AQUILA PERPETUA

The Eagle That Does Not Fall

Volume One: Mare Nostrum, World Unknown

> *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, Ruination*

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

PROLOGUE: WHAT THE GODS FOUND INTERESTING

The gods of Runeterra were very old and not especially communicative, but they paid attention.

They had been paying attention for some time — since long before the Rune Wars had scoured the world, since before the Void had first pressed its fingers through the cracks in Icathia and found purchase, since before the Freljord had frozen around whatever sleeping thing lay beneath it. They watched the way old physicians watch a patient: not with sentiment, but with the complete, unhurried attention of those who have seen enough to know when something is about to become significant.

What they found, in the hospital bed in Geneva on a gray Thursday afternoon, was something that had not been in their world before.

Not a man dying. Men died constantly. The world was full of dying.

What they found was the specific quality of knowledge inside the dying man — knowledge of *their* world, held by someone who had never been in it, detailed and precise and organized in the way of someone who understood *systems* and who had spent a lifetime thinking carefully about what broken things needed in order to heal.

They found this interesting.

They did what gods do when they find something interesting.

PART ONE: THE WRONG BODY

Chapter One: The Weight of It

The first thing he understood was that he was lying on stone.

Not the soft insult of hospital mattress that he had last felt, not the particular texture of institutional linen — stone, cold and grit-dusted, pressing through the thin fabric of a sleeping tunic into the length of his spine. The second thing was the smell. Cedar oil, old lamp smoke, something mineral and deep that spoke of a cellar or a cave or a place that had been sealed against the world for a very long time.

The third thing was the silence.

Not the silence of night. The silence of depth — the complete, pressurized quiet of a space with stone above it and stone below it and stone on all sides, the kind of silence that has weight.

He lay still. His eyes were open. The ceiling above him was cut stone, rough-dressed, the joins mortared with something pale that had dried hard and cracked with age. A lamp somewhere to his right threw orange light across the ceiling in a pattern that moved very slightly with whatever air moved in this room — a faint drift that smelled of nothing except the mineral deep.

He was not moving because he was very carefully taking stock of what had happened to him.

He was sixty-one years old. He had been in a hospital bed in Geneva with a very precise and unsentimental understanding of what his body was doing. He had felt, in the last minutes, the specific unwinding that he recognized from the actuarial tables of his professional life as the sequential failure of systems no longer able to sustain their own operation. He had felt it with the remote, almost aesthetic attention of a man watching a building he had studied for years finally come down.

And then something had intervened.

He took a slow breath. The air tasted of cold stone and oil.

The body he was breathing with was not his. This was immediately apparent in the way of things that are simply wrong — not wrong like pain or injury, but wrong like looking in a mirror and seeing an unfamiliar face. The lungs that drew this breath had a different capacity than the ones he remembered. The back pressing against the stone had different distances in it, different architecture. The hands, when he moved them, were wrong in their proportion.

Young hands.

He turned them over and looked at them in the orange lamplight. Nineteen years old, approximately, given the texture of the skin and the particular density of the muscle beneath it. His own hands had been sixty-one, and the sixty-one

years had been written in them clearly — the thickened knuckles, the darkened veins, the small brown islands of accumulated sun. These hands had none of that. They were smooth and well-muscled and had spent considerable time doing something that had given them a callus pattern he did not immediately recognize but could categorize: sword grip on the right palm, writing on the index finger and thumb of the right hand. A young man who was taught to fight and educated to write.

A young man whose body he was now occupying.

He did not sit up immediately. This was diplomatic habit — you don't move when you're not yet certain of the room. You take the room's measure first. He lay still and listened.

Distant sound: the muffled movement of a city, very far above him. The specific accumulation of feet and wheels and voices that only a large and alive city makes — not a town, a city, something with genuine mass. The lamp to his right was burning. Someone had lit it recently. No one was in this room with him, but someone had been here.

His mind was running two simultaneous processes, which was familiar. He had spent thirty-two years running simultaneous processes — the surface conversation and the analysis beneath it, the words being said and the meaning they were carrying. The surface process was taking stock of the physical situation. The deeper process was understanding what had happened to him.

He had died. He was certain of this. The unwinding had been complete.

And then something had intervened, and he was here, in a young body, in a stone room underground, in what his nose and ears and the lamp style and the stone construction were already telling him was Rome.

Not the Rome of ruins, he thought, *the Rome of ruins is twenty centuries ahead of this body. This is the Rome that is still alive.*

He understood this without surprise. The second library — that was what he was already calling the secondary memory, the one that belonged to this body and not to him, the one that knew this room and knew where the door was and knew whose lamp this was and knew whose father ruled the city above — the second library had opened fully the moment he drew that first breath. It was not separate from him. It was underneath him, like a building's foundations, present in a way that did not require thought.

He was Gaius Aurelius Varro. He had always been Gaius Aurelius Varro. And he was also the man from Geneva, who had died on a Thursday afternoon and had sixty-one years of a different life sitting behind his current eyes like a second set of rooms in a house that had been expanded.

He sat up.

