



CEDRIC

On a brisk summer's morning, Cedric sat alone at his study desk writing about whatever came to mind. Only his frequent glances through the open window gave him reprieve from writing. In the distance, he saw the immense pine trees on the edge of the hill swaying effortlessly with the wind. *The power of the wind is great and beyond human comprehension*, Cedric thought, feeling the chilling breeze sweep gently through his quarters. With his mind now at ease, he began to focus even deeper on his writings. Dipping his quill into the inkwell, he watched the liquid seep into the veins of the metal tip. He then raised it to his eyes and dipped it in again a few more times until he was satisfied with the weight.

Then, he pressed it down on his notebook and continued writing.

My Unconscious Life

I now have access to all the opportunities a person my age could hope for, and yet... I feel empty. I sometimes wonder to myself what my life would have been like had I not been awarded this prestigious scholarship. I feel like I am in a trance, a cycle of life I cannot escape. I feel like I am meant for something greater, but for what I cannot discern. Will my life always be so mundane and devoid of meaning? I want to do more.

However, as things currently stand, I cannot imagine how I could possibly escape this cycle, this vicious, terrible cycle which envelops almost all who reach adulthood. Then again, though I know all of this, I am unconscious to my struggles, and thus, I do nothing to change it.

Currently, I worry about how I will perform in my examinations and whether I will finally find a place among my peers. I wonder too if my yearnings for a perfect, sweet girl will come to pass. Finally, I wonder if I will ever become the master of my mind as I so desire.

Though I suppose only you, my future reader, would know. So, I ask you, Cedric, how many of the things which you dream of now have come to pass?

Everything?

Nothing?

Somewhere in between?

In any case, I don't have much more to say. How strange, isn't it? That you and I are almost two different people, strangers who have never met and will never meet.

Quite melancholic, I'd say.

Farewell, for now.

Sincerely,

Cedric



A noise stirred Cedric from his writings. He had been so deeply immersed in thought that it took some time for the sound to pierce his awareness. When he finally registered the knock at the door, he closed his notebook, titled, *The Wanderings of My Mind*, with slow, deliberate care, and called out.

‘Wait a moment.’

He sat still for a moment, listening. But no response came. With a rising breath, he stood, placed his notebook gently on the desk, and made his way toward the door. Slowly, cautiously, he peered through.

No one.

What was that? He wondered. *I could have sworn I heard a knock.*

He let out a sigh. Perhaps it was nothing, likely just another symptom of his frequent late nights staying up, scouring through books he borrowed from the great library that had little to do with his official studies but everything to do with his true interests. History, forgotten kingdoms, strange facts about distant lands — things no one else seemed to care for, but which gave him a profound sense of wonder and belonging.

Brushing away the matter completely, his gaze drifted to the winding clock on the wall. His eyes widened seeing that it was so late in the day, almost ten minutes past the

time he should have been seated in class. He grimaced as he turned back into his room and quickly gathered everything he needed for the day. His assigned books, a quill, a pencil and a few sheets of blank paper. Then, with a hurried breath, he stepped out into the hallway, finding it completely empty. His unease deepened as he realised, with a tightening in his chest, that everyone else was already in class and he alone would have to walk in late.

As Cedric moved swiftly through the hallway, he shook his head, irritated with himself. Then from a side corridor, another figure emerged in frantic disarray, robes half on, shirt undone, hair uncombed. Edwin Normany.

Edwin, a fellow student and a distant third son to some cousin of the Normany lord, was a name barely spoken and regularly forgotten. Among their cohort, he was often mocked and dismissed by those who clung to their lineages as if they were the only things they had, and oftentimes, they were.

Cedric, of course, had no noble standing to cling to, and yet, he disliked being seen beside Edwin. Not out of pride, but because the association drew a kind of gaze he hated to be under.

Edwin stumbled forward, clutching an unruly stack of books and papers to his chest. As he adjusted his shirt with one hand, the other failed him, and the entire pile

collapsed at once, scattering across the floor with a clatter that echoed through the corridor.

Cedric sighed, walked over, and knelt beside him. ‘You always find the most dramatic ways to start the day,’ he said, handing a leather-bound book to Edwin.

‘Thanks,’ Edwin muttered, red-faced. ‘I — I stayed up too late... thought I’d wake up with the sun, and then... well...’

‘Then you slept through the sun,’ Cedric replied, standing up, handing Edwin a few loose pages, ‘happens to the best of us.’

Edwin offered a crooked smile, freckles shifting awkwardly across his cheeks as he continued fumbling with his buttons. ‘Do you think the professor will notice us coming in late?’

Cedric inhaled. ‘If he doesn’t, someone else will. Might as well hurry now and get the shame over and done with.’

They looked at each other briefly before walking forward toward the stairwell. Cedric’s pace slowed slightly to match Edwin’s. The hallway stretched on ahead, lined with tall, paned windows that filtered in the morning light and quiet, empty alcoves which the students normally inhabited during their breaks. They walked side by side down the corridor, Edwin struggling slightly under the disordered weight of his books. Cedric said nothing more.

He didn't need to. He walked on, feeling that the day was already slipping from his grasp.

As they reached the long corridor that led toward the eastern stairwell, Cedric drifted inward. The echo of their footsteps mingled with the distant sound of morning bells, but his thoughts were elsewhere. A strange weariness clung to him — it was not the fatigue of a sleepless night — no, it was something deeper, something which felt unresolved in his mind.

He thought of how swiftly his final year at the Royal College of Constaria was progressing. The days bled into one another, and the final examination was already looming around the corner, just a few weeks away now. There had been a time, not long ago, when everything in the capital had thrilled him. Constaria, planned, orderly, grand, had seemed to him the heart of civilisation, the jewel of the great nation of Albion. But now... now it felt small. Grand, yes, but dull. Cold. Constaria had begun to shrink around him as if its entire structure was falling into a vast pit of sand, pulling him along with it. It lacked the energy, the life of a real city, a city like Massilia, where he had been raised.

His earliest memories began at seven, when he was finally given the freedom to wander the streets of Massilia. Everything before that was a blur. He could not even

remember when he had first come to Albion. But one thing was certain — upon his arrival, he had unconsciously shed all remnants of his past life, memories, bonds, friendships, even his old name. He had been renamed Cedric to make him palatable, to shape him into something that could be absorbed by Alban society without disruption.

Back then, his parents were still hopeful, still close. His father had found work in a butchery, and his mother as a seamstress in a factory. The capital city of Gaul, Massilia, had struck him with its strange sophistication. Its many boulevards pulsed with colour and life, and even the chaos of its markets moved with rhythm and purpose. It was a city that breathed. He had loved it instantly — making fast friends among the local children, some of whom he still shared a distant bond with despite the years. His education at Lauriet, the Gaulic Youth College, had taught him much and left even more unanswered. Potential lovers, alternate paths, friendships that still lingered in his mind. He often felt he had never truly lived them, and then, as suddenly as it had all begun, the passage of time had left him behind.

By the end of that chapter, without fully knowing why, he had resolved to become a military officer. And by some stroke of luck — or brilliance — he had secured admission into the Royal College of Constaria, a school typically reserved for the high-born. Cedric held no noble standing

in Albion. His family belonged to a minor line in another nation entirely — Srivania. An ancient, sea-bound realm nestled between the mountains and the sea. It was an archaic, once completely isolated land, only unveiled to the rest of the world by voyaging Sletion ships.

Srivania had always stood apart in his mind from the world he had now grown accustomed to. Its customs were older, stranger. Its religion, full of rites, spirits, and superstitions, had always repelled him. The natural land itself was beautiful, pristine, immense, but its people lived without structure, without the order he found so natural among the Albans. Cleanliness, hierarchy, precision — Albion had these in abundance, and Cedric preferred it that way.

He had been eighteen when his parents returned to Srivania, leaving him in Constaria so that he could begin his three-year study at the Royal College. They wrote often, kindly, but, in truth, he did not miss them. He loved them, yes, and they had been good to him, but he was glad to be alone. Glad to have distance, purpose, and the freedom to progress in life.

Progress towards what?

Cedric frowned at the thought.

He did not know.

As he paced up the stairs with Edwin in tow, his thoughts spiralled towards newer, more unpleasant memories.

The first year at the Royal College had been unbearable. He had struggled to belong. Among the pale sons of Albion's noble houses, his olive skin had set him apart, quietly but unmistakably. No one had spoken direct slurs, and only a few had made explicit gestures of exclusion. But every pause, every second look, every smile not returned had told him what he needed to know. He did not belong. Not truly.

And yet, he had endured. No, more than endured. By the second year, he had carved a place for himself. He had earned a reputation for discipline, for excellence, for a seriousness that made even the more arrogant sons take pause. He was respected by most, as he had been throughout his life. And yet, he had never found a circle, never found a place where he truly belonged.

Worse still, in his final year, the one in which he ought to be striving the hardest, he was slipping. His discipline was faltering. His grades, too. He could not explain why. Others had begun to notice, and so the reputation he had so meticulously built up was fading. That terrified him the most. The thought that others would see him now as a failure, a loser, an outcast. The fire that had once driven

him — unconscious and fierce, now burned low. He found himself questioning everything. Why should he try? What was it for? Was there meaning in this effort? Or was it being wasted here, in halls that no longer inspired him?

Never before had he asked himself these questions. The thoughts lingered like a shadow in his mind as he and Edwin climbed the winding stairs of the eastern tower. Their steps echoed softly against the stone, quick and irregular, hurried but silent. The air grew colder the higher they climbed, filled with the scent of old dust and the faint scent of morning dew.

As they passed the first great arched window, Cedric glimpsed the sun just beginning to rise above the horizon beyond the distant pine trees. The trees stood tall and motionless, their dark shapes outlined by gold. And with every level he and Edwin ascended, the sun climbed with them, rising slowly but steadily. The first rays touched his forehead as they reached the third window. By the fifth, the sun had fully cleared the trees, casting a warm glow through the windows and over the stairwell. He closed his eyes for a moment and allowed the sun to grace him.

The tower they were ascending was one of the two flanking the main building, which the College was a part of. Its uppermost windows were set with stained glass, each a work of reverent, Lucerian art. As they neared the top,

the light fragmented into intricate colours. Shades of red and blue and deep violet refracted from the tall glass and painted the walls, the stairs, their robes, and their faces as they passed.

They turned left onto the corridor of the top floor. The ceiling here was vaulted, supported by carved stone. Shadows hung below the oil lanterns, not currently lit, making the corridor feel more ominous than it should. Along the hallway were many rows of doors leading to different rooms. Among them stood the door to their classroom, which they found was shut.

‘Ahh! The door’s closed,’ Edwin muttered anxiously.

‘It is,’ Cedric replied, looking through the high arched window, seeing that the sun was already a quarter ways through the sky. He exhaled sharply. ‘They’ve definitely started. No point standing out here. Let’s go,’ he said, tugging lightly on Edwin’s robe. ‘Just walk in confidently.’

Cedric reached for the long brass handle and pushed it open. The door opened with a long, agonising creak that seemed to drag across the spines of every student in the room. All at once, their heads turned towards them. Cedric held his breath. The silence and the blank looks of disapproval stung more than any jeer.

They slipped in, heads downcast as they tried to move silently to the back, but their movement was caught by the voice they feared the most.

‘You two! You’re late!’ Came the voice of their Professor, Saserna.

Cedric halted mid-step, chest tensing.

‘I was just informing the other students about the importance of punctuality,’ Professor Saserna continued, his tone sharp and cold, ‘especially as your final examinations are ever approaching.’

The old professor stood at the centre of the room, a small book held tightly in one hand. His tiny spectacles were perched on the end of his hooked nose, his eyes forever narrowed, as though everything in the world was a disappointment to him. But today, the disappointment was focused. The glare was personal.

‘Sit down and pay attention!’ he barked. ‘You two have already missed much.’

Cedric obeyed, his face hot, his blood steaming dully in his ears. This wasn’t who he was. This kind of tardiness, this lack of preparation — it was beneath him. He was furious, but only at himself. He hadn’t even the dignity of an excuse.

After a time, when the moment had settled, came the muffled laughter, the indignant snicker. He turned his head

slightly and saw them. Septimius and Decimus Sletion. Septimius, the heir to House Sletion, and Decimus, his distant cousin. They were seated near the centre of the room, smirking as they turned to look at him, laughing at unheard jests. Not openly, but just enough to be heard by him. Just enough to humiliate.

Cedric said nothing. He didn't glance again. He simply looked down at his desk, then up at the board, pretending to follow the professor's monotonous voice and slow-moving fingers, which blurred under his vision.

His eyes drifted sideways, to the window. The glass was high and wide, set into the wall like a frame which revealed a brighter world. The room they were seated in was the highest in the entire college. Only the western tower on the opposite side rose above it, and even then, by no more than a few floors. He was glad that Saserna's class — *The Logistics of National Supply Chains* — was held in such a room, surrounded by high windows and open light, for this made it all the more bearable. The subject matter was dense, important perhaps, but lifeless in its delivery. Cedric could never bring himself to care which province grew the most barley or how many days it took for a shipment of iron to reach the inland foundries by train. Though the subject itself was insufferable, the view made it endurable. He always aimed for a seat by the window, and he had

managed to find one, even though he had entered late. Edwin, thankfully, had been forced into the only remaining seat on the other end of the room, giving Cedric the quietness he desired. The lessons bored him more and more these days, but the windows — the windows never did. Through them, the world was always interesting.

From here, he could see the entire expanse of the Palace and College grounds, the wide walkways, the neat gardens, the distant shapes of lower towers and dormitories. The Royal College was no ordinary school. It was the pinnacle of academia in Albion, a place where the young nobles of the great houses were tempered and moulded into the instruments of the realm. Military officers, diplomats, governors, judges — this was where they were made.

The Royal Palace and the Royal College were housed in a singular structure of stone and splendour — built not merely to house power, but to shape those who would one day wield it. From the front, it appeared seamless. Two near-identical towers flanking a long, colonnaded body, each stone cut from the same pale stone, each arch and balustrade echoing the same design. To any who stood at the gates, the College and the Palace were one. It spanned the crest of the city's highest hill, its grand form defined by bold Constarian architecture. Arched windows, high

gables, and domed roofs gave it the look of a place both sacred and imperial.

