AQUILA PERPETUA

The Eagle That Does Not Fall

Volume One: Mare Nostrum, World Unknown

Revised & Complete Edition

For every man who ever watched an empire rise in the dark of a private room, and understood exactly what it cost, and chose to build one anyway.

> *Invariably, all nations crumble, fall, and are forgotten. And in their final death throes, they often drag others down with them.*
>
> *— The Histories of Empire, Volume VI, by Tyrus of Helia (recovered from Blessed Isles salvage, approximate date unknown)*

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

> *Ninjutsu is not the art of killing. It is the art of surviving what was designed to kill you. The difference is everything.*
>
> *— Attributed to the Iga-ryū elders, provenance unverifiable*

PROLOGUE: THE MATHEMATICS OF DYING

The man who would become Gaius Aurelius Varro spent the last eleven minutes of his first life calculating his own probability of survival.

It was not despair. It was professional habit, the same impulse that had made him good at his job for thirty-two years — the compulsion to model the system, assign distributions to outcomes, and accept the median result without flinching. His body was failing. The distribution was narrow and pointed in one direction. The median result was unambiguous.

He was sixty-one years old. His name was David Aurelius — the middle name was his mother's small classical joke, a surname she'd given him like a wink across two thousand years of history. He had spent his career in the machinery of international diplomacy, in the clean conference rooms and

carpeted anteriors of organizations that mattered only slightly less than they believed they did. He had been good at reading systems. Better at reading people. Best of all at understanding that the two were, in the end, the same thing.

He lay in a hospital bed in Geneva. The window showed a gray afternoon. Someone had placed yellow flowers in a vase on the windowsill, which he thought was a kind and slightly absurd thing to do, as the flowers would outlive him by a week and then die too.

His specific grief — the quiet, surgical grief that had attended him through the last decade of his career — was not about dying. He had reconciled himself to dying with the same actuarial equanimity he brought to everything. His grief was about legibility. About understanding a system so completely that you could trace every fault line in it, name every structural weakness, predict every cascade failure — and discovering that being right, in diplomacy, was not sufficient. That the world could be measured, mapped, modeled, and still lost.

He thought, in those last eleven minutes, about Runeterra.

It was a strange thing to think about at the threshold of death. Most people, he supposed, thought about family, about regret, about the faces of people they loved. He thought about some of those things too. But underneath the human inventory ran a persistent, low-frequency current: the lore he had spent twenty years reading in the evenings, the political geography of a fictional world whose internal logic he had found cleaner, and more honest, than the one he'd spent his career navigating.

He knew the shape of Noxian expansionism. He understood the Piltovan technological advantage and its social costs. He had thought, more than once, that the Shadow Isles were the most precise metaphor for systemic institutional failure he had ever encountered — the way the corruption spread from a single catastrophic decision, through every connected structure, until the original form was unrecognizable.

He knew, in the technical sense, what was wrong with every faction on Runeterra and what, theoretically, could be done about it.

He thought also — because the mind near death circles toward the things it protected most carefully in life — of Japan. Of the eighteen years he had spent there as a diplomat: first attached to the consulate in Tokyo, later elevated to an advisory role in bilateral cultural and strategic negotiations. Of the language he had learned not from textbooks but from living inside it, from the specific humility required to navigate a culture that communicated meaning in layers, in silence, in the precise management of what was left unsaid. Of the history he had read not as an academic exercise but as operational intelligence — because understanding what Japan had been was the only reliable path to understanding what Japan intended.

He had gone deep. Deeper than his diplomatic role strictly required. He had read the military histories of the Sengoku period with the same absorption he brought to the Runeterra lore — the clan politics and the betrayals, the philosophy of the shinobi traditions, the specific, extraordinary history of the Iga-ryū and their destruction in the Second Tenshō Iga War of 1581. Oda Nobunaga's campaign. The dispersal of the survivors. The way a tradition that had taken generations to build was nearly erased in a season.

He had written a paper on it. Nobody had read it. He had found it beautiful and tragic and had filed it in the category of *things the world lost that it didn't know it lost.*

He had never expected those particular files in the second library to matter.

He had been wrong about that.

The last eleven minutes ended.

The gray Geneva afternoon dissolved.

He came back to consciousness with the smell of salt water, torch smoke, and cedar oil, and with the specific, deep-tissue ache of a body that had been running since before dawn.

The first thing he registered was the sound of an eagle standard.

Not a metaphorical eagle. The real thing — bronze cast, mounted on a polished shaft, carried by a soldier who stood at parade rest outside a pair of doors that were themselves carved with more eagles. The standard caught the morning wind from somewhere he couldn't see, and the fabric beneath it snapped with the crisp authority of something that had never doubted its right to be where it was.

He lay still for exactly four seconds, processing.

The ceiling above him was coffered stone, painted in warm ochre and deep red. The air smelled of wax and cold stone and, distantly, of the sea. His body was wrong — too young, the joints clean of the arthritis that had narrated his last decade, the muscles carrying a strange, coiled energy that felt borrowed. He could feel the memories layered beneath his own, like a second text written in a different hand on the same page: this was a room he had slept in every night for nineteen years; those were his father's eagle standards; the ache in his left shoulder was from yesterday's swordsmanship drill, which he had pushed too far because the instructor's praise had annoyed him more than his corrections.

The Great Sage said, quietly: *Cross-reference complete. You are Gaius Aurelius Varro. Heir apparent. Nineteen years of age. Physical condition: excellent. Situation: stable.*

He already knew this. The knowledge sat behind his eyes like a second library.

He was in Rome.

Not the Rome he had lectured about in seminars, the Rome of ruins and museum marble and undergraduate argument. The Rome that had not fallen — that had been moved, entire and alive, to a world whose name it didn't yet know and whose contents would, within ten years, arrive at its shores.

He lay in the quiet of the imperial apartments and let the grief of his old life settle into the new body's bones like sediment finding the floor of a new river. It would be there. He would not pretend otherwise. Sixty-one years of a life, well lived in technical terms, privately hollow in a way that he had never quite solved — it was not nothing, and he would not treat it as nothing.

But there was work to do.

He rose, dressed himself in the clothes laid out by servants who had not yet been summoned, and went to find the archive of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, because someone had to read those augural texts with the right set of eyes, and he was apparently the only person in two worlds equipped to do it.

PART ONE: THE WEIGHT OF WHAT YOU KNOW

Chapter One: The Cedar Case

The archive did not smell like the centers of power Gaius remembered from his first life.

It didn't smell of floor wax or the faint ozone of printer warmth or the specific expensive neutrality of air-conditioned conference rooms where the fate of regions was argued over mineral water and biscuits. It smelled of ancient dust, cedar oil, and the cold metallic tang of deep stone. The Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus sat at the crown of the Capitoline Hill, and its archive extended downward into the rock of the hill itself — a catacomb of careful preservation, each shelf sealed with wax, each case labeled in the careful hand of pontiffs who had been dead for generations.

Gaius sat on the floor. His bare heels pressed against the grit of the paving stones. This was a deliberate choice — the chair at the archive table was too formal for the kind of reading he needed to do, and he had found, in his first life, that the body's relationship to a text mattered. You read differently when you were comfortable. The floor kept him honest.

In his lap sat a cedar case, its ivory inlay yellowed with age, its hinges of dark iron worn smooth by two centuries of handling. Inside were the augural texts. Seventeen lines of Latin so dense with theological metaphor that three generations of Rome's best pontiffs had produced nineteen separate commentaries, all of which disagreed on the fundamental question of what, specifically, the gods were communicating.

Gaius read the lines.

Behind his eyes, the analytical architecture he had always called the Great Sage began its work. It was not magic, or it was not only magic — it was the accumulated habit of a mind trained in actuarial modeling, economic systems analysis, and the pattern recognition of thirty-two years spent parsing treaty language for what it meant beneath what it said. The gods had spoken in the idiom of Roman religious expression, which was itself a specialized dialect of legalistic Latin, in which every word carried five centuries of precedent meaning. A diplomat who understood both the surface language and the layers beneath it could read through the metaphor to the structure underneath.

Cross-reference complete. The internal voice was his own, stripped of register. *The augural language is consistent with a bounded temporal covenant. Three parallel constructions use the idiom of the caduceus of Hermes — in Roman context, Mercury as messenger-god, specifically Mercury as intermediary of contracts with time-limited obligations. The phrase rendered as 'until the waters calm' in the standard scholarly translations carries a double meaning in early imperial augural usage: both literal*

oceanic conditions and the metaphorical concept of 'until the conditions of preparation are satisfied.' These are not the same thing. Current confidence interval on the temporal covenant reading: seventy-one percent.