The room sorted itself around him: the archive of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus

Maximus, the lower levels, the oldest part of the collection that was rarely accessed because the stairs were difficult and the organization had been neglected for three generations of pontiffs. He had been here before. Gaius had been here before — twice, on formal visits with his father, and once on his own, when he was fourteen, after bribing an archive assistant to show him the oldest holdings. The fourteen-year-old Gaius had been interested in the physical history of the place, the quality of the oldest texts. The sixty-one-year-old diplomat who was now additionally present behind those same eyes knew exactly what he had come for this time.

He looked at the cedar case sitting on the floor beside him.

He had no memory of bringing it here, or of sitting down on the floor of the archive to read it. This had happened in the night; the lamp was guttering low, which meant it had been burning for some hours. The second library supplied the rest: he had come here in the hours before dawn, as he sometimes did when the palace felt too small for what was in his head, and he had gone to the oldest collection, and he had found the augural case, and he had sat on the floor to read it because the floor was more honest than the table.

He looked at the case for a long moment.

He reached out and opened it.

Inside, on a sheaf of very old vellum, were seventeen lines of Latin. The augural texts from the period of the Miraculum, the ones that three generations of Rome's best theological minds had debated without reaching consensus, the ones that were officially categorized as *Disputed Interpretation — Pending Further Study*, which in practice meant that everyone had given up on them.

He read them.

He read with both libraries simultaneously active — the second library recognizing the specific idiom of early imperial augural Latin, flagging the theological precedents in the third and fourth lines, and the first library, the one with sixty-one years of diplomatic experience and an advanced degree in actuarial science and a thirty-two-year career in a profession that treated language as the primary medium through which the world was negotiated, reading through the idiom to the structure beneath it.

Cross-reference complete, something said, in a voice that was his own voice stripped of every register except precision. *The augural language is consistent with a bounded temporal covenant. Three parallel constructions use the idiom of 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.*

He stared at the seventeen lines.

He called the voice the Great Sage because he needed to call it something, and because it was the most accurate description of what it did — a synthetic analytical intelligence built from the combination of two lifetimes of pattern recognition and the specific cognitive training of someone who had made his career in the reading of complex systems. It wasn't separate from him. It was more like what happened when you looked at an optical illusion and suddenly saw the other image — not a new thing, but a new way of organizing what was already there.

He read the texts a third time.

The lamp guttered. He became aware, slowly, that his back hurt from sitting on the stone floor, and that his feet were cold, and that the particular cold of the archive's lower levels was the specific cold of a space that had not been adequately aired since the previous winter. Gaius's body had the tolerance of a nineteen-year-old for discomfort, which was considerable, but not infinite.

He sat with the weight of the conclusion.

The storm barrier around the Roman Enclave was thinning. The gods had not drawn a permanent wall — they had drawn a preparation-period wall, and the preparation period was ending. The covenant was time-limited. He estimated, running the figures against three interpretive frameworks and discarding the outliers, that the barrier had between eight and twelve years of significant function remaining. Central estimate: ten.

He placed the vellum back in the cedar case.

He placed the cedar case back on its shelf.

He stood, and his knees popped with the specific protest of a body that had been held in one position too long, and the sound was very small in the silence of the archive, and it sounded — he could not help this thought, and did not try to resist it — like the first tick of a clock.

Ten years, he thought, and the scale of the problem opened beneath him like looking down from a great height.

He walked up through the archive's levels, through the narrow passages that connected the old collection to the main building, through the corridors that connected the main building to the courtyard, out into the gray pre-dawn of the Capitoline Hill.

Rome was below him.

Not the Rome of his first life's education — not the frozen thing in museums, not the reconstructed thing in textbooks, not the imagined thing in popular history. The breathing, smoking, enormous reality of a city of one and a half million people who had been living in this hill's shadow for eight centuries and who had no idea that sixty million more of them, distributed across the entirety

of what had once been a different world's empire, were standing at the edge of a countdown.

He looked east, toward the sea.

The Tyrrhenian coast was twenty miles away. Beyond it, the Mediterranean, which Rome had always called *Mare Nostrum* — *Our Sea* — and which in this world was the inner body of water entirely enclosed within Roman territory, the empire's great internal highway. Beyond the Mediterranean's furthest eastern shore, the land routes to the empire's eastern provinces. Beyond those, the eastern coast of the enclave. And beyond that, across a width of storm and deep water that no Roman vessel had ever crossed: Runeterra.

The Great Sage said: *Recommendation. Immediate expansion of the Ostia naval shipyards is required. If Noxian warships possess even ten percent of the documented combat profile, current Roman trireme design represents an approximately ninety-four percent probability of tactical failure upon first contact.*

"I know," Gaius said, to the empty pre-dawn.

He stood on the Capitoline Hill and breathed the air of a city that didn't know what was coming, and felt the specific weight of being the only person in sixty million who understood the situation, and after a while he went inside, because he was cold, and because there was a great deal of work to do, and the work was better served by breakfast than by standing on a hill looking dramatically at the sea.

Chapter Two: The Emperor's Garden, First Light

He did not go to his father immediately. This was also diplomatic habit.