The far eastern section and tower housed the Royal College. From the base to the tower's peak sprang lecture halls, dormitories, and libraries. Woven into the corner, separate in purpose, yet close enough to remain ever immersed in the rule of the realm. Ivy trailed its archways, and stone reliefs from the Old Empire peered down from the weathered facades. Those in their final year, the third years, were often brought deeper into the palace itself. There, they would sit in on minor councils, observe diplomatic receptions, or be made to rehearse audiences and staged negotiations. Never anything of real consequence, but always serious, always purposeful. For many of them would one day replay these same interactions in the real world. When Cedric was in his first year, the thought had thrilled him. He had longed for the day he too would walk those halls. But now that he was in his final year, the excitement had long faded. In truth, he sometimes dreaded stepping foot inside the Palace at all.

The rest of the structure — the western tower, the central halls, the royal apartments behind the main façade — belonged to the Palace itself. Externally, it looked the same, but internally, the architecture grew broader, more decorative. High inner balconies, ceremonial chambers,

and long corridors lined with banners and paintings. Together, the Palace and the College formed a single, living edifice.

What was taught in the east was practised in the west.

What was rehearsed by the students was lived by the statesmen. Yet they all moved within the same body, under the same roof. Together, the Palace and the College watched over Constaria like twin crowns — one of power, the other of learning.

Yet, from where Cedric sat now, he could not see the Palace. The windows here gave him only the view of the western grounds. However, from the other side of the room, just a few paces away, the side of the Palace could be seen clearly. He often chose those seats, if only to look upon the Palace and imagine a different life.

He would gaze at its gleaming domes and high walls with a distant longing, as if staring might draw him nearer, as if some part of him still believed that through discipline and will, he might find a way to belong there. But he never would. He knew that. Not because it was impossible for him, but because a certain part of him refused the idea, a part he did not fully understand. If he were to belong somewhere, then he would do so completely, not partially.

The Palace was Albion's crowning jewel. Its once-revolutionary design had shaped the course of Lucerian

architecture for centuries, ever since its construction over twelve hundred and twenty-two years ago in the year 600 LC by the great King Constarius — once a general of the Old Empire. The Lucerian Calendar, or LC, marked time from the birth of Lucer himself. All years preceding that moment were known as BLC. Before Lucerian Calendar.

Constarius's reign had marked the split of the province of Albion from the Ascanian Empire into its own sovereign nation. More than that, his conversion to Lucerianism marked the end of the old age and the beginning of the new. Within a hundred years of his rule, the Empire of Ascania had collapsed entirely. Yet, even now, many nations, both great and small, still clung to the memory of Ascania. Some claimed to be its true successors, though only a few could speak of such lineage with any real authority.

Albion was one such nation, for it claimed to have preserved true Ascanian dignity long after the capital, Ascania, had lost it. To Constarius, the break from the empire was no betrayal — it was cleansing. The city of Ascania still clung to its ancient rites — old, blasphemous, and in defiance of the Lucerian creed that had begun to sweep across the continent. Constarius condemned the ancient rites. He declared them rot that had weakened the heart of the empire.

Thus, in time, the old ways vanished. What remained were fragments, myths, symbols, vague remnants treated with suspicion or outright hostility. Cedric often wondered if such erasure was just, and why Lucerianism could not coexist with other belief systems which it continually sought to destroy. It had tried to encompass the world and purge all that stood outside its order, and yet it had failed. This was not to mention Muharanism and Falarianism, the other two heads in the trinity of belief that spanned half the world. The Lucerians and Muharans were ideologically opposed for reasons Cedric did not fully grasp, despite their worship of the same god. The source of both religions, however, stemmed from the Falarians, the relatively minuscule clique that had inadvertently founded these belief systems. Cedric wondered where and when the Lucerians and Muharans had diverged into two opposing doctrines born from the same god — the Falarian god.

Completely apart from this trinity stood Srivania, a small nation that had remained Astran, as had many other lands — distant, defiant, and dwindling with each passing century. Why had Lucerianism found no foothold in Srivania, a realm more ancient than Ascania itself? He recalled then the whispered rumours of Gaulic villages that still honoured the old gods. Moreover, in distant lands such as Alandir, the last western frontier, there were noble

houses and island sanctuaries that openly claimed Astran heritage. They had not bowed to Lucerianism. Not entirely.

In Albion, once the second heart of Luceranism after Latinum, the fervour had begun to fade. The blind reverence for Lucer, the self-proclaimed son of god, was weakening. Across the continent of Aeronia, the creed no longer held the same unshaken dominion it once did. Some nations, notably Hestrisis, had already severed ties between religion and state. Others were following as they slowly adopted a secular mode of life no longer bound to Lucerian churches.

Despite this, public worship of anything other than the state religion was to risk the label of Astran — heretic, devil worshipper, enemy of the so-called divine order. The word alone was enough to forsake one to condemnation. Cedric found the label crude, the judgement behind it even more so. He could not reconcile the Lucerian doctrine's absolutism with the beauty it often inspired. The grand cathedrals, the illuminated stained-glass windows, the artworks that bore the marks of Heaven. This tension lived within him always — it was one he could not find a resolution to. What troubled him most was the thought of the many Srivanian settlers who had come to Albion seeking work, hoping to toil away their bodies so that they could send coin back to their families. They could not

worship freely. They honoured their Astran gods in silence, hidden from sight, their faith forced into the shadows.

‘Now, we must consider the logistics of transport in old Albion,’ their professor said, pointing at a chalk diagram he had drawn on the blackboard. ‘Constarius kept much of Ascania’s road networks but dismantled many others...’

The professor’s words blurred in his mind, and Cedric drifted back into his own thoughts. When Constarius seceded from the Ascanian Empire, the territory of Albion was nominally larger, encompassing the city of Hestrisis and its surrounding regions. Back then, Constarius had divided the nation into three great houses, each swearing allegiance to the throne whose capital he named after himself, Constaria. One such house no longer existed. It had been dismantled by Constarius himself. His sister’s house. They were granted dominion over the central province of Caesonia. And yet, sometime in the century that followed, all mention of it vanished, its name erased, its banners forgotten. Her house had opposed him, and in response, he had erased it, not just in war, but in history.

The remaining two houses governed their lands as intended, and beneath them a web of minor houses struggled and schemed for power and relevance. A third great house arose only later: the Normany, once a wild people held beyond the empire’s wall, then bound into the

realm by marriage two hundred years ago. Thus three great houses still endured, though they were not the same three that had stood at the founding.

The Sletions, their banner a white phoenix upon a sapphire backdrop, held the western coast and its islands. Their wealth was rooted in naval power and foreign trade. Their opulence was infamous. Theirs was a name spoken with both awe and contempt. Cedric despised them. They were descended from one of Constarius's generals, a man who had conquered the coast and named it after himself. Their arrogance was ancestral.

The Normany, by contrast, were harder, colder. Their crimson red banner was marked by a large black hand holding a two-headed axe. Their domain stretched across Albion's greatest span, from the frozen hills of the far north to the narrow slip of fertile land just above the old walls of Hadrius. For centuries, that wall had stood as the empire's, and later Albion's, shield — holding back the barbarous ancestors of the Normany. Now, the Normany walked freely within Albion's borders, their integration sealed through marriage after three centuries of resistance. Yet, they had never fully submitted. Rebellions had flared since then, more than once. Their pride still ran deep. It was even rumoured that the current Lord of Normany sought independence from greater Albion.

Then there were the Gauls — their banner a white tree set against an emerald field. They were neither as wealthy as the Sletions nor as brutal as the Normany. They lived comfortably in their fertile lands. Where the Normany lacked in trade, and the Sletions in land, the Gauls lacked in nothing. Their land gave them all they needed. From that peace, they became craftsmen, scholars and emissaries. Their roots, too, ran back to another general of Constarius, one who, rather than conquering in glory, had rebuilt a fallen province and named it anew. Gaul. In honour of the land that had once resisted the empire, and later, yielded to it.

Perhaps it was his close ties to the Gauls, or that Massilia was the city of his childhood. Or perhaps it was the ideals of their house, which he still honoured. Whatever the cause, Cedric had always felt closest to the Gauls. Of all the great houses, they seemed the least corrupted by their power.

Finally, there was the throne itself, small in land but vast in power. It sat at the heart of the realm, and all houses answered to it. Each year, a portion of the finest soldiers from every house was transferred into the Royal Army, Albion's largest and most powerful army. Upon swearing allegiance, they relinquished their house and its colour for the remainder of their service and took instead

the white of the Crown. From that moment on, they served only the realm.

Beyond soldiers, taxes too flowed from every province into Constaria, feeding the throne's treasury, strengthening the capital's grip. The system was not without flaws, but in Cedric's eyes, it was a structure of genius. Measured, orderly, and born of the will of a single man.

Constarius...

Cedric shifted in his seat, his mind turning to the thought of that towering figure. *What possessed you, I wonder... to dream of something like this? To manifest it into the world with nothing but the force of your own vision...?*

A sharp exclamation by the Professor made Cedric shift his attention back to class. 'So now, we must consider why Relith was able to maintain a war on all fronts for such an extended period of time,' he said, pointing his ruler to the class. 'Who knows the answer?'

Relith...

The name rang like a bell. Rarely spoken in public, it carried the weight of something dangerous. Fifty-six years before Cedric was born, a man named Relith had risen from Sanctum Deutsch Roma, often referred to as S.D.R, a crumbling realm across the western waters, once a formidable neighbour to Albion and Hestrisis. The man had not come from nobility. He bore no crest, no claim, no

honoured bloodline. And yet in the span of two decades, he had completely reshaped the world.

Relith claimed he sought power not for himself, but for his people, for the nation he loved. His beloved nation that he had tried to elevate to the level of Ascania, true Ascania, before Lucerianism, a religion he so deeply yet covertly despised. Cedric had only come to know these reserved views through a collection of private correspondences between Relith and his advisors. In those pages, he began to see him clearly — far more so than even the professors at the Royal College whose interpretations were dulled by doctrine, emotion, and the safety of reinforced thought. Cedric's, by contrast, was shaped by reason — and by his unflinching will to see things as they were, rather than as he wished them to be.

Immediately upon his rising, Relith had proclaimed his vision to the world in full force, gathering to his flag those disillusioned with the hollow order of the present age. For a moment, it seemed the fire of the old world had returned. His people loved him, foreign rulers respected him, and for a time he was revered across borders. Under his rule, S.D.R had risen to become the foremost power of the age. Its army was unmatched, disciplined, relentless. They struck with precision, their cavalry as swift as lightning, their

cannon fire — thunderous. They swept across Aeronia and left little standing in their wake.

But the fire of Sanctum Deutsch Roma under Relith burned too hot. His ambition moved too quickly. He reached for too much, too fast. His ideas, his rituals, his very presence threatened the new consensus of the modernising world. After the war broke out, a great coalition formed. Albion, Hestrisis, Castille, Aragon, Narvagrod, Scaelia and many more, all backed by the hidden purse of the Falarians. They descended upon Relith's uprising with overwhelming force, and he was utterly defeated. Crushed. Erased from records, from monuments, from presence. Only his name endured. *Relith*.

To speak it in public was an act of suspicion. To venerate it, treason. Yet this did not stop Cedric from scouring the archives of the Royal College to read of him, secretly, carefully, in banned histories and forgotten manuscripts. From all that he had learned, what disturbed Cedric the most was not what Relith had said, or even what he had done. What disturbed him was how much he had understood.

'Professor,' said Gabriel Gaul, heir to the Gaulic house, raising his hand. 'Relith was able to maintain a war on all fronts because of the efficient and extensive communication strategy deployed by his loyal troops,

which was then outdone by our counter — reconnaissance,’ Gabriel recited like the studious scholar he was.

‘That’s wholly incorrect,’ Saserna replied, shaking his head. ‘Anyone else care to try?’

Gabriel looked unsettled and sank down in his seat. Cedric raised an eyebrow, noting how that was a rare misstep from Gabriel. There was, of course, nothing wrong with the lordling’s answer, but he ought to have known that every profession saw the world through their own narrow lens. Each believed themselves the sole or at least the primary cause of every major event.

Cedric, understanding this, anticipated what Saserna wanted to hear. Two other students offered their answers, but the professor quickly, ruthlessly dismissed them. Cedric considered raising his hand and looked around the class, now filled with anxious silence. With a quiet sigh, he raised his hand, and, at once, Saserna pointed his ruler at him, marking him as the next sacrifice on the block.

‘Professor, Relith was able to maintain a war on all fronts because of the logistics of the national supply chain at the time in S.D.R, which was extensive and effective. It was only after the collapse of this supply chain that he began to lose the war,’ Cedric said quickly.

For a moment, Saserna said nothing as the whole class awaited his response, then the professor gave a small

approving nod. A collective breath passed through the room in relief.

Edwin smiled cheerfully and looked upon him proudly from across the room, but this only made Cedric smirk in discontent. How absurd this all was. Not even the professor seemed to realise that Cedric had simply restated the subject of the class as the answer. He let the thought fade. It wasn't worth the energy. Instead, he glanced around at his classmates, each of them cloaked in long, dark robes marked with the colours of their houses. The Sletions' robes had blue trimmings, the Gaul's had green and the Normany red. Students from minor houses with no affiliation, or those without noble blood like Cedric, wore grey trimmings. To his knowledge, no other non-noble currently studied at the college, and only one had ever graduated. That was Patroclus, a brilliant student of Normany origin, born without title or wealth. When Cedric began his first year, Patroclus was already in his third. He remembered watching him from afar, admired by all, walking the halls with a natural authority that even the nobles did not question. Cedric had tried to mirror that presence, but he had never quite managed it.

Now Patroclus served as a personal guard to the crown prince of Albion, Roderic. His rise had been extraordinary, and many believed that he would reach even further in the

future. *What is beyond that? A Manus Regis?* Cedric wondered if he too would rise to such acclaim by the time he graduated. He doubted it. There was no clear path ahead. Only two choices stood before him, and neither truly called to him.

One was the path of an academic or diplomat, a life spent in closed rooms, among men who spoke often but understood little of the world beyond their walls. The other was to join the Royal Army as a prefect, the rank automatically granted to graduates of the Royal College. Many chose that path. It was stable, well-paid, and carried the weight of respect. The same could not be said of the scholarly fields, which promised little beyond sheltered obscurity. What worried Cedric was not the uniform nor the title, but the years. The role required a minimum of five years in active service. Most served ten. Why? He wasn't even certain. But ten years would make him thirty-two. Iskandar had conquered the world by thirty. Cedric could not bear the thought of surrendering that time to a cause he did not believe in.

That thought still lingered in his mind when the scrape of chairs snapped him back to the present. Class had ended. Students were rising, gathering their books, filing out with the usual mix of idle chatter and absent-minded routine.

Edwin approached him. ‘Coming, Cedric?’ his dull-eyed friend asked faintly.