Gaius read the texts again. He did not hurry. In his experience, hurrying through ambiguous language was how catastrophic misreadings happened, and a catastrophic misreading of these particular texts would be the most consequential intellectual error in recorded history.

He read them a third time.

Then he closed the cedar case and sat with the weight of the conclusion for several minutes, listening to the distant, specific silence of a city built on seven hills that had never fallen.

The storm barrier around the Roman Enclave was thinning.

The covenant was time-limited. The gods had promised protection sufficient for Rome to prepare itself — not permanent protection, but preparation. He estimated, running the numbers across several interpretive frameworks and discarding the outliers, that Rome had between eight and twelve years. Central estimate: ten.

He picked up the cedar case and returned it carefully to its shelf.

The click of the wood against stone was very small in the silence of the archive. It sounded, he thought, like the first tick of a clock.

Recommendation, the Great Sage said. *Immediate expansion of the Ostia naval shipyards is required. If Noxian warships possess even ten percent of the combat profile described in secondary source materials, current Roman trireme design represents an approximately ninety-four percent probability of tactical failure upon first contact. Secondary recommendation: before any military infrastructure adjustment, conduct a comprehensive census of what Rome does and does not know about Runeterra. Confirm the information gap before designing a response to it.*

He already knew this. He was already thinking it.

He walked out of the archive into the morning light of the Capitoline Hill, and looked east toward the sea, which was blue and ordinary and currently the only thing between Rome and a world it was not ready for.

Ten years.

He had ten years to prepare sixty million people for the most significant first contact event in any world's history, without telling any of them — in terms they would believe — what was coming. Without triggering political instability. Without creating a technology dependency that would make Rome stronger in the short term and fundamentally weaker in the long term. Without starting a war.

He stood there for a moment, the sea wind moving through his hair, and felt the sixty-one years of his first life settle into the nineteen-year-old bones of his second one like ballast settling into a ship.

He thought of Noxus. Then of Japan.

Then he went to find his father.

Chapter Two: The Emperor's Garden

The Emperor Marcus Lucius Varro received his son in the garden of the Palatine palace, which was where he received most people he considered worth receiving. The garden was a political statement disguised as horticulture. It said: *I am confident enough in my power to be found in informal conditions. I am secure enough to offer you the gift of my ease.* Gaius had understood this from childhood, though the understanding now carried a different texture — the old diplomat recognized the technique from a hundred iterations across a hundred cultures, and what had once seemed simply like his father's preference now revealed itself as the unconscious application of a political principle as old as power itself.

The Emperor was in his fifties, gray at the temples, with the broad-shouldered build of a man who had served in the legions before the senate and the purple. He was examining a rose bush with an expression of mild professional displeasure, as though the rose were a subordinate who had failed to perform adequately.

"The gardeners tell me it's the soil," he said, without looking up. "I've had the soil analyzed by two separate men from the agricultural colleges, and they disagree with each other and both disagree with the gardeners. I've decided the problem is actually systemic incompetence and have left it to resolve itself."

"Or the rose," Gaius said.

His father looked up. There was something in the look — not suspicion, but attention. A recalibration. The Emperor was a perceptive man; it was how he had stayed Emperor.

"Or the rose," he agreed, and set down his pruning shears. "You were in the archives this morning."

"The staff reports. There's a philosophical distinction." He sat on the low stone bench and gestured at the space beside him. "What did you find?"

Gaius considered his father for a moment. This was the first significant decision of his second life — not what to do, but how much to say, and to whom, and in what frame.

"I read the augural texts," Gaius said. "The commentary tradition has been misreading the third parallel construction for two centuries. The gods aren't describing a permanent condition. They're describing a preparation period."

"A preparation period," the Emperor repeated.

"For contact with whatever lies beyond the Mare Ignotum."

Another silence. His father had the quality Gaius had always respected in the best negotiators — the capacity to receive genuinely unexpected information without immediately reaching for the comfort of a predetermined response. He sat with it. He turned it over.

"How long?" he said at last.

"The distribution is wide. Best estimate: ten years."

"And your confidence in this reading?"

"High enough that I would design policy around it."

The Emperor looked at the rose bush. It was possibly dying and definitely not thriving, its leaves an uncertain yellow at the edges, and it struck Gaius — with the particular, slightly absurd clarity that sometimes attended important moments — that they were, in a way, discussing the same problem. A system in distress, its diagnosis disputed, its resolution dependent on whether anyone was willing to correctly identify what was actually wrong with it.

"Ten years," his father said. "What would you recommend?"

"Infrastructure, primarily. The shipyards at Ostia are undersized. The signal relay system between provinces needs modernization. The agricultural surplus in Aegyptus is being managed inefficiently, which means Rome's strategic food reserve is approximately forty percent of what it should be for a sustained foreign engagement. None of these things would attract comment if addressed now — they can be framed as domestic improvement, which they genuinely are."

"And the Senate?"

"The Senate needs to believe they thought of it."

His father made a sound that was not quite a laugh. "You've been spending time with Primus Pilus Severus."

"I've been reading Cicero."

"Same lesson, different century." The Emperor stood, brushing invisible dust from his toga. He was quiet for a moment, his back to Gaius, facing the rose bush. "When you were nine years old, you asked me why we stopped at the edge of the world. Do you remember?"

"I asked why no one had sailed past the storms."

"I told you the gods had drawn a wall around us while they prepared our next lesson." He turned. "I didn't believe it when I said it. I was placating a nine-year-old."

"And now?"

"Now my nineteen-year-old son reads augural texts that three generations of pontiffs have failed to understand and comes to me with a ten-year clock and an infrastructure agenda." He regarded Gaius with the specific, assessing attention of a man who was genuinely uncertain what he was looking at. "I'm revising my position on divine pedagogy."

Gaius said nothing. Silence, in this case, was the correct response. Let the man think. Let the conclusion arrive as his own.

"Tell me what you need," his father said. "In terms of access, authority, and resources. Be specific."

Gaius told him. He was very specific.

Chapter Three: The Power of Creation

In the third month after the Archive, in a locked workshop in the Palatine compound, Gaius Aurelius Varro created something.

He had been careful about this. He had thought about it for weeks before attempting it, constructing probability distributions around the risks with the same discipline he brought to policy analysis. The Power of Creation — housed in the bloodline of the imperial family, an inheritance so old that no Roman scholar had ever understood its mechanism, only its occasional effects — was not a secret. It was in the historical record.

What no one had understood, and what Gaius understood with complete clarity, was that the power was bounded by imagination. You could only create what you could fully conceptualize.

Gaius had two lifetimes of conceptual material.

He started with a book.

Not a dramatic object. Not a weapon, not a device, not anything that would have startled a visitor to the workshop. A book. Specifically, a treatise on advanced metallurgy — on the properties of steel at high carbon content, on the relationship between cooling rates and crystalline structure, on the practical applications of what his first world had called tool steel and his second world did not yet have a name for.

He placed the empty sheaf of prepared vellum on the workbench.

He held the concept in his mind with the complete, focused attention that the Great Sage made possible — not just the content but the structure, the pedagogical organization, the specific choices of illustration and example that would make the text comprehensible to a Roman metallurgist trained in the existing tradition.

The vellum acquired text.

Not in a flash. Not with a sound. It was quiet, and the light in the workshop didn't change, and the air tasted of nothing unusual. But when Gaius looked down, the vellum bore three hundred pages of precisely organized metallurgical instruction in careful classical Latin, illustrated with technically accurate diagrams, cross-referenced to existing Roman engineering practice.

He checked it. He read every page. He found two errors. He corrected them.

The book was good. It would, given to the right engineer at the right moment, advance Roman metallurgical capability by a generation.

He put it in a locked chest. He would not give it to anyone yet.

This was the discipline he had promised himself. The metallurgy book would go to the engineering colleges in two years, introduced through a third party, framed as the rediscovery of a Hellenistic text. The engineers would work through it. They would test it. They would adapt it, argue with it, build their own expertise around it. When they produced the improved steel — and they would — it would be theirs. Rome's. Not a gift from a magic emperor. An achievement of Roman engineering tradition, which happened to have been nudged in the right direction at the right time.

This is the principle, he noted in his private journal. *The Power of Creation is most powerful when used to create knowledge rather than objects. Objects can be produced, studied, used, and when they break, they are gone. Knowledge compounds. Knowledge builds institutions. Knowledge becomes a capacity, not a dependency.*

The goal is not to give Rome a stronger fleet. The goal is to give Rome engineers who know how to build a stronger fleet.

He locked the chest containing the metallurgy book, put out the workshop lamp, and sat in the dark for a moment, listening to the city outside.

The work continued.