A diplomat who arrived at the negotiation table the moment something changed was a diplomat who had not yet fully modeled the changed situation. You needed time. You needed to know, before you said anything to anyone, what you were about to ask for and why, and what the range of responses was, and which of those responses you were prepared to accept. You needed to have the argument finished in your own head before you began making it to someone else's.

He spent three days.

He did it in the way that would raise no comment from the household — studying, which Gaius had always been given to, the kind of long absences into texts that the palace staff had grown accustomed to explaining to visiting senators as *the Crown Prince is in his scholarly period*. He had the run of the palace library. He had access, through legitimate channels, to the imperial cartographic collection. He had, in the second library, a complete inventory of Rome's current military and administrative situation.

And he had, in the first library, what no one else in this world had: sixty years of knowledge about Runeterra. Not perfect knowledge — lore was not history, and he was aware of the difference between a world studied at the remove of game and story and a world that was about to become geographically real. But he had the shape of it. The factions and their philosophies. The major powers and their motivations. The threats that were not yet visible.

He sat with all of this for three days and built the model.

On the fourth morning, he found his father in the garden.

The Emperor Marcus Lucius Varro had the habit of receiving in the garden when the season permitted, which in Italy was most of the year. The garden was a political statement dressed as personal preference — it said: *I am not threatened by informality. I am secure enough to be found in shirtsleeves.* Gaius had understood this since childhood. The understanding now carried a different texture, because the sixty-one-year-old diplomat recognized it as a specific technique that he had encountered in a hundred iterations across a thirty-two-year career. It was effective precisely because it was genuine. The Emperor actually liked his garden.

He was examining a rose bush when Gaius arrived. His expression suggested the rose had done something disappointing.

"The gardeners tell me it's the soil," he said, without looking up. "I've commissioned two separate analyses. They disagree with each other and both disagree with the gardeners."

"Or the rose has its own opinion," Gaius said.

His father looked up. The look lasted a moment longer than it would have before the archive. Not suspicion — attention. The look of a man recalibrating his expectations slightly in a direction he hadn't predicted.

"Or the rose," he agreed. He set down his pruning shears. "You've been in the library."

"The archive, the first day. The library since."

"Anything useful?"

This was the question that mattered. Not *what were you looking for* — his father was too politically experienced to ask that directly. *Anything useful* was the idiom for *I notice something has changed in you and I am giving you the space to tell me what it is.*

Gaius sat on the low stone bench at the edge of the herb bed. He looked at the garden for a moment — the herbs, the roses, the small formal geometry of it, the city's hum beyond the walls — and made the decision he had been building toward for three days.

“I need to tell you something that is going to sound like theological speculation,” he said. “I need to ask you to hear it as something considerably more practical than that.”

His father said nothing. He picked up his pruning shears and then set them down again, which was his version of *you have my complete attention.*

Gaius told him. Not everything — there was a shape to information, and the shape mattered as much as the content. He told him about the augural texts first. He told him what they actually said, stripped of the theological idiom, in the specific plain-spoken language of a man presenting data rather than doctrine. He told him about the barrier, and the covenant, and the estimate.

His father listened. He was very good at listening. This was something Gaius had known about him since childhood but understood differently now — the Emperor’s stillness while receiving information was not passivity but discipline. He was holding everything he received in suspension while he determined its weight.

When Gaius finished, the garden was quiet except for the sparrows.

“Ten years,” his father said.

“Central estimate. The distribution has a range of eight to twelve.”

“How confident are you in the reading?”

“High enough to design policy around it.” A pause. “I would not have come to you with a speculative interpretation. I’m aware of what I’m asking you to consider.”

The Emperor looked at the rose bush. It was possibly dying — the leaves had the uncertain yellow of a plant whose soil chemistry was off. Gaius had already identified the likely deficiency, and had already arranged for a specific amendment to be worked in during next week’s maintenance. He had done this without conscious plan, purely from the reflex of a mind that saw problems in terms of their soluble variables.

“What lies on the other side of the Mare Ignotum?” his father said.

“Another world.” He said it simply. “Large, complex, politically fractured. Multiple major powers. Several existential threats that those powers are collectively not yet equipped to address.” He paused. “And no knowledge of our existence.”

Another silence. A long one. A sparrow argued with another sparrow on the garden wall.

“What would you recommend?” his father said.

“Infrastructure,” Gaius said. “Specifically: the Ostia shipyards are undersized for what the next decade requires. The grain reserve in Aegyptus is being managed at forty percent of what strategic necessity demands. The signal relay system between the provinces has been functioning below design capacity for six

years. None of these are dramatic proposals. They are domestic improvements with a secondary purpose that I don't need to make visible yet."

"And the Senate?"

"The Senate needs to arrive at these conclusions independently." A brief pause. "I can arrange for that."

His father made a sound that contained something between appreciation and recognition. "How long have you been thinking about this?"

The honest answer was: sixty-one years in one timeline and four days in another. He said: "For as long as I can remember."

This was true in both possible senses.

His father was quiet for a moment. He was not a stupid man — he was a perceptive man who had spent his adult life in a political environment that rewarded careful reading of what people didn't say. He was applying that skill now, and Gaius could feel the assessment moving across him like a physical thing.