‘No. I’ll stay a little longer,’ Cedric said, his tone quiet.

‘Are you sure Professor Saserna will be fine with that?’

‘Probably not. But he doesn’t have to know.’ Cedric’s gaze drifted to the side.

Edwin hesitated. ‘Alright then. I’ll see you later.’

‘See you,’ Cedric replied, watching Edwin walk out, leaving him alone in the tower.

He appreciated Edwin’s kindness. It was rare at the College. But there was always a faint dissatisfaction he could never quite dispel. Edwin was simple. Unremarkable. Cedric never felt truly seen by him, never challenged. There was no sharpness in their conversations, no weight. Though he valued Edwin’s loyalty, he often left their exchanges feeling more alone than before. At times, he feared that too much time in Edwin’s company might dull him — that his docile nature might begin to seep into his own.

Pushing the thought away, Cedric slumped forward and let his gaze settle on the grains of wood on his desk. He traced their patterns absent-mindedly, lost in their abstract spirals, and wondered how he had come so far, yet still felt so far behind. Compared to Srivanians his age, he was leagues ahead, but compared to the noble sons of

Albion, he was always reaching, never quite able to grasp the opportunities that were so easily afforded to them. Unlike those born to powerful fathers or great houses, Cedric had to continually claw his way toward relevance. He had to forge his own path — no one else would lay it for him. This emboldened him, but, beneath that, it terrified him even more. His path was steep, and his ambition — his true ambition — was vast. So vast that only extraordinary — indeed, almost impossible — success could ever bring it within reach.

He stayed like that for some time, motionless. It was unlike him. He usually hated sitting still. Restlessness had always been a part of him. Yet now, something kept him anchored. Then came the sound of footsteps climbing the tower stairs. His body tensed. Panic flickered across his face as he looked around, mind racing. If he was caught alone in an empty classroom, there would be questions, scolding, maybe worse. His other class would not begin for another hour, but that was no excuse — the College was strict — no students were to be in classrooms alone — that was a rule known to all. He considered hiding, but, if that failed, the punishment would double. He could pretend to have fallen asleep, but could he sell the lie convincingly? Before he could decide, the footsteps grew louder, closer, until the door creaked open slowly.

Cedric drew a steady breath and sat up straighter in his chair. *Who could it be?* he wondered, fingers tightening around the edge of his desk. The door had opened halfway, then stopped, as if whoever was behind was waiting for him to speak. Cedric fixed his gaze on the door, unmoving, then, after a moment, he spoke. ‘Y—you may enter.’ *Don’t be afraid*, he told himself, swallowing his fears.

The door creaked fully open, and a tall, broad figure stepped through — cloaked and imposing. The light of the day cast long shadows over the man’s face, revealing nothing but a thick beard beneath the hood. Slowly, deliberately, the figure closed the door behind them, then began their approach.

Cedric sat still, tension coiling in his limbs, but he did not flinch. *Who could it be?* The question echoed in his mind, but no answer came. His thoughts scrambled. *A visitor? A professor? A thief?* He didn’t know, and because he didn’t know, he didn’t move.

Had this been the streets of Massilia or some alley in Srivania, he might have stood, braced himself, prepared for the worst. But here, in the Royal College, in this restrictive classroom, he was bound by its stillness, by its rules. He could not act freely.

The hooded man said nothing, and for a long while, the room remained silent. Seizing the moment, Cedric rose to his feet.

‘Who are you? Why d—do you enter this place?’ he said, coldly staring at the man. A strange calmness had overcome him, as it often did when he was faced with tense situations. It was a trait he prided himself on.

The hooded man relaxed, scoffed and shook his head. ‘What nonsense, my boy. Is that how you greet a visitor who graces you with their presence?’

The deep, resonant voice of the man sounded oddly familiar, but Cedric was unable to decipher whom it belonged to. The sensation felt like catching a scent long forgotten or walking into a room and forgetting why you had entered in the first place. He couldn’t quite place it.

Cedric eyed the man’s long, dark cloak. *There could be a concealed weapon under there*, he thought, fear trembling at his lips. He quickly glanced at an ornamental spear on the wall and grimaced at how far away it was. The man could easily slash him down before he could ever reach it. He cycled through grim possibilities in his mind, but his thoughts broke off when the man lifted his hands. Cedric tensed and stepped back on instinct — until he understood the motion. The man was only lowering his hood.

That simple gesture stretched on as Cedric half expected something inhuman to emerge from the shadowed veil, some ancient thing summoned from the dark. He braced himself, but what greeted him was a smile.

A familiar one.

The hood fell away and revealed the face of Lord Cassius Gaul, the Headmaster of the Royal College.

Lord Cassius stepped fully into the light. His smile was mild, unreadable. He drew back his cloak, revealing a fine doublet beneath, dark green with silver accents — a mark of his house conformed to the colours of the crown, silver and white.

‘I trust I didn’t frighten you too much,’ he said, his voice carrying a distinctive noble weight.

Cedric didn’t answer immediately. ‘No — no, of course not,’ he let out quickly. His mind was still unsteady, but already, he felt the quiet sting of shame — the kind a man feels when caught in a moment of heightened emotion, stripped of his composure.

Lord Cassius looked around the room with a faint, amused expression. ‘I was out walking. A morning stroll through the city, I didn’t want to be recognised, so I wore this cursed thing. I had nowhere else to take it off.’ He tugged lightly at the cloak, then let his hand fall. ‘I needed to fetch a few reports I left behind yesterday. Thought I’d

come up quietly. And yet, to my surprise, I find you here, Cedric, alone in this room.'

Cedric straightened, sweeping his robe as if to appear composed, although blood was rushing to his face. 'Yes, I... I stayed back to think a little.'

'Hmm, I see,' the Headmaster said, gazing at him with an indiscernible expression. 'And how are you finding this semester?'

The question was simple, but Cedric could feel the weight behind it. 'Good,' he said, a bit too quickly. 'All is well.'

The Headmaster nodded slowly. He studied Cedric with eyes far sharper than the warmth of his tone suggested. Cedric wondered if the Headmaster had personally seen his records — noticed the faltering grades, the lapses in effort, the unmistakable pattern of inconsistency.

But Lord Cassius did not press — instead, he walked over to Cedric's desk and glanced down at the parchments and scattered books. 'You stay behind after class, even when no one asks you to. You challenge your professors without arrogance. You think more than you speak. A rare combination.'

Cedric said nothing as relief washed over him. He was being praised instead of scolded. *How absurd*, he thought.

The Headmaster looked out the window, his voice softening. ‘When I questioned you for your scholarship, I recall how boldly you spoke, not with entitlement nor fear, but with a certainty that even the most seasoned of men lack.’

Cedric searched for a reply, but what was there to say? The praise unsettled him. It felt like a prelude to something else, something heavier. So, he said nothing. Then, the Lord turned back to him.

‘Tell me, Cedric. What is it you plan to do after the College?’

The question startled him. His answer came before he could shape it. ‘I — I’m... considering the Royal Force.’

Cassius gave a slight nod. ‘A common path. Many take it. Stability, respect, a fine uniform.’

But something in his tone shifted.

‘Still, I wonder if that is the right path for you.’

Cedric blinked.

‘Gaul always needs good men. We lack emissaries who understand both the world as it is, and what it could be. Perhaps you should consider that instead. You may find the cause more suited to your nature.’

Cedric fumbled. ‘I — I see,’ he said, not knowing why the Headmaster was telling him this.

Lord Cassius adjusted his cloak again, his movements slower now, as if weighed by some unspoken fatigue. ‘This is my final year here as well, you know. After this semester, I return to Gaul, to Massilia.’

‘Truly?’ Cedric asked.

‘Yes,’ the headmaster replied. ‘The Crown Lands are... tiring. The politics. The noise. I’m needed elsewhere.’

There was something beneath those words, something deeper which Lord Cassius did not want to reveal. Cedric chose not to linger on the thought. He nodded, quietly.

Cassius slowly paced towards the front of the classroom and stared out of one of the tall windows that afforded a view of the Palace. His voice shifted, less performative now, more personal.

‘The realm is not well, Cedric. You see it, don’t you?’ he said, his eyes fixed on the distant outline of the Palace beyond the glass.

Drawn by the weight in his tone, Cedric rose from his seat and stepped beside him.

‘The Normany beat their drums louder every year, rattling their axes with pride and thirst. War is etched into their blood, and yet none among us dares to curb their temper. The Sletions sit fat and idle atop their gold, they grow rich off trade, they hoard like dragons, refusing to share it equitably with the rest of the realm. And my own

house...' he paused, a bitter twist at the edge of his mouth, 'we do nothing. As ever, we remain neutral, blind to both fire and decay.'

Cedric listened quietly as the Headmaster's voice grew heavier.

'But worse than all that, something darker has been taking root. Astran cults. Whispers, symbols, gatherings in the far-off fields. In the very lands of Gaul. The Holy See is watching closely now. Not only Albion's chapter, but Latinum as well. They sense what I fear... Something old is returning. Something that never truly died.' He sighed then, slowly, as if the weight of it all was too much to bear, his eyes did not leave the window.

'My eldest brother is to blame. Titus. He was once a magnificent orator, a passionate, active Great Lord. But his heart... his heart was never faithful. For decades, he spent his energy quietly restoring Astran rites. Festivals. Icons. The old Ascanian flame. Publicly Lucerian, privately heretical. He revived traditions best left to ash. And now... he lies in Gaulica, barely conscious, with the mess of his life unravelling across our province. Aurelius and I are left to clean it up.'

Cassius turned slightly, his gaze falling back on Cedric.

'Albion remains frozen in time. We are a relic. Our neighbours — Hestrisis, Castille, even Sanctum Deutsch

Roma — are shedding their skins, embracing the future. Tricolour flags, factories, capital, all the trappings of modernity. And we? We cling to banners and bloodlines as if they will save us from the tide.’

Cedric was stunned. It had never occurred to him to think in such terms. For three years, he had peered at the world through the narrow lens of study. He had forgotten that beyond the walls of the Royal College, the world still turned — restless, changing, conspiring, unfolding — with or without his gaze.

Cassius then turned to face him, his presence less looming but his words heavier.

‘I need someone I can trust. Someone not affiliated with any house. I need help, Cedric. Help to root out the rise of these cults.’

Cedric sat up straighter, intrigued.

‘Of course,’ he answered quickly, his voice steady but formal. Too formal. Even as the words left his mouth, he felt disgusted by them. Disgusted by how natural it felt to fall into place before Alban nobility, to perform the obedience expected of him. He had spoken with the voice of a servant rather than a free man, and yet, he said nothing more. He couldn’t.

Cassius watched him closely, the sharpness in his gaze momentarily softening. Then, with a faint smile, the warmth of the Headmaster returned.

‘Good,’ he said, grinning with familiar pride. ‘You set a fine example to all Srivanians. I knew it was a wise choice to elevate you to this place.’

Complying and serving without thought...is that what passes for a fine example? Cedric thought briefly, the faint ember of resentment flickering behind his calm expression.

The words were dressed in praise, but he heard the presumption underneath. A man such as Cedric could never have true sovereignty in his life — he would always have to comply with the whims and wants of the nobles above him. He forced a small nod, keeping his silence.

Cassius turned slightly, his tone lightening as he shifted to another subject. ‘There is to be a great festival in the capital soon. You know of it — Floralia.’ He gave Cedric a brief glance. ‘Titus revived it during the early years of his long reign as Great Lord of Gaul. It’s a yearly tradition, yes — but this year will be its last.’

There was a strange finality in his tone, enough for Cedric to straighten his posture and listen to the Headmaster more attentively.

The lord exhaled, a quiet, weary breath escaping him. ‘Titus was born fifteen years before Aurelius and eighteen

before I. Our father remarried in his later years. His first wife — well, never mind that. Titus is separated from my brother and I not only by age. We come from different mothers, different worlds. Titus's mother... she was a public heretic, praising Ascanian Gods, praying to them, all while shunning Luceranism. Thus Titus... Titus grew up differently, completely apart from what my brother and I regarded as normal.'

Cassius's gaze wandered across the classroom, not focused on anything in particular. 'He was already a young man by the time we were learning to walk. We shared a father, but little else. And over time... well, we began to quietly shun him. Too different. Too headstrong. Too attached to the past.' Then, with a low chuckle, Cassius shook his head. 'I shouldn't be telling you this.'

Cedric said nothing. There was nothing to say. He watched the man carefully now, trying to understand why he had been chosen for this conversation.

Cassius continued, shifting his tone again, more pragmatic now. 'The festival is in a week. The main ceremony is on Solisday eve. You'll have a role to play in it, as the Fire Bearer.'

Cedric blinked. *Floralia? Fire Bearer? A week? I always remembered Floralia taking place later in the year... Gods, time*

has really moved so fast this year. He thought as an unsettling feeling overcame him.

‘There’s not much you’ll need to do. Recite a short script, nothing elaborate, then at the right moment, you’ll shoot a flaming arrow into the ceremonial wreath above that cursed statue in the city square. You’ve seen it done before, haven’t you?’

‘Yes, I have,’ Cedric replied cautiously, uncertain what any of this had to do with the deeper matters they’d just spoken of.

‘Good. Then it should be simple enough.’ The lord paused for a moment, then added, more deliberately, ‘Once the arrow strikes the wreath, the statue will collapse — fixed, of course, to fall just at the right moment. A sign. A spectacle. Proof to the people that the Lucerian god still speaks, still reigns... and that the old ways must fall.’

Cedric’s breath caught. So that was it. A false miracle. A scripted revelation. And he was to be the one to deliver it. He stood aghast. He had always known the noble houses to be cunning, calculated, cold. But this was something deeper, more insidious. He had not imagined such deception from a Gaulic lord. They had always struck him as honourable — an image they had carefully, almost artfully, preserved.

He stared at Cassius, struggling to hide his unease. How many other moments in history had been choreographed like this? How many supposed divine signs had been nothing more than tricks played on faithful crowds?

As if sensing the ripple of doubt, Cassius spoke again. ‘Someone will come to you before the ceremony. They will prepare you and explain your role in more detail. Don’t worry.’

Cedric nodded slowly. But his mind was no longer with the lord. It was already spiralling as questions, discomfort, and an unspoken guilt settled into his chest. He didn’t want to take part in a lie. Not one this deliberate, this orchestrated...this unjust. But he also knew he couldn’t refuse. Cassius had wrapped his intent in flattery, veiled it behind warmth and authority, and before Cedric had even understood what was being asked, he had already accepted — without question, without caution. He had trusted the Alban lord, the Gaulic lord, blindly.

