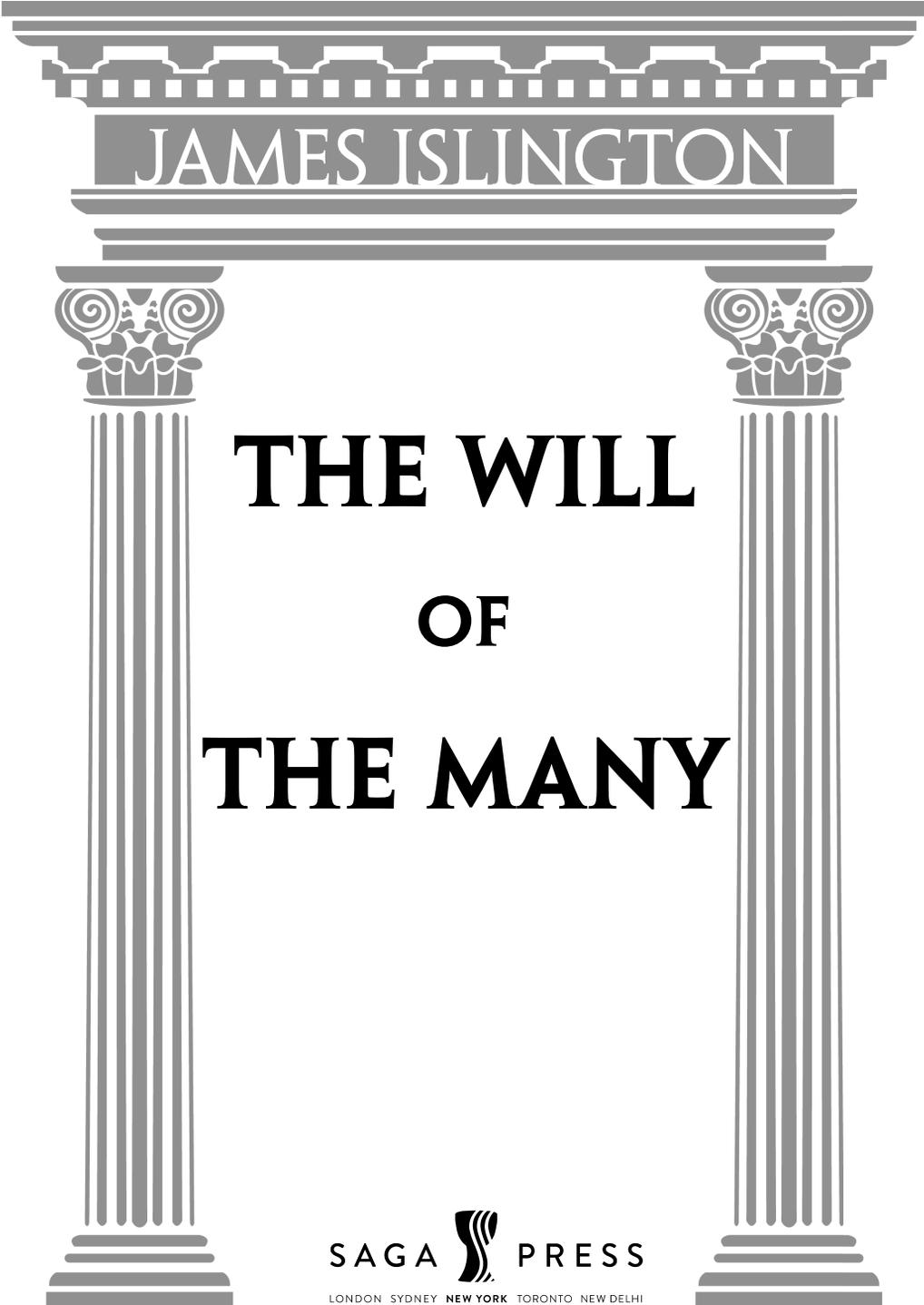


**THE WILL
OF
THE MANY**



JAMES ISLINGTON

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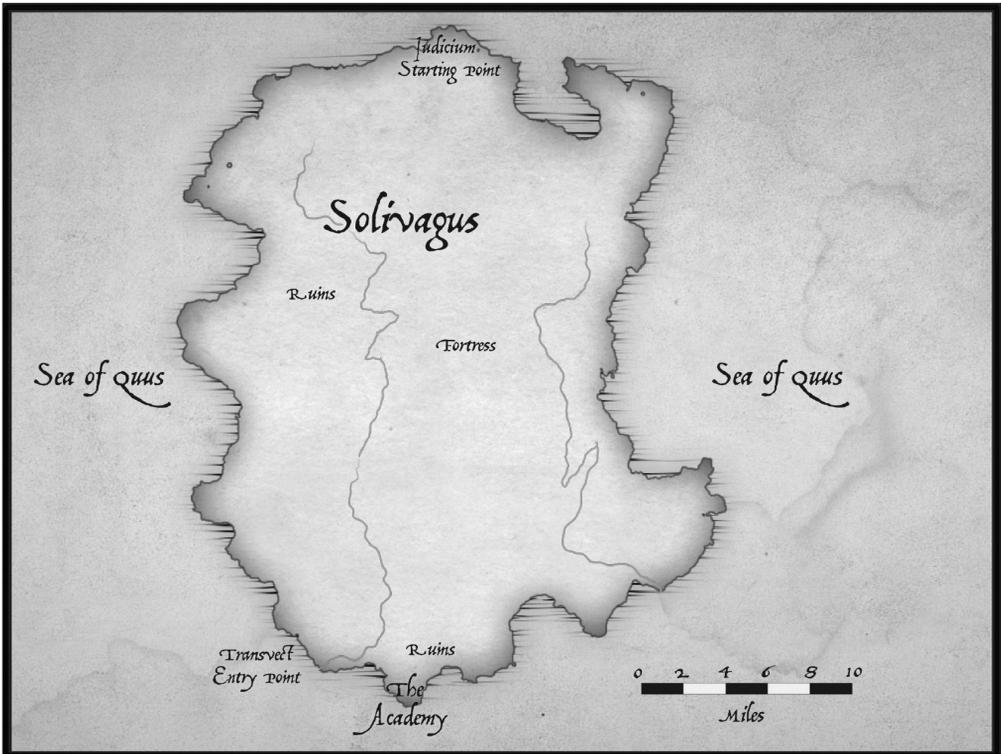
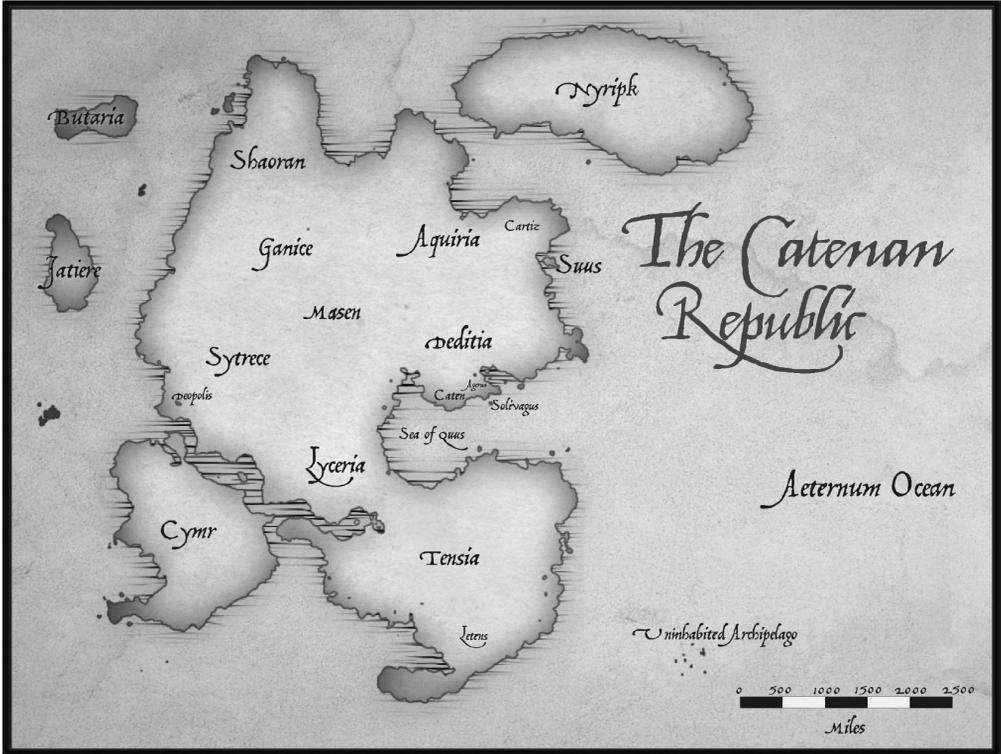
For friends, lost.

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CATENAN RANKINGS

RANK	RECEIVES WILL FROM:
1. PRINCEPS	46,232 PEOPLE
2. DIMIDIUS	23,115 PEOPLE
3. TERTIUS	7,704 PEOPLE
4. QUARTUS	1,925 PEOPLE
5. QUINTUS	384 PEOPLE
6. SEXTUS	63 PEOPLE
7. SEPTIMUS	8 PEOPLE
8. OCTAVUS	NONE





I

I AM DANGLING, AND IT IS ONLY MY FATHER'S BLOOD-slicked grip around my wrist that stops me from falling.

He is on his stomach, stretched out over the rocky ledge. His muscles are corded. Sticky red covers his face, his arms, his clothes, everything I can see. Yet I know he can pull me up. I do everything I can not to struggle. I trust him to save me.

He looks over my shoulder. Into the inky black. Into the darkness that is to come.

"Courage," he whispers. He pours heartbreak and hope into the word.

He lets go.



"I KNOW I'M ALWAYS TELLING YOU TO THINK BEFORE YOU act," says the craggy-faced man slouching across the board from me, "but for the game to progress, Vis, you do actually have to move a gods-damned stone."

I rip my preoccupied gaze from the cold silver that's streaming through the sole barred window in the guardroom. Give my opponent my best irritated glare to cover the sickly swell of memory, then force my focus again to the polished white and red triangles between us. The pieces glint dully in the light of the low-burning lantern that sits on the shelf, barely illuminating our contest better than the early evening's glow from outside.

"You alright?"

"Fine." I see Hrolf's bushy grey eyebrows twitch in the corner of my vision. "I'm *fine*, old man. Just thinking. Sappers haven't got me yet." No heat to the words. I know the way his faded brown eyes crinkle with concern is genuine. And I know he has to ask.

I've been working here almost a year longer than him, so he's wondering again whether my mind is losing its edge. Like his has been for a while, now.

I ignore his worry and assess the Foundation board, calculating what the

new red formation on the far side means. A feint, I realise immediately. I ignore it. Shift three of my white pieces in quick succession and ensure the win. Hrolf likes to boast about how he once defeated a Magnus Quartus, but against me, it's never a fair match. Even before the Hierarchy—or the Catenan Republic, as I still have to remind myself to call them out loud—ruled the world, Foundation was widely considered the perfect tool for teaching abstract strategic thinking. My father ensured I was exposed to it young, often, and against the very best players.

Hrolf glowers at the board, then me, then at the board again.

“Lost concentration. You took too long. Basically cheating,” he mutters, disgusted as he concedes the game. “You know I beat a Magnus Quartus once?”

My reply is interrupted by a hammering at the thick stone entrance. Hrolf and I stand, game forgotten. Our shift isn't meant to change for hours yet.

“Identify yourself,” calls Hrolf sharply as I step across to the window. The man visible through the bars is well-dressed, tall and with broad shoulders. In his late twenties, I think. Moonlight shines off the dark skin of his close-shaven scalp.

“Sextus Hospius,” comes the muffled reply. “I have an access seal.” Hospius looks at the window, spotting my observation of him. His beard is black, trimmed short, and he has serious, dark brown eyes that lend him a handsome intensity. He leans over and presses what appear to be official Hierarchy documents against the glass.

“We weren't told to expect you,” says Hrolf.

“I wouldn't have known to expect me until about thirty minutes ago. It's urgent.”

“Not how it works.”

“It is tonight, Septimus.” No change in expression, but the impatient emphasis on Hrolf's lower status is unmistakable.

Hrolf squints at the door, then walks over to the thin slot set in the wall beside it, tapping his stone Will key to it with an irritated, sharp click. The hole on our side seals shut. Outside, Hospius notes the corresponding new opening in front of him, depositing his documentation. I watch closely to ensure he adds nothing else.

Hrolf waits for my nod, then opens our end again to pull out Hospius's pages, rifling through them. His mouth twists as he hands them to me. “Proconsul's seal” is all he says.

I examine the writing carefully; Hrolf knows his work, but here among the Sappers it pays to check things twice. Sure enough, though, there's full authorization for entry from Proconsul Manius himself, signed and stamped. Hospius is a man of some importance, apparently, even beyond his rank: he's a specialised agent, assigned directly by the Senate to investigate an irregularity in last year's census. Cooperation between the senatorial pyramids of Governance—Hospius's employers, who oversee the Census—and Military, who are in charge of prisons across the Republic, is allowing Hospius access to one of the prisoners here for questioning.

"Looks valid," I agree, understanding Hrolf's displeasure. This paperwork allows our visitor access to the lowest level. It's cruel to wake the men and women down there mid-sentence.

Hrolf takes the page with Manius's seal on it back from me and slides it into the outer door's thin release slot. The proconsul's Will-imbued seal breaks the security circuit just as effectively as Hrolf's key, and the stone door grinds smoothly into the wall, a gust of Letens's bitter night air slithering through the opening to herald Hospius's imposing form. Inside, the man sheds his fine blue cloak and tosses it casually over the back of a nearby chair, flashing what he probably imagines is a charming smile at the two of us. Hrolf sees a man taking liberties with his space, and curbs a scowl as he snaps Hospius's seal with more vigour than is strictly necessary, releasing its Will and letting the door glide shut again.

I see a man trying too hard to look at ease, and do everything I can not to react.

Probably nothing. As much as I try to convince myself, after three years, I'm adept at recognising other actors.

Our visitor is nervous about something.

"Thank you, Septimus." Hospius's gaze sweeps over me, registering my youth and dismissing my presence, focusing instead on Hrolf. "I know this is irregular, but I need information from someone. A man named Nateo."

Hrolf pulls the jail ledger from atop the shelf in the corner, flipping it open. There are a few seconds of him tracing down the paper with his finger. "Nateo, Nateo . . . here he is. Deep cells, east forty-one. Vis, you wait here."