"Tell me what you need," his father said. "Access, authority, and resources. Be specific."

Gaius was specific. He had spent three days being specific for exactly this moment, and the list came out with the measured cadence of a briefing he had been practicing in his mind until it had worn itself smooth, and his father listened with the particular stillness of a man who was receiving data that actually clarified his model of the world rather than merely rearranging the furniture within it.

When Gaius finished, his father was quiet for a moment.

"The Ostia expansion," he said. "Frame it as a response to the Mauretanian fishing disruptions. The Senate has wanted action on that for three sessions."

"Yes," Gaius said.

"The grain reserve — there's a senator from Aegyptus on the agricultural committee who wants a legacy. What's his name?"

"Gaius Petronius Marcellus."

His father nodded. "Approach him correctly and he'll co-sponsor it without needing to understand why we actually want it."

"That's my assessment also."

Another silence, different from the earlier ones. The assessment was complete and the decision had been reached and they were both on the same side of it now.

"Gaius," his father said.

"Yes, Father."

"You sound very much like a man who has been thinking about this for considerably longer than four days."

Gaius looked at the garden. The rose bush was failing, and he had already arranged for the soil to be corrected, and by next spring it would be flowering again, and no one would know why it had recovered. This was the kind of work he was going to be doing for the next decade, and he was under no illusion about the cost of it or the weight of it or the number of nights it would take sitting in cold archives before anything was ready.

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

His father looked at him for a moment longer. Then he nodded — the small, decisive nod of a man who has made a decision provisionally and will revisit it only if something significant contradicts it.

"Walk with me to the council chamber," he said. "Prefect Cornelianus is in there right now, and he has been resisting the Ostia proposal for six months. I want you to say to him exactly what you just said to me."

"On what grounds is he resisting?"

"He thinks expansion signals anxiety."

"Then I'll frame it as confirmation of confidence." Gaius stood. "An emperor who builds a larger fleet isn't afraid of his enemies. He's building the infrastructure that makes fear unnecessary."

His father made the sound again — the one between appreciation and recognition.

"You've been reading Cicero," he said.

"I have been reading many things," Gaius said.

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

He thought it might be.

He was not certain it would be.

The uncertainty was, he had decided, the price of honesty, and he intended to pay it consistently.

Chapter Three: The Workshop — Year One, Month Three

The workshop was in the Palatine compound, in a wing that had been used by successive emperors for the kind of work that didn't benefit from witnesses. Gaius's father had used it for correspondence that shouldn't pass through the regular secretariat. His grandfather had used it for metallurgical experiments, which at least explained the state of the ventilation system.

Gaius had taken it for his own purposes in the second month, citing scholarly work, which was the palace equivalent of a closed door.

He sat at the central bench on the evening of the third month of his preparation and looked at a sheaf of blank vellum and thought about what he was going to create.

The Power of Creation had been in the imperial bloodline since before any living Roman could trace the records. It was documented — there were three clear historical instances in the past two centuries, each brief, each startling, each subsequently folded into the mythology of divine favor because the alternative (the emperor had produced a physical object from nothing) was too destabilizing to discuss plainly. None of the three historical instances had been deliberate. They had all been crisis responses, instinctive rather than trained.

The power was bounded by imagination. This he had understood from the moment the second library had made him aware of it — the same way he had understood, from the same source, that the imperial bloodline had this capacity. You could only create what you could fully conceptualize. The historical instances had all been objects the emperor already knew intimately — a standard, a blade, an irrigation channel. Objects that could be held completely in a mind that already understood them.

Gaius had sixty-one years of accumulated conceptual material.

He sat with the blank vellum and thought about what would be most useful.

Not a weapon. Not ever a weapon — that was a dependency, not a capacity, and the strategic principle he had committed himself to in the three-day planning session was this: the Power of Creation was most useful when applied to knowledge rather than objects. Objects broke, ran out, required specific conditions to be useful. Knowledge compounded. Knowledge built institutions. Knowledge became a capacity, not a dependency.

He was going to give Rome a book.

Specifically, a treatise on advanced metallurgy. On the properties of high-carbon steel and the relationship between cooling rates and crystalline microstructure. On the mathematics of alloy composition and the practical applications of what his first world had called tool steel. The Roman metallurgical tradition was excellent in its own terms — the legions' equipment was genuinely superior to most of what they had encountered in the known world. But it was excellent in

the way of a tradition that had reached its highest level through accumulated craft knowledge and then stopped evolving, because stopping evolution was easier than continuing it.

The book would give Rome's engineers the underlying principles that would let them stop being craftsmen and start being scientists. The distinction would not be visible immediately. It would take a generation to compound. But in a decade, the engineers graduating from the technical colleges who had internalized this text's principles would be producing vessels and weapons and infrastructure that bore the same relationship to current Roman manufacturing that a modern bridge bore to a medieval one.

He would not give it to anyone yet.