Cassius gave him one final look — the mask of warmth returned. ‘You’ll do well, Cedric. I know it.’

Cedric gazed distantly through the window toward the Palace, trying to make sense of what was unfolding. He still admired the Gauls, and part of him felt he owed them this service. Surely this act was not so grave. Although Srivania was Astran by tradition, Cedric had never truly held any

faith of his own. He believed in no gods — neither the Lucerian one nor the many Astran deities his homeland revered. That alone would have been heresy if ever spoken aloud. But it would never be.

Still, there was another reason he found himself complying. The bearer of fire during Floralia played a central, exalted role. They stood at the heart of the ceremony, watched by royals, dignitaries, nobles, and commoners alike. Cedric remembered how August, the former young heir of House Gaul, had once stood upon the very stage he was now about to ascend.

August, son of Lord Titus, had already been exceptional by reputation — but after the festival, he became more than just a promising heir. He became a symbol. Honourable, handsome, capable, just. His part in the rite had made his almost mythic image undeniable.

And then, a month later, he perished in a great fire. Along with his mother and his younger sister. A tragedy, spoken of in hushed tones ever since. *Such sudden, unexpected things*, Cedric thought, *can happen to anyone. Even me.*

He pushed the thought aside and tried to focus on what would be required of him. Memorising the script, at least, posed no challenge. Instead, what worried him was that first, he had not properly handled a bow in years — always

favouring a sword during their weekly practices. The second — and far more dismaying — was his speech.

The curse which had plagued him since he was a boy. It came and went like a storm, unpredictable and cruel. The more he thought of it, the worse it became. He had tried everything. Reasoning, resisting, recognising. Nothing worked. His condition had no logic, no mercy. Such an ailment was said to afflict the anxious, the uncertain. But Cedric was not that — he knew. So why then did it affect him? He did not know.

He glanced up at the Lord, whose words had grown faint in his ears. But he brought his attention back just in time to see Cassius extend a hand.

‘I knew you would be useful,’ the Lord said, shaking his hand with enthusiasm. ‘Now, I’ve given you much to think about, so I’ll leave you to it. And.’ He paused, reaching inside his cloak. ‘I almost forgot. This is the script. Take it, memorise its lines.’

‘Of Ch — ’ Cedric began. But the phrase stuck in his throat. Dread coiled in his chest. Stuttering was tolerable. But this — this paralysis — this failure of the voice itself — was something else entirely. ‘S–Sure,’ he forced out instead.

Fuck.

‘Splendid!’ the Lord replied, handing him the folder. Then, a flicker of hesitation passed across Cassius’s face. ‘I... I must go now,’ he said abruptly, turning away as he did.

Cedric remained silent, too mired in his own struggles to question the sudden shift in the Lord’s demeanour. He watched the Lord walk to the door, pull his hood over his head, and glance back one last time.

‘I will see you soon, my boy.’

Then he was gone.

Cedric stood alone, unmoving. The silence returned. His thoughts churned. What had he just agreed to? What had he done? And worse — what was he becoming?

The next day passed in a haze. Cedric tried to study, to maintain his rhythm, but the words on the page in front of him blurred in his mind. His thoughts were elsewhere — adrift, fevered. He had told no one about his role as the Fire Bearer in Floralia and he had not yet looked at the script the Headmaster had given him.

Around him, life at the College moved as it always had. Boys drifted in and out of dormitories, clustering by house, laughing, discussing, or simply mingling in each other's company. This year's cohort was unusual in that it included two heirs of the three great houses — Gabriel Gaul and Septimius Sletion. It was a rare convergence, and many of the students tried to take advantage of the proximity they had with the future great lords. They circled the two like eager servants, hoping to win their favour at any given instance.

Cedric played no part in such games. He often passed by their dorms and saw the crowds. Laughter, voices, admiration. Doors flung open, friends spilling into the halls. Septimius's room, especially, was always overflowing with admirers, many of whom had nothing but flattery to offer. Cedric never stepped inside. He didn't belong with the Sletions, and even with the Gauls — whom he was presumably closer to — he often felt a tinge of unease. The Gauls had never pushed him away outright. But that subtle

distance was always there, hanging in the air like an off-putting smell.

He had once respected Gabriel for his neutrality. He had taken it as wisdom, a sign of level-headedness. But after his conversation with the Headmaster, Lord Cassius Gaul, Gabriel's uncle, that illusion was beginning to fracture. Cedric had begun to notice a pattern — how often the Gauls stood at the centre of disruption, and yet how rarely they were held to account. Their missteps were softened, reframed, forgiven. The College, whether by design or not, seemed to bend itself around them. And with the headmaster a Gaul himself, that leniency felt less like coincidence and more like design. He recalled the Sletions' frequent complaints. He had once dismissed them as petty grievances. He didn't anymore.

A memory surfaced. It was late spring, during a midday recess. He, Gabriel, and a few others were gathered in the north courtyard. Cedric had been speaking passionately about the rigid nature of their education. He questioned why their lectures had to feel so forced, so mundane in structure. Why memorisation was prized above understanding. Gabriel had listened, politely, but unmoved. He had responded that these methods had worked well for nearly five centuries — since the founding

of the College by Constarius's direct descendants — and saw no reason to change what had endured for so long.

Cedric had pushed back, citing the abolition of slavery just a century prior — how wrongs can endure for far too long simply because no one dared to reimagine them. That made Gabriel pause. For a moment, he had seemed to truly consider Cedric's point.

Then Septimius and his company arrived, drawn in by the noise of their debate. The conversation turned sharp. Septimius had cut into Cedric without mercy. He questioned his right to speak on Albion's affairs. 'What would a foreigner know about the oldest and most revered College in the realm? Nay, the world?' he had asked, eyes glinting with cruelty.

Hearing this, even some of the Sletions shifted uncomfortably. This was no longer a matter of reason — it was, instead, an attack of blood and race. One born from inherited prejudice, a festering, ill-informed hate that passed from one generation to the next.

Still, Cedric had stood his ground. He argued with clarity, with conviction. But when he turned to Gabriel for support, he was met with that same neutral tone. Gabriel, who had previously seemed receptive, had completely abandoned him in favour of neutrality. The Gaulic lordling spoke with the same attempts at balance. He had tried to

find a middle path, even though the path was plainly crooked. Septimius had clearly stepped out of line. Cedric had been right. But Gabriel would not take sides.

Cedric clenched his jaw, grimacing at the unfairness of it all. He envied them. Their names. Their certainty. Their effortless claim to power. How different his life might have been, had he too been born into a great house. How swiftly he could have silenced Septimius. How easily he might have swayed the crowds. How naturally he could rise, step by step, and claim the power to reshape a world whose flaws he was only just beginning to see.

But he was a Srivanian — a people with no great name, no feared legacy, no honoured past. Neither revered nor reviled, they simply were. Before the College, he had never questioned his own identity. In Massilia, people were lifted by merit — or so he had been taught. Skin, name, origin — none of it was supposed to matter. But now... now he wasn't so sure. Something inside him shifted. The crack had widened. The illusion was beginning to fracture. He saw now that even if the Gauls claimed to strive for some noble ideal, their culture, their subtle glances laced with unexpressed intent, their social order, their inherited personalities stood in clear defiance of it. And there was something else — something deeper still. A darker root that fed these patterns of thought. He could not name it

yet, but he felt its presence, pervasive, elusive, lurking just beyond reach.

Within their own households, behind closed doors, the nobles viewed themselves as the measure of all things. And for those who stood outside that heritage, the path was steeper, the ceiling lower. It revealed itself in the smallest of ways — details so finely veiled that only the most discerning among those who had lived beneath them could ever hope to see. Many endured it blindly, suffering in silence, never quite able to name the force that shaped their fate or decided their roles.

Cedric did not yet fully understand it himself, but he was close. On the verge of seeing it whole. Of grasping, at last, why he had always felt as though he could never become anything of true consequence. In this society, for those like him, such things were never truly allowed.

Under the amber hue of evening light, Cedric rose from his desk, rummaged around his room and picked up his flute — an old Srivanian make, bought from a travelling vendor in the markets of Massilia. The day's studies had been fruitless. No page would yield its knowledge to him, no text could still his mind. Feeling deeply frustrated in himself, he resolved then to not waste what remained of the day. If nothing else, he would do something he'd been meaning to for weeks.

He slipped the flute beneath his coat and left the dormitory, seeking a place to play. His room, though private, was not soundproof. The walls were thin, and sound carried too easily — it was no place for solitude. The internal courtyard was not much better. Its many windows made him feel perpetually watched, as though unseen eyes lingered on him from the hallways and balconies.

As such, he made his way outside into the Palace grounds. Past the courtyards and cloisters, he wandered among the neatly trimmed hedges and pristine lawns, searching for a place where he would not be disturbed. At last, near the corner of a garden wall where ivy draped heavily across the stone, he found peace.

There, he raised the flute to his lips and began to play.

The melody was one of his own making — an old tune, stitched together from memory and feeling. He had made it years ago, in the company of his dearest friend. A fellow Srivanian named Nicholas, three years his elder. They had grown up together, walked the same streets of Massilia, shared aspirations, hopes, dreams. Cedric had always called him Nish.

As the notes rose into the air, soft and uncertain at first, Cedric felt a deep melancholy swell in his chest. He missed Nish. Missed the brotherhood of his younger years. The comfort, the acceptance, the sense of being understood

without needing to explain himself. Here, in the capital, in the marbled halls of privilege and pretentiousness, that kind of closeness was hard to come by.

He had comrades, perhaps. But not brothers.

Not anymore.

And yet, beneath that yearning, he felt something imperceptible, something painful.

He missed what he had never truly known.

He missed belonging to something greater than himself, to a cause, a vision, a world where he could be certain of his place. A home not made of walls or soil, but of meaning. A sense of destiny. He wondered if this sorrow was born from a faded memory of another life, from some echo that clung to his soul.

In his mind's eye, he saw himself as the ruler of a great nation. A noble king, clad in gilded armour, standing upon the ramparts of a vast city — his city. One hand rested on the pommel of a sword that had never known defeat. Another around his queen — radiant, wise, beautiful — though her face remained a blur. Before them rode his friends, now his knights, the same loyal shadows from his youth, leading the charge across wind-swept fields, carrying his banner into the horizon.

Then, as the wind softened and the last notes of his flute faded into the hedges, Cedric found himself reflecting more deeply.

How far he had come.

He was in a place no Srivanian had ever stood. A student at the Royal College of Albion. And now the chosen Fire Bearer for Floralia. He asked himself — how? Why him? Not so long ago, a life like this would have felt like an impossible dream, but now it was real — it was his.

His thoughts drifted back to his earliest memories of childhood in Srivania. He remembered his vast extended family, their warm voices, their open arms, the meals always shared. There had been a rhythm to life, a purpose of belonging that wove through every household. He had never felt alone there. Not once.

Then came Massilia. Its gardens, its busy markets, the marble courtyards filled with distant scents and sounds. A city of immigrants, of seekers. He remembered the friends he had made — boys and girls from Aragon, Achaea, Nasrid, Arabius, even Aryanius, the large nation to the south of Srivania. Ordinary people often mistook Srivania as a province of Aryanius since they shared the same Astran faith. Cedric despised this mislabel as Srivanians were vastly different to their Ayranian cousins. Between their two nations lay the Rum Caliphate — a proud

Muharan land that stood like a wall between the Astran Srivania and Aryanius. *Perhaps one day I will unite these lands — by conquering the Rum and Aryanius.*

He was still half-lost in memory when a sound from the hedges startled him.

A soft rustle — then a girl stepped through. Curly brown hair, gentle features, a curious smile. She glanced behind her and beckoned the others forward.

Out came Gabriella Gaul, followed by her brother Gabriel, another girl he did not recognise, and — unexpectedly — Decimus Sletion.

‘What are you doing out here?’ Gabriella asked, tilting her head, one hand resting on her hip.

Before Cedric could answer, the unfamiliar girl pointed toward him. ‘Oh, you know him? He’s the one who was playing. Look!’

Decimus stepped forward, cautious but certain. ‘That’s Cedric. Another student here.’

Cedric rose, uneasy at finding himself the centre of attention. He tucked the flute beneath his arm and offered a brief, respectful bow toward the girl.

‘A pleasure. I am Cedric Arivarna.’

She blushed, just faintly. ‘Clarissa Clayment. The pleasure is mine.’

Then Decimus added flatly, ‘She’s my cousin.’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘Do you play often?’ he asked.

Cedric shook his head. ‘Not really, this is the first time in a long while. I’m still practicing.’

Decimus raised his lip and nodded. ‘You’re quite good.’

Cedric was taken aback by the sudden compliment. Before he could respond, Gabriella stepped forward with a warm smile.

‘Hi, Cedric.’

Her voice was familiar, her tone gentle. She looked the same as ever — wavy brown hair, light freckles, a kind, rounded face. He had always liked her. Never romantically but always sincerely.

‘Gabriella,’ he said. ‘How have you been? What brings you to the capital?’

‘Floralia,’ she said brightly. ‘Gabriel and Decimus are showing us around.’

The word pierced him — Floralia. He was reminded, all at once, of what lay ahead.

She smiled brightly. ‘Are you prepared?’

He blinked. ‘For what?’

‘You’re the Fire Bearer, aren’t you?’ she said, slightly tilting her head.

The others looked at him in surprise.

‘Yes,’ he said slowly. ‘How did you know?’

‘My uncle told me,’ she said, shrugging.

The headmaster.

Clarissa gasped, stepping closer. ‘Oh my! Fire Bearer?’ She covered her mouth, eyes wide.

Cedric nodded.

Decimus stepped forward. ‘Wait — how? I thought only Gauls were chosen for that.’

Cedric stiffened. He recalled the words Cassius had said to him, the flattery, the manipulation. ‘I suppose they chose me this year... for some reason,’ he said coolly.

Gabriella smiled. ‘I’m sure you’ll do well, Cedric.’

Cedric inclined his head. ‘Thank you.’

Gabriel checked the time on his pocket watch, then gestured to the path behind them. ‘We’re heading to the Palace for dinner. Care to join us?’

Cedric paused, uncertain. After everything he had come to realise, part of him recoiled at the thought of dining within those walls. And yet, he couldn’t bring himself to refuse. The opportunity was too rare.

‘Alright,’ he said, softly. *I’ve never been inside the Palace for something like this. I can’t deny it — part of me is excited.*

As they walked, Clarissa fell into step beside him, speaking with innocent ease. She told him about her family, about how exhausting the journey had been from Sletonia, how they had to change trains twice after arriving

in Cross–Port. Cedric listened politely, but inwardly he was restless. He couldn't stand her, how oblivious she was to the world and its real struggles, how privileged and sheltered she was. She had never known struggle. Not truly.

