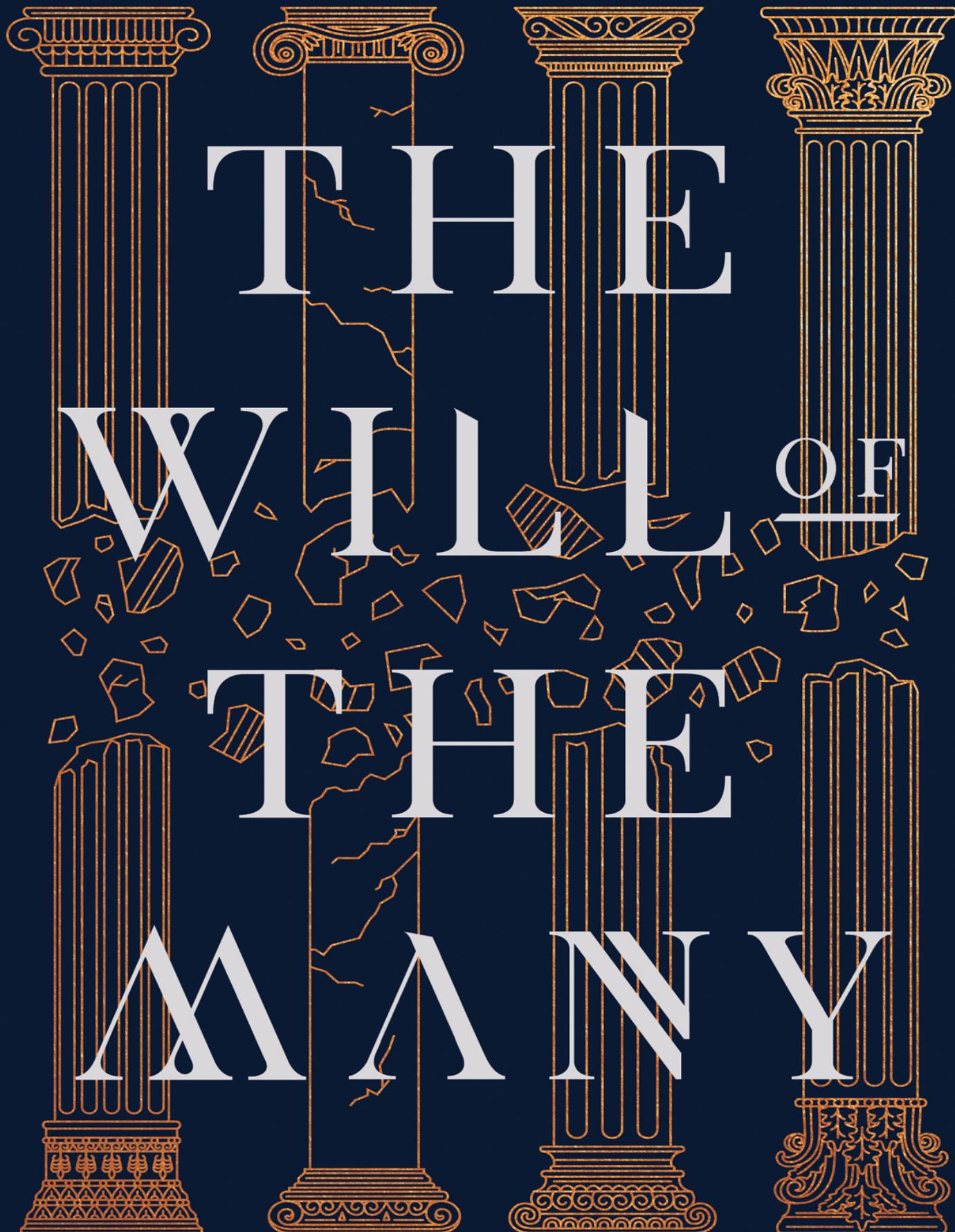


HIERARCHY, BOOK I



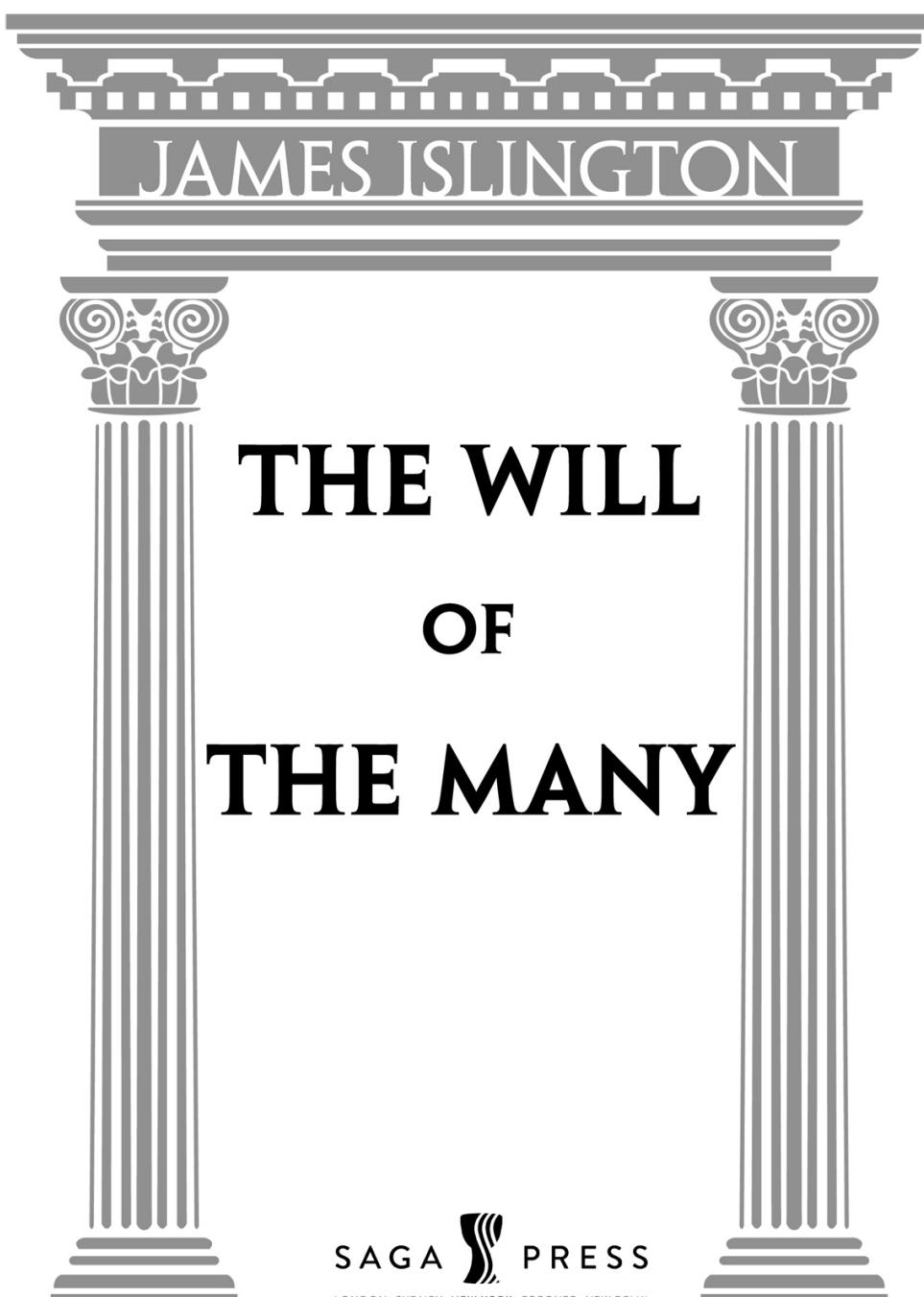
JAMES ISLINGTON

Thank you for downloading this Simon & Schuster ebook.

Get a FREE ebook when you join our mailing list. Plus, get updates on new releases, deals, recommended reads, and more from Simon & Schuster. Click below to sign up and see terms and conditions.

[CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP](#)

Already a subscriber? Provide your email again so we can register this ebook and send you more of what you like to read. You will continue to receive exclusive offers in your inbox.