He grabs a key off the hook and takes three steps toward the jail's inner door—just a regular lock on this one—but on his fourth, he stumbles. And

when he rights himself, he peers around at me and Hospius with lost uncertainty. The expression's gone in an instant, but I know what it means.

"My apologies, Septimus. I forgot about your bad knee," I lie quickly, striding over and snatching the key from his hand before he can protest. "It will be faster if I escort the Sextus. Deep cells, east forty-one, you said?"

Hrolf glares at me, but I see his gratitude in the look. He knows what's happened, but probably doesn't even remember who Hospius is.

"My knee could use the rest," he plays along. "If the Sextus has no objections."

"None." Hospius waves me on impatiently. I don't think he's seen anything amiss.

We enter the jail proper and I lock the door again behind us, hiding a vaguely dismayed-looking Hrolf from view. A lantern holding a candle, lit at the beginning of our shift and now closer to a stub, burns on the wall. I unhook it and hold it high, illuminating the narrow stairwell down. Clean-cut stone glistens wetly.

"Watch your step," I warn Hospius. "It gets slippery down here."

I walk ahead of the Sextus, too-dim light pooling around us as we descend. My back itches with it facing him. I can't get his initial moment of affectation out of my mind. But his document—or at least, the seal affixed to it—was imbued by Proconsul Manius, impossible to fake. And I know better than to press. So I simply have to hope that his nerves, and his attempt to hide them, are not from anything untoward.

More importantly, I have to hope that whatever his purpose here, it will draw no attention to me.

"How long has your Septimus been like that?"

Vkk. Still inclined to curse in my ancestral tongue, even if I can only risk it in my head. I paste on a puzzled expression and cast a glance back. "What do you mean?"

"He's been working here too long." Hospius's intense brown eyes search mine until I turn forward again, focusing on the steps. "You don't have to worry. I won't say anything."

I force a chuckle. "I'm not sure what you think you saw, but you're wrong." If Proconsul Manius finds out, Hrolf will lose his position here. He's old enough that he'd be placed in a retirement pyramid, and with a suspect mind as well, he'd almost certainly be demoted to Octavus. Forced to live with constant

exhaustion as he's slowly used up, the Hierarchy stealing years and quality from his life just as surely as they do the men and women here in the deep cells.

And, of course, I would have to navigate another new Septimus. Of the three who have managed Letens Prison since I started, Hrolf has been by far the easiest to deal with.

Hospius just grunts in response. He doesn't sound persuaded, but nor does he press.

We reach the end of the stairs, my lantern revealing smooth walls slick with damp stretching both left and right. A low hum touches my ears, almost imperceptible. Even after more than a year here, I find it unsettling.

There's a half cough, half gag from behind me. "What is that smell?"

"The prisoners." I barely notice the stink of sweat mingling with urine anymore. It's really not that bad, on this level.

"Why don't you keep them clean?" Hospius is incensed.

"We do. We wash them twice a day, as best we can. But they can't control their bowels in the Sappers." I smooth the anger from my own voice, but can't help adding, "Catenan regulations are to wash them twice a week."

Hospius says nothing to that.

We turn several corners and start down another flight of stairs, leaving the upper floor in darkness. These lead to the deepest level, where the long-term prisoners are kept. Sentences of more than two years: murderers and purported Anguis collaborators, for the most part. It feels like we've been sending more and more people down here, recently.

"You know your way around." Hospius's deep voice booms off the austere walls, despite his attempt to match his voice to the hushed surrounds.

I don't want to make conversation, but it's riskier by far to be rude. "I have to come down here every couple of nights."

"So you and the Septimus alternate looking after these prisoners?"

"That's right."

"Despite his bad knee."

Vek. I shrug to cover my concern at Hospius's persistence. "It's sore, not crippling. And he takes his responsibilities very seriously."

"I'm sure he does." Hospius is walking alongside me now, the stairs wider than before. He's taller than me by a head. I see him glance down at me, his interest apparently piqued. The opposite of what I was trying to achieve. "What's your name?"

“Vis.”

“And how long have you been helping the Septimus here, Vis?”

“A few months.” Not a lie, even if it’s not what Hospius is really asking. I’m not about to let on how long I’ve really been exposed to the Sappers.

“You’re young, for this work.”

“Vis Solum.” I expand on my name by way of explanation.

“Ah.” The pieces click into place in Hospius’s head. I’m an orphan. Clearly one who’s had difficulty finding a home, given my age. So Religion—the third senatorial pyramid, who run the orphanages in the Hierarchy—and Military have found a use for me here instead.

We’ve reached the end of the stairwell; two pitch-black passageways branch out at right angles away from us, and another goes straight ahead. I move left, into the eastern one. “We’re almost there,” I say, more to head off any more questions than to fill the silence.

The stench becomes worse, thicker, and Hospius holds a kerchief to his nose and mouth as we walk. I don’t blame him. I retched the first few times I came down here. Accustomed to it as I am now, my eyes still water as my lantern casts its light into the first of the numbered cells.

Hospius comes to a dead halt, hands falling to his sides, smell temporarily forgotten.

“Never seen a Sapper before?” It takes all I have not to show satisfaction at the towering man’s horror.

The cells in Letens Prison are demarcated by stone walls, but there are no doors, no front sections to them whatsoever, making their contents easily visible. Only six feet wide and not much deeper, each unlit alcove contains only two things.

A prisoner. And the Sapper to which they are strapped.

The man in east cell one is around Hospius’s age, but the similarities end there. Fair skin is deathly pale in his nakedness, almost grey. Body thin and frail, cheeks hollow, blond hair long and matted. A wheezing rasp to his breathing. Steel manacles encircle his wrists and ankles, joined by dangling chains to a winch fixed above him. His blue eyes are open but filmy, unfocused as he lies atop the mirror-polished white slab, which is near horizontal but angles just barely down toward us. Toward the thin gutter that runs along the front of all the cells, where the worst of the prisoners’ waste can be easily washed away.

The truth of the Hierarchy is laid bare down here, as far as I am concerned.

“No.” Hospius’s answer to my question is soft. “I . . . no. How long has he been in here?”

Eight months. “I’d have to look at the ledger.” I remember strapping him in.

“What did he do?”

Does it matter? “I’d have to look at the ledger.” I keep my tone bored. Neutral. Try to make him understand that this is every day down here. “We should keep moving, Sextus.”

Hospius nods, though his eyes don’t leave the prisoner’s spindly form until the departing of our lantern returns him to the darkness.

We walk, and to our left and right, our small circle of light reflects copies of the first cell as we pass. Men and women, manacled and feeble and naked, all lying against cold white. Their emaciation is a result of the devices to which they are bound, I think, rather than lack of sustenance. I feed them far more at mealtimes than I would ever eat, and they get no exercise.

Hospius is silent next to me, no indication whether he is affected by the wretchedness of our surrounds. I want to watch him more closely—something still feels not quite right about him, his presence here, this entire night—but my desire to avoid notice is stronger. Regardless of whether he is all he claims to be, if he spots my suspicion, it will only draw attention.

“East forty-one,” I say as our flickering light reveals the number engraved large into the back wall of the stone recess. The man here, Nateo, has been with us for less than a month: I remember him coming in because unlike most prisoners, he’d evidently been transferred from another Sapper facility. He’s as gaunt as everyone else, cheeks hollow, combining with a hooked nose to give him a distinctly hawk-like visage. His stringy black hair splays against the white, down past his shoulders. It’s hard to tell prisoners’ ages, but I don’t think this one is older than thirty.

There is no response to my announcement. I glance across at Hospius to find that he’s peering at Nateo, a small, inscrutable frown touching his lips. The man on the Sapper gazes back glassily. No recognition, no reaction to the light or our presence.

“I need to talk to him.” Hospius steps forward.

“*Stop.*” I snap out the word in panic, then hold up a contrite hand immediately as Hospius freezes. “My apologies, Sextus, no disrespect intended. It’s

just dangerous to get too close. It takes days to prepare a prisoner for a Sapper. Touching it could kill you. *And everyone ceding to you.*"

"Ah." Hospius heeds the warning, doesn't venture closer. "But you can shut it off? Temporarily?"

"I can winch him up. Break the connection." Nausea threatens as I consider what is about to happen. "It will not be pleasant, though. Especially for him."

Hospius rubs the dark surface of his shaven pate. It's a moment of doubt—I'm sure I see it in the motion—but when he looks across at me, his face is hard. "I came here for answers. Do what you have to."

I start edging around the white slab, deeper into cell forty-one. I've been unaffected by the Sappers, so far—mere proximity affects most people within months, and I've been working here for almost fifteen—but still I move with care, fastidiously avoiding brushing against anything. Immune or not, these things are designed to instantly drain Will on contact. Not just the portion the Hierarchy usually takes from the millions of Octavii who form its foundation, either. *All* of your drive, your focus, your mental and physical energy, is funnelled away by these pale stone beds to be received by some distant, particularly favoured Septimus.

In my eyes, death would be a preferable fate.

And the worst part is that I know many of the men and women in here would agree.

I reach the farthest section of the cell and crouch, moving the lantern along until I find the spiked wheel. I begin turning it, muscles working. There's a jangling and grinding above as chains shake and then pull taut. The man on the Sapper sags at the waist as he's drawn in ungainly fashion upward, peeling from the white stone, swaying. A couple more rotations until he's a few inches clear, then I lock the wheel in place.

I straighten, eyes fixed on the flaccid, bony man suspended above the slab in front of me. I've only seen prisoners being released a few times; the managing Septimus is always in charge of end-of-sentence procedures, and other reasons for waking a captive are rare.

I rejoin Hospius at the mouth of the alcove as he fiddles uncomfortably with his tunic. Governance uniform, a dark blue pyramid sewn over the heart. It's crisp, perfectly clean, folded in all the right places. Unfaded.

Immaculate, in fact. Like it's never been worn before.

“Why isn’t he waking up?” Hospius hasn’t noticed my examination, his complete attention on the man in front of us.

“It takes a minute.” Even as I say it, something changes. A break in the steady, gasping rhythm of the prisoner’s breath. A less desperate sigh escapes his lips. His chains twitch, then his eyelids flutter and cognizance seeps back into his gaze as, for the first time, he is at least partly here with us.

Hospius glances at me, and I can see him debating whether to try sending me away. I won’t go, though; even at the risk of angering him, I would be breaking too many rules to leave him alone down here.

Evidently reaching a similar conclusion, he says nothing and moves closer to the Sapper, into the prisoner’s line of sight. He crouches alongside, so their faces are at the same level.

“Nateo. Can you hear me? My name is Sextus Hospius. *Nonagere.*”

He says it all carefully, enunciating, but it takes me a second to place the last word. It’s Vetusian.

Don’t react.

Hospius looks up at me again and I do everything I can to apply the warning he’s giving Nateo. I’m not supposed to know what the word means. Why would I? Vetusian is a dead language. An academic oddity. Aside from the odd word already integrated into Common, it was excised by the Hierarchy more than a hundred years ago. Its only real purpose is to allow for the reading of original texts from an era long past.

But my father was passionate in his belief in the importance of a history uncoloured by Hierarchy translators. My mother was a scholar, fluent in three languages herself. And I was groomed by both them and my tutors for fourteen years to be a diplomat, to support my sister in her eventual rule by travelling to other nations.

Nateo’s head lolls as he gazes blearily at Hospius. He runs his tongue over his lips. Then he slowly, painfully nods.

He understands. These two men know each other.

Blood pounds in my ears. Is Hospius here to break Nateo out? I can’t allow that; the kind of scrutiny it would bring would be the end of me. But I cannot act pre-emptively, either. He’s done nothing wrong so far. His documentation looked genuine. *Was* genuine.

I say nothing, do nothing. I have to wait.

“You talk?” Again in Vetusian. The way Hospius speaks is stilted, like he’s

dragging the words from some long-past schooling of his own. Neither man is looking at me, but I feign perplexed indifference, just in case.

“I can. A little.” Nateo’s voice is like nails scraped weakly across stone. He uses the dead language too, though with far more comfort than the man here to see him. “How long?” His gaze roves, as if seeking the answer somewhere other than Hospius.

“Five years.”

A flicker in Nateo’s eyes, and he focuses again on Hospius. Sharper this time. “Here to release me?”

“I hope. Information first.” Hospius sees the rising panic in the imprisoned man and reaches out, grasping his shoulder, steadying him as the chains begin to rattle from his trembling. “I know . . . you innocent. Need to understand . . . why you in here. Veridius?” The name is a question, asked with quiet intensity.

“Could have been.” Nateo calms, but there’s doubt in the response.

I pretend to stifle a yawn as I leave the lantern on the ground and wander away, out of sight, as if I am inspecting the nearby cells while I wait. Hospius will know I’m not far, but it’s easier to focus on translating if they can’t see my reactions.

“Need you . . . think. About Caeror. Anything he said before . . .” He trails off, and though I can’t see his face, this time I don’t think it’s because he’s struggling with the language.

“Long time ago.” A bitter, choking laugh from Nateo.

“He sent a message, before it happened. Names I do not know. Obiteum. Luceum. Talked about a . . . gate. Strange power from before Cataclysm. Do you know what . . . mean?”

Silence. A faint clinking. Then, “I need to be out first. No more.”

I close my eyes, mouth a curse into the darkness before forcing boredom into my stance, scuffing my boots along the ground and strolling back into view as if nothing important were happening. Reminding Hospius that I’m there. I don’t think he was planning an escape, anymore. But I don’t want him to change his mind.

Hospius looks up at the motion of my arrival, meets my questioning gaze. His nod says he doesn’t expect to be much longer. I conceal my relief. Nateo notes the exchange, his breath quickening. The chains begin to shake again, Nateo’s fear chattering at the darkness.

“I will do all I can. Oath.” Hospius draws Nateo’s attention away from me. “But you . . . his friend. Please. If you know . . .”

Nateo stares back stonily. This is his only card.

Hospius wears his disappointment as he straightens and steps back.

“Please.” Nateo speaks in Common, this time, not Vetusian. Begging. “*Please*. No more. Don’t put me back. You don’t know what it’s like.” The words are pure misery. His head twitches around, enough to include me in his gaze. “You. You’re nicer than the others. Gentler. I know. I know, because being on this slab isn’t like sleeping. It’s worse. You’re *almost* asleep. *All the time*. But awake enough to recognise that things are happening. You know your mind should move faster. You know the world is passing you by.” There are tears, now. Desperation. He’s blubbing. “Five years. Five *years*. Look at me! I didn’t even—”

“Nateo.” Hospius, trying to calm the man. Concerned. No doubt worried his secrets are at risk. He takes a half step closer.