He then glanced over at Decimus, wondering what kind of life he had lived. Likely one not far removed from hers. These nobles lived with ease, and they did not even realise it.

They passed through the main gates of the Palace with hardly a pause. Two guards stood at attention on either side, clad in immaculate white garments overlaid with gleaming silvered chestplates, bracers, and greaves. Their helms, open–faced, bore the unmistakable threat of authority — the gaze of men trained not just to watch, but to act. Cedric instinctively slowed, half–expecting to be halted, interrogated, turned back. Yet when the guards caught sight of Gabriel leading the party, they offered only a subtle nod and stepped aside. *Of course*, Cedric thought bitterly, trailing behind. *One look at a highborn Gaul, and the gates open as if fate itself had issued the command.*

The entrance opened into a vaulted corridor of cold splendour. The floor beneath his feet was made up of black and white stone, polished so pristinely it felt like he was walking on ice. Candlelight poured down from chandeliers shaped like golden starbursts, their arms branching like the

points of a crown. On either side, between the towering marble pillars, hung the banners of Albion's great houses — Gaul's emerald, Normandy's ruby, the sapphire of Sletion, and at the centre, high above all, the white of the royal house.

As they went up the curved stairway, identical on either side, leading to the higher plateau of the throne room, Cedric felt the air change. A seriousness overtook him. *This is where power resides*, he thought, feeling the energy that seemed built into the stone. The room rose like a cathedral, impossibly tall, the stained-glass dome above glinting like a thousand shattered stars. Every window was anointed in light. Evening sun poured through the stained glass, casting fractured beams across the marbled floor and walls. The entire chamber was filled with a striking hue, orange, red and gold — like a flame frozen in time.

At the far end of the room, high above, loomed the throne. It rested at the peak of a sweeping marble staircase, flanked on either side by thin pillars and the deep curve of an arched space. Above it, fixed upon the wall, towering far above any person, was a great crimson cross — deep red, rich as blood, like a wound cut into the Palace itself. It did not glow. It did not glimmer. It simply was, like a reminder that Lucer was above all, even kings. It was more than a

symbol — it was a claim which signified the divine right of kings.

At the foot of the stairs stood two of the Manus Regis, and though Cedric had seen them before, their presence always caught his breath. They were armoured not in the simple polished steel of the palace guards but in their own unique ornate plates of tempered steel lined with gold and etched with the runes of old. One bore a massive one-headed axe, its blade broad enough to cleave a man in two. The other rested his hands on a longsword — its pommel inlaid with a sapphire that caught the light like a star. They stood perfectly still, like silent sentinels, not swayed by any force, and yet he could feel that they were watching, ever ready to spring into action.

He dared a glance up, just for a moment. He wanted to see if he could identify them. One of the Manus Regis met his gaze with the dispassionate weight of someone who had judged a thousand souls before him. Cedric's eyes dropped. His throat tightened, and he continued onwards towards the dining hall. *What presence... Why am I afraid? What could they possibly do to me? I suppose they could strike me down if they so pleased, and since they are Manus Regis, no one would oppose them. After all, I am just a foreign student here.*

As a child, it had been his dream to join the Manus Regis. He recalled discussing it with Nish, how they had

trained every day in the evening when their parents would permit. How they had sparred with sticks with laughter and joy and returned home, bruised, drenched in sweat, with swollen fingers they tried to conceal.

To stand in armour like that, below the king. It had seemed noble then. The highest form of achievement.

Not anymore.

That childish dream had died somewhere between Massilia and Constaria. And now, standing in that vast, gilded hall beneath the blood-red cross of Lucer, he could not even imagine it. Something about this place repulsed him. It was grand, yes. Orderly. Immaculate. But too much so. The symmetry was unnatural, the stillness suffocating. It felt staged — curated to impress, to deceive, to intimidate. There was no warmth in its beauty, no soul in its splendour. It felt like a lie that had forgotten why it was lying. Something was wrong with this place. He felt it in his chest.

Clarissa's voice broke the spell. She was still speaking beside him, her tone animated, unaware of the solemnity around them. He half-listened, nodding when it seemed polite, but his mind was elsewhere — watching, remembering, feeling.

They passed beyond the throne room into the western wing, where light and laughter spilled out in front of them.

The dining hall was far more alive than the rest of the palace. It was brimming with guests, dignitaries, and a scattering of highborn students already seated at long, linen-covered tables. Silverware clinked, goblets caught the light, and floral arrangements bloomed in polished vases between every other seat. The hall hummed with anticipation. *All for Floralia, Cedric thought. All to see the Fire Bearer light the wreath. All to see me...*

He hated it. Hated that he was being used — dressed up in ancient robes only to defile their very meaning. He, a boy of Astran blood, made to carry the flame of Lucerian triumph. As if his heritage was something to parade and discard as they saw fit.

Floralia, despite its religious dressings, had once meant something real. Life, laughter, the bloom of a new season. It was meant to herald spring — to celebrate rebirth after winter's long grip. But Titus had revived it as spectacle, not spirit. Its timing was broken. Now it came at summer's end, on the cusp of autumn, when the world began to die. It no longer welcomed life as it was meant to. In truth, the whole festival was a façade. A stage, nothing more. But it was still beautiful, pure, even if its resurrection was flawed. And now its final occurrence marked nothing but erasure. To take its place was Lucerian order.

Cedric inhaled deeply, his eyes found an open place at one of the centre tables, already occupied by Gaulic students engaged in casual conversation. Gabriel and Decimus took their seats, greeting others with the ease of nobility, and Clarissa practically floated in beside them, her words continuing unabated.

Cedric sat down last, his mind still on the throne. Its image lingered — etched like a scar. He was on the brink of something, some deep realisation, he knew it, he felt it, but he could not see it yet.

Across the table, a flurry of chatter filled the air. Two identical little girls spoke in unison. One of them locked eyes with him mid-sentence, froze, then leapt up with a shriek.

‘Cedric!’

His name rang out like a bell, drawing half the table’s gaze. Her twin pulled her back into her seat, while an older girl beside them hushed them both with a single raised finger. Lucy, Ella and Evelyn — the Headmaster’s daughters. His heart gave a small, unwelcome flutter at the sight of the eldest daughter, Evelyn.

She was two years younger, though she carried herself with an easiness he could never match. Her long brown hair fell in soft waves over one shoulder and she met his

gaze only briefly, offered a faint smirk, then turned back to her conversation with another girl.

The twins, meanwhile, could not be contained. They bounded over to him, interrupting his conversation with Clarissa — much to his relief. He had once mentored the twins during his later years at Lauriet, and for a time, they had felt like sisters to him. Lucy had always been the leading twin, sharp-tongued and strong-willed. Ella, by contrast, was gentle, soft-spoken and always shy in her sweetness. He remembered how remarkably curious and intelligent Lucy had been during their lessons. How her mind grasped concepts with startling ease and how she always pressed him further — never content with shallow answers.

Seeing them now stirred something warm in him. They hadn't changed. Not at all. They still retained that purity of youth.

Lucy stood in front of him, hands on her hips, her dark blonde hair tumbling in front of her. Her hazel eyes, wide and bright, held a mischievous fire, and her face, youthful yet sharp, made her appear to be older than she actually was. Her sister, Ella — though near identical — was clearly different. There was a softness in her gaze, in her posture. She somehow looked younger, and so one could easily tell

them apart not by their features, but by the way they carried themselves.

‘You never wrote to us, did you?’ Lucy declared with a fury typical to her. ‘Not once!’ she added, jabbing her finger at his chest without hesitation, as if daring him to justify his absence.

Ella, half a step behind her sister, gave a meek smile. ‘We thought you had forgotten us.’

‘Forgotten you two?’ Cedric smiled, rising. ‘I could never.’

And in truth, he hadn’t — they were special, fragments of his youth, reminders that goodness and purity still existed in the world. He continued telling them how the college had kept him too busy to write.

Lucy narrowed her eyes, unimpressed. ‘Busy?’ she repeated, hands still on her hips. ‘You could’ve written one letter. One. We’re not strangers, Cedric.’

They were right, he could have. What had stopped him? Before he could think further or reply, Clarissa leaned in from his side, far too close.

‘You didn’t say you knew the Headmaster’s daughters,’ she said, smugly leaning her head toward the twins with apparent curiosity. Then, as if she belonged, she nestled into the circle of conversation. Gabriel, Decimus, and Gabriella joined in soon after, drawn by the noise and

familiarity. Their table then gradually grew louder and louder in shared conversation.

Lucy, never one to stay off centre, crossed her arms and asked, ‘What are you even going to do once you graduate?’

Cedric looked off to the side, caught off guard. ‘I don’t know yet.’

‘You don’t know?’ she said, half-laughing. ‘Then why even come here? Why study at the Royal College at all?’

Her question wasn’t cruel, just earnest, but still, it made something flick inside him. He turned to her, bemused. ‘Because I have no estate, no title, no power. People like me have to carve something for themselves — I came here because it’s the only way forward.’

The words hung for a breath. Decimus’s eyes sharpened, sensing the obvious connotation. ‘You think it’s easy for all nobles?’ he said flatly. ‘You know nothing of my life.’

‘I am not saying that your life is easy, no life truly is, but your birth, your name, your title, it gives you privileges that others don’t have,’ Cedric rebuked.

‘That’s not always true,’ he said, fists clenched. ‘Sometimes, all those additional things which you named only make things more difficult — they make a life harder than it should be.’

Cedric glanced at him, then nodded slowly. He had never considered that. ‘Perhaps you’re right,’ he admitted. ‘I

shouldn't have assumed. If you ever want to tell me, I'd like to listen.'

That silenced the table. Decimus stared at him as though he'd spoken in another language. The young noble looked stunned, as if trying to decipher whether there had been a hidden insult in what Cedric had just said. But there was none. Cedric had been sincere in his words, and that, in this world, was incomprehensible.

Cedric understood. Decimus was a noble so used to conceit and deception laced in practically every dialogue. He understood the coldness of their world, the distance taught to them from birth. He appreciated then why such a gesture from him would seem so foreign. He thought then of Srivania — of the unspoken sense of belonging that lived in every person, every word, every shared glance. Of the warmth he had felt there — not only from the people, but from the land itself. As if the hills knew his name. As if the mountains, the clouds, the sea cared for him deeply.

For so long, he had envied nobles, for they had seemed to possess everything he had been denied. But now, he was beginning to pity them. They could never have what he had known. And he — if he kept rising, kept climbing, without forgetting where he had begun — then he might yet have everything which they valued and more.

He could still retain his soul, his connection to Aereth, whereas they had been severed from it since birth. Never in their entire life would most of them understand what came so naturally to him. A slow smile curved on his lips as he looked at Decimus once more.

He wanted to show them all a glimpse. Teach them all that the world need not be so cold and narrow. That there was still light, still hope, just beyond the horizon — waiting. So close to their reach. All they needed to do was to reach out and grasp it.

Reach for it.

A voice spoke through him.

I am lucky, he thought to himself as his smile grew wider. I was a fool to ever think otherwise.

‘So, you truly don’t know what you want to do after you graduate?’ Ella asked, breaking the silence.

‘I do know,’ he proclaimed, drawing in the close attention of the others.

‘Well, what is it?’ Lucy nipped.

‘I want to be a king, king of Srivania,’ Cedric declared to the world.

Gabriel laughed, thinking it a jest, but when Cedric didn’t break his stare, the lordling’s expression changed. ‘Truly?’ he asked, narrowing his eyes, tilting his head forward.

‘Yes, truly,’ Cedric affirmed.

‘Are you a high noble there? A prince, perhaps?’ Decimus said, leaning in closer.

‘A prince?’ Clarissa repeated, her eyes widened.

‘No,’ Cedric replied, wishing it to be otherwise. ‘I am not, but my family does hail from a minor noble house. Our not — so — distant ancestors used to be rulers, not kings but high nobles, much like the Gauls or Sletions I suppose. But that was hundreds of years ago. Now we have no claim nor title.’

‘Then how do you plan on becoming the king?’ Decimus asked, not in a presumptive way — there was more curiosity in his tone than anything else.

‘Through sheer force of will,’ he declared, glancing up at the ceiling.

‘Will that be enough?’ Decimus questioned.

‘Only time will tell I suppose,’ Cedric said, shrugging. ‘But if I am to speak plainly, then yes.’

‘You are an interesting fellow Cedric,’ Decimus said, nodding his head slowly.

‘Hey!’ Lucy exclaimed as she pulled him closer by his collar. ‘I thought you didn’t tell others about your goals and that it was a secret between us,’ she whispered.

‘It was,’ he replied, laughing. ‘I’m not sure what overcame me.’

Lucy took a step back and watched him closely. ‘You’ve changed Cedric. You’re not the same anymore.’

‘Perhaps in some ways I’m different. But internally I am the same and I always will be.’

‘Is that true?’ she asked, her expression faltering.

‘It is. I promise,’ he said, raising his pinkie finger.

She extended her hand, raised her finger and curled it around his. ‘I believe you.’

The dinner stretched long into the evening. Three courses of finely arranged delicacies were served. Drizzled portions of vegetables, sculpted pieces of pork, and some Hestrisi crème dish he did not know the name of.

Though presented well, Cedric found them hollow, somewhat tasteless, and utterly bland. The thought made him long for the steaming trays of the college cafeteria, for the sharp spices and overcooked rice served by Alia, the old Misirian cook whose stern kindness had always reminded him of a grandmother. Her food had soul and was perhaps the only part of college life that had ever surpassed his expectations.

Conversation at the table drifted into simpler matters — the happenings in Massilia, college rumours, the antics of professors. Usually, he would have loathed such conversation, but today, around such company, he welcomed it. Still, he did not contribute much — smiled

when required, responded when addressed. He was at ease. Content.

Frequently, his attention kept drifting sideways — towards Evelyn. Though she was just across the table, next to the twins, she was in a world of her own. Far from his reach. She spoke easily with the girls around her. Her gestures were fluid, her voice high and melodious, her smile — disarming. The other girls orbited her like celestial bodies drawn to her greater existence. She was like him in that way — self-contained, drawing others without effort — this intrigued him and made him want to be closer to her. He considered approaching her. But each time the thought took form, it withered. What would he say without sounding foolish?

So, he remained silent.

Watching. Waiting. Wanting.