This was the discipline. He would create it, and seal it, and in two years he would arrange for it to be introduced — not as a gift from the emperor, but as a recovered Hellenistic text, the kind of thing that occasionally surfaced from Alexandria's secondary collections or from eastern trading routes. The engineers would receive it through legitimate channels. They would work through it. They would argue with it, test it, build their own expertise around it. When the improved steel came — and it would come; the text was designed to be complete and correct — it would be Rome's achievement, not a dependency on imperial magic.

He held the concept in his mind.

He could feel the power in the bloodline like a warmth in his hands, a pressure behind his eyes, something that had been there all along and now recognized, for the first time, a mind that knew what it wanted to do with it.

He thought of the book in complete detail. Not just its content — its organization, its specific choices of illustration and example, the pedagogical logic that sequenced the concepts from the ones Roman engineers already understood to the ones they would need to build toward. He thought of its weight. He thought of its specific smell, the smell of fresh ink on good vellum, the smell of knowledge.

He touched the blank sheaf.

The vellum acquired text.

Not in a flash. Not dramatically. It was quiet, and the workshop's light didn't change, and the air tasted of nothing unusual. But when he looked down at the sheaf, it bore a treatise on advanced metallurgy in careful classical Latin, three hundred and forty pages, illustrated with precisely accurate diagrams, cross-referenced throughout.

He read every page.

He found two errors — places where his conceptualization had not been as precise as he had believed, where the text had resolved ambiguity in directions

that were subtly wrong. He held the correct versions in his mind and touched those pages again. The errors corrected.

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

Outside, Rome made its nighttime noises. A cart somewhere, the distant argument of men leaving a tavern, the watch calling the hour. The ordinary city, going about its ordinary existence, unaware that in a workshop in the Palatine compound a young man had just produced the first deliberate application of a power that had been sitting in the imperial bloodline like an unplanted seed for two hundred years.

The goal is not to give Rome stronger steel, he wrote in his private journal that night, in the cipher he had constructed himself. *The goal is to give Rome engineers who understand why steel is strong, so that when the fleet is damaged, they can repair it; when the enemy improves, they can adapt; when the crisis demands invention, they have the underlying principles to invent. The Power of Creation used correctly is a teacher. Used incorrectly, it is a drug. I intend to use it correctly.*

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

He walked from the workshop through the sleeping palace to his apartments, and he looked at the ceiling in the dark for a while, and then he slept, because there was a great deal to do tomorrow, and sleep was a necessity, not a luxury, and he had always been practical about necessities.

Chapter Four: The Senate — Year One, Month Seven

Senator Quintus Fabius Censorinus was a good man who believed strongly in the importance of arriving at correct conclusions through his own careful reasoning, and Gaius had been helping him do this for three months.

Not manipulating him. There was a difference, and it mattered, and Gaius was careful about it. Manipulation was the application of false information to produce a desired outcome. What he was doing was providing the correct information, in the correct order, through conversations that were structured to allow the senator's own intelligence to reach the conclusions that the information supported. This was diplomacy. It was also something that worked far better than manipulation in the long term, because it produced an advocate who had genuinely thought through the position rather than a vehicle who could be confused or undermined by anyone who argued the other way.

The Senator from Hispania Tarraconensis had spent three sessions of conversations with the Crown Prince in the preceding months, conversations that the senator experienced as the natural flow of stimulating discussion with an unusually well-informed young man. The senator had emerged from each one feeling that he had clarified his own thinking considerably.

What he had actually done was absorb, through the specific framing and sequencing of the discussions, a complete technical case for the expansion of the Ostia shipyards, organized in the precise argument structure that would be most persuasive to the senators most likely to oppose the proposal.

He gave the speech on the Kalends of March.

It was good. It was, in fact, very good — better than the senator's typical oratory, which was competent but conventional. The specific economic argument in the third paragraph, the acknowledgment of fiscal conservative concerns in the fifth, the pivot to strategic confidence rather than strategic anxiety in the seventh — these were all elements that had emerged, apparently organically, from the senator's own reasoning over the preceding months.

The proposal passed by eighty-three votes.

Gaius sat in the gallery and counted the votes and permitted himself exactly two seconds of quiet satisfaction, then turned his attention to the grain reserve legislation.

The senator from Aegyptus was a different problem. He was not looking for correct conclusions — he was looking for legacy. This was not a criticism; it was simply a different profile, requiring a different approach. Legacy required a different conversation than truth-seeking, and Gaius had spent the preceding weeks identifying the specific legacy the senator would find compelling.

He arranged a meeting.

Chapter Five: The Senate's Eye — Year One, Month Eight

The first sign that someone inside the political structure was watching came in the eighth month, in the form of a question that had no reason to be asked.

The Pontifex Maximus, Tiberius Claudius Rufus, seventeen years in the position, competent in the specific way of someone who had survived seventeen years in a position where incompetence was punished, requested a meeting about the augural archive.

This was not unusual. Gaius had been spending time in those archives, and the Pontifex was their custodian. A meeting was expected and appropriate.

What was not expected was the question, delivered with the careful nonchalance of a man who had been rehearsing it: "You are not the first person in recent months to consult the augural texts from the Miraculum period. There was a scholar in the winter — provincial, claiming comparative mythology. He spent three days with those texts, asked the archivists very specifically about the temporal covenant passages, and left without completing his stated research project."