Then Nateo is twisting, far faster than a man in his state should be able. He bucks, roars, wrenches around, animalistic desperation lending strength to his spindly limbs. Metal clatters deafeningly. He uses the momentum of his swinging form to twist and lunge and grab Hospius’s too-new tunic.

“*Rotting gods*.” I’m cursing and moving before I have a chance to properly assess. Sliding around the white stone, slamming hard into Nateo’s arm, jamming myself between the two men before the Sextus can be dragged onto the device. Nateo’s grip breaks. His hand scrapes along my shoulder. I’m already off-balance.

I fall backward, tangled in chain, the slick surface of the Sapper ice against my hands.

A slinking, sick tingle creeps over my palms. Acidic, cold and burning, sharp and wet. Terror rolls through me. I launch myself away, flinging myself free of the mess of metal links and kicking desperately at the lever locking the winch. The rimless, spoked wheel spins madly as I scramble back, away from where Nateo might be able to grab me again.

The jangling sound of unspooling chain, and then just heavy breathing.

“Gods’ graves,” mutters a shaken-looking Hospius from where he’s slumped against the cell wall. He watches Nateo’s metal-draped figure as if he expects the man to leap up and attack again. But the tangle of limbs and links is sprawled flush against the Sapper. Nateo’s eyes are empty as they stare into mine. I still feel their accusation.

“Are you alright?” I stand, unsteady. Heart thumping. The old scars across my back are taut and aching with tension. I touched the Sapper. Skin to stone. I risk a glance at my hands. From what I can see, they’re fine. Still tingling, but fine.

“Yes.” Hospius fingers his tunic where Nateo clawed at it. His gaze lingers on the man, nakedly melancholic before he remembers himself. “Thanks to you.”

He straightens, focusing on me again. There’s a query in the look.

“No harm done.” I reply to the question I hope he’s asking. If he actually saw what happened, I’m in trouble. “Lucky, though. Almost fell on the godsdamned Sapper.” The tremor in my voice isn’t faked. I’m still waiting for something terrible to happen to me.

“But you didn’t?”

I push out a laugh. “You think we would be having this conversation, otherwise?”

Hospius steps forward and thumps me on the shoulder. “True enough. Fine work, *Vis Solum*. Fine work. I was fortunate you were here.” It’s high praise, from a Sextus. Another man would probably be flattered.

I set about resetting the winch, then somewhat tentatively adjust Nateo’s positioning on the Sapper using the almost-taut chains, ensuring he’s lying as comfortably as possible again. I don’t blame him for his actions.

That’s reserved, as always, for those who put him in here.

The candle in the lantern burns low as we make the return trip. At the base of the second flight of stairs, I light another from the nearby shelf and hand it to Hospius. “I should fetch some things from the storeroom while I’m down here.” It’s true, but more importantly I need some time alone, to properly inspect my hands, to let out the terrible tension that’s threatening to break free with every breath. “The guardroom is up ahead. Just knock. Septimus Hrolf will let you through.” Hardly protocol, but Hrolf won’t care.

Hospius pauses as he starts up the stairs, turning back. “*Vis*. It may be best not to mention what just happened.” His voice is abrupt against the quiet. “I wouldn’t want you getting in trouble with the Septimus, or the proconsul.”

“Of course, Sextus. Thank you.” A threat? I can’t tell. It’s true enough that I’d be blamed for the incident, no matter what was said. But it seems neither of us want the attention. That suits me.

Those penetrating eyes of his study me. Then he digs into a pocket and flips

me something that glitters; I catch it neatly, surprised to find a silver, triangular coin in my hand. It's worth more than I'm going to earn from my shift tonight.

"For your trouble. And your discretion."

He resumes his climb. The light of his candle drifts away.

Only when the echo of his boots has completely faded do I drop the coin into a pocket and let my hands tremble.

Setting my lantern on the shelf, I splay my fingers out, palms up, peering through the dim light at every line, every pore. The skin's a little red from where I've been rubbing my fingers nervously, but I don't see any damage. I roll up my sleeves, just to be sure, but there's nothing wrong with my arms, either. And the discomforting sensation in them is completely gone.

I'm alright.

I exhale shakily and slump to the floor, back against the wall, giving myself a minute to let the fear leave me. I've often wondered if I might be able to survive contact with a Sapper. I've never ceded before—never once allowed my Will to be taken at one of the Aurora Columnae scattered around the Republic. Almost all children are brought to one of the ancient pillars when they turn twelve, after which they're able to cede to anyone, any time, without needing the presence of the massive pre-Cataclysm artefacts. My best theory is that my refusal to go through the ritual is why I've managed to stay unaffected all this time, working here.

But it was always just conjecture, a semi-educated guess. I never meant to put it to the test.

My candle is threatening to gutter out and Hospius took the only spare, so I hurry to the storeroom, sweep up the food and cleaning supplies needed for the next shift, and haul them back upstairs. To my surprise, voices seep under the guardroom door.

"... it up for me anyway. I'd like to know." Hospius is still here. I curse myself as I remember why I took the man down to the cells in the first place, then mouth furiously at the door for Hrolf to keep his stupid mouth shut. I've no love for the old man—no one in the Hierarchy has earned that from me—but nor do I think he deserves the fate in store if Hospius decides he's no longer capable of performing his duties.

There's a rustling of paper. "Three years and seven months left," says Hrolf. "Is there anything else, Sextus?" Not rude, but a clear indication that Hospius is welcome to leave.

There's silence, and I wish I could see Hospius's expression.

"Your young assistant seems to know his work." Casual. Conversational. My heart still clenches.

"Should do. He's been here longer than me."

"How much longer?"

"Months," says Hrolf vaguely. I can almost hear his shrug.

"You know him well?"

"He's quiet. A bit aloof, really. Doesn't like to talk about himself. Why?" There's no suspicion, just curiosity.

"He impressed me. I'm wondering whether he's being wasted down here."

Hrolf chuckles. "Oh, no doubt about that. The boy plays *Foundation* like a demon. And he's smarter than he lets on. Quoted gods-damned *Fulguris* at me the other day, even if he pretended he hadn't read it afterward."

I berate myself again for that lazy conceit, then debate interrupting before Hrolf makes more of a mess—he thinks he's helping me by embellishing my merit to the Sextus, never imagining that the attention could get me killed—but if Hospius is after information, my presence isn't going to change anything. Better to wait and find out what, if anything, he's fishing for.

"Hm." Hospius, fortunately, doesn't sound as impressed as Hrolf seems to think he should be. "Well, if a more appropriate position for someone his age should come up in Letens, I'll mention him." There's a vague, dispassionate note that signals it's a conclusion to the conversation. I puff out my cheeks in silent relief.

A scuffing of boots, then the door in front of me rattles as the outer one admits a blast of air.

"Thank you, Septimus. Stronger together," says Hospius, his voice more muffled now.

"Stronger together, Sextus," replies Hrolf formally. The wind-induced quivering of the door in front of me stops.

I wait two minutes before knocking, using the time to decide what to tell Hrolf. He'll be curious about what transpired.

"So what was that all about?" is his greeting as I admit myself back into the guardroom.

"Not sure. They were talking in some other language." I deposit the fetched supplies onto their shelf, then flop into my seat.

Hrolf emits an intrigued grunt, but realises there are no further conclusions to be drawn from the information. “Any trouble?”

“Just what you’d expect. Prisoner wasn’t exactly happy when he realised his time wasn’t up. Bit of kicking and screaming.” There’s the burn of bile in the back of my throat as I think of Nateo’s terror, his begging. His fight. But I don’t let it show.

Hrolf claps me on the back in manly sympathy anyway, knowing I’m understating, if not by how much.

“Thanks,” he adds.

We spend the next quarter hour talking of nothing, whiling the time until I normally depart. Hrolf will stay all night—alone, from when I leave until dawn—though with the prisoners already fed and washed for the day, his responsibilities during that time are nominal. He’ll sleep for most of it.

Somewhere outside in Letens, the city’s common clock faintly shivers a single note. The end of evening, and the beginning of true night. It won’t sound again until dawn. I stand.

“Offer’s still there, Vis,” says Hrolf, watching me. His eyes are suddenly sad, though he tries to hide it. “I don’t mind changing our terms if you want to stay, help awhile longer.”

“You don’t need me here.” I collect my threadbare cloak, shrug it on.

“The proconsul doesn’t know that. Your matron doesn’t know that. And it’s not as if the coin isn’t already paid.”

“Thanks, but no. It’s yours.” Better his than the matron’s, anyway. I assess the Septimus, looking for any sign that he’s thinking of backing out of our deal. That’s not what this is about, though. The worried crinkle around Hrolf’s eyes gives him away.

“Less bruises if you stay here,” he observes, confirming it.

“Better conversation, too.” I hold out my hand, palm up.

Hrolf sighs, but there’s no surprise on his weathered face as he retrieves my pay from the Will-secured box on the far wall. Copper triangles, each one etched with eight parallel lines. I get six for my work today. The other nine that Hrolf tucks away were meant to pay for my time tonight, but instead go toward his tolerance of my absence.

The metal jingles, a comforting weight in my pocket, as I move to the heavy stone door. I don’t offer any words of thanks for his concern. Part of me wants to.

But then I remember that if he knew my real name, this seemingly humane grey-haired man would see me dead just as quickly as anyone else.

“See you tomorrow,” says Hrolf as he inserts his key into its slot. The door grinds open.

“See you tomorrow.” I walk out into the blustery cold of Letens, and head for the Theatre.

II

LETENS IS A STRANGE CITY.

Here at the southern edge of civilisation, more than fifteen years after joining the Hierarchy, Catenan influence still mixes uneasily with the old world. The lamplit streets are twisting, muddy, and narrow, ill-suited to the Will-powered carts and carriages that occasionally squeeze along them. Buildings veer sharply from barely functional wooden boxes to citizens' towering, walled mansions of stone. The many-arched Temple of Jovan soars above it all in the distance, crowning the Tensian Forum. It's surrounded by the last of the sacred druidic grove that once formed the heart of the city. There are no druids, anymore.

While Letens Prison is not exactly on the outskirts, the city is vast, and I'm still heading toward its centre after more than ten minutes. This late, there are more red-cloaked soldiers about than anyone else, though a few others do still brave the icy wind sweeping in from the south. Octavii, mostly. You can tell from the way they trudge, avoiding eye contact as they murmur wearily to one another in their native Tensian. A few of the women wear stolas with their children's names sewn into the cloth above the left breast, proud proclamation of their contributions to the Hierarchy. Their clothes are threadbare and stained, otherwise.

Even so, there's less of the Hierarchy this far south than almost anywhere else in the world. I sometimes tell myself that's why I stopped running.

Of course, if I'm honest, the hunger and loneliness contributed.

At least the hunger's no longer a problem.

The quiet streets finally lead me into the unlit deep of an alley that's almost invisible beside the ugly curvature of the long, sloping building next to it. Mud squelches beneath my boots. Side streets like this would have been dangerous once; crime in Letens does still exist, but now it caters far more to the thrill of the forbidden than the violence of need. The Catenans are nothing if not serious about Birthright, their set of laws ostensibly meant to safeguard human life. Anyone desperate enough to challenge it inevitably finds themselves in a Sapper.

Just as the light from the main road behind threatens to become too dim,

there's a short set of stairs that descend to a door sunken below the street, all but hidden from view. I push it open without announcing myself. Inside, three men and a woman break from their conversation at the table in the corner of the small, stuffy room, the hint of tension dissipating as I'm recognised.

"Vis, my boy!" Septimus Ellanher rises as she utters the words in her rich, aristocratic voice, a hawkish smile splitting her angular face. She's powerfully built, a head taller than me, with a mass of wavy raven-black tresses that fall freely to her waist. Her arms are bare, glistening in the candlelight from the sweat of some exertion or other, highlighting both muscle and scars. "Just who I was hoping to see!"

I carefully close the door behind me and stop dead, giving her a flat stare. The welcome's too warm for Ellanher by far.

She rolls her amber-flecked brown eyes, joviality only slightly diminished by my response. "Come, now. Can't a lady be enthusiastic about the arrival of her favourite fighter?"

"I'm sure a lady could." I nod politely to the three men at the table. All are bigger than even Ellanher in height and brawn, if not in presence. Two, Caren and Othmar, I recognise from previous nights. Their eyes glitter resentfully as they nod back. "What do you want?"

Ellanher chuckles throatily, unfazed. She knows I'm partly joking, and the other part she takes as a compliment anyway. "You are a rascal. But I suppose I do have a special bout for you, tonight."

I don't like the way the three men are watching me as she speaks. Anticipating . . . something. Like most people they're Octavii, normally ceding half their Will to a Septimus's command. My skin crawls to think of it.

Tonight's different, of course. Usually Will is ceded in perpetuity; the Hierarchy organises and tracks all such arrangements with fastidious care, and only whoever controls someone's Will can return it. But these men's Septimii have seen fit to do exactly that for the evening—presumably in exchange for a share of any earnings. Illegal, of course. But the sort of thing that would incur only a small fine if discovered.

Any of the three could break my back with an embrace. But ceding day in and day out has slowed their wits, their reaction times, whole again though they temporarily are. Something has been taken from them. They're broken in ways they don't understand, and it makes them fodder in a fight.

They've never liked that I, smaller and younger than they, am not.

“A special bout,” I repeat, my attention returning to Ellanher.

“Yes, dear boy! I was approached a few days ago by an older gentleman. I shan’t tell you his name, but he’s rather well-known up in northern Tensia. A knight, if you’d believe it. He had heard of our little shows here, from an acquaintance who has enjoyed our hospitality from time to time. This man had a very interesting proposition. His son has accrued some unfortunate debts, and—” She sees me yawning exaggeratedly and scowls. “He’s a Sextus,” she finishes somewhat tetchily, disappointed I’ve ruined her build up. “You’ll be fighting a Sextus tonight.”

I don’t think I’ve heard her correctly at first, but the smug expressions on the Octavii’s faces tell me otherwise. I’m to be meat for the grinder. It feels as though the air has been sucked from the room.

“What are the rules?” I’m relieved to find my voice is level, neither fury nor fear showing through. Ellanher’s had this arranged for days. She’s sprung it on me because she knows I’m not going to pull out, not when the fight’s set and the crowd is waiting. I’d never be allowed to see the inside of this place again.

“No weapons. No killing.”