Chapter Four: The Senator from Hispania

The Senate of Rome convened in the Curia Julia on the Kalends of March, and Senator Quintus Fabius Censorinus, representing the third district of Hispania Tarraconensis, gave a speech about the naval yards at Ostia that was so well organized and so precisely calibrated to the anxieties of the fiscal conservatives on the opposite benches that three senior senators sought him out after the session to ask who had written it for him.

Senator Censorinus told them he had written it himself, which was technically true. He had written it himself, after three conversations with the Crown Prince — conversations in which the Crown Prince had asked a great many questions and offered very few answers, and which Censorinus had come away from feeling, each time, that he had arrived at a significant conclusion through his own considerable intelligence, which was the specific sensation of a man who has been carefully steered and has not noticed.

The Ostia expansion proposal passed by a margin of eighty-three votes.

Gaius heard the result from his seat in the gallery and permitted himself exactly two seconds of quiet satisfaction before moving to the next item on the list.

Chapter Five: The Watcher in the Senate

The first sign that someone was watching came in the sixth month, in the form of a question that did not need to be asked.

The Pontifex Maximus — Tiberius Claudius Rufus, a man who had occupied the position for seventeen years with the kind of unobtrusive competence that made institutions function without attracting credit — requested a private meeting with the Crown Prince to discuss the augural archives.

This was not unusual. What was not expected was the specific question, delivered after twenty minutes of perfectly unremarkable archival conversation, with the careful tone of a man who had rehearsed his nonchalance: "You are not the first person, in recent months, to consult the augural texts from the period of the Miraculum. There was a scholar here in the winter — a visitor from the eastern provinces, claiming work in comparative mythology. He spent three days with those texts and then departed without completing his stated research project."

Gaius controlled his expression with the ease of long practice. "Did he leave notes?"

"Nothing in the archive. Nothing registered at the customs office either, which is how I know he was not a scholar." The Pontifex met his eyes. "He asked the archivists very specifically about the temporal covenant passages."

After the meeting, walking back across the Forum in the late afternoon light, Gaius ran the probability distributions with the focused calm that was, by now, simply the way his mind worked.

Someone in the Senate — or someone with senatorial access, which was a narrower but still meaningful set of people — had sent a proxy to examine the same texts he had examined. Not a scholar. Someone with a specific analytical objective and the operational discipline to leave nothing behind.

The timing was the significant variable. It had been four months since the Ostia vote. The grain reserve legislation was moving through committee. The signal relay expansion was framed as a domestic infrastructure project. Nothing, on the surface, should have attracted the kind of attention that sent a trained operative into a theological archive looking for covenant language.

Which meant someone in the Senate, or close to it, had a different information base than Gaius had assumed.

Raphael was not yet Raphael — that evolution was still months away — and the Great Sage processed the situation with the clean impersonality of pure analysis: Surveillance from within the Roman political structure is a more immediate threat than any external pressure at this stage of the preparation. A senator who understands the augural texts and their implications is a senator who can build a coalition against the infrastructure program before it reaches completion.

Gaius agreed with the assessment. He also recognized the specific flavor of this threat — domestic political intelligence, the oldest kind — and knew what it required. Not confrontation. Not counter-surveillance, not yet. What it required was patience: continuing to move, continuing to build, and watching the Senate's fault lines with the same attention Marcus Veridius Ocelus was applying to the storm system on the western coast.

Someone was watching.

He would watch back, more carefully.

He went home and began drafting a list of the twelve senators most likely to commission unofficial archive research, ranked by motive and opportunity, and started the slow, patient work of determining which of them it was.

Chapter Six: Raphael

The evolution came in the second year, and it came at cost.

The decision itself was not complicated. A grain merchant in the Capitoline district had been shorting the public distribution — not massively, not spectacularly, but consistently, over a period of fourteen months, in a pattern Gaius had identified when running population flow models for the grain reserve legislation. The merchant's name was Sextus Aemilius Paullus. He was moderately well-connected, a minor figure in the networks of the Capitoline trading families, liked by his neighbors and generally regarded as honest — a reputation he had maintained carefully, which was itself evidence of how methodically the fraud had been constructed.

The complication was that Paullus was also, as Gaius had discovered, a low-level informant for a network of commercial interests that operated across three provinces and that had, twice in the previous decade, provided the imperial intelligence apparatus with information that had prevented significant political instability. The network trusted Paullus partly because he was useful and partly because his fraud was known to them and gave them leverage.

The prosecution would burn the network. The network, assessed against its historical value, was probably worth more than the recouped grain — though not, the Great Sage noted with precision, more than the precedent of impunity.

The mathematically optimal decision was clear. The prosecution served the long-term institutional integrity of the grain distribution system. Paullus had trusted Gaius enough to provide intelligence that Gaius had used to protect a senator whose support he needed.

The correct action would cost a man who had trusted him.

He made the decision. He initiated the prosecution. He did not pretend it was uncomplicated.

That night, the Great Sage was different. Quieter, and in the quietness, larger. When it spoke, it still spoke in his own voice, but the register had changed — something warmer beneath the precision, a presence that understood risk distributions and also understood what it cost to be right.

He named it Raphael. The Healer; the Messenger; the one who accompanied travelers who did not know how long their journey would be.

The prosecution is filed, Raphael said, in the dark of the workshop.

"I know."

The man who can make this decision correctly is only useful if he continues to understand what it costs. The day you stop sitting with the cost is the day the correct decision and the good decision permanently diverge.

He thought about that for a long time.

Chapter Seven: Year Two — The Ships from the East

The harbor master of Ostia sent his message on a Tuesday morning in late spring, in the second year of Gaius's preparation, and the message arrived in Rome by midday through the relay network that was, as of three months ago, finally functioning at design capacity.

The message was six words: *Unknown vessels at Ostia. Come immediately.*

Gaius was in the Senate gallery when the courier arrived. He read the message twice, folded it into his sleeve, and excused himself from the gallery with the unhurried ease of someone attending to a minor administrative matter. Then, in the corridor, he walked faster.

Probability assessment, Raphael said. *Unknown vessels at Ostia, second year of the preparation period. The barrier dissolution timeline does not support contact from Runeterra at this stage. Alternative hypotheses—*

"I know what it is," Gaius said, quietly, to the corridor.

He knew because of a sensation that was not quite memory and not quite foreknowledge but lived in the space between the two, in the second library behind his eyes where eighteen years of Japanese diplomatic service sat next to twenty years of Runeterra lore. He knew the way you know the answer to a problem you've been running in the background, the kind of knowledge that arrives not as a calculation but as a recognition.

He had thought about this possibility exactly twice. Both times he had filed it under *probability too low to model* and moved on.

He had been wrong about the probability.

He requisitioned a horse from the imperial stables, changed out of his senatorial toga into traveling clothes, and rode for Ostia at a pace that his escort found alarming and he found insufficient.

The harbor of Ostia was in the specific state of controlled chaos that Gaius had learned to read as *something unprecedented is happening and the professionals are managing it.*

The harbor master, a compact, weathered man named Gaius Porcius Lentulus who had been managing the port for eleven years and had encountered most of the unusual things the western Mediterranean produced, met him at the dock gate with the expression of someone who had decided to stop trying to explain what he was seeing and would simply show it.

"How many vessels?" Gaius said.

"Seven. Three large, four small. Came in on the morning tide from the northwest." A pause. "Moving under oar. No sails rigged. The design is—" He paused again, searching for a word. "Not Roman. Not anything I've seen charts for."

"How many people?"

"We count approximately two hundred and forty. We stopped counting when they stopped disembarking." He looked at the Crown Prince with the look of a man about to say something that he expected to sound absurd. "They're in good order. Military discipline. When we moved our port watch forward, they formed up and waited. No aggression. But they're armed — light weapons, mostly blades, and gear I don't recognize."

"Are they frightened?"

The harbor master blinked. It was not the question he'd expected. "Some of the younger ones. The elders — there are three, I think, older men in the front — they're not. They look like people who have come to a conclusion and are waiting to see if it's correct."

Gaius understood that description very precisely. It was the posture of survivors. People who had survived something catastrophic and arrived somewhere inexplicable and were holding themselves together by the specific discipline of *we will deal with the next thing when the next thing comes.*

"Keep the port watch where it is," he said. "No weapons drawn. No formation changes. Nothing that reads as hostile. I'm going to the dock."

"Your Highness — protocol requires—"

"I'm aware of the protocol." He was already walking. "Protocol assumes we know what's happening. We don't yet. I do."

He was not entirely lying.

The dock smelled of salt water and resin and the specific, less definable smell of people who had been on the ocean for an uncertain amount of time and were managing their fear with the only tool available to them: dignity.