Dinner ended before he realised it. Dishes were cleared, chairs scraped back, and people left slowly in groups. Lucy and Ella approached to bid him goodbye, but something in their tone — half-pout, half-lament — carried the sense that the evening had slipped from their hands too quickly. That their reunion after many years felt much more hollow than it should have. And it had, in part, because of Clarissa. She had not relented throughout the entire affair, her presence constant, her pursuit unmistakable. Under

certain angles, in a certain light, she could be considered attractive — but Cedric had no patience for such shallow criteria. His standards were not only in appearance, not even in character. He desired perfection, utter perfection. A single blemish, a single flaw in personality, and he would be utterly indifferent.

He was holding himself back for a girl who was worthy. A girl flawless in every regard, who speaks with care, who understands without needing to be told. Selfless, yet self-aware. Whole within herself, yet capable of completing him completely. Evelyn, perhaps, could be that. But he did not know her well enough. Clarissa — he knew enough.

She had begun to say something more to him — perhaps to arrange another meeting. But he was already turning away, pretending not to hear. With a practiced charm, he slipped through the crowd, vanishing politely into the stream of exiting guests.

As he passed through the gilded arches of the hall, he caught sight of Decimus. Across the room, standing still amidst the shifting sea of noble silks and shimmering dresses, the young Sletion noble was watching him. His piercing blue eyes cut through the crowd and reached him directly. Yet, they said nothing, and passed each other by without so much as a parting glance.

That gaze stayed with him. It lingered as he slipped past the crowd through the lavish corridors of the Palace into the still night. The air was cold, colder than he expected. *Autumn, it feels like, is coming sooner than it did this time last year.* He rubbed his hands together and exhaled slowly. The Palace behind him glowed with laughter and warmth, but he had left it behind. He did not want to walk back with his friends, he was seeking something else — solitude.

He found a narrow alcove tucked beside the College's outer wall, a place half-forgotten, overgrown with hedges and moss. There he leaned back against the cold stone and looked up. Somewhere far above, the stars were just beginning to appear, dim and scattered, flickering softly in their iridescent glow. The moon was nowhere to be seen, and the sky felt strangely empty without it.

He remained there for a long while unmoving, in silence, reflecting on his day, his life. How far he had come, and yet how distant the heavens still seemed, so far above him. But they were not unreachable. He would bring them down. He would make a Heaven on Aereth. It was not impossible. It was destiny. His destiny. He was certain of it.

When he rose at last, he slipped through the back entrance of the College silently, finding the halls completely empty. At the door to his room, something halted him. It was not a sound nor a voice — only a

presence. A faint stirring in the darkened shadows of the corridor ahead lit up by torchlight, where the hallway bent and disappeared into nothingness. The eastern stairway lay in that direction — the same one he had ascended in the morning. Yet tonight, it called to him, quietly, beckoning him closer.

He had been outside for perhaps half an hour. By now, all the other students would be in their rooms, likely asleep or drifting close to it. Their chambers were lit only by the faint, wavering glow of night lamps. Cedric stood still, his college robe drawn tight around him, his heart faintly trembling — not from fear, but from anticipation. A strange desire had crept upon him, sudden yet undeniable. He had been surrounded by people mere minutes before — bathed in light, in voices, in the false warmth of belonging. It had awakened something joyful within him. But now he longed to feel its opposite. His brief sojourn outside had offered him a glimpse, but now he wanted it in full. It was the kind of loneliness one must seek to truly understand. The sort that lives in forgotten spaces, where no eyes watch and no soul enters. What would it feel like? To stand in a silent room at the top of a tower in the dead of night, completely alone. It was an absurd curiosity, and yet, it gripped him. And so, without hesitation, he moved.

His boots pattered on the cold stone floor as he passed through the narrow arch before the stairs. He moved forward and stepped up the winding spiral staircase of the eastern tower, hand gliding across the cold stone wall. The air grew colder with each step. No sunlight graced him now — only the faint light of stars bled in through the long windows as he reached the door to Professor Saserna's classroom.

He stepped inside. The door creaked softly, then fell shut behind him. The strange coldness of the room struck him at once — it was colder than it had been outside. This unsettled him. The room felt emptier than it had in the morning — hollow, as if something within it had retreated. He crossed his arms over his chest, finding a fleeting warmth there before a sudden gust of wind struck his face, harrowing his eyes and chilling him to the bone.

He turned.

Two tall windows stood open, shutters clattering madly against their frames, the latch still miraculously fastened. The wind hissed through them and struck him. He shielded himself and stepped forward.

Who the hell left this open? He thought, reaching for the windows.

Just as his fingers met the cold metal, the wind stilled — and above, parting through the weight of impossibly vast clouds, the moon emerged in full.

It illuminated the room at once, casting a pale silver glow across his face. Then, it slowly pulled his gaze downward. Below, by the lower ridge of the palace hill, a series of large, covered wagons wound through the narrow path that led to the old stone warehouse — the one tucked just beneath the Palace's shadow. The light of lanterns held by gloved hands lit up the path, their pale radiance flickering against the dark.

Voices rose from below, distant and muffled. They sounded like echoes from another world — faint, rhythmical, almost playful in tone. A child might hear such noises and have no further speculation of their cause or purpose.

But Cedric was no longer a child.

There was more here — he knew it.

The crates being unloaded were heavy. Metal-bound. Some large, others small. Not goods. Not food. But arms. Weaponry. They had to be.

He narrowed his gaze and leaned further over the windowsill. One of the lanterns passed near an open crate and for an instant, the light caught something inside — dark iron barrels, narrow and heavy yet marked with

strangely vivid colours — red, green, orange. Foreign designs, without question. Western-made. Likely refinements of the old S.D.R. models, remnants of Relith's failed conquest. He recalled whispers he had heard in the courtrooms, rumours of western cannons that could tear through stone gates, and hand cannons, light enough to carry, yet powerful enough to halt a charging knight fifty paces away.

And now they were here. In the capital. Hauled in the dead of night, unannounced, unmarked. No longer whispers, but real, deadly.

He stared longer, his heart slowing in steady, contemplative rhythm. Why now? Why in secret? Floralia was mere days away — every noble eye was fixed on celebration, on rites, on the illusion of unity. And beneath it all, this. Armament. Preparation. But for what?

The thought chilled him more than the night breeze ever could. He stepped back and closed the windows slowly, securing the latch and locking it in place. The wind howled against the glass for a moment longer — then faded.

He stood in the cold, unmoving as the severity of the scene finally struck him. How had even he — who lived within the same building as the Palace, who walked its

corridors and dined beneath its vaulted ceilings — failed to grasp its full weight until now?

There was a veil over all things. A haze that dulled the senses and obscured the reality of things. It was not unique to Albion. This fog of ignorance hung over all nations. The masses wandered through it blind. And the nobles, for all their learning and rank, fared little better. Only a few — those who stood nearest to the heart of power — saw what truly stirred beneath the surface. Even among them, some would shudder and turn away. Others would watch, unmoved. Only the rarest would act. And yet, it was never they who paid the price.

No — it was the workers, the farmers, the merchants, the young men pulled from their homes, the mothers and daughters left behind. The ordinary people were always the last to know and always the first to suffer.

Cedric realised that such an unfortunate fact of life was inevitable. The few would always dictate the lives of the many. Still, the thought unsettled him. For he knew with certainty now that the Alban government did not serve its people.

Has any government ever truly done so?

The Royal Court acted only for itself. Every policy, every decision, every secret shipment such as this served the same unjust ends. The preservation of their power, their image,

their hold over the lives of ordinary people. That much was clear. The workers below were but cogs in that vast machine. They could not be blamed. No — it was those behind the curtain who were to blame. But who were they really? The King? The nobles of the court? The Sletions, with their gold? The Gauls, with their pride? The Normany, with their grudges? Or was it someone else entirely — someone deeper in the shadow, whom no one dared to name? Cedric did not know.

But this much he did know. The crates below had come from across the Free Channel — foreign weapons, smuggled in under the cover of night. Unmarked, undocumented, unseen. No public declaration. No grand decree. No call to arms. Only silence. Only deception. And he was to be a part of it.

Cedric shivered. The weapons could only mean one thing. Albion was preparing for war. The long peace that had followed Relith's defeat was nearing its end. Yet, as he stared longer, uncertainty crept in. Perhaps he was mistaken. Perhaps there were justifications, spoken in council chambers far above his reach — reasons weighed and measured by minds older, nearer to power. Surely their minds were greater than his — more seasoned in calculation, in governance, in securing Albion's future.

Surely he was too young, too inexperienced to presume that he could arbitrate their decisions.

He tried to believe it. He told himself he was overreaching. He told himself to let it go. But the thought lingered. There was truth in what he had realised. And that truth unsettled him to the core.

The wind howled again, stronger than before. It slammed fiercely against the windows with a fury that made Cedric flinch. The shutters trembled violently in their frames, rattling as though they might rip free and fly away. Below, a few wagons began to leave. They departed in a slow, winding line, their lanterns swinging gently as they descended down the slope. To him, they almost looked like an immense glowing serpent slithering through the valley, its long body rippling beneath the silver gaze of the moon.

Then, the wind stopped. The sudden stillness that followed was unnatural. The chaos outside had vanished, replaced by a feeling of deep, unspeakable dread. A coldness settled in the room. He stood for a moment in that silence, thinking he might still find peace in it.

But then — he felt it.

All at once, it seized him. A fear raw and primal, drawn from the oldest part of his mind.

He had felt this only once before, long ago, in the forests of Srivania while hiking with his cousins late in the

afternoon. The buzzing of insects had vanished. So too the chirping of birds. The woods had gone eerily still. Later, in a clearing, his eldest cousin admitted something had been following them. He had not spoken of it earlier, afraid that panic might scatter them. They had assumed it was a tiger.

But this was not Srivania. This was Albion. An empty room, locked away from the world. There was no logic to it. No reason. And yet — he could not ignore it. The tightening of his chest. The chill in his blood. The unmistakable sensation of being seen. Seen by something on the hunt, by something dangerous, by something that was already very near.

The shadows in the corners of the room seemed to pulse, to shift, to breathe. The glass of the window, which moments ago had held the moon and the world, now held nothing but darkness. It felt like a thin barrier. He felt, nonsensically yet certainly, that something was watching him from the other side.

Eyes widened and without further thought, he held his robe around him tightly and left the room in a rush. He didn't look back. He didn't dare look back. As he hurried down the spiral staircase, his peripheral vision deceived him. The flickering light from a distant corridor lantern twisted the shadows behind him. On the wall beside him,

he thought he saw impossible misshapen limbs grabbing the air, reaching after him.

He nearly fell twice. His breath was shallow, his pulse racing. When he reached the bottom, he ran. The social part of his mind — ever dutiful, ever ready to account for his image — wondered what he would say if a professor or another student found him now, half-crazed, panting, fleeing from nothing. But no one was present.

Out of fear, he passed by his room in a blur, then quickly turned back and stumbled inside, slamming the door behind him. Only then did he look through the slit in his wall to the corridor outside.

Nothing.

Of course. He exhaled, long and slow. His back slid down the door until he sat on the floor. His logical mind took hold. *Spirits don't exist. Ghosts aren't real. Those are the stories of the uneducated, of villages tucked between distant hills and haunted forests. Not scholars. Not me.*

Still — it took some time before his hands stopped trembling. Eventually, his mind steadied. He rose from the floor and lit the oil lantern on his desk. The soft, amber glow filled the room, chasing the shadows into corners where they no longer frightened him. What he had just experienced was not real, it couldn't be. He banished the unsettling thoughts from his mind and turned to the script

Lord Cassius had given him. The pages were on his desk, wrapped in parchment and bound with a thin red cord. He loosened the knot, unfurled the bundle, and held the script in his hands. Then, slowly, he began to read.

The lines were short, ceremonial, spoken in the old Ascanian tongue. He read them aloud once, then again, then a third time. He focused on the vowels, on the cadence, on the subtle tension in the consonants. His voice, though uncertain at first, began to settle. He imagined August Gaul — perfect, noble August — standing before a gathered crowd, his light brown curls tucked neatly behind his ears, his bright blue eyes shining against the dark. Wrapped in a toga, arms raised to the heavens, reciting the rites with flawless grace. Cedric tried to summon that same poise. He thought, too, of Lord Aurelius — Gabriel and Gabriella's father — the realm's most revered orator, whose voice moved even foreign courts to silence.

He mimicked both their mannerisms. The lift of the chin, the upturned palm, the command in pauses, the deliberate shaping of each phrase. He practiced for what felt like hours. Eventually, his voice grew hoarse. He reached for the flask beside his desk and found it nearly empty. He crossed the room to refill it from the water barrel. The sound of pouring calmed him. His heart had stopped racing. The fear was long passed.

He decided that he had done enough for the night, so he laid in bed, the coarse blanket wrapped tightly around him. His body ached. His mind wandered. Today had been... strange. Monumental. *How will my life change after Floralia?* He wondered, welcoming the sense of tiredness that made his eyelids grow heavy.

Then, as sleep came, it was not war or shadows that filled his dreams. It was a girl. A perfect girl he met at a grand fair who made him feel as if there was nothing else more important in the entire world.

When Cedric awoke the next morning, he longed to remain beneath the blanket, wrapped in its fading warmth. He yawned and rubbed his eyes as they traced the lines of the wooden beams above him. The cold air that clung to the room made him reluctant to move, and for a while, he allowed himself to indulge in that guilt-ridden pleasure of remaining in bed when he was supposed to be up. The morning chill in Constaria was unlike anything he had known before. Even after three years, he still had not gotten used to its biting cold. Nestled beneath the northern mountains that stretched deep into Normandy territory, Constaria was far colder than Massilia — the coastal city of his childhood, warm and open to the southwestern winds.

It was only when he heard the footsteps of fellow students hurrying toward the mess hall that he stirred. Hunger, and the insistent pressure of social obligation, forced him out of bed at last. *I swear, the ability to wake up whenever you wish must be one of the main drivers behind the pursuit of wealth and power*, he thought, sighing. *It is certainly becoming mine.*

He dressed quickly, not bothering to groom himself. At this time of day, only students would see him, not professors or, more importantly, girls. Thus, there was no need for refinement. Passing Edwin's door, he glanced

briefly through the half-open frame and found the lad still asleep, sprawled carelessly across his bed. Cedric shook his head and moved on, slipping into the growing tide of young men funnelling toward breakfast. The moment he entered the mess hall, the air shifted. Dozens of eyes turned to him.

Some whispered as he passed, others merely watched — measuring, envious, indifferent. Word of his role in Floralia had already spread, it seemed. Cedric lowered his gaze, made his way to the canteen and collected his meal quickly before settling at the closest empty seat he could find.