“I’ll do my best,” I mutter, though the bravado rings false in my own ears. I stare at the ground, coming to grips with what’s about to happen, then straighten. Look her in the eye. “Triple pay.”

“Double.”

“Quadruple.”

“You’re supposed to meet in the middle when you haggle, darling.”

I say nothing, but I don’t break the gaze.

There’s silence, and then Ellanher gives a small, acceding laugh. Delicate and refined, still so strange to hear emerging from that powerful physique of hers. “Triple, then. But no extra for a healer, even if that handsome face of yours needs it.”

And it probably will, but this is the best deal I’m going to get. I gesture toward the narrow hallway leading farther inside, somewhat curtly, indicating both my acceptance and that she should lead the way. Ellanher smiles serenely, murmuring a farewell to her companions. The three men are glowering again as we depart. They’d hoped to get a better reaction from me.

Inwardly, I’m still reeling.

We make the short journey to Ellanher’s “office”—her dressing room,

during the day and early evening—without talking. Once inside, I'm struck again by the incongruity of the space. A well-lit mirror, a dresser with vials of makeup. Feathered hats and soft fur cloaks and a rack full of wildly different dresses. It's surreal to imagine Ellanher readying herself to sing and dance and boldly act out her lines on the same stage where she's about to send me to get my head caved in.

The Septimus strides over to the safe on the wall, taking the Will key from around her neck and inserting it into its slot. The granite latch clicks aside, revealing rows of carefully stacked coins. Will-locked vaults, even small ones like this, are a hundred times more secure than anything mechanical. Priced accordingly, too. Ellanher's late-night side business is paying handsomely.

She counts out my compensation—six silver triangles, worth sixty coppers—and presses them into my palm.

"I admit to being curious, Vis," she says as she locks the vault again, some of her grandiose act faded away now we're alone. She knows it doesn't impress me the way it does the others. "What you earn here . . . it's hardly riches, but it is a lot for an orphan. And you're willing to go through so much pain to get more. So what is it all for? Debts? A woman? Some vice that you cannot bring yourself to give up?" Her tone's light, as it always is with me, but she's far from joking. It bothers her that she doesn't know.

"This Sextus I'm to fight. I assume he'll be ceding?"

"Of course." If Ellanher's fazed by my pointedly ignoring the question, she doesn't show it. "I don't want you dead, my boy."

"Just badly beaten."

She sizes me up, coming to a decision. "Yes." There's neither apology nor regret. "A little fight from the underdog can be fun, Vis, but too much becomes a statement. The sort of statement that gets Catenan attention."

I close my fist around the coins in my hand, the sharp points digging into my skin until they threaten to do injury. I've been testing my Septimus opponents more and more during the months I've been fighting here. Won more than I've lost, over the past few. To think, I was actually feeling good about that. I should have realised it would be noticed. Commented on. Disapproved of, in certain quarters.

"I'll see you onstage," I growl, wheeling and leaving before I say something to make my situation worse.

The dimly lit passageways here seem tighter than ever. The bowels of

Letens's largest auditorium are a warren of private rooms and preparation areas, most of which have been shut off since the last of the actors left more than two hours ago. I don't pause at any of the many branching paths, though, heading almost inattentively for the stairs leading up to the very top of the seating area. I've been here three times a week for more than six months. I know my way around.

I'm accompanied only by my apprehension at what's to come until I'm almost at the very top of the stairs, when the murmur of voices bleeds into my consciousness. The first arrivals of the night have trickled in. In about thirty minutes, that murmur will become a rumbling, expectant buzz as seats fill. Then a primal roar as the first fight gets underway.

I emerge onto the top row of the semi-circular white stone amphitheatre, my entrance unremarked by the smattering of people already present. The stage below is distant; this place can hold several hundred spectators at capacity. Once open to the air, a vaguely foreboding, sound-deadening dome now sits overhead. Three layers thick, it's a special design by Catenan architects, who were commissioned several years ago by some of the wealthier citizens migrating from Caten itself. Apparently, the disturbance rowdy Tensian plays caused to their evenings was becoming simply unbearable.

The curved mass of stone was not exactly popular with the Tensians—it's hardly aesthetically pleasing, and the crass nickname the locals have given it very much reflects that—but it *is* effective. Even the most raucous of noise from in here won't escape.

I scan the crowd nearby and spot the man I'm looking for quickly enough, familiar black notebook clutched in his hand as he talks animatedly to someone. Gaufrid's energetic for an Octavii, even if the effects of more than a decade of ceding have him looking closer to fifty than his late thirties. What he likes to refer to as his receding hairline is well into the realm of balding, though at least he keeps the remaining sandy-coloured strands neat and close-cropped. He's dressed entirely in an off-putting shade of green tonight, for some reason.

I loiter near the exit, mostly out of sight from the gathering crowd, waiting patiently until I catch his eye. When he notices me, he excuses himself and hurries over.

"Vis!"

"Gaufrid." I eye his attire. "Lose a bet?"

“Ha. Ha. My wife’s choice, if you must know.”

“One way to make sure you’re faithful, I suppose.”

“You’re an ass.” Gaufrid’s grin shows he doesn’t think much of the outfit either. He grabs my arm, draws me conspiratorially into the shadows. “Your admirer’s back.”

I follow his nod to the sparse crowd, spotting the girl soon enough. A thick dark cloak still swathes her, despite the relative warmth indoors. My age, at a guess, maybe a few years older. Dark skin and long, curly brown hair. There’s something unsettling about the way she leans forward in her seat, ignoring those around her, gaze fixed on the empty stage below. Though as we watch, her concentration breaks and she frowns around before abruptly drawing her hood up, concealing her face. As if she can somehow sense our examination.

“Lucky me.” I’ve never spoken to her, but she’s been here for every fight over the past two weeks. Quietly asking around about me. Gaufrid thinks it’s romantic. I’m concerned she’s recognised something about me. “Still not interested.”

“And good friend that I am, I continue to tell her that you are as enigmatic as you are handsome.” As usual, though, Gaufrid looks vaguely disappointed. “So. Come to make an early wager?”

I feel the weight of the coins in my pocket. Calculate. Gaufrid is the unofficial bookkeeper for these evenings: if you want to make a wager that will actually pay out when you win, you go to him. “Last fight of the night.”

“Octavus or Septimus?”

I grimace. “Special circumstances. This one’s against a Sextus.”

A frown of confusion, then the blood drains from Gaufrid’s face. He grabs my arm and pulls me deeper into the passageway, completely out of sight of any spectators.

“Are you *mad*?”

“I didn’t find out until five minutes ago. Not much I can do.”

I see Gaufrid’s mind working, see the moment where he understands that this is a punishment being meted out.

“Go to Ellanher. Tell her that you’ll lose to every Septimus you’re put up against for the next month. She’ll accept the compromise.” Gaufrid looks genuinely troubled. “One wrong hit from a Sextus could cave your skull in, Vis. It probably wouldn’t even be deliberate. Even if he—he?” I nod. “Even if he is ceding, he’ll have the strength of ten people behind every punch! You understand that, right?”

“Nine and a quarter people, actually,” I correct him in irritation. “And he can’t be particularly skilled with Will if he has to earn his money here. With weak Septimii ceding to him as well, he might only be self-imbuing worth three or four.” Something similar to Gaufrid’s suggestion had already crossed my mind. Call it pride, call it stubbornness, but I’m not going to do it. I’ve worked too hard, suffered through too many injuries and too much mockery to return to constant defeat.

Besides, I’m not here for the coin alone. I gave up on dreams of exacting revenge on the Republic long ago, but that doesn’t mean I’ll never have to defy them.

This is practice.

Gaufrid growls something under his breath. I’m not sure whether it’s concern for me, or concern that he’s about to lose the benefits of this mutually beneficial deal we have. I can’t guarantee wins and I won’t guarantee losses, but most of the Septimii fighting here are regulars: those I haven’t already faced, I’ve studied. Which means I know my chances, more often than not. And, importantly, can usually drag out a match to any length of my choosing, even if the result doesn’t go my way.

So I bet largely on how long I think I’ll last, and Gaufrid uses that information to . . . *adjust* the odds he offers everyone else.

“What will you give me on three minutes?” It sounds ludicrous even as I ask it, but I’m here now. In this mess. I may as well try and use it to profit.

Gaufrid chokes a disbelieving laugh. “Vis, when this is announced, I won’t be able to sell odds on you lasting more than three seconds.” When I don’t back down, he sighs. “Twenty to one.”

“For *three minutes?*”

“Those are the best numbers I’m going to give you,” he assures me. “For all I know, you could have an agreement in place with this Sextus to split the winnings.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you,” I say, offended.

“I believe you. Doesn’t change the risk.”

“What about for two minutes?”

“Same odds.” Gaufrid fixes me with a serious look. “Same again for one minute.”

I scowl, but I know Gaufrid well enough to know he’s not going to budge. He thinks he’s helping me, forcing me to shorten the fight rather than aim for

a big windfall. I draw four silver triangles from my pocket, holding them out. “Longer than one minute, then. Less than one and a half.”

Gaufrid whistles between his teeth as he takes them. “Stupid *and* rich today. Alright.” He slips the coins into a pouch at his waist. There’s no entry into his small black notebook, no receipt listing the amount or the odds he’s given me, but that’s normal. The man has a remarkable memory, and I know he’s good for it. If for no other reason than Ellanher’s aware of our arrangement, and though she takes her cut, she’d tear him limb from limb—perhaps literally—if she ever thought he was cheating one of her fighters.

I turn to go, business complete, but Gaufrid grabs my shoulder.

“No shame in calling it at first blood.” He looks frustrated, almost angry, that he’s issuing this advice. Given how people are likely to bet, that’s unsurprising. “I know it’s not in your nature, but Vis—if you’re ever going to swallow your pride, tonight’s the night.”

He releases his grip and strides back into the amphitheatre, still looking faintly ridiculous clad in green.

Gaufrid’s warning echoes uncomfortably as I descend the stairs again, heading this time for the waiting area just offstage. He might be right. Once there’s blood, either fighter can concede the bout—and there will almost certainly be blood before the end of the first minute, no matter how fast I move.

But it’s one minute. One minute for *eight gold*. That’s almost double what I’ve managed to save since I started here.

It’s not just the amount of coin on offer, either. I’ve been feeling the inexorable press of time on my shoulders lately. I’m seventeen years old in truth, as of two months ago, even if the Hierarchy’s records for Vis Solum say that milestone isn’t for another ten weeks. Part of me regrets not stretching the lie further when I first came to the orphanage, but the risk of the claim drawing notice was too great.

Regardless of whether it was a mistake, it means I have little more than a year before the law demands my Will. Either ceded after a trip to the Aurora Columnae, or taken by a Sapper.

And all the ways I can think to try and avoid that involve *significant* expense.

I navigate the back hallways and arrive at the room the Octavii are given to prepare, still deep in thought as I enter. It’s to the right of the main stage, an austere stone box that’s large enough to comfortably accommodate the dozen men within. A small, temporary shrine to Mira is, as usual, erected by the door.

I ignore it. The room already stinks of stale sweat and animal fat as men grease their arms and run on the spot, or jump repeatedly, or do whatever they can to expel the stiff cold from their muscles.

None stop their exercises, but eyes surreptitiously fix on me as I find an open space to warm up. They've heard, then.

Like Othmar and Caren earlier, none of the gazes are especially sympathetic. I've always been an oddity here, I suppose, even before I started winning. The youngest by at least two years, and easily the least physically imposing. Not that I'm weak—the Theatre, not to mention my time prior competing in the gladiatorial competition of Victorum, has made me leaner and stronger than I'd once thought possible—but these men were singled out for their physiques. They're mountains of brawn, without exception.

And now I'm to fight a Sextus. It will be an insult to some; they'll see it as an acknowledgment by Ellanher of my successes, rather than the castigation it is. Others will just be delighted that I likely won't be around for a while.

Time passes at an interminable crawl as I suffer their constant sideways glances, each one only adding to my concern. The buzz of excited murmuring from the amphitheatre builds steadily, muffled though it is in here, until finally it's cut short by Ellanher's voice. Warming up the crowd. There's laughter, cheers. She's beloved out there.

Ten minutes go by, allowing enough time for bets on the first fight after its announcement. Then the stage door is opening and Idonia—Ellanher's younger cousin, supposedly, though with her short-cropped blond hair and bright blue eyes, they bear no physical similarities whatsoever—peers through. "Pabul." A giant with long reddish-brown hair and a front tooth missing slips through the door after her.

It's a parade of names called and men departing after that. They don't come back the same way; we never know how any single bout has gone until the end of the night. Though you can usually guess. There's a certain feel to the crowd noise when a match is close. Or when an injury is particularly nasty.

I block it all out tonight, formulating a strategy. I've thought about this plenty of times before, albeit in the most abstract terms. No weapons is a good start. Still, most Sextii can imbue things—a simple touch and he could make my shirt start to strangle me, or if he doesn't want to look like he's cheating, just pull me off-balance at the wrong moment. Unpleasant though it is, there's only one way to avoid that.

He'll be strong, of course. I briefly consider the tactic of *letting* him imbue something; Will is a finite resource, and however much he infused elsewhere would leave him with that much less to bolster himself. But I immediately dismiss the idea. An errant punch to the head might only maim rather than kill, in that scenario. Not much of an advantage.

Then there's the question of his speed. That's harder to predict, and the one area which gives me hope. The Will being ceded to him improves his reaction times, but it's a marginal enhancement over a Septimus. Training and experience play more of a role, there. And if this Sextus is only fighting tonight because he thinks it's an easy way to make coin, then it's possible he may not have the discipline of others I've already faced.

As I assess and reassess my logic, around me, the room gradually empties. Quietens. The heavy stench lingers. The roars of the spectators out front ebb and flow.

Finally, suddenly, I'm the only one left.

I strip, carefully and methodically. Cloak, tunic, underclothes. Folded neatly and put in a pile. I have to believe that I'm going to need them again. Then I use the pot of animal fat to grease my entire body. It's disgusting, but if the Sextus gets a good grip on me, he'll be able to snap or crush bone. And the substance won't keep its form, so it can't be imbued.

The door opens just as I finish.

"Vis, you're . . ." I donia sputters as she sees me. Gapes, then glances away. She's more shy than her cousin. "You're up. I mean, you're ready. It's your turn. To fight." She's red. Almost flees back toward the stage.