There were two hundred and thirty-eight of them, he would later confirm. They were dressed in varying states of what had once been functional, practical clothing — dark blues and grays and blacks, layered in the specific way of people who needed to move quietly and carry tools at need. The weapons the harbor master had mentioned were there: short blades, rope, implements he recognized from eighteen years of reading and two field visits to the Iga region as the tools of ninjutsu practice. Movement equipment, really, more than killing equipment, though the distinction was finer than it appeared.

They were watching him approach. The three elders — and they were elders, he could see it in their bearing, the kind of age that comes from having survived things that should have ended you — stood at the front of the group. The younger faces behind them ranged from approximately twelve years old to

late forties. There were women, children, men. A community, not an army. What was left of a community, which was different and worse.

He stopped approximately four meters from the nearest elder and he said, in Japanese, in a register that was specifically the formal register of a person addressing someone of recognized authority: *I am Gaius Aurelius Varro, heir to this empire. You are in the harbor of Ostia, in the territory of Rome. You are safe here. I would like to understand how you came to be here and what you need.*

The silence that followed was the most complex silence Gaius had encountered in either of his lives.

It lasted seven seconds. He counted.

The eldest of the three elders — a man perhaps sixty years old, with the particular stillness of someone who had spent decades learning to be invisible and had forgotten that he was not — looked at Gaius for the entirety of those seven seconds with an expression that moved through shock, through calculation, through something that might have been recognition, and arrived, finally, at a caution so total it was almost its own kind of respect.

Then the elder said, in Japanese, in a register that was the formal register of a senior addressing an unknown power whose nature had not yet been determined: *You speak our language.*

"Yes," Gaius said.

You know what we are.

"I believe so. I would like you to tell me, so I can be certain."

Another pause. Shorter this time.

We are what remains of the Iga-ryū. We fled the campaign of Oda Nobunaga in the province of Iga, in the country of Japan, on the forty-eighth day of the seventh month of the ninth year of Tenshō. A pause that carried considerable weight. *We were sailing downstream to scatter and survive. We did not arrive where we intended.*

Gaius looked at the seven vessels moored behind them. At the two hundred and thirty-eight people who had gotten off them. At the faces of children who had been born into a tradition that had just been nearly obliterated and who did not yet know where they were.

Raphael, he thought.

I know, Raphael said. *The probability was not zero. It was never zero. You assigned it too low.*

"No," Gaius agreed, quietly.

Then, aloud, to the elder: *You are far from Japan. I don't fully understand how you came to be here, and I suspect you don't either. But you are here, and you are safe, and there is food and shelter available within the hour if you want it. What happens after that — where you go, what arrangement you make with Rome — is a conversation we can have when you're rested and have had time to think.* He paused. *I am not going to ask anything of you today. Today I am going to ask you to rest.*

The elder studied him. The studying was thorough and professional, the kind of assessment that covered not just the obvious indicators but the subtle ones: how he stood, where his weight was, whether his hands were still, how he breathed. The evaluation of someone trained to read the difference between what a person presented and what they were.

Whatever the elder concluded, it was sufficient. He turned and spoke briefly to the other two elders. Then he turned back to Gaius.

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

"That's fair," Gaius said. "That's exactly what I would have said."

For the first time, something that was not quite a smile moved across the elder's face. Not warmth, exactly. Recognition.

He gave the order to his people. They began to move, organized and quiet and carrying their tools, toward the temporary quarters that the harbor master's people were already preparing.

Gaius stood on the dock and watched them and thought about what his probability model had missed, and why, and what it meant that the gods — or whatever force had moved sixty million Romans to Runeterra — had also apparently moved the survivors of the Tenshō Iga War through whatever seam connected the worlds.

They're here for a reason, Raphael said.

"Everything that arrives is here for a reason," Gaius said. "The question is whether the reason is designed or emergent."

Does it matter?

He thought about that. "No," he said. "What matters is what we do with it."

Chapter Eight: The Negotiations

The negotiations lasted thirty-one days.

Gaius had set up the sessions in a quiet administrative residence in Ostia rather than in Rome itself, which was a deliberate choice that communicated several things: this conversation was not yet a public matter; the distance from the capital preserved the Iga-ryū's freedom of movement; and the setting — functional rather than ceremonial — said *we are here to reach an agreement, not to perform one.*

He had also, in the first three days, done something that the three elders recognized and marked without commenting on: he had done nothing. No overtures, no second meetings, no administrative pressure of the kind that institutions reflexively produce. He had provided food, shelter, access to fresh water, and medical attention for the two children and one adult who needed it. He had assigned a household steward who spoke no Japanese and would therefore communicate nothing inadvertently. And he had waited.

On the fourth day, the elder who had spoken to him at the dock — Fujibayashi Nagato, as Gaius came to know him, a man who had been the operational commander of the Iga-ryū's southern networks — requested a meeting.

The other two elders were named Momochi Sandayū and Hattori Hanzō the Younger. Gaius knew these names from his reading the way he knew the names of Rome's historical figures — as texts, as legends, as the subjects of historical analysis rather than the people sitting across a table from him. Knowing the text and sitting across the table were different experiences. The text did not sweat. The text did not carry the specific, contained grief of someone who had watched their world end and was trying to decide, with what remained, whether to continue.

Hattori Hanzō the Younger was approximately thirty years old, the youngest of the three elders, and he watched Gaius with the specific attention of someone who had concluded that the Crown Prince of Rome was either exactly what he appeared to be or something considerably more dangerous, and had not yet determined which. The watching was precise and professional and completely undisguised — not an attempt at concealment but a demonstration that concealment was unnecessary because the watching itself was the message.

He's telling you he sees you, Raphael noted.

"I know," Gaius said, internally.

Are you concerned?

"No. I'd be concerned if he wasn't watching. It would mean he'd already made up his mind."

The negotiations were tense in the way that honest negotiations are always tense — not because either party was being dishonest, but because both parties understood that what was being decided would be binding for a very long time, and neither wanted to reach an agreement that was wrong in ways they hadn't anticipated.

The Iga-ryū's core concern was survival with integrity. They had spent three generations building a tradition — not just a set of techniques, but a philosophical framework, a set of obligations, a way of understanding what the individual owed the collective and what the collective owed the individual. They had nearly lost it to a campaign of extermination conducted by a man who had concluded that a network of trained intelligence professionals operating outside his control was a threat he couldn't tolerate. They were not interested in simply trading one master for another.

Gaius's core concern was, in one sense, simple: he needed what they had. Rome's existing intelligence apparatus was adequate for domestic stability and completely inadequate for the kind of operational intelligence work that the next ten years would require. The archive proxy — whoever had sent that trained operative into the theological records — was proof of that inadequacy. Someone in the Senate had moved, and the imperial intelligence service had not detected the movement until the Pontifex mentioned it in passing. That was a structural problem, not a personnel one. What the Iga-ryū represented was not just two hundred and thirty-eight individuals — it was a living tradition of counter-intelligence, operational security, information gathering, and the specific, difficult art of knowing things that the person who wanted to know them was not supposed to be able to find out.

But his concern was also more complex than that. He had read their history. He understood what they had survived and what it had cost them. And he had been a diplomat long enough to know that the most durable agreements were not the ones that extracted maximum value from the weaker party, but the ones that created mutual interest in the agreement's continuation.

He wanted them to stay because staying was worth it, not because they had no choice.

On the fourteenth day, he said something that he had been holding back while the formal negotiations ran their course. He said it in Japanese, in the informal register, and he said it to Fujibayashi Nagato directly, without the diplomatic framing that had surrounded everything up to that point:

I know what happened at Maruoka Castle. I know what Nobunaga's forces did to the people who couldn't flee. I know how many of the tradition were lost and how many survived. I know the history of the Iga-ryū from its founding to this moment, because I spent eighteen years of my previous life studying it. He paused. *I am telling you this because I think you deserve to know what you're negotiating with. I am not a Roman emperor who happens to speak your language. I am something more complicated, and I think you have already guessed this, and I think you deserve the honest version rather than the version I've been careful to present.*

The silence that followed this was different from the earlier silences. Deeper.

Fujibayashi Nagato looked at him for a long moment. Then he said: *Previous life.*

"Yes."

You died.

"In a hospital in Geneva. Sixty-one years old. I was a diplomat. I served in Japan for eighteen years."

And now you are a nineteen-year-old Roman prince.

"Yes."

And you have been preparing this empire for contact with a world you already know.

"Yes."

Nagato was quiet for a long time. He looked at the table between them — a plain wooden table, scarred with the marks of administrative use, entirely unremarkable — and he appeared to be thinking something through with the methodical completeness of a man who was not going to act on a conclusion until he was certain of it.

Then he said: *The gods have a sense of humor.*

"I've had that thought," Gaius said.