He regretted it at once.

The table became occupied by the most unpopular students in the College — sons of minor noble houses with little influence, boys whose names no one remembered. Their standing was even lower than Edwin's, who, at the very least, carried the Normany name. These boys were awkward, forgettable and easily overlooked. One of them offered a tentative greeting, and though Cedric had no real desire to engage, he nodded politely and allowed the conversation to stir.

They were astonished by him. By the title. The Fire Bearer. They asked him how he had been chosen, what he had to do to secure the role — Cedric had no answer to offer. He wasn't sure himself. Perhaps Lord Cassius had

named him out of preference. Or perhaps he had merely been in the right place at the right time.

Either way, the role was his now — and only ever his. For there would be no one after him.

He had memorised the lines, and though he had not yet practised the bow, he felt prepared — at least outwardly. Still, the thought of public failure haunted him.

He was midway through his meal when a presence entered the room that made him pause. He looked up.

Patroclus.

The brilliant former student. He wore knight's armour, newly forged, polished to a striking gleam. He moved with that same gravitas Cedric remembered so vividly. For a moment, Cedric watched him, wondering why he was in the college again. Then the young knight glanced his way once and headed straight for him.

Cedric's breath caught. 'P-P-Patroclus,' he stammered. *Fuck*, he thought, inwardly wincing.

Patroclus stopped before him, his expression unreadable. 'I believe you are Cedric.'

'Y-yes, I am,' Cedric replied, trying to compose himself, conscious of how unkempt he must have looked.

'I've been informed that you are the Fire Bearer for Floralia. Congratulations.' His voice was steady, almost detached. The dark iron of his armour caught the light, the

red inlays glowing faintly. A short red half-cape hung over his left shoulder, straight, pristine.

Cedric had never seen him so close. His short dark hair was neatly cut, every strand in place. His eyes were a calm, unreadable grey. His skin — pale, lightly freckled. His face — clean-shaven and his features — sharp, precise.

‘Thank you,’ Cedric said, standing up straighter, squaring his shoulders.

Patroclus nodded once. ‘I’m here to deliver a message. Lord Aurelius Gaul of Massilia requests your attendance. He’s waiting by your room.’

Cedric’s mind blanked for a moment. ‘L-Lord Aurelius?’

‘Yes,’ Patroclus replied, stepping aside. ‘If you are not otherwise engaged, follow me.’

Cedric looked down at his unfinished meal. The bread was stale, and the vegetable soup, once warm enough to tolerate, had grown thick and unappetising.

He stood, picked up the tray, and carried it to the bin before discarding its contents without hesitation.

Then he moved quickly to follow behind the armoured figure of Patroclus. There was something surreal about walking so close behind him. Patroclus was the ideal — the unspoken standard by which every Royal College student measured themselves. Even after his graduation, his name

was still whispered. He was brilliant in all the ways that mattered. A scholar of unmatched depth, fluent across disciplines and languages. A warrior of grace and force, skilled with bow, blade, and reins. Whatever task he was given, he mastered it. Cedric had seen him before, but only from a distance — on stages, receiving accolades, or in the hallways of the college, existing in another world entirely. That he now walked behind him, summoned for an audience by Lord Aurelius himself, felt unreal. He wanted to speak. To ask something. Anything. But what could he say to a man who had already carved his name into the future?

Instead, Cedric's thoughts turned inward. Why had Lord Aurelius come? What could the Lord of Massilia possibly want with him?

Before he could find an answer, they were already at the dorm. Patroclus stopped just short of the door and turned, offering a single nod. The meaning was clear. Go in.

Cedric opened the door slowly, his fingers trembling on the handle.

And there he was. A man, seated on the edge of the bed, half-turned away and examining a small object in his hand. His robe — deep green, adorned with golden thread — bore the sigil of Gaul, the great white tree. His long brown

curls, streaked with grey, fell neatly over his shoulders, and his trimmed beard carried the same elegance as his bearing.

Though Cedric had spoken with him before at Lauriet, the awe had never faded. This man was more than a simple noble — he was a pillar of Albion, one of the three true powers beneath the Crown. Each the heads of the three great houses: Lord Gerald Sletion, Lord Maynard Normandy and, of course, Lord Aurelius Gaul.

Lord Titus, Aurelius's older brother, was ailing, and had long since withdrawn from active rule. Thus, it was Aurelius who held the reins of Gaul, who spoke in councils and courts, and who shaped the future of the house. His presence filled the small dormitory utterly, as if the walls themselves bowed to admit him.

The Lord turned slowly as Cedric entered, placing the object beside him on the table. 'Cedric,' he said, his voice warm and rich.

Cedric lowered his gaze and knelt. His fist clenched to his chest, he murmured, 'My Lord.'

'Rise, Cedric,' the Lord replied, stepping forward with grace. 'No need for such formalities.' He placed a firm, reassuring hand on his shoulder and guided him gently upright.

Cedric met his gaze — those sharp, steady eyes so like Lord Cassius's, and yet gentler, older. The brothers shared

much in bearing, but Aurelius carried an *auctoritas* shaped not just by intellect but by decades of command and experience. He looked every inch the statesman he was. Without pause, the Lord gestured toward the desk.

‘Come. Sit.’

Cedric obeyed, drawing the chair back and settling before the desk, facing the lord. Lord Aurelius sat again on the bed, letting out a quiet breath as if shedding some unspoken weight.

‘Are you prepared for the festival?’ he asked, folding his hands on his lap.

Cedric hesitated. There was no easy answer. Nerves still twisted in his stomach, but so too did a kind of strange assurance. ‘Yes, my Lord. I am... certainly,’ he said, murmuring the last word.

‘Good,’ Aurelius said, his tone measured. ‘You have an important role to play.’

Cedric’s eyes drifted to the object the Lord had set aside. A small golden figurine — familiar. His.

‘Do you know what this is?’ Aurelius asked, lifting it again and turning it in his fingers.

Cedric swallowed. ‘Y–yes. A figurine of a mythical weapon, is it not?’ He could have said it outright. It’s a Vajra. But he held the word back, uncertain if the lord knew and was simply testing him.

‘I see,’ the Lord said, examining it with interest. ‘I’ve never seen anything quite like it.’

The object was no longer than a finger — tapered like a spear at both ends, joined by a rounded centre. Dull gold in colour, carved with intricate symbols and strange, ancient markings which no one quite understood.

‘I found it on your shelf,’ Aurelius continued, his gaze still fixed upon it. ‘Intriguing design. It’s not from Albion, is it?’

‘No. I — I’ve had it for as long as I can remember. A relative from Srivania gave it to me before I came here.’

The Lord raised his brows faintly. ‘Srivania... the little mountain nation above Aryanius and the Rum. A strange and lovely place. I’ve only visited twice, but I remember it well. Tucked between sea and stone, difficult to reach, offering no wealth or strategic use... and yet, there’s something about it. A tranquillity. A beauty. It provides nothing material to Albion, and yet it gave us you.’

His words landed softly, not outright flattery, more an observation. Then the Lord’s expression sharpened, just slightly.

‘Do you know,’ he said, voice quieter now, ‘why you were granted your scholarship to study at this College, Cedric?’

‘N–no, I don’t really,’ he replied hesitantly.

Lord Aurelius laughed, a deep, resonant sound that softened the room. ‘That’s an important thing to know — so listen well,’ he said with amusement in his tone. ‘I was a young noble then. It had been half a year since the last king passed. My eldest brother was still capable, and so he ruled Gaul. Whereas Cassius and I were free, filled with wanderlust. Desiring to map all corners of the world. We were both restless, full of ambition, eager to see the world before the duty of our house fell upon us. I travelled across Aeronia — but everything felt too familiar, too tame. At a port in Alandir, I heard of a distant land — Srivania. Thus, my younger brother and I were resolved — one final curiosity before our long return.’

His tone shifted, tinted now with nostalgia. ‘We were boys still then, in some ways. Laughing, loud, convinced that nothing could touch us. And in Dhwarka — your capital — we met you. You were no more than seven. But fearless. Unreasonably so.’

The Lord’s smile broadened. ‘The first time we saw you, you marched up to Cassius in the market and asked why foreigners had come to your streets. You listened to our answer with such thoughtfulness that it struck us immediately. Not like a child at all. I had never seen a boy that sharp. My own boy, Gabriel, the same age as you, was still hiding behind his mother’s skirt! Cassius was amused,

I was struck. And from then on, you followed us everywhere.’

He laughed again, more quietly now. ‘Your parents tried to rein you in, God bless them. They came to us apologising, mortified that their son would pester foreign nobles. But we didn’t mind. Not at all. You asked better questions than half our court. Even now, I rarely meet someone who listens and enquires the way you did then.’ He leaned back slightly on the bed, his eyes far away.

‘Cassius jested that you’d follow us to Albion. We laughed. Thought nothing of it. But when the time came to leave... you cried. Begged us to stay. We had no choice — we boarded the ship. Left you behind.’

The warmth in his voice faded. He drew in a breath, slower now.

‘The storm came three days into our voyage, a swell in the Strait of Percyrus. Fierce winds struck our vessels and thrashed them against each other. Our ship was taking in water, and we were forced to cast off our cargo or be sunk. As we threw over the last of the crates, Cassius heard a strange sound and opened one — only to find you curled inside. Asleep. Clutching a small bag with all your then worldly possessions.’

Cedric’s breath caught. His throat tightened.

‘Later we learned that you’d written your parents a letter, declaring that you were going to Albion. That you’d meet them in Massilia.’

The Lord shook his head, his smile now heavy with feeling.

‘I winced so deeply when I thought what might’ve happened. We almost threw you overboard. But we didn’t. Thank the Lord for that. I held you tight the rest of that night. Through the storm. Through the thunder. And I’ve never forgotten it. It was my fault — we were warned not to sail. I dismissed it as superstition. I wanted to go home. But now I wonder... perhaps that storm was a part of it. Perhaps it was all meant to be. Our Lord works in mysterious ways.’

He paused.

Cedric sat frozen.

He had never recalled this himself, and yet, something within him remembered. And now, at last, the curtain was drawn back, and a hidden detail of his life was finally revealed to him.

‘My Lord... what does this have to do with the scholarship?’ he asked, voice low.

‘Oh yes, I’m getting to that,’ Aurelius said, his tone light again. ‘When we finally reached the next port, you woke. Looked at me, confused, and asked, “Why am I wet?”’

Aurelius laughed, striking the bed with an open palm. ‘You slept through the storm! I had no idea what to do with you, so for that month, until your parents arrived, I kept you by my side. Like a son.’

He looked at Cedric now, a deep smile plastered on his face.

‘Years passed. I saw you again — an older boy at Lauriet, serious, hungry for knowledge. So, I placed my nieces, Lucilla and Ellanore, under your tutelage. From the moment they grew attached to you, I knew at once. The spark had not left you. You were still the boy who had once crossed vast oceans in pursuit of something greater. I spoke to your father. I told him his son must apply to the Royal College upon graduation. That we needed boys like you — for the nation we were building. A new Albion. Not one bound by blood and rank, but one shaped by merit and guided by faith.’

Cedric’s mouth parted slightly, but he said nothing. He felt a tightness in his chest. A frustration. He wanted to speak — but the words would not come.

The Lord seemed to sense it, but continued. ‘And now you know. Why I chose you. Why I gave my name to the application that brought you here. I thought perhaps your father would tell you, but it seems he did not. Perhaps he feared what you might think of it.’

Aurelius's tone darkened slightly, and the lightness slipped away momentarily as he cleared his throat. 'But I did not come here only to reminisce. There's more to your role, Cedric. More than being a symbol.' He leaned forward. 'You were chosen as Fire Bearer for a reason. You have a part to play in something greater. And it is time you knew what that is.'

Cedric leaned in, unease twisting in his gut.

'You see,' the Lord said, voice quieter now, 'we Gauls have long believed that monarchies are flawed.'

Cedric blinked. *He speaks of treason so freely.*

'It is because of monarchy that we have Rickard as king. And worse Roderic is to follow. That boy... he is dangerous — unhinged. I've tried to reason with him. God knows I've tried. But he is deaf to counsel. Drunk on privilege. He will bring ruin, as all tyrants do.'

The Lord's eyes flashed. 'My elder brother Titus — did you know? He once dreamed of being king himself. Few know that. But the dream nearly consumed him.'

He folded his hands again, more solemn now. 'We must return to the ancient ways, Cedric. To the governance of the Achaeans. To democracy. Only the people's rule can be just. No one man should wield total power. Total power always corrupts, Cedric. Remember that.'

Cedric's mind reeled.

The Lord continued. ‘Just as Constarius seceded from Ascania when he sensed its decadence, we too must secede from the Crown. All houses should join together in the realisation of this goal. Our neighbours, Hestrisis, Castille, S.D.R have already embraced this new form, with many others seeking to follow suit. Albion is falling behind. It must not fall behind. We must modernise.’

You wish to replace the tyranny of one with the tyranny of many. Is that truly better? Cedric had read much of the ancient Achaean system of governance — its assemblies, its promises of shared rule. But he also knew its flaws. Its fragility. How even the wisest Achaeans, in public and in private, had turned against it. The Ascanians, too, had once embraced their ideals in the form of a republic. But in time they abandoned it for empire — and only then did they enter their longest and most prosperous age.

Nonetheless, despite knowing all this, Cedric said nothing.

The Lord paused. His eyes drifted downward, fixed on the floor as if the weight of the coming words made it hard to meet Cedric’s gaze. ‘I believe my brother has already informed you of this, but I must explain it more. Where you come into this, Cedric,’ he said quietly, ‘is that you will be the last Fire Bearer. This Floralia will be the final one. The rite ends with you. Not only will this act signal the end

of ancient heresy, but it will also herald in the new age of man.'

Aurelius raised his eyes again with more certainty. 'This tradition of Astran worship,' he continued, 'was revived by Relith — a man I consider the most destructive and vile figure in history. It was then adopted by foolish people like my eldest brother who clung to false gods, idols. The Ascanian ways are dead, Cedric. It is time we declared it so.'

Aurelius stood up and stepped forward, slow and composed. 'After you light the flame, the statue will crumble as if Lucer himself commanded it. My saboteurs have seen to this. The marble will shatter before the people's eyes. And in its place, we shall raise the cross. The true cross. The one God, Lucerian, shall take His rightful place in the public square.'

He paused again, studying Cedric. 'And why you? Because if my son were to do this, it could be taken as a political act. Contested. Interpreted as ambition. If Cassius did it, it would be a scandal. But you — Cedric, the distant Srivanian, the scholar with no house — your gesture will be taken as divine.' He folded his hands and looked down at him. 'The people will believe it to be a sign from Lucer himself.'