I chuckle to myself as I pad after her, though mostly to avoid thinking about my own discomfort. Living on the run meant that propriety and advantage were rarely companions, that first year and a half, and any reservations I may have once had were beaten out of me long ago. Still, there's something inherently unsettling about being naked. Some part of me that can't help the embarrassment, feel exposed in more than just the physical, regardless of whether it's the smart thing to do.

It's a short walk down the corridor to the stage. Ellanher's making the big announcement about the Sextus. There's a renewed thrill in the air, gasps and excited chattering. Ahead I can see I donia has dashed onstage, cheeks still flushed, whispering in Ellanher's ear.

The burly woman's dark hair swings as her gaze snaps to me. Those brown

eyes of hers are fathomless as she watches me stride onto the stage, expression not changing as the first of the crowd notices my lack of attire and starts to whistle and laugh. I walk past her toward the onlookers seated in the dim beyond the stage, a broad grin on my burning face, raising my arms as if they're cheering me. The laughs increase, but they're mostly approving, not mocking. Confidence, real or perceived, has a peculiar power over people.

I look back over my shoulder at Ellanher. Her eyes are fixed on me, but something's changed. They're puzzled. A hint of shock. I realise she's seeing my back for the first time. The terrible mass of scars upon scars upon scars. It doesn't matter. I doubt she knows what they mean, and I have no intention of sharing.

My breath shortens as I catch movement from the other side of the stage.

The Sextus is . . . imposing. Perhaps a decade older than me. Tall. Athletic—not built of muscle like the Octavii but with more of a graceful power to him, a liteness as he saunters out onto the stage, giving an easy smile and waving at a crowd who are now cheering in earnest. He's handsome into the bargain, brown hair cut fashionably short, square jaw covered in dark stubble. An automatic favourite.

He removes his tinted spectacles—proof positive that he's a Sextus; no one of lesser rank is allowed to wear those—and hands them to Ellanher. His self-assuredness falters when he spots me, only for a second. Then his smile returns. It's harder this time, though. He's not pleased.

I smile back.

Idonia's already darted away. Ellanher glides to the front of the stage, raising her hands and gazing up into the back rows of the amphitheatre as if she can see every single person sitting in the shadows. She holds that pose. The whispers stop, the murmuring fades. It's as if the entire building is holding its breath. Everyone is focused on her.

Blood thunders in my ears as I turn and face the Sextus, moving to the balls of my feet, readying myself. There will be no introductions, no names. Not here.

Finally, satisfied that the tension is at its peak, Ellanher drops her arms again. Steps lightly off the stage as her voice rings out, a dagger into the eager silence.

“Begin.”

III

THE RELEASED BELLOWING OF THE CROWD IS A WAVE hitting the stage, crashing down from the surrounding darkness.

Exhilaration courses through me at the sound. They're unique, these eternal moments before a match truly begins. Blood pounding. Fighting to keep my breathing steady. Not sure whether it's excitement or fear that's heightening every sense, making my skin tingle and hands twitch in anticipation. Every second seems to draw out, every minor detail of the stage and my opponent seems to be brighter, *clearer*. There are the spindly cracks in the faded white stone underfoot, several spaces coated in fresh splashes of red. The warm heaviness of the air from a night of bodies packed together. The way the Sextus's lip almost imperceptibly curls as he stalks forward, green eyes bleeding to black and glittering in the light of the torches arrayed around the stage.

Ellanher asked me what it's all for. I tell myself that it's for the coin, for the practice. For survival. And none of that's a lie, but as the shackles on my mind fall away, I acknowledge that there's another truth beneath it all.

This is the only place in the world where I don't have to pretend to be friendly. Or dull. Or servile. Or weary.

This is the one place where I don't have to hold back.

I start my mental clock. *Five seconds.*

The stage is large, a semi-circle perhaps fifty feet in radius. The bounds for the contest are set by the surrounding torches; if one of us steps past those, the fight ends. Of course, doing that too early doesn't just destroy a career here. Ellanher made it clear before even my first bout that whatever injuries a fighter might avoid in doing so, would be revisited double upon them by the end of the night.

I head across to the centre of the stage, at an oblique angle to the Sextus's path. He's moving determinedly, but not hurrying. It occurs to me that he's probably intensely conscious of making this look effortless; anything else would be embarrassing for him. That's good. Means he's more likely to act bored, rather than work to chase me down within this vital first minute.

I slide back as he nears and begin circling, staying out of range. He follows, still at the same deliberate pace. *Fifteen seconds.*

The first mocking call drifts from the crowd, quickly taken up by others. Baiting me. Baiting him. The Sextus's pace subtly increases. I match it, drawing more scorn. I don't care. I'll throw punches and risk hits only when it's smart, regardless of how I look.

Twenty-five seconds. Plenty of bawdy jokes about the Sextus enjoying the chase too much. Laughter. There's something dark about the other man's expression now, beyond the night in his eyes. They're getting to him. Normally I'd enjoy that, but more anger means less mercy. I feint forward, as if to attack. It gives the athletic man pause. I resume my circling. *Thirty seconds.* I can barely believe my luck so far. No actual fighting.

The Sextus has remained at an exasperated stop at the centre of the stage. I slide to a halt as well, never taking my eyes from him.

"Octavus!" His voice booms, rich and louder than it should be, cutting easily through the jeers. I'm not technically an Octavus, having never ceded before, but neither he nor anyone else here knows that. "Are we really doing this? In front of everyone?" Trying to put the onus to engage back on my pride. Clever, and yet a complete misunderstanding of his opponent.

I don't respond. Don't move. *Thirty-five seconds.*

He steps forward, and I step back. He scowls openly this time. "I'd have thought twice about coming out here if I'd realised my opponent was such a coward!"

"Says the big brave Sextus fighting the Octavus," I call back, to scattered approving laughs from the darkness.

I bite my tongue as soon as the words are out of my mouth. Stung to a reply. Perhaps not a *complete* misunderstanding by the Sextus, after all.

And he sees that.

"Ellanher told me about you." His voice is still raised, but quieter than before, and I doubt his words carry beyond the stage. "She said that you're an orphan." There's an ugliness to the way the words fall, and something deep in my chest shifts, tightens in response. Preparation for a different kind of assault.

He advances, I retreat. *Forty-five seconds.*

"But you're old, for an orphan, aren't you? So for some reason, no one wants you." Advance, retreat. He shows me perfect teeth. His eyes are dead and cold. "Starting with your parents, I imagine. Did you even know them? Do you re-

member when they abandoned you, Solum, or have you always wondered about why they did it?" Advance, retreat. "Were they the ones who whipped you? Or did they just leave you to the ones who did?"

I try to block out his words but it's hard to both focus on him and ignore them. He's wrong, of course. Wildly off target in his guesses. But my breathing's too shallow, for some reason. More of a growl. And I've lost track of the count. Is it a minute yet? There's heat against my back. A torch. I'm too close to the edge. Hemmed in.

"I bet they were worthless anyway," the Sextus crows as he closes in.

Everything goes cold. Sharp. Not here. Not out here, the one place I don't have to think about them.

I advance.

Distant, the crowd roars.

The Sextus is smug as we meet. He throws the first punch, but it's an obvious one and I let it sail over my left shoulder, closing in and delivering a swift strike to his ribs before darting away again. I'm not running anymore, but even through rage's red veil, I know not to get close enough to be grappled.

It was a hard hit—I'm nowhere near as heavy as the Octavii who fight here, but I *am* fast—and the Sextus takes a step backward, smirk replaced by a grimace. It's brief, though. Surprised rather than pained. I might have cracked a rib if I'd taken a blow like that. A Septimus would at least have a bruise. But the Sextus? His Will probably makes it feel more like I gave him a sharp push.

"A little sensitive, Solum?" he sneers, coming at me again.

I snarl and swing first this time, but he's ready for it, dodges faster and more smoothly than I could possibly anticipate. Not as unskilled as I'd hoped. I overextend, try to twist away from the elbow I see coming in the corner of my vision.

It's a glancing blow, in the end, more arm than elbow. Barely making contact with my left shoulder.

My face burns as it skids along cold stone. I'm blind. Winded, hacking. Cheers muffled and twisted in my ears. I gasp, vision and awareness returning enough to roll away from the Sextus, who towers over me. Not even looking at me, I realise. His back to me. Waving almost disinterestedly to the adulation of the darkness.

He grazed me. It feels like the building fell on my head.

My left shoulder's in agony, so I put my right hand to my cheek. It comes

away sticky, bright red. I steady and haul myself to my feet, bitterly grateful for the Sextus's arrogance as my head clears. It has to have been more than a minute. My reward, not to mention survival, awaits. I just need to step off the stage before he turns.

But something still seethes, and it's calculating my odds.

I know, both academically and from fighting Septimii, that even a hit that appears to do nothing is still a hit. For a Septimii, a blow needs to land in the same place at least twice before it starts to take full effect. For a Sextus, that's likely to translate to at least seven or eight times.

So, terrible odds. But the idiot's back is to me.

A voice from the corner of my mind is shrieking at me to be smart. It's so distant, though.

I launch forward.

Perhaps the Sextus thinks I'm down. Done. Or he thinks I'll fight honourably, wait for him to face me again before attacking. Or, perhaps, it's just inexperience. Whatever the reason, he doesn't respond quickly enough to the rising warning of the crowd.

I scream as I pour all my fury and momentum into the hooking, running punch at the side of his jaw, aiming for the point I know would knock out any regular person. He realises something's wrong at the very last second, but I still make almost perfect contact.

There's a shiver down my arm at the impact, and the Sextus groans as he staggers.

The enthusiastic shouts from the audience cut off, replaced by the sound of a hundred people gasping in unison. I don't pay it any attention. Even at a fraction of its real strength, the positioning and power of that hit has made a difference. The Sextus is dazed. Stumbling.

I'm on him, right fist crashing again, missing the same spot on his jaw but connecting with his cheek. No time to think. I swing again, barely blocked this time. He's reeling. Recovers enough to swat furiously at me; heat sears down my injured shoulder but it's a panicked shot, no venom behind it, and I'm braced this time. I'm too far gone to care about the pain anyway.

It's a cold, disconnected fury that drives me now, one that clears my head, slows time, and focuses. I feint and get in a hard strike to the Sextus's collarbone, then another. I feel it give way on the third. He's wheezing. Eyes black and wide. Struggling to comprehend. I surprise him by getting in close and

delivering a savage knee to the groin—an effective strategy no matter how much Will is cushioning the blow, I’ve found—and then step back and follow with a thundering uppercut to his jaw as he doubles over.

He goes down.

I don’t stop, don’t give him a chance. I kick aside his warding arm and fall at him, bringing my fist down on his face. There’s blood, and it’s not mine. “You want to know about my parents, Sextus?” I’m snarling. I barely know what I’m saying. I straddle him and strike again, same place. “You want to know about my family?” Again. “You want to know why I have these gods-damned scars on my back?” The words come out ragged. A stranger’s voice.

He’s not answering. He’s not fighting back anymore.

There are strong hands looping under my armpits, pulling me off him. I thrash until I realise it’s useless to resist; then the rage is abruptly draining away, leaving me with nothing but ache and weariness. My vision’s blurred. The blow to my head? Tears? Blood? I don’t know. The Sextus is motionless on the ground. The stone near his head is splashed crimson.

Ellanher’s saying something, but the words are just a strange buzz. Now my wrath’s died, I think the Sextus’s hits are taking their toll. There’s a cloak being draped over my shoulders. Ellanher’s tone is worry overlaid with calm. She’s speaking slowly, as one would to a child. I still can’t understand her.

I let her half carry me off the stage. There’s no applause, no cheering. Just stunned muttering from the surrounding darkness.

As we shuffle away, I let out a bitter, tired laugh as I realise something. I won the fight. Which means I just lost my bet.

I’m barely going to earn anything from tonight at all.

IV

CHAIN YOUR ANGER IN THE DARK, MY MOTHER USED TO tell me, and it will only thrive.

I never really understood what she meant, growing up. Why would I? I was a prince of Suus. I had comfort, safety, tutors and servants and family. I was loved. My ire was over being forced to attend dull lessons, over imagined slights and the unfairnesses of entirely fair parental restrictions. A petty wrath, gone almost as soon as it was expressed.

When the Hierarchy came, though. When they took all of that. When I had to learn to hide among them every day. When I had to smile and nod and engage in conversation with people whose weakness allowed the Catenans to be powerful. When I had to swallow rage in every reply and pretend to agree with their excuses for their slavery, *my* slavery, just to survive.

Then I understood.

Though until tonight, I did think that my chains were strong enough for it not to matter.

I hate it, but I can't help but wonder what my mother would think of me right now.

The boos coalesce, rain down as I stand alone back in the centre of the blood-spattered stage. I keep my eyes on the ground, not letting anyone see my defiance. Ellanher has just finished telling them all that I cheated. That I've admitted to buying the Will of a Totius Septimus, a Septimus who doesn't cede to someone else, for the evening. She played the hurriedly crafted lie to perfection, mortification heartfelt as she addressed her patrons. Even gave a traditional Threefold Apology, by Catenan custom preventing retribution if accepted. The crowd was sullen at her first appeal for forgiveness. By the third impassioned plea, she'd won them over.

Of course, the subsequent announcement of my banishment has helped. As has that any successful bets on my fight tonight will be honoured, and all others will be repaid in full.

Even through my boiling frustration, I cannot help but think of how much Gaufrid will *bate* that last part.

My fists clench against the ire of the crowd. Teeth grinding. Breath coming short. I've complied with this charade only because Ellanher has assured me that far worse than an aching shoulder and bruised ego awaits me, otherwise. This way we can part, as she puts it, "amicably." If there's been no upending of the natural order here, then there won't be any extra scrutiny from the Hierarchy. And we both know I can't exactly go to the authorities about any of this.

The heckling peters out soon enough. Grumbling turning to mollified chatter. Everyone here got to see a Sextus beaten, even if it was through cheating. A scandal to talk about for weeks to come, and no money lost from it. They've had a good night, all told.

"That will do, my boy." Ellanher's at the edge of the stage, waiting for me to start walking. We leave the already-gossiping rumblings of the departing crowd behind us.

The journey back to her office seems too long. Our footsteps echo.

"About your back—"

"No." I growl the word. I've expected the question since the fight, saw Ellanher's glances as she bandaged my shoulder before we went back out there.

Ellanher knows she doesn't have much left to bargain with. "Of course, darling," she says softly.

Another silence as we trudge through the empty corridors. She eventually sighs. More regret than anger in her. "There's always a return to Victorium. I hear they miss you down there."

