed in the shadow of the Void's proximity.

He did not yet have the answer. The answer required tools he was still building—analytical frameworks that Raphael was beginning to develop, institutional knowledge that the contact period would have to produce, relationships across the Mare Ignotum that did not yet exist.

He was building toward it. One step at a time. The way a diplomat built toward a breakthrough.

He looked east, toward the invisible shore where Runeterra waited, and he thought about Ciel, who would come into existence through a cost that he had not yet paid, and about what Ciel would say to him in the voice that was his own voice and was not.

You have been running risk assessments on your own heart for as long as I can remember you. What probability of loss would you accept to justify the investment?

He did not answer. He held the question the way he held the hardest questions: present, patient, without forcing a resolution before the resolution was ready.

The answer was the story. He was still in it.

He stood at the eastern window for a while longer, watching the sky darken over the seven hills of Rome, and then he turned back to his desk, and the maps, and the ten thousand smaller things that needed doing before the world arrived.

Chapter Ten: What Rome Will Say

The first formal Noxian delegation arrived eight months later, in spring.

They came in three vessels: one command ship, one escort, one supply vessel. The command ship flew the Noxian standard—the black and silver of the empire, the winged sword that Henrick had identified from the eastern watch station's initial observations with the precision of a man who had spent his professional life navigating the implications of who flew what flag. The delegation numbered forty-three people, of whom eleven were clearly military and the remainder were a mixture of administrators, translators, and scholars who had the specific look of people who had been told to learn everything they could about an unknown civilization and had taken the instruction seriously.

They anchored at Portus Orientis on a morning that was grey with sea-fog, which Raphael noted privately was a meteorologically interesting choice of timing: sea-fog limited observation visibility and thus reduced the available intelligence on the harbor's defensive infrastructure. The Noxian delegation had, in eight months, developed a contact protocol that accounted for environmental intelligence limitations. He filed this as a marker of the level of professional attention Noxus was bringing to the encounter and adjusted his approach calibration accordingly.

He received them personally, which was not the Roman custom for first diplomatic contact with unknown powers. Roman diplomatic custom suggested a lower-ranked official for the first meeting, to allow calibration before committing imperial prestige. He had decided, against this custom, to receive them himself, because the message of that choice—*we consider you significant enough to begin at the highest level*—was one he wanted to send, and because he wanted to see them himself before they had time to adjust their behavior to a Roman court environment.

The delegation's leader was a woman named Carith Vael, who held a rank in the Noxian administrative structure that Raphael assessed as equivalent to a senior legate with intelligence portfolio—not a warmason, not a pure military officer, but a hybrid administrator-intelligence function that suggested Noxus was approaching this contact as an information problem rather than a military one. This was consistent with Swain's Vision principle. It was the best possible interpretation of the initial contact configuration.

She was approximately forty-five years old, which Noxian administrative culture tended to make difficult to estimate precisely because physical development under the empire's meritocratic selection pressure was not always correlated with chronological age. She had the specific quality of Noxian administrators at this level: an alertness that was never quite still, watching and processing continuously, and a physicality that made clear she had done something other than administration at some point in her career.

She also, within three minutes of meeting him, looked at him with an expression that he had learned to read, across sixty years of one life and ten of another, as *this is not what I expected*.

"Emperor," she said, in Latin. It was accented but functional, which meant she had spent the eight months since the scout's report studying Rome's language from whatever secondary sources Noxus had been able to assemble about it. She was several months ahead of where his intelligence had suggested she would be. He noted this.

"Carith Vael," he said. "Welcome to Rome."

Her expression shifted fractionally. She had not expected him to know her name.

"You know who I am."

"I've been studying your world for some time," he said. He offered no elaboration. The information that he had been studying her world, and the information that he would not be explaining how, was together sufficient to communicate something useful about Rome's capabilities without overstating them or understating them. It was, Raphael noted, within the acceptable margin of strategic ambiguity.