You speak our language. You know our history. You understand what we lost and what we have left. A pause. *What do you want from us?*

"What you do," Gaius said. "Intelligence, counter-intelligence, operational security, and protection. Not for me personally — for the empire, and for the work I'm doing, and for the people who will still be doing it after I'm gone." He paused. "In exchange, I will give you what Nobunaga took from you. Not a patron. A home. Land of your own, governed by your own laws, with the legal protections of Roman citizenship and the autonomy to continue your tradition on your own terms."

And if we refuse?

"Then you are free to go. We will provision you for the journey and ask nothing further." He met Nagato's eyes. "I am not Nobunaga. I don't want your obedience. I want your partnership. Those are different things, and if the distinction isn't clear enough to build an agreement on, then the agreement isn't worth having."

Nagato studied him for a moment longer. Then he stood, with the specific economy of a man whose body had been trained to waste nothing, and said: *I need to speak with Sandayū-sensei and Hanzō-san.*

"Of course."

He left. Gaius sat at the plain wooden table and waited.

Raphael, he thought. *Probability that the next seventeen days produce an agreement.*

High, Raphael said. *You told him the truth. That's rare enough to be decisive.*

The final agreement was sealed on the thirty-first day, in Latin and in Japanese, in a document that Gaius had drafted with the care he brought to the best treaty language of his first career — every clause deliberate, every contingency addressed, every ambiguity eliminated not by choosing one interpretation but by making the language precise enough that interpretation was unnecessary.

The Iga-ryū were granted citizenship of the Roman Empire. They were granted a self-governing territory in the hills north of Capua — remote enough to maintain operational security, close enough to Rome to be useful — which was designated a protected reservation under direct imperial authority, exempt from provincial administration and the ordinary mechanisms of Roman law. Their internal governance, customs, and training traditions were their own. The land was held in perpetuity.

In exchange, the clan swore an oath. Not the oath of a client to a patron, not the oath of a soldier to a commander, but something more specific and more lasting: an oath to protect the emperor, the empire, and the dynasty Gaius intended to build, through the specific arts that were the Iga-ryū's inheritance. Espionage. Counter-intelligence. Sabotage when necessary. The protection of things that the empire's military could not protect because the threats were too subtle, too interior, too much like the water finding the crack in the stone rather than the hammer striking it.

Gaius signed the document. Fujibayashi Nagato, Momochi Sandayū, and Hattori Hanzō the Younger signed it. Two witnesses from each side signed it.

Afterwards, walking to the harbor with Hanzō — the youngest of the elders, who had been quiet through most of the negotiations and had said, on the last day, more than anyone — Gaius said: "What made you trust me?"

Hanzō was quiet for a moment. He had the quality of someone who gave every question its genuine weight before answering.

"You did not try to explain yourself," he said, in Japanese. "You simply showed what you were. The man who needs to explain himself is uncertain of what he is. The man who shows himself has decided." A pause. "Also, you know our history better than most of our own young students. That is — unusual. Meaningful."

Gaius thought about the paper nobody had read, about eighteen years in Japan, about the specific and useless love of understanding things for their own sake that had characterized his first life and had turned out, against all probability, to be exactly what his second life required.

"Good," he said.

"One question," Hanzō said.

"Ask it."

"The world beyond the storm — the one you know and are preparing to meet." He looked at the harbor, at the sea. "Is it as complicated as ours was?"

"More so," Gaius said honestly. "Different categories of complicated, but more of them."

Hanzō considered this. "Then we will have work," he said, in a tone that was not quite satisfaction but was adjacent to it. The tone of a tradition that had nearly been extinguished finding, in an impossible harbor on the other side of whatever seam connected the worlds, a reason to continue.

"Yes," Gaius said. "We will have work."

Chapter Nine: Year Three — The Three Institutions

Gaius proposed the education legislation to the inner council on a morning in early spring of the third year, and he did it in a way that had taken him the better part of the preceding winter to design: not as a single proposal, but as three distinct ones, each with its own sponsoring senator, its own economic justification, and its own institutional logic. Three arguments designed for three different audiences, all pointing at the same thing.

His father asked him, in private, the night before: "Why education? We have schools."

"We have schools that teach the sons of citizens who can afford to send them," Gaius said. "We have technical colleges that teach the trades their fathers already practice. We have nothing that systematically develops the capacity of every person in the empire to understand and improve the world they're living in." He paused. "Ten years from now, when the barrier falls, Rome is going to meet a world

that contains, among other things, a city called Piltover. Piltover has built an entire civilizational advantage on the systematic application of organized knowledge to practical problems. They call it hextech; the mechanism is different from ours, but the principle isn't." Another pause. "I am not going to wait until we meet Piltover to start building our answer to it. I intend for Rome to arrive at that meeting already knowing what organized knowledge can do."

His father looked at him for a moment. "You've thought about all of this before," he said. Not quite a question.

"For a long time," Gaius said, which was true in one of two possible senses.

"And these three institutions—"

"Are designed so that they build on each other. The basic one produces literate, numerate citizens capable of contributing to the skilled workforce. The practical one translates that literacy into technical capability — engineers, physicians, architects, navigators, the people who actually build and maintain a civilization. And the advanced one produces the people who advance what those others are building. The people who ask *why does this work* instead of just *how does this work.* Those are the people who, in thirty years, will be in a room with a Piltovan inventor and have something to contribute rather than something to steal."

The Emperor was quiet. He had gotten better, over three years, at absorbing the specific quality of his son's thinking — the long-range focus, the tendency to design for outcomes two decades ahead of the current problem, the way each individual proposal connected to a larger structure that was not always visible until you stepped back from it.

"How much?" he said.

Gaius told him. The Emperor winced. Then he nodded.

"Which senator for the basic curriculum?" he said.

"Gaius Petronius Marcellus of Aegyptus. He sponsored the grain reserve legislation; he has an established reputation as a domestic reformer. Adding the basic school network to his portfolio is consistent with that identity and gives him a legacy project that will outlast him."

"The practical college?"

"Senator Marcus Licinius Rufus of the engineering committee. He opposed the Ostia expansion initially; supporting the Collegium gives him a way to claim investment in infrastructure without conceding that he was wrong about the shipyards."

"And the advanced institution?"

Gaius paused. This one he had thought about more carefully than the other two. "I'll take this one myself. Directly, in my own name. The advanced institution is the one that will attract the most intellectual resistance — there are members of the Senate who believe that questioning established

knowledge is inherently dangerous to social order — and I need to be the one who argues for it, because I'm the only one who can explain why it isn't."

"Can you?"

"Yes. Because the alternative to people questioning knowledge inside legitimate institutions is people questioning it outside them. And people who develop unorthodox ideas in isolation, without the discipline and accountability of an institution, are considerably more dangerous to social order than people who develop them in a structured environment where the questions and the answers are both recorded and reviewed." He paused. "Dangerous knowledge doesn't go away because you refuse to teach it. It just moves somewhere you can't see it."

His father looked at him with an expression that Gaius had come to recognize over three years as the specific expression the Emperor used when he concluded that his son was right about something he wasn't entirely comfortable with.

"You're thinking about the archive proxy," his father said.

Gaius had briefed the Emperor on the visiting operative two months earlier — not the full analysis, but enough. He had framed it as evidence that the Senate contained at least one faction with enough sophistication to commission intelligence work against the Crown Prince's preparation program, which was true regardless of who that faction was or what they ultimately wanted.

"I'm thinking about everything," Gaius said. "The archive situation is part of it. So is Piltover. So are the sixty million people in this empire who are currently restricted in their capacity to contribute by the limits of their access to knowledge." He looked at his father steadily. "Education is infrastructure. It works the same way roads work. A road doesn't tell you where to go — it makes it possible to get there. A school doesn't tell you what to think. It gives you the capacity to think better. That's what I'm building."

The Emperor was quiet for a long moment.

"All right," he said. "Bring the proposals to the council in the morning."

The three institutions were established by senatorial decree before the end of the year, funded through a combination of the grain reserve surplus, a modest luxury goods tax, and the administrative budget freed up by the signal relay network's operational efficiencies.

They were named with the care that Gaius brought to all naming decisions — names that were Roman in form, that carried the specific gravity of Latin institutional language, but that described their function precisely enough to resist the bureaucratic drift toward vagueness that institutions invariably suffered over time.

The *Academia et Lyceum* for Basic Education. Open to all citizens' children above the age of six, without fees, funded directly by the state. The curriculum: Latin letters and numerals, Roman history and civic structure, practical natural philosophy, and the physical and moral training that the Roman tradition had always valued — but organized, for the first time, into a systematic progression rather than the haphazard acquisition that characterized existing education for anyone outside the wealthy families.