JAMES ISLINGTON

THE WILL
OF
THE MANY

SAGA PRESS

LONDON SYDNEY NEW YORK TORONTO NEW DELHI

Publisher's Notice

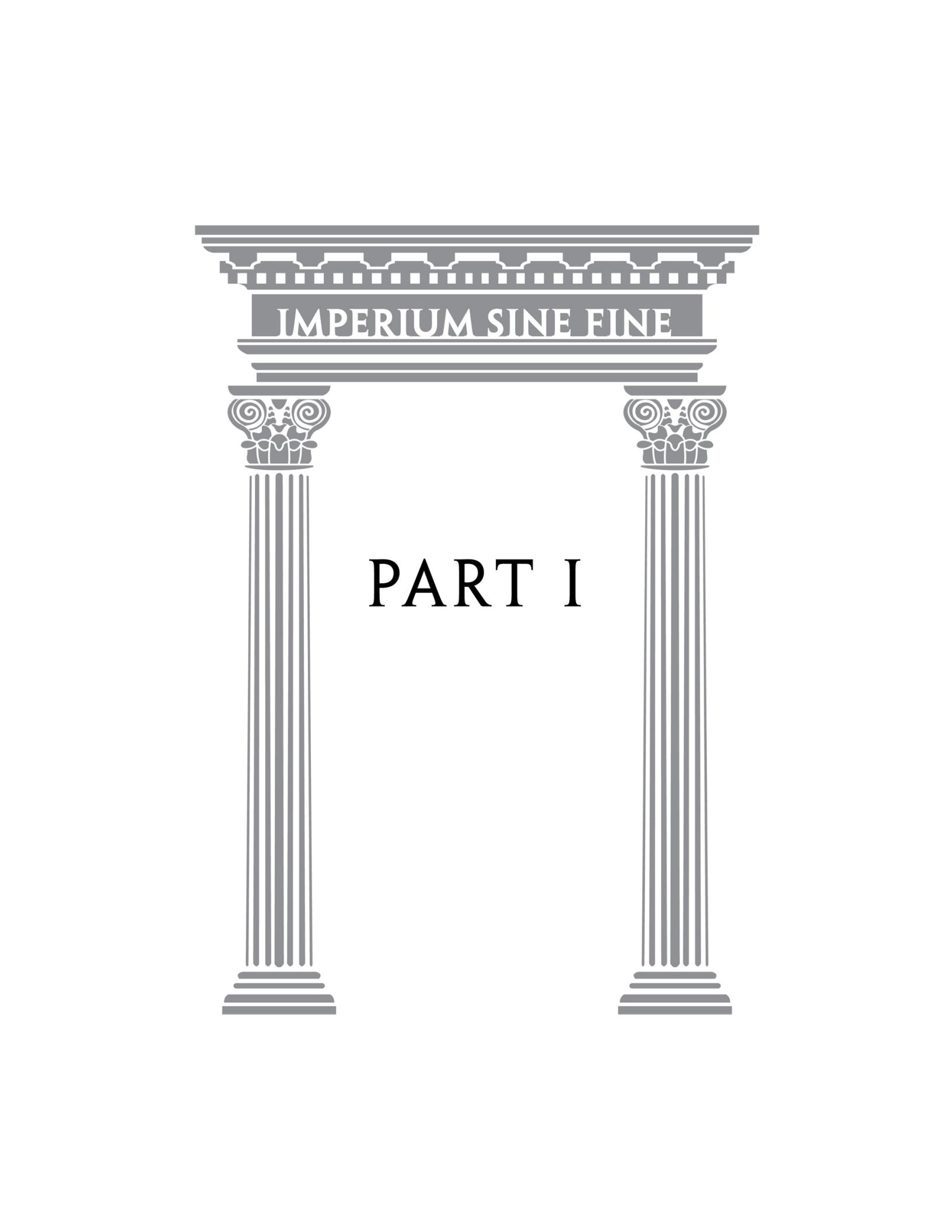
The publisher has provided this ebook to you without Digital Rights Management (DRM) software applied so that you can enjoy reading it on your personal devices. This ebook is for your personal use only. You may not print or post this ebook, or make this ebook publicly available in any way. You may not copy, reproduce, or upload this ebook except to read it on your personal devices.

Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this ebook you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: simonandschuster.biz/online_piracy_report.

For friends, lost.

CATENAN RANKINGS

RANK	RECEIVES WILL FROM:
1. PRINCEPS	40,320 PEOPLE
2. DIMIDIUS	20,160 PEOPLE
3. TERTIUS	6,720 PEOPLE
4. QUARTUS	1,680 PEOPLE
5. QUINTUS	336 PEOPLE
6. SEXTUS	56 PEOPLE
7. SEPTIMUS	8 PEOPLE
8. OCTAVUS	NONE



IMPERIUM SINE FINE

PART I

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 unmistakeable.

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?”

Vek. 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 splay 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 of 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, steadyng 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 blubbering. “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 gods-damned 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.