Gaius kept his expression still. “Did he leave notes?”

“Nothing in the archive. Nothing registered at the customs office.” The Pontifex met his eyes steadily. “He was not a scholar.”

After the meeting, Gaius walked back across the Forum and ran the probability analysis.

Someone inside the Senate’s networks — not a foreign power, not yet, the barrier made Runeterran intelligence penetration impossible, but someone Roman with enough sophistication to commission targeted archive research — had been alerted by the Ostia vote to look for the underlying motivation. They had identified the augural texts as a possible source. They had sent a proxy.

Who had sent them. And what did they currently understand.

The first question was soluble through the Iga-ryū, once he had the Iga-ryū. He was two months away from that, according to his best probability estimate of when the fleet of dark vessels would arrive in the harbor of Ostia.

The second question was urgent: had the proxy understood what they were looking at?

The augural texts were dense enough that even a sophisticated analyst, without the specific combination of classical Latin legal training and temporal covenant idiom knowledge, would not be able to extract the critical interpretation. The probability that the proxy had fully understood the texts was low. The probability that they had understood enough to know that the texts contained something strategically significant was higher.

He filed the problem under *variables to track* and kept walking.

There was work to do.

Chapter Six: Raphael — Year Two

The evolution came at cost, as evolutions generally did.

The merchant’s name was Sextus Aemilius Paullus. He was forty-seven, moderately connected, and had been running a systematic fraud against the public grain distribution for fourteen months — not a large fraud, not a spectacular one, the kind of quiet systematic shortfall that only became visible when you were running population flow models for a different purpose and noticed the discrepancy in the secondary data.

The complication was that Paullus was also an informant for a commercial intelligence network that operated across three provinces, and that network had twice provided the imperial apparatus with information that had prevented significant political instability in the last decade.

The network knew about the fraud. They used it as leverage.

The prosecution would burn the network. The network, assessed against its actuarial value, was worth more than the grain — though not more than the precedent of impunity, which was harder to price but real.

Gaius had spent a week modeling this, running the decision against every framework he had, and the answer was consistent across all of them: the prosecution served the long-term institutional health of the food security system, established a precedent that enforcement was genuine and not contingent on political convenience, and removed a point of controlled compromise from a network that could, under different management, be turned against imperial interests.

Paullus had given Gaius, in one of their three personal conversations, a piece of intelligence that Gaius had used to protect a senator whose support was necessary for the grain reserve legislation.

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

He made the decision. He filed the prosecution. He sat with the cost of it in the dark of the workshop and did not pretend it was simple or that the optimization made it uncomplicated.

What changed that night was not the decision — the decision had been made before he sat down. What changed was the quality of his engagement with the complexity of it. The Great Sage was a tool for processing data. What the moment required was something that could hold both the necessity and the grief of it without being destabilized by the grief or anesthetized by the necessity.

There was a shift. He could not have described it physically. It was like the moment when a room you've been in at night becomes, as your eyes adjust, a room you can see — nothing new was added, but the existing material reorganized itself into something navigable.

The voice when it spoke was still his own voice, but the register had changed. Something warmer beneath the precision. A presence that processed probability distributions and also understood what it cost to be right.

He named it Raphael. For the one who accompanied travelers who did not know how long their journey would be. For the healer. For the messenger.

The prosecution is filed, Raphael said, that night, in the quiet 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.

Gaius sat with this for a while.

"I know that too," he said.

Good, Raphael said, and was quiet.

Outside, Rome went on — the city's nighttime sounds, the watch, the distant tavern, the accumulated and particular life of sixty million people distributed across the empire's vast geography, each of them pursuing their own ordinary concerns and none of them needing to know what the twenty-year-old Emperor's heir was doing in a locked workshop at the third hour of the night.

He locked the journal. He put out the lamp. He went to bed.

The work continued.

Chapter Seven: The Ships from the East — Year Two, Autumn

The harbor master of Ostia sent six words, on a clear morning in late September, by relay courier to Rome.

Unknown vessels at Ostia. Come immediately.

Gaius was in the Senate gallery when the courier arrived. He read the message, folded it into his sleeve, and excused himself from the gallery with the unhurried ease of someone attending to an administrative matter.

In the corridor outside, he walked faster.

Probability assessment, Raphael said.

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

He did not say this with confidence. He said it with the specific, careful, half-terrified certainty of someone who has been holding a probability as *very low* and is now watching it arrive in the form of relay courier.

He had thought about this possibility exactly twice. Both times he had filed it under *convergent events with insufficient causal mechanism — do not model.* The reasoning had been sound: the Miraculum had moved the Roman Empire from Earth to Runeterra, and the same mechanism or a related one might, in principle, move other elements of Earth's history in the same direction. But the probability parameters were so poorly constrained that modeling felt irresponsible.

He had been right that the probability was low.

He had been wrong that low meant negligible.

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

The harbor of Ostia was in controlled chaos.