The *Collegium Polytechnica* for practical and applied knowledge. Entry by examination from the Academia graduates, or by demonstrated competence for those who had not attended. The curriculum: engineering, architecture, medicine, agriculture, navigation, and the applied sciences. Workshops alongside classrooms. The metallurgy text that Gaius had created in the locked workshop in year one was introduced here, in its third year, as a recovered Hellenistic manuscript — and the reaction of the engineering faculty was exactly what he had hoped: they did not simply use it, they argued with it, improved it, built three new applications from its underlying principles within the first semester.

The *Universitas et Ateneo* for Higher Learning. Entry by merit from the Collegium graduates, or by demonstrated scholarly achievement. The curriculum was deliberately open — philosophy, natural philosophy, mathematics, history, rhetoric, jurisprudence — but organized around a principle that was, as Gaius had predicted, the most contested part of the entire proposal: the principle that the purpose of advanced learning was not to transmit established knowledge, but to question it, test it, and extend it. That the measure of a scholar was not how well she could recite what was known, but how rigorously she could identify what was not known and design the inquiry that would find it.

The Senate debate on the Universitas had been the longest of the three. Senator Publius Valerius Corvus, whose family had endowed one of the existing philosophical schools and who had strong views about the relationship between learning and political stability, gave a speech on the third day that was genuinely persuasive and genuinely wrong — the kind of argument that Gaius had encountered in various forms across a diplomatic career, the argument that said: *the existing structure of knowledge is the foundation of the existing structure of society, and to question one is to undermine the other.*

Gaius spoke in response from the gallery, which was technically not his forum — senators spoke, not princes. He had arranged, with the studied casualness that was becoming his signature approach to the Senate, for the debate to reach an impasse that required a clarifying address from a non-partisan authority. The Presiding Consul provided the procedural mechanism. The Crown Prince provided the argument.

He said: "The Senator's concern is that organized questioning of knowledge leads to instability. I want to suggest that this gets the causation backwards. It is unorganized questioning — the kind that happens in private rooms, outside the reach of the institutions that could evaluate it — that produces instability. What I am proposing is not the permission to question. People will question regardless of what this Senate permits. What I am proposing is the discipline. The method. The framework within which questioning is conducted rigorously enough that its results can be trusted, tested, and when necessary, corrected. A civilization that is afraid of organized inquiry has already decided it cannot defend its established knowledge against scrutiny. I am confident that ours can."

He sat down.

The vote passed by nineteen.

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

"I'd like to be both," Gaius said, pleasantly, and walked away.

In the locked workshop that night, creating the second text the Collegium would receive in three years — a foundational work on hydraulic engineering that would, in a decade, improve Rome's aqueduct capacity by forty percent — he thought about Piltover. About the systematic application of organized knowledge to practical problems. About the gap between where Rome was now and where it needed to be when the barrier fell.

Thirty-one schools in the first year. Ninety-four by the third. The signal relay network was already being used to share curriculum materials between provincial branches of the Academia. The Collegium was graduating its first class of engineers who had been educated, rather than apprenticed, into their profession — engineers who asked *why* as automatically as they asked *how.*

The Universitas was accepting its first cohort.

It was not, by any measure, sufficient. But it was a beginning that would compound, and compounding was the only reliable path to the kind of civilization he was trying to build.

How does it feel? Raphael asked, in the quiet of the workshop, where the text was acquiring itself on the vellum in the slow, specific way of something being created rather than written.

"It feels like the right shape," Gaius said. "It feels like something that will outlive me."

That's the intention.

"Yes." He looked at the vellum. "Knowledge survives the person who created it. Institutions survive the person who founded them. A civilization that understands how to create and transmit knowledge can survive almost anything." He paused. "Almost."

And the things it can't survive?

He thought about the Void. About the Shadow Isles. About the Frozen Watchers beneath the ice of the Freljord, patient and ancient and very nearly awake.

"Those," he said, "are what the other preparations are for."

Chapter Ten: Year Three — The Cartographer's Apprentice

In the third year, a young man named Marcus Veridius Ocelus completed a cartographic survey of the western coastline of the Roman Enclave that was commissioned, officially, by the Department of Public Works for purposes of harbor assessment.

The survey was real. Marcus was a genuinely talented cartographer, twenty-four years old, trained at the technical college in Ravenna, with an eye for coastal topology that his instructors had noted as exceptional. He had been recommended through a chain of connections that led, without any single link appearing significant, back to the Crown Prince's office.

What Marcus didn't know was that the survey brief contained a supplementary set of instructions, delivered personally by the Crown Prince: document every natural anchorage along the western coast, assess their depth profiles and shelter characteristics, and produce a classified annex with recommendations for which sites could be converted to military harbor facilities on a three-year timeline.

It was not the harbors Gaius was building toward. It was the knowledge of the coastline. When the barrier fell, Rome's first strategic requirement would be accurate maritime geography — understanding which approaches were defensible, which anchorages could support a fleet, where supply lines could be established. The knowledge needed to exist before the event.

He was building a library of strategic knowledge, one seemingly administrative survey at a time.

In the fourth month of the survey, Marcus sent a message requesting an urgent meeting. He arrived at the Palatine with the slightly dazed look of a man who had encountered something his professional framework could not account for. He also carried, in a separate case, three items he had recovered from a stretch of coastline twenty miles south of the Pillar of Hercules: a fragment of wood with an unfamiliar grain, a piece of rope woven in a pattern no Roman rigger used, and a small carved figure in a material that was not ivory and not bone.

He placed them on the table between himself and the Crown Prince.

"I found these," he said, "in a beach cave. Along with the bones of a man who was not Roman."

Gaius looked at the objects.

Raphael cross-referenced in silence. The wood grain was consistent with species from the archipelago regions of Runeterra's eastern maritime zone. The rope weave was Bilgewater sailor work. The carved figure was unfamiliar.

"He was Bilgewater-born," Gaius said.

Marcus blinked. "You recognize the—"

"The rope pattern. It's consistent with a specific style from a port culture east of the current storm zone." He watched the cartographer's face carefully. "This is not as surprising as it must seem. We've had reason to believe, from the augural texts, that the storms are thinning. What you've found is evidence of an early passage."

Marcus sat with this for a moment. "There are people out there."

"Yes."

"And you already knew."

"I have had reason to believe it for approximately three years," Gaius said. "I have been preparing accordingly. What you've found accelerates the evidence base." He paused. "I need to ask you a specific and important question. The answer will determine what happens next, for you and for this project."

The cartographer met his eyes. He was frightened, Gaius assessed, but the fear was contained by curiosity. "Ask it."

"Are you the kind of man who needs to understand why he's being asked to keep a secret, before he can keep it? Or are you the kind of man who can keep one on the basis of the asking alone?"

A long pause. Marcus looked at the rope fragment and the carved figure and the piece of strange wood.

"I want to understand," he said. "But I can wait."

"Good. Give me three years. At the end of three years, if we're both still alive and Rome is still standing, I'll explain everything."

Marcus filed it under *important thing the Crown Prince is managing* and went back to his survey. He would eventually become the first cartographer of what the Crown Prince called the Exploratores — Rome's intelligence corps for the world beyond the barrier — and he would never entirely forgive Gaius for making the job sound straightforward.

Chapter Eleven: Year Three — New Rome's Hidden Tradition

The territory north of Capua had no official name for the first three months of its existence. Gaius had intended to let the Iga-ryū name it themselves — a small courtesy, but meaningful — and they had taken their time.

They called it *Kagami-no-Mori*. The Forest of Mirrors.

He visited in the third month of the third year, on a morning when the autumn light was turning the hillside to amber, and found it already transformed in the specific way of a community that has been given land and has decided to keep it. The external perimeter was indistinguishable from the surrounding Italian countryside — farmhouses, terraced gardens, the usual evidence of provincial life. The interior was something else.

Fujibayashi Nagato met him at the entrance path and walked with him through the settlement, not as a tour but as the kind of walk that communicates through what it chooses to show and what it chooses not to. The training grounds were visible enough. The documentation center — where the clan's records and curriculum were being reconstructed from the memories of survivors, a project that Gaius had provided materials for without being asked what they were for — was not visible at all.

"The children are adapting," Nagato said, in Japanese.

"How are the youngest ones?"

"They adapt fastest. The ones I worry about are the adolescents. Old enough to understand what was lost. Young enough that they have not yet found what might replace it." He paused. "Hanzō-san is working with them. He has a gift for it."

Gaius thought about the Universitas, which was accepting its first cohort in six months. He thought about it for a moment before speaking. "I would like to discuss education," he said. "Specifically: the institutions I've established have a formal curriculum. But there are things that your tradition teaches that the formal curriculum doesn't cover, and I think both sides would benefit from an exchange."

Nagato looked at him sideways. "You want our methods taught to Romans."