I snort. Letens's Victorium league is where Ellanher found me, first approached me to participate in these nights. It's the less-consequential cousin of Caten's great gladiatorial bouts: voluntary and, more importantly, without the shadow of being consigned to a Sapper if you reach three losses.

It's still dangerous work, despite the blunted steel we used—and worse, comparatively pointless. It's a Hierarchy-sponsored activity. The matron would have to officially approve my involvement again, meaning I wouldn't even get to keep the coin I earned.

"You were good, my boy," presses Ellanher as we reach her office. She does seem genuinely disappointed that I'm leaving. Sincerely trying to encourage me. Though she is also a fine actor. "And you may be less tempted to try and kill your opponents there."

"I wasn't trying to kill him." I haven't seen the Sextus, whose injuries are undoubtedly being treated somewhere nearby, since the fight. A bloodied and

broken nose. Bruises. A headache. Despite my rage, it won't be anything worse than that. He'll hear secondhand what was said out there and tell himself that it's why he lost. That it's the *only* way he could have lost.

She opens the door. "You can wait in here until the . . . less pleased of our customers are gone. If you wish."

I'm tempted to refuse, but I'm in no condition to handle being confronted by disgruntled spectators. I step inside, ease myself into one of the chairs.

Ellanher stays in the hall, hand on the door. "And Vis? I was right there. I saw your face when you were hitting him, darling."

She smiles sadly, and leaves me alone.

I sit for a while, wrestling my heavy-hearted frustrations under control. My shoulder throbs beneath its strapping. It's been a mess of a night.

It's perhaps forty minutes later when there's a short knock. I hold my silence, assuming that whoever it is will be looking for Ellanher.

"Vis? I know you're in there."

It's Gaufrid. I stare at the door, trying to decide whether the man would be angry enough at me to have brought muscle.

Probably not?

I unlock it, easing it open. Gaufrid hears and turns from where he had already started walking away, green suit even more garish surrounded by the drab hallway. He looks tired rather than irate. He's alone.

"Come in." I open the way a little wider. "But I'm leaving soon."

"I know. This won't take long." Gaufrid joins me in Ellanher's office but stands awkwardly by the door, not shutting it, shaking his head when I motion to a chair. Instead, he digs into a pocket and abruptly leans forward, grabbing my wrist with one hand and then pressing something cold and sharp into my palm with the other.

Four silver triangles.

"Just refunding your wager," he says gruffly. As I inspect the metal in my hand, puzzled, he moves to depart.

"Why?" I'm confused. Grateful, but can't help but be suspicious at the same time. Gaufrid has to know that he's never going to see me again. And I'm responsible for him losing a *lot* of money tonight.

The balding man pauses. "Two minutes and thirty-seven seconds."

I look at him quizzically.

"That's how long your fight lasted. And then you *won*. Seeing an Octavus

beating a Sextus? That was a damned fine thing. A *damned* fine thing.” He keeps his voice low. Afraid of being overheard, but emphatic, determined to say the words anyway. “And I don’t care what Ellanher says. You didn’t cheat.”

He leaves, shuts the door again. No goodbye. Not even a nod.

But I’m standing a little straighter. Smiling, despite myself, as I let the four coins jingle in my hand and then join their siblings in my pocket.

Another half hour passes before I deem it safe to leave. No one accosts me as I slip out into the early morning darkness of Letens. The wind has died down, but the chill is more than enough to stir me from the threat of sleep.

I stand there for a long second, melancholic despite myself. These past six months have given me a strange kind of stability. The last of that is almost over, now.

There’s just one more thing I need to do tonight.



I RETURN TO THE ORPHANAGE A FEW HOURS LATER, JUST as the cloudless sky starts to reveal sharp blue.

I’m feeling better as I approach, albeit still sore. My detour to Letens’s Bibliotheca was a success, the travelogue I stole strapped to my back beneath repurposed bandages. It’s filled with maps and descriptions of the archipelago of uninhabited islands about three weeks’ voyage to the east. A bad option, a desperate option. But after tonight, I may not have the chance to find better.

I use my key to unlock the door, slipping inside. I’ve already re-tightened the concealing bandages and tucked the remainder of what I earned from the Theatre tonight into my boots, so when movement greets me before I can even start toward the stairs to my room, I’m ready.

“Vis.” Matron Atrox rises smoothly from her chair. The Septimus in charge of the orphanage is a slim woman, her blond hair shoulder-length and features petite. In her forties, from what I gather, though she could pass for younger. Probably quite attractive, if you don’t have the disadvantage of knowing her.

I make a show of reluctance as I dig the single silver and five copper triangles from my pocket, offering them to her. “For all your hard work, Matron.”

The matron’s smile withers to something cold and hard, and far more familiar to me. “Careful. Your work at the prison is at my discretion. There are

always . . . *other* ways I could task a boy like you with earning his way.” From the lascivious way she says it, there’s no doubting her meaning.

I ignore the threat; it’s long since lost its sting from repeated use. The hateful woman frowns at my lack of response, then scrapes the metal from my hand. “I need your help as soon as mid-morning bell rings today,” she tells me as she checks the amount. She signed the contract for my work at Letens Prison. Knows down to the coin how much I’m supposed to be paid.

I try not to show how much pain her simple statement brings me. Mid-morning’s only a few hours away, and my throbbing shoulder exacerbates my need for rest tenfold. “Why?”

“A messenger came not long before you. There’s a potential adopter coming at noon today. The children will be excited, and I need your help getting them ready.”

“That’s short notice. And a strange time to be notified.” I’m getting an odd sense of enthusiasm from Matron Atrox. She usually considers adoptions as chores to suffer through.

“The recommendation came from Proconsul Manius himself. And the adopter is a Quintus.” She waits, nods as she sees my reaction. Important men in the Hierarchy, far more so than we would usually be entertaining. In fact, I’ve been here for a year and a half, and we *once* had a Sextus adopt someone. “It’s vital that everything go smoothly today, Vis.”

It’s a statement and a threat. A statement because if a Quintus adopts someone in her charge, that raises Matron Atrox’s stock considerably. It could lead to increased funding from Religion, maybe even a promotion to Sextus for her down the track.

And a threat, because my presence would reflect poorly on her. A near seventeen-year-old who still refuses to visit the Aurora Columnae?

The deep, layered scars on my back reflect exactly how much of an embarrassment that is to her.

“I’ll stay clear.” I haven’t been interviewed for months, anyway—not since the matron gave up on getting rid of me or farming me out for my Will, and decided to put me to work in other ways. Which involves doing the majority of her job, during the day.

Now she’s seen past the frustration of not being able to break me, I think she rather likes the new arrangement.

“Good boy.” The matron smooths her white skirt as she stands. I’m not

sure what time she rises in the morning, but she's always impeccably dressed and made up. Never a hair out of place. "I'll send Vermes to wake you."

She sweeps away toward the kitchen, not giving me another glance.

I wait until she's gone before I move. As expected, the fresh abrasion on my face hasn't elicited comment—she assumes, and I've often implied, that I'm treated poorly at the prison—but if she notices my shoulder, then she'll want to make sure I'm fit for work. And at present, an examination would lead to the discovery of the travelogue.

Once I'm certain she's disappeared, every muscle groans as I climb the stairs and follow the long hallway to my room. It's at the far end. Tiny. Space for a single mattress on the floor, and not much else.

It's all mine though. The twenty or so other children here have more space, but bunk two or three to a room. I was moved here when I started working outside the orphanage, so as not to disturb anyone with my unusual schedule.

It's suited me. There's a panel in the wall that I managed to pry loose early on without any visible damage, with a cavity behind it that's large enough to secret away the extra coins I've been earning. I deposit the few leftover from tonight, then slowly, stiffly unwind my bandage and add the book. It's a tight fit, given the nook isn't especially large, but after some careful manoeuvring, I get it in and move the panel convincingly back in place.

Despite my exhaustion, I take the time to rebandage my shoulder as best I can. It's a clumsy process. Painful. Certainly not as effective as Ellanher's work. I won't be able to hide the injury, come morning, so instead I'll have to convince Matron Atrax to do a better job of it when I figure out how to excuse its existence.

For now, though, I just need to sleep.

V

“WAKE UP, REX, YOU LAZY ASS.”

Pain ricochets through my shoulder as I’m prodded roughly. I growl as I open my eyes, glaring at the smug-looking fifteen-year-old looming over my mattress.

“Vermes.” I say his name like a wearily uttered curse, which is exactly how I mean it. “I’m up.”

“Doesn’t look like it.” The blond-haired boy nudges me again with his boot, dancing back with a smirk as my temper flares and I sit up. His thick bulk is mostly muscle, and he’s tall for his age. Still smaller than me, but he knows my position here is too tenuous for me to react with violence. “Matron says there’s an adoption happening today, and you need to get everyone ready.”

I close my eyes. Let my irritation settle as the early morning conversation with Matron Atrox comes back to me. The curtains in the north-facing window have already been drawn back, and the sun’s angling through enough to touch my feet. “Time?”

“Bell went ten minutes ago.”

I massage my shoulder. It’s stiffened overnight, but the ache’s less. “I’m up,” I repeat, more firmly this time. Far from a good amount of sleep, but enough to function. “Tell her I’ll be right down.”

“Tell her yourself. I want to get ready.” Vermes leaves before I can respond.

I drag myself up and to the washroom, splashing my face with water and using the mirror there to smooth my steadily lengthening brown hair. Until the orphanage, I was shaving it in the Aquirian style—doing everything I could to change my appearance in line with my story—but the only razor allowed here is Matron Atrox’s. And I’m not going to let that woman touch my hair.

It likely doesn’t matter. Even with the thick, wavy strands growing back, I barely recognise the hard and hollow face beneath them anymore.

I head downstairs, stopping first by the kitchen to sneak some leftovers. There’s exhilarated chatter from some of the girls in the next room as I tear away chunks of bread from a half-eaten loaf. A potential adoption always generates excitement—letters of recommendation are hard to come by for most

people—but today, I can almost taste the anticipation in the air. A Quintus. If someone here is fortunate enough to be chosen, they'll be departing to a lifetime of comfort.

I take a few moments to eat and then venture out to the main hall. It's the largest room in the house, and most of the younger children will be playing in there already.

Some of the older ones spot my passage and trail behind, knowing why I'm there. I tell them to pass word that it's time to get ready; they obey, even as they call me Rex in response. "King," it means. A curse in the Republic and a mockery of my refusal to attend the Aurora Columnae, not to mention my flimsy façade of authority here.

I ignore the name. Uncomfortably close to the mark, but they're children, and reacting only ever makes it worse. Neither friendliness nor reason travel far with them, either. So most days, I do my best to just view it as an honorific. A reminder that I've held out, when so few do.

It doesn't always work.

Before long, everyone is assembled in the main hall. Its unadorned stone walls are sterile and characterless. Most of the children have taken seats at the long dining tables in its centre. As always, it's easy to spot the ones whose turn it currently is to cede to Matron Atrox. They're quiet, less obviously enthusiastic. Skin slightly wan. Distant stares and slow blinks as they wait, especially from the younger ones. At least they'll get a brief reprieve today, when the matron temporarily returns their Will to them so that they can cede in their interview instead.

Of the room's twenty-odd occupants, more than half are between seven and ten years old. Aside from myself, Vermes is oldest at fifteen, followed by Brixia and Jejun at fourteen, and a close-knit group of five who are all around twelve. The presence of the older ones typically means plenty of sneers, jokes, and back-chat aimed at me, but today that's kept to a minimum. Everyone's focused on getting ready.

"I don't know why you're bothering," Vermes smirks as I line the children up and start neatening hair and straightening clothes. "A Quintus will want whoever can cede the most here, and that's me."

"Let's just hope they don't care about personality," I mutter, not stopping.

There's a tittering from some of the others, but Vermes's glare around the room silences any mirth. "Not like you need to worry about what they

want, *Rex*.” I’m fairly sure he bullies a lot of them when I’m not around. I wish they’d confirm it for me so that something could be done, but I’m too much a pariah to have their confidence.

Any response I might have made is quelled by the appearance of Matron Atrox, who sweeps into the room and favours the children with a beatific smile. Almost all of them reflect it back, even Vermes. They adore the matron. And why wouldn’t they? She treats them with patience and respect. She feeds them and clothes them, gives them hope for a family. And all they have to do is regularly cede to her, and then occasionally to strangers for a day or two.

I’ve thought about telling them the truth. That most of those strangers aren’t potential adopters but rather Octavii, so desperate to gain a temporary edge for one thing or another that they pay Matron Atrox handsomely for the extra Will. That if a child ever refused to cede, she would beat them within an inch of their lives. But I don’t. Even if I could convince them, I’m not sure what good it would achieve.

“My girls and boys! You all look wonderful.” Matron Atrox beams, her very slight acknowledgment to me indicating that I’ve done an adequate job. “Are you excited?”

There’s a chorus of loud, muddled responses, all variations of an enthusiastic yes.

“Well, you won’t have to wait too much longer. Our guest has just arrived!” Her eyes go to me again.

I take the cue, and leave.

My chores for today are mostly yard work, but interviews can take all afternoon, so I exit the hall via the kitchen. The massive walk-in pantry is always well stocked, and I spend a minute picking through what’s on offer.

The muffled sound of eager young voices raised in greeting soon filters through from the hall. Cradling an apple and a couple of pastries, I pause. I’m not awed like the others, but I’ve also never seen a Quintus up close.

I put my food on the bench and crack open the door to the hall again.

Everyone is facing away from me, circled around the newcomer so that I can’t get a good look at him. I shift, standing on my toes.

Freeze.

It’s only a glimpse—the impression of a face—but I’m certain.

It’s the man from the prison last night. Hospius.

I pull the door closed as gently as I can and flee for the yard, food forgotten.

Why is he here? It cannot be coincidence. He *did* see me touch the Sapper. That has to be it.

I feel able to breathe again only once there's sunlight on my face and I'm hidden by the greenery of the orphanage's expansive gardens, my flight unseen. I'm anxious, but I know how to keep outright panic at bay. Too many years of lying, of close calls. This is no different. Stay calm. Think through the problem. Rashness could easily make a bad situation worse.

I run back our conversation from the previous night, the timeline of events. I told him that I was an orphan, but there are a dozen orphanages in Letens. Could he have sent messengers to them all, and this was simply his first, or maybe second, stop? That seems likely. He's trying to be subtle about finding me, else he would have simply walked in and asked for me by name. And Matron Atrox knew he would be coming before I got back to the orphanage. He didn't follow me here.

The Matron won't mention my existence. I doubt any of the children will. If I stay here, stay quiet, he'll just move on.