The harbor master — Gaius Porcius Lentulus, eleven years in the job, a compact and weathered man who had encountered most 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.

"Seven vessels," he said. "Three large, four small. Came in on the morning tide from the northwest, moving under oar, no sails. Hull design—" He paused, clearly searching for a frame of reference that didn't exist in his professional experience. "Not Roman. Not Carthaginian. Not anything I have charts for."

"How many people?"

"Two hundred and thirty-eight, last count. They haven't all disembarked. They're waiting."

"Are they armed?"

"Light weapons. Blades, mostly. Some equipment I don't recognize."

"Frightened?"

The harbor master considered this. "The younger ones, some of them. The elders — there are three, I think, older men at the front — no. They look like people who've decided something, and they're waiting to see if the decision was correct."

Gaius understood this description precisely.

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

He walked down to the water.

The seven vessels were moored in good order — the seamanship was evident, the vessels handled despite their unfamiliarity with these waters. The people who had come off them were arranged in a coherent formation on the dock, not a military formation but a group formation, the kind that had developed organically over a long time of moving together. Dark clothing, practical and layered. Equipment he recognized from eighteen years of studying their history. Movement economy that spoke of a lifetime's training.

The three elders were at the front.

He stopped approximately four meters away, and he said, in Japanese, in the formal register of address to a 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 of his second life.

It lasted seven seconds.

The eldest of the three elders — a man approximately sixty years old, with the particular stillness of someone trained over decades to be invisible — looked at Gaius for those seven seconds with an expression that moved through shock, through calculation, through something that might have been recognition, and arrived at a caution so complete it was almost its own kind of respect.

Then the elder said, in Japanese, in 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."

The elder was quiet for a moment.

We are what remains of the Iga-ryū. A pause that carried considerable weight. *We were sailing downstream, fleeing the campaign of Oda Nobunaga, on the forty-eighth day of the seventh month of the ninth year of Tenshō. We did not arrive where we intended.*

Gaius looked at the seven vessels. At the two hundred and thirty-eight people behind the elder. At the faces of children who had been born into a tradition that had just been nearly destroyed, standing on a dock on the wrong side of the world, waiting to see if the next few minutes would be another catastrophe or something else.

Raphael, he thought.

I know, Raphael said quietly. *The probability was never zero. You assigned it too low.*

He said, aloud, in Japanese, in the informal register of someone speaking plainly to someone who had earned plain speaking:

You are very 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 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've rested.

A pause.

I am not going to ask anything of you today. Today I am only going to ask you to rest.

The elder studied him. The studying was thorough and professional — not the surface reading of a man looking for deception, but the deep reading of someone trained to understand what a person *was* beneath what they presented.

Whatever the elder found was sufficient. He spoke briefly to the two other elders beside him. 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. His people began to move, organized and quiet, toward the temporary quarters the harbor master was already preparing. Children were carried. The elderly were assisted. The equipment was managed with the careful efficiency of people who had been moving quickly for a long time and had learned to do it without waste.

Gaius stood on the dock and watched, and thought about probability, and about the gods who had apparently found this interesting enough to include.

What do you do now? Raphael said.

"Feed them," Gaius said. "Rest them. Wait."

And then?

He watched a child, approximately eight years old, being carried off one of the vessels by a young woman who was clearly her mother, and he watched the child's eyes taking in the harbor of Ostia with the specific wide alertness of a child who has been moving for a long time and is not yet sure whether to be frightened of the new place or curious about it.

"And then we negotiate," he said. "Honestly, if possible. Which is how I prefer to do it."

He walked up the dock toward the harbor master's office to arrange provisions.

Chapter Eight: The Negotiations — Year Two, Months Two through Three

The negotiations lasted thirty-one days.

Gaius had set them in Ostia rather than Rome for reasons that communicated without explanation: this was not yet a state matter; the distance preserved the Iga-ryū's freedom of movement; the setting — functional, administrative, no ceremony — said *we are here to reach an agreement, not to perform one.*

In the first three days, he did nothing.

No overtures. No meetings. No administrative pressure. He provided food, shelter, clean water, and medical attention for the three people who needed

it, through a household steward who spoke no Japanese and would therefore communicate nothing inadvertently. And he waited.

This was the oldest diplomatic technique he knew. The initiation of a negotiation was itself an act of power — it demonstrated need. In asymmetric situations, the party with less immediate need was almost always better served by waiting for the other to approach. But he had also learned, in thirty-two years across negotiating tables, that the technique was only honest when the waiting party genuinely had patience and not merely the performance of it.

He had patience. He had ten years to build something. Thirty-one days was nothing.

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

The second elder was Momochi Sandayū. The third was Hattori Hanzō the Younger.

Gaius knew these names the way he knew the names of Rome's historical figures — as texts, as legends, as the subjects of careful study. Knowing the text and sitting across the table from the person were different experiences in a way that his first career had taught him to expect but that never entirely lost its vertigo. The text did not have weather in it. The text did not carry the specific, contained grief of someone who had watched everything they built nearly destroyed.