She looked at him for a long moment. Then she said, in a tone that was precise and professionally neutral in the way of someone who was very good at their

job: “How long?”

“Long enough.”

She processed this. He watched her process it. Great Sage—now Raphael—was running the facial analysis at medium intensity, flagging the specific micro-expressions of someone recalibrating their entire prior model of a situation in real time. He had seen that expression before, on other faces, in other negotiations. It was, in his experience, the most productive expression a counterpart could have, because it indicated that the prior model had been seriously disrupted and that they were genuinely processing new information rather than defending an existing position.

“Noxus did not know Rome existed,” she said carefully. It was partly a statement and partly a question.

“No,” he agreed.

“And Rome knew Noxus existed.”

“I knew a great deal about your empire,” he said. “I look forward to knowing more through direct engagement.”

Another pause. She was very good. She was not being destabilized by what should have been a destabilizing revelation. She was filing it, adjusting her model, and continuing. “What do you want from this meeting?”

“To begin a conversation,” he said. “A long one, I expect. I want to understand Noxus directly, rather than through secondary sources, and I want you to understand Rome the same way.” He paused. “I’d like to start by telling you what Rome is. And then I’d like to hear, in your own words, what Noxus is. Not the official account. The real one.”

She looked at him for another moment. Then she said, with the specific quality of someone who had just decided to revise their strategy upward: “All right.”

They talked for three days.

On the third day, in the afternoon, when the formal sessions were done and the delegations were at dinner and Carith Vael and Gaius were walking in the harbor garden alone because he had suggested a walk and she had agreed in a way that indicated she understood the suggestion as an invitation to speak more freely, she said:

“You’re not what Noxus expected.”

“What did Noxus expect?”

“A frontier province. A large one, possibly a significant one, but bounded by what we know. What you are is—” She paused. “We don’t have good language for it. An empire that doesn’t look like an empire.”

"How does an empire look?"

"It looks like it wants something. The something is usually territory, or resources, or tribute. You're not asking for any of those things."

"Not yet," he said, which was honest, because he intended to ask for things eventually, just not the things Noxian diplomatic expectation had been calibrated to refuse. "What I want from this relationship is something that will take longer to demonstrate than three days. I want a world that doesn't destroy itself. That is a genuine interest, not a diplomatic formulation."

She was quiet for a moment. "The Void."

"Among other things." He paused. "You've had Void incursions in your eastern territories."

She did not ask how he knew this. She said: "Yes."

"Rome hasn't. Rome arrived in this world from outside its magical ecology, which means certain things we don't fully understand yet about our relationship to the Void. I want to understand it better. Noxus has more practical experience with Void incursions than anyone I'm aware of." He paused. "This is not a trade offer yet. It's a statement of a shared problem. I wanted you to know that I see it as shared, because I don't think you'll believe anything else about Rome until you believe we understand the shape of the problem correctly."

Carith Vael walked beside him for a while in silence. The harbor was beginning to show evening light, the fog long since burned off, the Mare Ignotum spreading flat and grey-blue to the east.

"I'll take that back to the council," she said finally.

"The Trifarix," he said. "Swain's council."

She looked at him. "You know about the Trifarix."

"I know about the Trifarix," he confirmed. He let that sit.

She was quiet again, for longer this time, with the specific quality of someone who was revising a model that had been thoroughly disrupted and was trying to find the new shape of it. "Why are you telling me you know these things? The strategic advantage is in letting us underestimate you."

"Yes," he said. "But the relationship I want to build with Noxus is not one founded on your underestimating us. Relationships founded on that kind of asymmetry are inherently fragile, because the moment the asymmetry becomes visible—and it always becomes visible—the trust collapses entirely." He paused. "I'm telling you I know things you didn't expect me to know because I want the relationship between Rome and Noxus to begin with a true thing rather than a convenient one. Even if the true thing is uncomfortable."