I set to work trimming and weeding, twitching at every faint sound from the direction of the house. Meditative labour though it is, I don't get much done. The more I consider, the stranger the situation becomes. He had papers indicating he was a Sextus last night. Is he here accompanying the Quintus, or is he impersonating one? Or was last night the impersonation? And if he did see me touch the Sapper, then why not apprehend me, then and there? Why leave, then search for me later?

Something's not right, but I can't see what. And it makes me nervous.

The crackling of twigs underfoot, only a half hour later, exacerbates the feeling.

"You're needed, Rex." It's Brixia, glaring and out of breath from her search.

"For what?"

"Don't know." She looks at me with glinting eyes too small for her pudgy face. "But Matron didn't look happy."

I consider. If I run, right now—if I can subdue Brixia quickly and quietly, gather my hidden stash from my room, and flee before anyone else comes looking—then all the reasons I didn't do so long ago come into play. I'm recorded under the Hierarchy's census; it's the price I paid for stumbling half-starved into the orphanage a year and a half ago. They have my age, name, description. Even if two of those things are made up, it's the listing itself that is the issue.

Because as soon as I try to flee from what's seen as my place in the system, I'll be proscribed. Publicly made a prize for anyone who can capture and turn me in. The Hierarchy circulates those lists with terrifying efficiency. Within a day, there won't be an inhabited place that isn't dangerous for me.

And if Matron Atrox, her greed no longer a motivator, reveals my refusal to cede Will as well? Or worse, Hospius mentions what he saw? My bounty gets raised, and if I'm caught, there's a good chance I'll be confined until I turn eighteen. Destined for a Sapper unless I give up my resistance to the Aurora Columnae.

I clench my hand into a fist, then let my fingers loosen again. I'm not ready. I don't have enough coin, a solid plan, a direction.

"Coming."

We walk back to the house, Brixia looking sullen. There's a low, bemused chatter that drops away as we enter the hall, replaced by angry stares in my direction. They all think I'm sabotaging them somehow.

Matron Atrox straightens from her consoling of one of the younger boys, Lacrimo, whose interview plainly didn't go so well. Her eyes fix on me.

"Vis." She walks over. Leans close, so only I can hear. "I don't know how you managed to get his ear, but I swear to you—if you foul this up for the children, or for me, there will be consequences."

I almost laugh. Just like the others, she thinks that this is what I want.

She leads me through a gauntlet of glares to the door to the library, clearing her throat and knocking. "I've found him, Quintus. He appears to have recovered." She shoots me a meaningful glance. Illness, evidently, was offered as an excuse for my absence.

"Send him in."

With a final glower, Matron Atrox opens the door and all but shoves me inside.

The orphanage's library is not much bigger than a large room. Worn couches sit beneath two long windows, though the view through them is only of the grey stone of the building next door. Shelves filled with Hierarchy-supplied books are everywhere.

Hospius—or whatever his name actually is—reclines in a chair on the opposite side of the table that dominates the middle of the room. He indicates the seat across from him.

"Vis."

“Sextus.” I sit. Resist the urge to say more, to risk filling the silence with things he may not yet know.

“Quintus, actually. Quintus Ulciscor Telimus. I . . . apologise for yesterday evening. It was a necessary deception, and one fully sanctioned by Military.” Ulciscor—for now, I’ll assume the name isn’t another fake—fiddles with the sleeve of his shirt. “You’re not surprised to see me.”

“I saw you come in.” I consider what he’s just told me. If Military really did send him to the prison, it would explain the quality of his false credentials. And mean that I have absolutely no hold over him.

“Hm.” Even seated, the man opposite is imposing as he scrutinises me, rubbing the dark stubble on his chin. I get the impression this wasn’t how he expected his introduction to go. “And you didn’t think to mention to the matron that you’d already met me? That I used a different name?”

“There didn’t seem to be much point.”

“Because you wouldn’t be believed?”

“Because you wouldn’t have come here, if you didn’t think you could pass a closer inspection.”

Ulciscor, to my surprise, nods in an almost pleased manner. He waits for me to ask why he’s here. When I don’t, he lets his gaze rove to the books surrounding us. “How many of these have you read?”

I pause at the change in direction. “A few.” A large portion of this library has been irrelevant to me since the day I arrived—the material is aimed at younger children, or those with less tutelage-heavy backgrounds. The rest, I’d all but memorised from lack of alternatives within my first few months here.

“Not as good a range as the Bibliotheca, I imagine.”

The words cut through me. Delivered so casually, but those deep brown eyes across the table are stalking my every nervous twitch.

“Not even close. Matron Atrox used to send me there sometimes, when she realised I was too old for a lot of what’s here.” Not a perfect recovery, but it’s not bad.

“Used to?”

“When I got older, she decided my time was better spent elsewhere.” As soon as she realised there was no chance of my getting adopted, in fact. It’s why, after every fight, I’ve been using a portion of my winnings to bribe the Bibliotheca’s night guard for entry instead. Studying any and every subject I can in those last spare hours before returning here. At first, it was to find a way to

avoid ceding—some distant Catenan province where it wasn't a requirement, maybe. Or a little-known legal loophole. An historical precedent. *Anything*. And after I uncovered only bad options like the archipelago from the travelogue, I kept going there anyway because knowledge is always useful, and I was learning more about Will and how Catenan society works than I could ever have through mere observation. More knowledge meant more ways to hide. More avenues to survival.

But it was also simply because the time there, lost in those books . . . it reminded me of Suus. My lessons, once something I hated. Once something I shirked.

It felt like, just for a few hours, I got to live a sliver of my old life again.

Of course, without a way to earn any extra coin, that's all over now.

I'm growing increasingly tense—which, I think, is the point. Ulciscor's prodding, poking. Trying to unsettle me. He somehow knows, or at least suspects, where I was last night.

I let my shoulders slump, a quaver enter my voice.

"And . . . I've been sneaking back there, some nights. You obviously know. I'm sorry. I just . . . I don't have any other way to see her anymore."

Ulciscor, for the first time, is visibly thrown. "Who?"

"I'm not going to tell you her name." I let some defiance seep into my voice. A boy in love, not wanting to get his lover into trouble. It's a contingency meant for Matron Atrox, but it will do just fine here. "And if you need to punish me, I understand. But I'm *not* going to give her up."

It's a decent story. It fits the recklessness of what I've been doing, provides motivation for most of my actions. I could even work in my refusal to cede Will, if it came down to it.

Ulciscor adjusts his sleeves again; it seems to be a habit of his when he's thinking. I stare down at the table, trying to look a mix of determined and vulnerable. I was a terrible actor when I left Suus. I'm much, much better now.

After an interminably long silence, there's a disappointed sigh.

"You're not in trouble, Vis."

I plaster hope on my face and look up again. Ulciscor waves at me tiredly. "It seems I've made a mistake. You can go."

I still want to know how he knew about the Bibliotheca, but I'm not about to ask. I thank him with the sort of nervous profuseness he'd probably expect for such a reprieve, and hurry for the door.

“Another step, I kill you.” He says it in clear, quiet Vetusian.

I like to believe that I’m quick on my feet, but when someone issues a death threat in a language you’re not supposed to know, your mind and body fight themselves.

I flinch. Stumble. Stop.

I know I’ve given myself away, but try to rescue it regardless. “Is that the language you were speaking last night?” I’m still facing the door.

“Sit back down, Vis.” It’s not a suggestion this time.

I’m frozen. There’s no running, not from a Quintus. No way to fight him, either.

I force air back into my lungs. “I have coin.”

“Not interested.”

Unsurprising. The panic subsides enough for my body to come back under my control, and I turn to see Ulciscor watching me. Not angry, not wary, not stern. Just thoughtful.

But there is a black tint that’s fading from his eyes.

I return to my seat, trying not to shake.

“That was a good try.” Ulciscor sounds reluctantly impressed. “Impossible to prove, but plausible. Relatable enough that anyone with a romantic bone in their body wouldn’t come down too hard on you. Take away your understanding my conversation last night, and I might have believed it.”

I’m not inclined to enjoy the praise. “How did you know?”

“A man’s face is different when he’s hearing and when he’s listening. Something about the eyes.” Ulciscor shrugs. “If it’s any comfort, I almost missed it.”

It’s not.

There’s silence as I struggle with the situation. Maybe all of this is just about what I overheard.

“I didn’t really catch much of what you said to the prisoner. And I barely understood what I did.”

“Any of it is too much.” There’s implied menace in Ulciscor’s gentle smile. “But I think there may be a way we can work this out, to both our benefits. So let’s start again. Without the lies, this time.”

“Alright,” I lie.

“Good. Now. Let’s start with the Sapper. I saw you touch it last night. Don’t deny it,” warns Ulciscor, stilling any protest I might have made. “Do you know why you weren’t affected?”

There's too much confidence across the table for repudiations. "No."

Ulciscor nods, approving my lack of dissembling. "I have a theory, but first I need you to cede some Will to me. Just a little."

There's a sudden, familiar heaviness in my chest. This is traditionally the first question that's asked in an adoption interview, given it's the easiest way to assess someone's strength of Will. It's also where the interview traditionally ends, for me. Usually accompanied by outrage. Shouting. Punishment.

"No."

Ulciscor doesn't even twitch. "It will only take a minute. But I need you to do this if we are to work out this little problem between us."

"Still no." I say it firmly. I used to prevaricate, apologise and make excuses, as if I was in the wrong for refusing. It only ever made things worse.

Ulciscor leans forward. "Vis, let me prove my theory and I will forget about last night. I will give you as much money as you need. I will get you out of this orphanage, ensure you are in line for whatever position you'd like. A word from me, and you'll start life after here as a Sextus, no matter the career you choose. I'll guarantee you all of this in writing if I need to. Sealed with my Will. All you have to do is cede for a minute."

It's the most I've been offered, ever, by a long way. Unfortunately for Ulciscor, I'm just as comfortable rejecting the carrot as taking the stick. "Thank you, Quintus—that's very generous—but my answer hasn't changed. It *won't* change."

I make sure not to even hint at the molten anger that sits, hard and heavy, somewhere in the pit of my stomach. This is the dividing line: me on one side, the people who killed my family on the other. The idea of crossing it revolts me. I'm not even tempted.

The corners of Ulciscor's mouth quirk upward.

My grimly certain strength falters as I frown back at him, too confused to do anything else. Wondering if I'm somehow misinterpreting the expression. He looks *pleased*.

"You haven't been through the Aurora Columnae rituals," the man opposite concludes with satisfaction.

My blank look lingers, and then I exhale as I understand. Of course. I'm so used to being defensive, so thrown by this surreal conversation, that I missed it. "You think that's why the Sapper didn't work on me." That's my theory, too—there's only one obvious distinction between me and everyone else in the Hierarchy—but it feels like Ulciscor's conclusion is more than just a guess.

“It’s something I heard years ago. Just idle speculation from . . .” He trails off. A flash of melancholy. “I’d forgotten about it until last night.”

“So you’re here to make sure I keep quiet, then.” I don’t hide my bitterness. A potential immunity from, or even just resistance to, the Sappers is something that the Hierarchy wouldn’t want getting out.

“Partly.” Ulciscor looks at me like a puzzle he needs to solve. “Why don’t you want to cede?”

“So I can walk around exhausted all day like those children outside? Eventually become an Octavii and lose, what—ten, fifteen years off my life?”

He ignores that last part, even though the Hierarchy doesn’t officially admit it. “I’m not talking about refusing to cede to your matron out there, or refusing to be slotted into some dead-end pyramid. That, I understand. But not submitting to an Aurora Columnae at all? I assume you’ve at least been taken to one before.” I give a dour confirmation. “Surely that would be worth it, even if it’s just to have the ability in adoption interviews.”

“They can’t force me.”

“I imagine they tried.” His gaze flickers unconsciously to my shoulder. He knows about my scars, has guessed their origin. Which means he was at the fight, too, or has at least heard a report on it. I assumed as much—it would be strange if he knew about the Bibliotheca and not that—but it still makes me cornered prey.

“Not hard enough.” I let him know I saw the glance and understand what it means. “Why do you care?”

“Because it means that what I have to offer will be of particular interest to you. I can guarantee you won’t be asked to cede Will again for at least another year. And after that, you may even be able to earn the chance to go somewhere that won’t require you to cede at all.”

“No such place.”

Ulciscor pulls a book from somewhere under the table. It takes me a moment to recognise the travelogue. The one I took last night, that’s supposed to be safely hidden in my room.

“How . . .”

“I ducked upstairs after I used the facilities earlier. Don’t worry, nobody saw. The rest of your little stockpile is still there.”

I scowl. “How did you *find* it?”

“I’ll give you until the end of our conversation to figure that out.” He waves

a finger. “But we’re getting distracted. I’m in a position to help you. You *might* be in a position to help me. That’s what matters.”

I stare at the book. Verbalised or not, Ulciscor’s uncovered enough that the warning is there among the promises. That’s how the Hierarchy operates, after all: the potential of reward ahead, the menace of punishment chasing behind. Even if only one of them is usually real.

“Alright. I’m listening.” I exhale the words a little fatalistically. The decision’s made. Whatever else may be happening here, we’re still talking, which means that I have something Ulciscor wants. I can work with that.

And gods know—if he’s telling even half the truth, I can’t afford to pass up this opportunity.

Ulciscor beams.

The questions start.

It’s slow, at the beginning. Boring, if the discussion were in another context. Ulciscor is prodding around the basics of my education, the sorts of things well covered in the books around us. My understanding of the Hierarchy, its structure, its laws and traditions. Geography, which areas are considered provinces, and which are simply “friends of Caten.” Caten’s own history, which I dutifully recite according to their accounts. Aside from the specifics of the latter, I knew the answers to all these questions before I left Suus.

But then the tone changes. We start to cover economic considerations of the spread of the Hierarchy into other systems of government. Philosophical takes on the morality of Will, its exponential growth and application. The mathematics of its distribution and how that’s carefully balanced against the need for oversight and control. Even the debate over whether it could have contributed to, or even caused, the Cataclysm three hundred years ago. I’m taken aback at first. Some questions require the dredging of my memory for obscure books I read years ago. Some I outright don’t know. A lot, I’m only able to answer thanks to my time at the Bibliotheca. And almost all require genuine extrapolation from me, actual thought rather than just recitation of facts.