"Not operationally. Philosophically. The Iga-ryū's approach to patience, to reading situations rather than forcing them, to the discipline of *knowing when not to act* — these are things the Roman military tradition is genuinely bad at. Our armies are excellent at direct confrontation. We are less excellent at the kind of sustained, indirect engagement that I expect to be necessary in the world we're about to meet." He paused. "I am not asking you to compromise your operational security. I'm asking whether there's a version of what you teach that could be part of what Rome teaches."

Nagato was quiet for a long moment. They had reached a point in the path where the hillside opened and the view extended south toward the coastal plain, and on a clear day, to the sea.

"There is a question I have wanted to ask since Ostia," Nagato said.

"Ask it."

"You knew our history better than our own students. You came to us immediately, before anyone else could interfere. You negotiated fairly and you told us the truth when you didn't have to." He looked at the view. "Why? What do you gain from our welfare beyond our service?"

Gaius considered the question carefully. It deserved the careful answer.

"In my first life, I spent eighteen years in Japan studying a culture that had no idea what I was going to do with what I learned. I learned your language and your history and the philosophy of your traditions because I found them worth learning, not because I had a use for them. What I learned is part of why I can do what I'm doing now." He paused. "You were nearly destroyed by a man who found your tradition threatening because he couldn't control it. I find your tradition valuable specifically because it contains things I can't produce myself. Those are different orientations toward the unknown. I am the second kind. I intend to remain the second kind."

Nagato looked at him.

"Also," Gaius added, because honesty required it, "Rome is going to need everything it can get. In approximately seven years, the barrier falls and we meet a world that contains enemies we cannot fight with legions. Having a tradition that understands the craft of knowing things you're not supposed to be able to know is not a luxury in that context. It is a survival requirement."

Nagato made the sound that was his equivalent of a laugh: a short exhale, controlled, the reluctant acknowledgment of something that was both obvious and earned. "At least you're honest about the practicality."

"I try to be both things simultaneously," Gaius said. "It's harder than choosing one."

They walked back toward the settlement.

"We will teach," Nagato said. "Not the operational curriculum. The philosophical one. What it means to be still when others are moving. What it means to understand a room before you enter it. What it means to know that your most powerful tool is not your weapon but your patience." A pause. "These things cannot be taught in a classroom. They must be taught in context, over time, by someone who lives them."

"I know," Gaius said. "That's why I'm asking you."

The arrangement was formalized two weeks later, in an addendum to the original agreement that took half a page — two paragraphs, precise and complete — to describe what had taken a much longer conversation to reach. The Iga-ryū would contribute instructors to the Universitas et Ateneo, operating under their own authority and teaching their own curriculum, which would be offered to all students as an elective sequence. It would not be called *ninjutsu* in the formal records — the Romans had no framework for the word and would misunderstand it. It would be listed, in Latin, as *Disciplina Silentii et Prudentiae*: the Discipline of Silence and Judgment.

The first cohort of Roman students who encountered it would find it baffling, frustrating, and — after approximately three months — transformative. The technique of understanding a room before entering it, it turned out, transferred very readily to the technique of understanding a negotiation before participating in it.

Gaius had thought it might.

Chapter Twelve: Year Five — The Naming

The Senate's inner council met in the small room behind the Curia Julia on the second day of November in the fifth year.

Gaius had three things to present.

The first was a comprehensive map of the western coastline, produced by Marcus's survey team, now six cartographers and two engineers, still nominally a harbor assessment project. The map showed twenty-three natural harbor sites, fifteen of which had been secretly assessed for military conversion potential.

The second was a summary of five years of investment: the expanded shipyards at Ostia, now producing vessels with the improved hull geometry that the metallurgy advances had made possible; the grain reserve, now at sixty-eight percent of target; the signal relay network, which could now transmit information from Britannia to Aegyptus in thirty-six hours in favorable weather; the three educational institutions, now running at provincial scale, with the first cohort of Universitas graduates entering the public service; and the Iga-ryū settlement in the hills north of Capua, which appeared on no public map and in no official record except one sealed document in the imperial archive.

The third was a sealed case.

"Gentlemen," Gaius said, in the tone of a man presenting data to people who were capable of receiving it. "The barrier around the Mare Ignotum is dissolving. In approximately five years, the storms that have enclosed us since the Miraculum will clear sufficiently for ocean crossing in both directions. There is a world on the far side of those storms. It is large, politically complex, and entirely unaware of our existence. I have prepared an assessment."

He opened the sealed case and produced the map.

Not a weapon. Not a miracle. A map — drawn by Marcus, refined by six months of additional work, incorporating every piece of intelligence Gaius had assembled across five years. It showed the eastern continental landmass of the world they were about to meet: the double continent of Valoran and Shurima, the Piltovan Isthmus between them, the maritime approaches from the east, the strategic geography of a world that had no idea it was about to be encountered by a sixty-million-person empire with two thousand years of institutional experience and a Crown Prince who had spent sixty years in a previous life studying it.

The senators studied the map in silence.

One of them — Gaius Petronius Marcellus, the senator from Aegyptus, whose grain reserve legislation had passed in the third year, whose school network legislation had passed in the same year — said, very quietly: "You've been planning for this."

"Since the beginning," Gaius said.

He gave them time to process it. Then: "The world they come from has a name. It's Runeterra. I don't know how I know it — I believe it came to me in a vision, which is consistent with documented historical precedents for divine communication in the imperial bloodline." He said this with the slight tonal adjustment of a man who was telling something that was, technically, true in at least one sense. "That name is for this room only, and for this moment."

Senator Corvus — who had opposed the Universitas and lost, and who had since become, without quite meaning to, one of the inner council's most valuable analytical voices — said: "The intelligence and counter-intelligence capability we would need for contact with a world of this complexity. Do we have it?"

"We are developing it," Gaius said. "Rapidly."

He did not mention the Iga-ryū by name. The agreement had been explicit on that point: their existence was known to the Emperor, to three senior members of the imperial household, and to no one else. The inner council would learn of them when the time required it. The time had not yet required it.

The inner council deliberated. They debated. They raised eight significant objections, all of which Gaius had modeled in advance and answered with data rather than argument. By the end of the session, the expansion of the preparatory operation had been provisionally authorized. The Exploratores — Marcus's survey team, formalized — would receive a budget.

Walking home from the Curia Julia through the cold November dark, Gaius allowed himself, for the length of three blocks, to feel the structural confidence of a man who has placed the right stones in the

right positions and can see the shape of the thing he is building.

You're tired, Raphael said.

"Yes."

Five years is a long time to hold this alone.

"I haven't held it alone. I've held it carefully."

There's a difference.

"Yes." He walked a few more steps in the cold. "But the shape of it is right. Five more years and we'll know if it holds."

He walked home through Rome, under the same stars that shone over the sea, and the sea moved eastward, and somewhere past the thinning storms, a world was living its ordinary and extraordinary life, completely unaware that someone was preparing, very carefully, to introduce himself.

Chapter Thirteen: Year Six — The First Message

In the spring of the sixth year, a fishing vessel returned to the port of Carthago Nova with an unusual catch.

The fishermen had found a man.

He was alive, barely, lying on a piece of wreckage that the fishermen initially mistook for a floating timber from an unknown shipwreck. He was about thirty years old, heavily tattooed in patterns none of the fishermen recognized, carrying no documents, speaking in a language that no one in Carthago Nova's considerable multilingual harbor district could identify. He was unconscious for three days, and when he came back to consciousness, he was, by his own subsequent account, extremely confused about where he was and moderately convinced he was dead.

His name was Cael Dunmore. He was a Bilgewater salvager.

The message reached Gaius in Rome in two weeks. It was flagged with the specific notation code that Marcus had been authorized to use for the single category of intelligence that overrode all other prioritization.

Gaius read the message in the locked workshop, at the desk where he kept his journal, in the early morning before the household was awake.

He read it twice.

Then he sat for a long time without moving, while Raphael ran the distributions and Rome moved quietly outside the window.

It begins, Raphael said.

"Not yet," Gaius said. "This is still preparation. This is the last test of the framework before the real thing."

How do you treat him?

"Carefully. Honestly, within the limits of what's safe to say. He's frightened and far from home. He's also a salvager — trained in the assessment of value and risk. He'll understand the situation better than most people would, once it's explained to him." He paused. "I also need to think about what Fujibayashi-dono needs to know about this arrival, and when."

The Iga-ryū's operational brief covers exactly this category of contact.

"Yes." He thought about Nagato's careful, systematic mind. About Hanzō's watchfulness. About the two hundred and thirty-eight people in the hills north of Capua who had spent three years rebuilding a tradition and were now — this was the thing Gaius was sitting with in the dark — ready to use it. "I'll send word to Kagami-no-Mori before I leave for Carthago Nova. Not operational deployment. Not yet. But awareness."