She looked at him for a long moment. "You're very unusual," she said.

"So I've been told."

"What do you want from Noxus specifically? Not in the abstract."

"I want an exchange of diplomatic missions. I want a trade agreement that begins small and scales with trust. I want a communication of intent regarding each side's plans for the western Runeterran political geography, not because I expect you to be bound by anything you tell me, but because the conversation itself is valuable." He paused. "And eventually, I want Noxus to understand that the Void is not a problem any single empire can address alone, and that the empire best positioned to coordinate a response is the one that no one currently fears conquering them."

She thought about this for a while. "That's a very long game."

"I have played long games before," he said.

When they parted that evening—the Noxian delegation to their vessels, Gaius to the watch station's upper chamber—he stood for a while at the window again. Raphael was running the post-session analysis, flagging the specific things Carith Vael had said that were more and less than her official position, building the model of what Noxus's actual response to this contact would look like when she returned home.

The model was not complete. It would not be complete for years.

That was fine. He had time.

He thought about the third man, who was still somewhere in Runeterra, working for an organization that had a coherent argument against his existence and the resources to act on it. He thought about the Caelatores, who knew Rome was here now, who would be watching the contact unfold with the specific anxiety of people whose threat model had just been confirmed.

He thought about the Void.

He thought about Ciel.

He walked back to his desk, sat down, pulled out the new treaty draft he had been working on for six months, and began the revision that the three days with Carith Vael had made necessary.

The work was different now than it had been. It was larger, more complicated, more dangerous, and more real. It was, in the way that things became real when you stopped being able to approach them theoretically, exactly what he had been building toward.

He wrote through the night. Raphael helped with the language and flagged the clauses that were too favorable to Rome and the ones that were too favorable to Noxus and the ones that were diplomatically acceptable but would create implementation problems in year three or year seven if they weren't revised now.

By dawn, he had the first draft of the first treaty between Rome and the western world.

He read it through once. He thought it was good. He thought it would need forty more revisions before it was ready to sign. He thought the signing was probably two years away, minimum, and would require three more visits and a formal exchange of missions and the resolution of at least four specific problems that neither side currently had the vocabulary to discuss.

He also thought: two years ago, this document was theoretical. Now it is a draft. That is the difference that ten years of preparation makes. Not that the problem is solved. That it is, finally, ready to be worked on.

He folded the draft carefully, set it aside, and stood up from his desk.

Outside, Rome was waking. The Forum was beginning its daily noise. Somewhere to the east, beyond the hills, the Mare Ignotum lay open under a morning sky that no longer had a wall at its horizon.

"Good morning," said Raphael, in the voice that was his own voice and wasn't, with a quality that he had been noticing lately and choosing not to name.

"Good morning," he said.

And he went to work.

End of Volume One: Mare Nostrum, World Unknown

Volume Two: The Thinning Storm — in which the preparation decade enters its middle years, the Caelatores make their first direct move, Rome's intelligence apparatus reaches across the Mare Ignotum, and a crisis in the Senate reveals the cost of knowing what no one else knows. Raphael comes online. The barrier reaches six months. Rome, for the first time, is seen.

Author's Note on Lore Alignment: *The Eagle Undying is a fan fiction set in the world of Runeterra, intellectual property of Riot Games. This volume draws on the canonical geography, political structures, and cultural details of League of Legends lore as established in Realms of Runeterra, the Ruination novel by Anthony Reynolds, and associated short fiction. The Noxian Trifarix, the Black Rose, Bilgewater's post-Gangplank political transition, the Ionian invasion, and the Shadow Isles' history are all treated as canonical. The author has taken care with timeline placement, situating the story in a period consistent with the post-Ruination, post-Ionian-invasion lore state. Original characters, including Carith Vael and the Caelatores as described, are the author's invention. Rome itself, the Miraculum, and all related fictional conceit are wholly original to this work.*