Occasionally, Ulciscor will argue a point I’ve made or look disappointed in one of my answers. But I warm to the task, and more often than not, he appears satisfied when we move on. It starts to feel like the sparring conversations I used to have with Iniguez, my favourite tutor. The weathered old man with the straggly grey hair was the only one who never spoke down to me or deferred to me, never treated me as either child or prince. The only one who ever seemed

interested in whether I was filling my own potential, rather than exceeding that of others.

Ulciscor and I talk for two hours, in the end. Matron Atrox checks on us five times in the guise of offering refreshments. Ulciscor accepts on her fourth interruption. When she opens the door the last time, she finds me wetting my throat with the drink she prepared for the Quintus. She doesn't look pleased.

For my part, I try to remember the situation and not enjoy the conversation too much. Ulciscor is an intelligent, well-educated man—the kind I haven't spoken with in years—but his motives, even his personality, remain inscrutable. There are flashes of passion when we talk about certain topics, or when he strongly objects to something I've said. And he's certainly interested in what I have to say. But he lets nothing significant slip.

When the questions stop, my mug is empty and throat sore. This is the most I've talked in one sitting for a long time.

"I think that will do," says Ulciscor. He sounds contemplative. "You've put your time at the Bibliotheca to good use. There are gaps, but nothing we can't fix."

I study his expression. "You have other concerns." I make sure I sound analytical rather than anxious. Ulciscor may not have made up his mind, but I have.

I want to see where this opportunity leads.

"Yes." He tugs absently at a sleeve as he locks his gaze with mine, searching. "Your temperament, for one."

Of course. The fight last night. A topic as yet untouched. "I can keep my temper under control."

"Easy to say, but it's in the way you bear yourself, Vis. The way you talk. I think you're so used to resisting, you don't know how not to."

I feel some irritation at the words, but now is fairly obviously not the time to display it. "I'm not sure there's a way for me to convince you, when it comes to that."

"Hm." Dissatisfied. "Tell me. Why did you fight naked, last night?"

"I was worried the Sextus would imbue my clothes. Stop me from getting away."

"He wouldn't have been able to. Refined, flexible materials and limited time, at his level . . . impossible. But I suppose you wouldn't have known that," Ulciscor allows. "Was that the only reason?"

“Why else would I do it?”

“I thought it might have been to embarrass him.”

“I wanted to put him off, I suppose. But I didn’t go out there hoping to humiliate him, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Alright.” Ulciscor believes me. “You did show composure under pressure, earlier. The ability to think on your feet like that is useful. Your disposition, the other rough edges . . . we can likely smooth them out.” He’s only half talking to me. As if he’s trying to picture me in a particular situation.

He’s still wavering, though.

“The coin you gave me. You imbued it with Will.”

Ulciscor blinks, focuses back on me. “Why do you say that?”

“You followed me to the fight and to the Bibliotheca, through all but empty streets, without me noticing—and you’re working alone, otherwise why come here yourself and risk the trouble that false identity could cause you?” The first half of the interview, when I barely had to think about the questions, let me chew over the problem. This is the only explanation I could come up with. “Plus, you must have sent messengers to all the orphanages last night, but you knew I was here this morning. And I doubt you asked the matron for directions to my room, let alone had the time to search it for that loose panel in the wall.”

A coin’s supposed to be all but impossible to imbue, given that it’s forged, but he *is* a Quintus.

Ulciscor reaches into his pocket. Displays a silver triangle. The tightness in my chest eases as he nods his decision.

“Alright,” he says quietly. “Let’s tell the matron the good news.”

VI

THE HALL STILLS AS WE EMERGE FROM THE LIBRARY.

Matron Atrox breaks from her conversation with Vermes and strides toward us, sparing me a glare as she does so. All the children are still here. Restless, understandably, after so long.

“Quintus! I hope Vis has not been making a nuisance of himself.” She gives me another dark look. She’s already implied several times to Ulciscor that I’m not to be trusted. Trying to mitigate the things she’s imagining I’m saying about her, no doubt.

“Not at all. We’ve had a delightful conversation.” Ulciscor talks so that everyone in the room can hear. “In fact—I’ve made my decision, Matron. If you could please fetch the paperwork, I would like to formalise the adoption.”

Matron Atrox looks at him blankly. The expression, I note with some amusement, is mirrored behind her.

“For *Rex*?” It’s Vermes, speaking into the shocked hush. He suddenly laughs, the concept so impossible to him that he thinks it’s a joke. It still manages to come out as mostly a sneer. “Quintus, who did you really pick?”

A few other titters echo from Vermes’s simpering coterie. They cut off quickly enough when Ulciscor’s expression hardens. Matron Atrox opens her mouth but, seeing Ulciscor’s face, instead pales and scurries off to collect the necessary documents.

“You’re really taking *him*. Above any of *us*.” Vermes has always been terrible at reading situations. Doesn’t have the self-control or sense to know when to back down, either. “You know he wouldn’t even cede when they dragged him to the Columnae, right? He’s useless to anyone. He’s a joke.” He spits the words. There’s a low mutter of agreement from some of the other older children, though they stay in the background. Smarter than Vermes by a hair, at least.

“Vermes, wasn’t it?” Ulciscor gazes at the large boy. “Do you want to know why you haven’t been adopted?”

Vermes blinks. Looks lost at the question.

“It’s because you’re a deeply unpleasant child,” continues Ulciscor calmly.

“Immature. Spiteful. And honestly, not very bright. So it doesn’t matter how strong your Will is. Nobody wants to have someone like you living with them. You need to change, Vermes. Better yourself, or you’ll be a Solum for the rest of your life.”

His gaze sweeps the rest of the room. The other children cringe beneath it. Vermes’s lip curls. He’s bright red.

He turns and stalks away.

I watch him go, oddly tempted to call after him. Offer him some measure of comfort to balance the acid in Ulciscor’s lecture. I’ve despised the boy for a long time, but I can’t help but pity him, too.

“A little harsh, don’t you think?” I murmur as the other children begin to drift from the hall, seeing that Ulciscor’s decision has been made. They’re bitterly disappointed. A few of the younger ones look on the verge of tears.

“Maybe if I had more time with him, I’d show him the compassion he needs. But kind words from me in passing aren’t going to have any effect. Sometimes bullies are better off with the truth, no matter how unpleasant.” He eyes me. “You disagree?”

“No.”

Matron Atrox reappears, papers in hand. She begins laying them out on the table.

“Quintus,” she says carefully, not looking at either of us as she fastidiously arranges the documents. “Before you finalise this decision, would we be able to have a word in private?”

“Certainly.” Ulciscor doesn’t blink at the request. “Vis, perhaps it’s time to collect your belongings from your room.”

“That’s not necessary. Vis doesn’t have—”

“Here.” Ulciscor cuts her off as he unslings a satchel from around his shoulder. “Will this be big enough?”

I take the bag, glancing inside. There’s only the travelogue in there. More than enough room for the coins I have hidden away.

“Thanks.” I glance past him at Matron Atrox, who is giving me a look that promises violence, and then at Ulciscor. His back still to the matron, he gives me a near-imperceptible nod.

It only takes a few minutes for me to hurry upstairs, shift my stash from the hole in the wall to the satchel, and then return. I pass a few of the children in the passageways. They glare at me jealously. None say anything.

When I step back into the hall, Matron Atrox is seated at the table as Ulciscor signs documents. She's white. Trembling.

Ulciscor pauses his writing to glance up at her. She leaps to her feet.

"Vis." Her voice is tight, but it's not with anger anymore. She's *meeek*, as she holds out a small leather bag. "These are your wages from Victorum and the prison. That I've been . . . keeping, for you." She stumbles over the words. Her hand shakes as she proffers the purse.

I take it with a frown, surprised at the weight. When I glance inside, gold glitters back at me. No way to tell if it's the amount I've earned, but it looks about right.

Before I can respond, Ulciscor signs the last page with a flourish and straightens, clapping me on the back. "Ready?"

"I suppose so." It's all happened so fast. No one here I particularly want to bid farewell to, and no one who will care if I don't. As surreal as it is, there's nothing stopping me from leaving.

We start toward the door, but something makes me stop. I walk back to the matron. She looks old, smaller and more tired than I can ever remember seeing her. It doesn't matter, when I think about the scars on my back.

I lean forward so that my whisper carries to her ear. "I'm going to come back one day." There's no trace of anger in my voice.

Just promise.

Any façade she was maintaining falls away, and I see cringing terror in her green eyes. I stare at her a moment longer, locking her gaze to mine. Making sure she understands.

Then I'm walking away, out the door.

Ulciscor takes the lead once we're outside, and I'm content to follow, still acclimating to my life's seismic shift. It's colder than I expected. The sun from this morning has vanished, and heavy clouds to the west threaten rain.

"What did you say to her?" I ask eventually.

"Nothing that didn't need to be said." Nonchalant, but there's an edge somewhere underneath the words. "You?"

"Same."

It's mid-afternoon, and the streets of Letens are busy, though not as crowded as I know they will be in the market district. Ulciscor observes all the activity—Will-powered carts, clumps of pallid Octavii labouring for their Septimii, a group of younger Tensian children playing Victorum with wooden

swords—with mild, albeit unimpressed curiosity. He clearly hasn't been here for long.

"So. I believe you owe me some more information." It's finally dawned on me that Ulciscor's taking me *somewhere*, but I know nothing beyond that. We're heading toward the city outskirts. Probably leaving Letens altogether.

"I'll explain everything on the way."

"To where?"

"Deditia."

Somewhere behind us, there's a scream of triumph from one of the children as she knocks her larger opponent to the ground, straddling him. I flinch. Not entirely at the sound. Before Caten was the capital of the world, it was the capital of Deditia.

But it's been three years, and the official story is that I'm dead. No one is looking for me anymore, if they ever were. Whether I'm here or in the country cocooning the beating heart of the Republic, it probably doesn't matter.

Besides. There's no going back, now.



TWENTY MINUTES OF WALKING—LARGELY IN SILENCE, AS it appears Ulciscor does not wish to discuss anything further while we're among crowds—brings us to the edge of Letens.

I haven't been this way since I first arrived in the city eighteen months ago. It's changed. The squat, ramshackle wooden buildings that housed Octavii and their families have vanished, replaced by either towering façades of stone or the half-fleshed skeletons of them. Streets have been widened. Straightened. Paved. Octavii still roam them, but they're hard at work, using what remains of their strength to haul masonry or lumber. It's a hive of construction, Septimii barking orders and even what must be a Sextus, eyes clouded as she raises a massive slab up three full stories, allowing several struggling Octavii to secure the levitating stone.

Ulciscor has noticed the Sextus too. "Inefficient," he mutters disapprovingly.

It's enough of a conversational opening for me to take it. "They're building warehouses?" It's the only thing I can come up with. This is a strange part of Letens to be improving, otherwise. And I don't think most of these buildings

are meant to be residences. The doors are too tall and wide, and there aren't enough windows.

"Part of Tensia's treaty with us was a split of any resources we harvested from their land. Grain and stone, mostly. They were never able to extract it efficiently themselves. Things only properly got underway six months ago, though."

"So this is all for storing it?"

"This is for storing the Tensian share. Though eventually, they'll realise they can't put it to good use and ask for our help in deploying it. Or this will all fill up, and they'll start selling it to us at cost." He talks absently, neither boasting nor sad at the prospect. Just assessing how events will play out.

"Then what happens to the Catenan cut?"

"It gets sent to Caten."

I scoff. "It can't have been much of a split, then." We're almost three thousand miles from the capital, and that's with the Sea of Quus in between. The logistics would be a nightmare.

Ulciscor just smiles.

Soon enough we're leaving the rising buildings and worn workers behind, moving past the line where a great stone wall once guarded the city—dismantled under the Hierarchy's treaty with Tensia, ensuring their reliance on Will alone for protection—and out onto a long, grassy plain. It's not hard to guess what we're angling toward. The white monolith, three-sided and impossibly tall, has marred the skyline since not long after we left the orphanage. I've wondered at its purpose since spotting it, but thought it best to follow Ulciscor's example and remain mute.

We're close enough to see it properly now. It's granite, I think, the white speckled with streaks of black. Perhaps thirty feet wide on each side. At least two hundred high. Taller? A single building also blights the plain, directly behind the column. It's huge as well, even comparatively, an unusually elongated mass of wood and steel and stone and even glass that dominates the landscape. Workers march, ant-like, along a paved road that skirts the monolith and scythes through the grass, connecting the structure to the city. Will-driven carts clatter along it.

And underneath the building, at points.

I stumble, not quite processing that last part. There are no supports visible, and yet it's suddenly clear, even from here, that the whole thing is just . . . *hovering*.

“What in the gods’ names?” It comes out in a whisper, involuntary. I squint, but we’re still too far away for me to make sense of it. If it’s distance that’s the problem, of course.

“It’s a Transvect.” The corners of Ulciscor’s lips quirk upward as he takes in my reaction. “Never seen one?”

I shake my head, unable to rip my gaze from the sight.

“The anchoring point was completed six months ago.” It’s subtle, but there’s a note of pride. “It’s loaded and ready to depart. Just waiting on us, actually. We’ll be in Deditia by morning.”

“By morning,” I repeat faintly. I’ve heard of Transvects before, of course—briefly studied the concept, in fact, all those years ago in Suus. Will-powered behemoths that move at several times the speed of the fastest horse, carrying massive loads of troops or supplies to the farthest corners of the world. Or in this case, I suppose, to its centre. It’s not that I ever doubted their existence, exactly, but they always seemed too much like propaganda. An exaggeration of the Hierarchy’s making, a story they circulated to vaunt their power. So I never really tried to envisage what a Transvect might actually look like. Certainly never imagined the sheer *size* of the thing.

Even staring at its reality, I can’t bring myself to imagine this colossal, hovering creation moving fast. Or at all.

A gust of chill wind carries the first flecks of rain, and I draw my cloak tighter, shivering.

The walk to the Transvect is interminable; just when I think I’ve come to grips with the enormity of it, we get closer. It’s mostly wood, but with what looks like enormous granite strips forming a core running along its belly. There are windows here and there. Massive doors for loading. The edge nearest the city tapers sharply for a few feet, a stone nose in the shape of a squat, sideways pyramid.

I can’t remember the last time I felt so small.

We’re hailed as we pass into the Transvect’s shadow and near the stairs rising to a hundred-foot-long platform ahead, our path blocked by an officious-looking woman.

“Workers only,” she calls out as soon as we’re in earshot. It’s a warning.

“And passengers,” Ulciscor corrects her. He produces signed documents—he seems to excel at obtaining those—and proffers them with a cheerful flourish.

The woman—a Septimus; her movements are too energetic by far for an