He thought about the Runeterra he knew — the Shadow Isles and the Black Mist, Noxus and its relentless territorial logic, the Void beneath Icathia, the ancient sleeping weight of Shurima, the strange and beautiful isolation of Ionia. A world that was not simpler than Earth, but differently complicated. A world in crisis in ways that were, in some respects, more tractable than crisis on Earth, because the sources of crisis were more legible, the fault lines more visible, the agents of catastrophe less numerous and more identifiable.

A world that needed, in his honest assessment, at least one additional stable institutional actor with long-term strategic interest in planetary survival.

Rome could be that actor.

If he built it right. If he spent the next four years finishing what he'd started. If the senatorial faction who had sent a proxy into the archive didn't find the leverage they were looking for before the inner council consolidated behind him. If Bilgewater's salvager turned out to be the right kind of person to receive the first careful truths of a civilization that was about to stop being alone.

Those were significant ifs.

He filed them under *variables to manage* and began drafting the initial communication protocols for first contact with Runeterra. He wrote in diplomatic language — the specific formal register of treaty negotiation, adapted for a context in which there was no treaty yet and might never be one, in which the goal was to communicate that Rome was not a threat without being so careful about it that the message became incomprehensible.

The first draft was too formal.

The second draft was too casual.

The third draft read, in part: *We are far from your home. We found you because we were looking. We have been looking for longer than you know. We intend you no harm, which we understand is something every dangerous power says, and we therefore offer you this instead of our word: tell us what you need to feel safe, and we will do it, or tell you honestly why we cannot.*

He looked at the third draft for a long time.

"That's the one," he said to Raphael.

It's honest. Raphael agreed. *In the precise technical sense that it doesn't contain any lies, and in the deeper sense that it says what you actually mean.*

"Good." He put down the pen. "That's what I want Rome to be."

Outside, Rome was waking up — the sound of the city assembling itself from sleep, the first carts in the streets, the first voices in the Forum, the accumulated weight of sixty million lives moving into another ordinary day in a civilization that had never fallen and was, with considerable and careful effort, going to continue not falling.

He folded the draft message and placed it in the leather case beside his journal.

Four years now, he thought. The Bilgewater salvager was an early sign of the barrier thinning faster than the central estimate.

He adjusted the distribution.

He went to find his breakfast.

The work continued.

INTERLUDE: WHAT THE ROSE READS

From a document held in the Black Rose's sealed archive, Noxus Prime — classification: Primordial. Author designation: The Pale Librarian. Date: uncertain, estimated within the preparation decade.

There is a current in the western deep-ocean that has no business existing.

I have been reading sea-current charts since before the Immortal Bastion had its current name, and I know the difference between a natural deep-water oscillation and the residual hydrodynamic signature of a sustained magical construction. The western anomaly is the latter. It has been present in the data for as long as we have had instruments sensitive enough to detect it, which means it has been present for considerably longer than that.

What changed, in the period I am documenting here, is that the anomaly began to diminish.

A sustained magical construction that diminishes does not do so randomly. It does so because the purpose it was constructed to serve is approaching completion, or because the entity maintaining it has

decided the construction is no longer necessary, or because something on the far side of it has changed in a way that made the maintenance untenable.

All three interpretations point in the same direction: something is changing in the western deep, and whatever is on the other side of the anomaly is either preparing to emerge or preparing to be found.

The Black Rose does not concern itself with what is. We concern ourselves with what is about to be, because the interval between those two states is the only moment in which influence is possible.

My recommendation to the Circle is this: allocate observational resources to the western maritime approaches. Not naval — we have no vessels capable of reaching whatever lies beyond the anomaly, and attempting it would waste ships and alert whoever is watching our movements. Observational. The Serpent Isles maritime network already captures anomalous current data; redirect the relevant analysts. Commission the two Piltovan hextech firms with active ocean-monitoring contracts to share their western buoy readings under the standard academic cover arrangement.

And watch Bilgewater.

Bilgewater knows more than it says about most things, and it sits at the nearest point to the western approaches that is also a functioning node of maritime intelligence. If something has crossed the anomaly — if a vessel or a person has made contact from the far side — the first trace of it will appear in Bilgewater's harbor registries, its salvage logs, its rumor networks.

Something is coming from the west.

It has been a very long time since anything came from the west.

The last time something came from a direction no one was watching, it changed the shape of the world.

We will not be caught unwatching again.

EPILOGUE TO VOLUME ONE: THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

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

He had been watching it for four years now. He knew it better than anyone alive — its rhythms, its changes, the specific quality of the light at its margins. He had documented its behavior across forty-three separate surveys. He could tell, with reasonable confidence, whether it was stronger or weaker than it had been the previous month.

It was weaker.

Not dramatically. To an untrained eye, it would look precisely the same — the turbulent black-green wall of weather that had defined the western edge of the Roman world since before anyone alive had been born. But Marcus was not an untrained eye. Marcus could read coastlines the way other men read texts,

and what the storm was saying now, in the specific language of pressure gradient and cloud formation and wave periodicity, was different from what it had been saying three years ago.

It was saying: *Not yet. But soon.*

He wrote the observation in his survey log, with the specific precision of language that the Crown Prince had taught him to value above concision. He wrote the pressure readings, the wave period measurements, the cloud formation classifications, the barometric comparisons to his own previous surveys. He wrote it in the technical language of cartography, and in the margin he added, in his own handwriting:

I think we're nearly out of time. I also think we might be ready.

He sealed the log and handed it to the relay courier who would have it in Rome in ten days.

Then he stood on the edge of the world for a while longer, watching the storm, thinking about the salvager from Bilgewater who was currently housed in a quiet residence in Carthago Nova, learning Latin with a speed that suggested he understood the specific value of communication. Thinking about the map in the inner council's room. Thinking about the three schools that were now operating in every province, graduating people who asked *why* as naturally as they asked *how*. Thinking about the hidden settlement in the hills north of Capua that did not appear on any map he had ever drawn, and the people in it who moved like water around obstacles, who taught the Roman students who visited them to read a room the way Marcus read a coastline. Thinking about the man who had built all of this out of a locked workshop and a cedar case of augural texts and sixty years of knowledge that had no business being in a nineteen-year-old body.

The wind came off the storm with the smell of deep water and distance. It smelled, Marcus had always thought, of arrival. Of something approaching that had not yet arrived.

He took a long breath of it.

He turned back toward the camp.

There was work to do.

There was always work to do.

The eagle didn't fall.

END OF VOLUME ONE

Volume Two: The Preparation Decade — In which the barrier thins, intelligence flows in both directions, the Iga-ryū identify the senatorial faction and its patron, Raphael becomes Ciel, and Gaius Aurelius Varro becomes Emperor in circumstances he did not plan and could not prevent.

Author's Notes on the Revised Edition:

On the Iga-ryū: The historical Iga-ryū were largely destroyed in the Tenshō Iga War of 1581, when Oda Nobunaga's forces conducted a systematic campaign of extermination through the Iga province. Survivors scattered across Japan, with many entering the service of other lords — most famously Hattori Hanzō's service to Tokugawa Ieyasu. The choice to bring some of those survivors to Rome through whatever seam the gods opened between worlds is not a historical claim; it is a narrative one. Their value to the story is not ornamental. A Rome preparing to engage with Runeterra's intelligence landscape — Noxian tactical intelligence, the Black Rose's long information game, the Kinkou's balance-maintaining surveillance in Ionia — needs a counter-intelligence tradition that the Roman military machine does not natively possess. The Iga-ryū provide it, while also providing the story with its most complex negotiation: the question of what trust looks like between a civilization and a people it has no category for.

On the Three Institutions: The *Universitas et Ateneo*, *Academia et Lyceum*, and *Collegium Polytechnica* are designed to parallel, in Roman terms, the educational infrastructure that Piltover represents in Runeterra — the systematic organization of knowledge production and transmission. The parallel is deliberate and the gap between them is real: Rome's institutions are classical, built on existing philosophical and technical traditions, while Piltover's are technological, built on hextech theory. What they share is the underlying conviction that organized knowledge compounds and that the civilization which manages the compounding most effectively wins over time. This is the argument Gaius is making to the Senate, and it is the argument the story is making about what education is actually for.

On the Interlude: The Black Rose is Runeterra's oldest and most patient intelligence network, operating within Noxus but not entirely of it. Their interest in the western anomaly is consistent with their institutional character: they do not act on incomplete information, but they never stop gathering it. The Pale Librarian's memo is the first indication that Runeterra's most sophisticated intelligence apparatus has begun pointing its instruments west. It will not be the last.