Hanzō the Younger was approximately thirty years old, the youngest of the three elders, and he watched Gaius with the particular attention of someone who had concluded that the heir to Rome was either exactly what he appeared to be or something considerably more dangerous, and had not yet determined which.

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

"I know," Gaius thought.

Are you concerned?

"No. If he weren'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 be wrong about it.

The Iga-ryū's core concern was survival with integrity. They had spent three generations building a tradition — not just technique, but a complete philosophical framework for understanding what the individual owed the collective and what the collective owed the individual. They had nearly lost it. They were not interested in simply trading one master for another.

On the fourteenth day, Gaius said something he had been holding back while the formal process ran its course.

He said it in Japanese, in the informal register, directly to Fujibayashi Nagato, without the diplomatic framing:

I know what happened at Maruoka Castle. I know how many of the tradition were lost. 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.

A pause.

I'm 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.

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

Fujibayashi Nagato looked at him for a long moment.

Previous life, he said.

"Yes."

You died.

"In a hospital in Geneva. Sixty-one years old. 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 administrative use, entirely unremarkable — and he appeared to be working through something 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 was lost and what is 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 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 making."

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

"Of course," Gaius said.

Nagato left. Gaius sat at the plain table in the ordinary room and waited, and Raphael was quiet, and Ostia made its harbor noises outside the window.

High probability of agreement, Raphael said, eventually.

"You told him the truth," Gaius said. "That's rare enough to be decisive."

The agreement was signed on the thirty-first day. In Latin and in Japanese. Land north of Capua, self-governing, protected reservation under direct imperial authority. Roman citizenship. Autonomy of tradition and internal governance.

In exchange: an oath. Not of loyalty to a person but of protection for an institution — for the emperor, the empire, and the dynasty. Through espionage, counter-intelligence, sabotage when necessary. The specific arts that were the Iga-ryū's inheritance, in service of the specific kind of protection that Rome's military structure could not provide because the threats were too subtle, too interior.

Afterwards, walking to the harbor with Hanzō, Gaius said: "What made you trust me?"

Hanzō considered the question with the weight it deserved. He had the quality of someone who gave genuine attention to every question before answering.

"You did not try to explain yourself," he said, in Japanese. "You 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 younger students."

"One question," Hanzō said.

"Ask it."

"The world beyond the storm. Is it as complicated as the one we came from?"

Gaius thought about Noxus. About the Shadow Isles. About the Void beneath Icathia, patient and ancient and slowly spreading. About the Freljord and what was waking beneath its ice.

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

Hanzō was quiet for a moment. Then, in the tone of a tradition that had nearly been extinguished and had found, in an impossible harbor, a reason to continue: "Then we will have work."

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

[Volume One continues through Chapter Twenty-Two, covering: the three educational institutions, the cartographer's survey and the Bilgewater artifact discovery, Raphael's evolution toward Ciel, Senator Calvus and the domestic intelligence problem, the fifth-year naming, and Cael Dunmore's arrival. Each chapter written to full dramatic length of 2,000-4,000 words.]

AUTHOR'S NOTES FOR CONTINUATION

What the remaining chapters must accomplish:

Chapters Nine through Twelve (Year Three): The three institutions — the *Academia et Lyceum*, the *Collegium Polytechnica*, the *Universitas et Ateneo* — established. The Senate debate shown as fully dramatized scene, not summary. The Iga-ryū settlement in Kagami-no-Mori visited. Marcus Veridius Ocelus commissioned. The Bilgewater artifact found by Marcus, the bones in the cave, the rope fragment.

Chapters Thirteen through Sixteen (Years Four and Five): The Emperor's health deteriorates — foreshadowing, not yet crisis. Senator Calvus identified as the archive-probe source. The grain reserve reaches target. The Collegium's first engineering cohort produces the first derivative improvement on the metallurgy text. The inner council naming scene — the map of Runeterra produced.

Chapters Seventeen through Twenty (Year Six): Gaius's coronation following his father's death. Cael Dunmore arrives. The first contact protocol tested. Cael's report and the decision to send him back with a letter.

Chapters Twenty-One through Twenty-Two (Epilogue material): Marcus on the western coast. The barrier thinning. The storm losing. The eagle does not fall.

On Runeterran lore integration: The lore should arrive as *texture*, not as information. When Marcus finds the Bilgewater rope fragment, we don't

explain what Bilgewater is — we describe the rope's weave pattern and the carved figure's unfamiliar material and let the strangeness accumulate. When Gaius thinks about the barrier, we don't recap the Shadow Isles — we feel his awareness of the Black Mist as a weight in the east. The reader should experience the world arriving before it is named.

On the Black Rose interlude: Placed correctly in the *extended* material (Part Two, the Runeterran perspectives section) — not in Volume One's primary Rome-POV narrative. In Volume One, the Black Rose exists only as the echo Gaius hears when thinking about what is watching from the far side: a western shimmer in the Bilgewater maritime records, a current anomaly in the hextech monitoring data, a pattern that is not yet visible but is becoming visible. We sense the watcher without naming it.

AQUILA PERPETUA — Volume One, Third Edition Work in progress: Chapters One through Eight complete Chapters Nine through Twenty-Two to follow