Cedric clenched his jaw — something churned within him. *Why does this anger me so?* He wondered. *Why, when I'm being offered a place in something so grand — something so transformative? Why does it feel like betrayal?*

It wasn't just that Cassius had deceived him into believing that he had picked him in the spur of the moment. Nor was it merely Aurelius revealing the vast design at play, one that reached beyond religion into the very reshaping of Albion's governance. It wasn't even the planned destruction of the statue, though that too felt like a desecration of something old, something sacred. No... it was something deeper. Something he could not yet name.

'Listen to me,' the Lord said, his voice firm now. 'You have an important part to play, my boy. With your flaming arrow, you will help light the first fire of revolution.'

No, Cedric thought, but he did not speak it aloud. Yet it burned inside him, unyielding.

The Lord grinned. 'Cassius advised I keep this from you,' he admitted. 'He said you might hesitate. But I remembered the boy in Dhwarka. The one who followed us not out of obedience, but curiosity. You were never a coward. I trust you will understand what must be done. My most loyal man, Malvern Darle of Gaulica's archer corps, will come to you this evening, around five, while there is still light enough to see clearly. He will instruct you in the

ways of the bow, though I suspect you know them already. Take the day off. It has been arranged.'

It was meant as praise. But Cedric heard only the shadow of command behind it. There was no trust. Not truly. He was being ordered. They had given him this life, and now he must give them his unending service. This was the will of Gaul, passed through a velvet tongue.

Cedric realised then that he had never been free. Not since that storm. Not since he'd hidden in a crate and slept while fate sealed itself around him.

The Lord said something else — words meant to soothe, to reassure, but Cedric did not hear them.

He felt the weight of a hand on his shoulder. But his eyes were elsewhere. They were fixed on the figurine lying beside his hand.

The Vajra.

That old, golden weapon — etched with the script of a forgotten tongue. A symbol of divine wrath. Of unstoppable judgement. A relic from a people who had once stood between Gods and men. It blurred in his vision and awoke in him a deep dread — a sense of unspeakable doom.

He imagined, for a moment, lifting the Vajra — feeling it surge awake in his grasp, growing vast, almighty, heavy with the judgement of forgotten Gods. He saw himself

wielding it without mercy, casting it upon Aurelius, slicing through his neck with a blade of golden light. Then, with the same divine force, directing it upon the Palace, upon all of Constaria, until stone turned to ash and falsehood to truth.

He stood motionless. The Lord was beside him, speaking still. But Cedric heard nothing. Their voice had become distant now.

He no longer understood the Lord.

He only saw the weapon.

The Vajra was the only thing he understood now.

Long after the Lord had departed, Cedric remained seated, unmoving. His gaze stayed locked on the ancient weapon resting upon his desk. The Vajra gleamed faintly in the morning light, its sacred etchings catching the sun's rays and casting them into his eyes. That light entered his eyes and filled his mind, dancing, glimmering gold. He felt enlightened, reverent, as if he was receiving a revelation from something older than memory. By something that had waited in silence for a thousand years. For a time, he was motionless. He didn't speak. He barely blinked. Only when the light shifted, and the glow left his eyes, did he finally stir — slowly, as though waking from a dream.

A slow breath escaped him as the sun's warmth touched his skin. His chest felt tight, as though bound by invisible strings. He needed air. He needed to escape the vines of thought that now entangled him. Until his afternoon duties under Sir Malvern's command, the day was his. That was more than enough.

Without a second thought, he threw on his cloak, adjusted his shirt, and departed. The hallways of the College were quiet this late in the morning, the bustle of breakfast long passed. Cedric quickly exited the College from the side door near the stairs of the eastern tower and departed from the grounds via the back entrance, which hardly anyone ever used.

As he approached, he passed a dozing guard slouching on a chair, leaning against the tall metal fence. The guard didn't notice him at all, not even when he vaulted over the handrails beside the stairs and immediately turned toward the treeline — towards the vast, untamed forest that grew around the western reaches of the Palace grounds.

Cedric followed no particular path and walked with no clear purpose, only allowing instinct to guide his steps. He pressed forward, brushing past ferns and low-hanging branches, until the great stone towers of the College and Palace were obscured behind the wall of trees. Eventually, he stumbled into a clearing and rested, sitting upon a fallen log.

The wind gently rustled the leaves above him, and the sun glided slowly between vast clouds, shifting the forest from light to shadow and back again. He looked up at the ever-changing sky and imagined some colossal, invisible hand guiding the clouds in divine patterns. The thought humbled him, and once again, he realised how small and meaningless his life and his worries were in the grand scheme of things.

He rose again and walked, sipping from the flask tied at his side. The cool water steadied him. *It's as if my life is part of some great story, too many things feel as if they were meant to*

be. Is there such a thing as God? Is he responsible? Or is the cause of these coincidences something else entirely?

His musings were cut short, for just ahead — fluttering against the shrubbery — was the unmistakable shape of a small girl. She stood among the bushes in silence, dressed in a strange white garment that shimmered faintly beneath the rustling leaves. Her dark brown waves fell loosely past her shoulders, and her skin glowed porcelain-pale.

She turned to face him, and their eyes met. Green. Tranquil. Calm. She tucked a purple flower behind her ear with a soft, deliberate grace as she turned away.

Who is she? And why is she here — alone? he wondered. Not wanting to startle her with his presence, Cedric dropped his gaze and walked forward without a word.

He moved on, thoughts spinning, until he came upon an overgrown pathway. The stonework astonished him. It was unlike anything he had ever seen. The pathway was crafted with tiny blocks of colourful stone, depicting plants, animals, and other figures he could not make out. Its backdrop was almost entirely white, and its edges were marked with delicate golden swirls. The moss had overtaken much of it, but beneath the decay, the path still shimmered with the elegance of a bygone age. His steps slowed, and he knelt down to examine it. Curiosity drew

him. The path led further up the slope, but where could it end? He wondered.

Then — just as he was about to ascend the path — the mysterious girl from before reappeared. This time, gently stepping out from behind a tree, smiling.

‘Hi,’ she said softly, giving a brief wave.

‘Hello,’ Cedric replied, almost reflexively.

She studied him, tilting her head slightly. ‘I’ve never seen you before. Why are you here?’

Cedric blinked. He had no answer, not a proper one. What could he say? That he had been fleeing thoughts too heavy to carry? ‘I got lost,’ he said, after a pause.

She raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. ‘Really? You don’t seem like someone who gets lost easily.’

He frowned. ‘What makes you say that?’

She giggled lightly. Her voice was foreign and carried like the wind through leaves. ‘Look at how you stand. Look at how you’re dressed. You walk like someone on a quest. Like someone ready for anything. People like that don’t just get lost.’ She leaned in slightly, her expression sharpening. ‘You look like someone who’s here for a reason.’

A reason? Cedric felt the words settle into him like a pebble into water. ‘And what reason would that be?’ he asked, genuinely intrigued. But she only smiled again, and

her silence told him nothing. He tried again, shifting the question. ‘Then tell me — why are you here?’

She stepped closer, her hands hidden behind her back. ‘I like to come here in the mornings. I live nearby.’

‘Where, exactly?’ He enquired, perplexed, only the Palace was nearby.

‘Not too far,’ she said airily, now standing beside him. ‘This place is peaceful. It helps me relax.’

Cedric glanced around. The forest, once mysterious and foreboding, seemed different in her presence. Lighter. Calmer. ‘Yes... I suppose it is.’

‘But there’s something even more beautiful nearby,’ she said suddenly. Her eyes lit with excitement. ‘Would you like to see it?’

His rational mind hesitated, but something else drove him forward. ‘O—okay. Sure.’ *What am I doing? I just met her... what could she possibly want to show me? Is this some sort of trap? But who would want to trap me? Who am I to trap? I am no one. Could there still be bandits this close to the capital? No, certainly not. Bandits like that don’t exist anymore. I’ve been reading too many stories.*

‘You think too much. Hurry, follow me!’ she called as she began climbing the hill.

He tilted his head, perplexed but fascinated. The girl weaved through the forest with a swiftness he couldn’t

match. Her white dress clung tightly to her delicate figure beneath a strange leather bracing, and her feet, clad in simple leather sandals, stepped across the ground with ease.

Cedric struggled to keep up.

She dashed through the bushes, through narrow openings in the trees. Every movement was instinctual — as if the forest itself was shaped for her. Cedric, by contrast, had to wrestle through thick shrubs and stoop under low-hanging branches.

The girl looked back once and smiled again, wordlessly.

Was she checking to see if I'm still here?

He pressed on.

The incline steepened. The bushes thickened. Still, she ascended, unbothered. Cedric's breathing quickened.

Where is she taking me?

Just as he thought to call out, the girl ducked beneath a branch and vanished from sight. Cedric paused, uncertain. The hill had steepened sharply now, and each step forward felt precarious. He dropped low, gripping at exposed rock to steady himself. One misplaced footfall and he could tumble back down. Heaving up a ledge, he pressed on until he was halted by another branch. Through its tangle, he glimpsed glimmers of light — faint, but ethereal — breaking through the foliage like the glow of some distant

world. Without thinking, he reached forward and lifted the branch.

A sudden burst of white brilliance struck his eyes.

He recoiled, shielding his face. A rock slipped beneath his boot and went clattering down the hill, but he managed to keep his footing. With a grunt, he threw his weight forward, grasping onto an exposed root and clawing his way up. Breathless, heart thudding, he paused to steady himself.

The light was still blinding, but slowly, the world beyond began to unveil itself. He climbed over the ledge. And there she was — just a few steps ahead, bathed in gold and silver light. Her arms hung loosely at her sides, palms open to the sky. Her face tilted upward, eyes closed. Cedric was filled with a sense of awe. The girl looked at one with the world, with the trees and with the sky.

Sensing his presence, she turned and smiled, then stood waiting. Her voice came soft, delicate.

‘Aperi oculos tuos...’ she whispered. ‘Open your eyes,’ she repeated.

He opened his eyes and witnessed an utterly breathtaking scene.

Beautiful...

The landscape before him was unlike anything he had ever seen. The great clouds parted, allowing the sun to cast

its golden rays unbroken across the valley below. A small river wound through the heart of it, and above, a flock of white birds flew in unison, tracing its meandering path. But what held his gaze most was the ruins across the valley — pale, weathered columns rising from the crest of a distant hill. They stood like ghosts of an ancient world, serene and forgotten.

What is that? he thought, stepping forward, utterly transfixed.

The sudden scatter of pebbles beneath his feet startled him. He looked down and realised how sheer the ledge truly was.

Shit.

He lunged backward into the dense foliage, which caught him in its embrace.

I never knew a place like this existed... so close to the Palace.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ the girl said beside him, her legs now dangling freely over the edge, her tone as light as a song.

‘Yes... it — it’s truly astonishing,’ he murmured.

She stood again. ‘Come,’ she said, straightening her dress. ‘We’re almost there.’

There’s more? He wondered, stepping aside to let her pass. He followed.

They climbed further.

The girl was agile, bounding lightly up the half-ruined path. One side of the trail had long since crumbled away, claimed by a landslide, yet she climbed without hesitation, light-footed and sure, as though the Aereth knew her and would not let her fall.

Whereas Cedric had to yet again clamber, sidestep, and force his way through the brush. Reaching the top of the slope, he spotted a rise in the ground, almost unnoticeable, overgrown with vines and long grass. In its midst, a staircase appeared — faint, worn, made of pale stone that matched the path they had found earlier. As Cedric placed his foot on the first step, a jolt surged through him, rising from the soles of his feet to the flame in his mind. His eyes flashed azure, lit not by thought, but by a memory older than his own.

As he climbed, the trees fell away behind him. The staircase opened onto a forgotten plateau. The view from here surpassed even what he had seen before. The old railing that once guarded the edge had crumbled in places, leaving only fractured remnants. Some lengths had vanished entirely, now half-buried in the moss-covered aereth.

At the centre stood the broken pedestal of a statue. Upon it remained only a single foot, still firmly planted. The rest had fallen. Yet, even in collapse, the statue

possessed the bearing of a fallen god. A ruined torso lay nearby, and the head — split cleanly in two — rested gently against a stone. The face was that of a young man, noble and composed. His shattered visage held no rage yet appeared ever-defiant. His gaze was still tilted upward, as though the sky itself owed him an answer.

Cedric stepped toward the base and read the inscription, faint but still legible.

ACTA EST FABULA, PLAUDITE

He couldn't understand it. But he recognised the text. It was the same tongue as the lines he had memorised for Floralia.

'Do you know what it says?' the girl asked, now beside him, leaning over to read the inscription.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw her looking up at him with a curious, expectant gaze. 'I — I... no. I don't,' he said somewhat uneasily. *I wish I could read Ascanian, but I can't.*

'Oh...' she said, brushing her hair behind her ear as her gaze fell to the ground. Her tone shifted, tinged with subtle disappointment. 'I thought you might.'

A steady heat rose in his chest. He had skipped the optional classes to learn Ascanian in his first and second

year, thinking them unimportant. But now, he felt the sharp edge of regret.

Then suddenly, she shot up and placed her hand on the base of the statue, before raising her chin proudly. ‘It says, “The performance is over — give your applause.”’

Cedric raised his eyebrow. *That... sounds familiar.*

The girl smiled knowingly, as if reading his thoughts. ‘It was said by the grandfather of the man who came to civilise this land. The man was Clavius. And his grandfather...’

‘Was Aurastus! Oh yes, of course! I remember now! That’s where I’ve heard it. The emperors of old,’ he said excitedly, feeling like a child who had correctly guessed the answer before it was revealed.

‘That’s right!’ she said brightly. Her joy was radiant, and she looked impressed, as if he had passed some hidden test. ‘Clavius was gentle. A kind man, even as emperor. And his grandfather...’ her voice softened, ‘was the greatest man who ever lived. Or so I’m told. I never met him, of course.’

Cedric chuckled. ‘Of course not. He lived almost two thousand years ago.’

Her eyes dimmed. ‘Yes...’

Without warning, she dashed towards the broken railing and leaned out over the ledge. Cedric’s heart lurched. He

stepped forward instinctively, arm outstretched, to keep her from falling.

Yet she turned to him with a mischievous grin. ‘You must have wondered what those words carved into the stone meant.’

‘Hmm... yes,’ he said, lifting a hand to his chin. ‘The performance is over... could it mean that the role of an emperor is performative? That Aurastus believed — wait, no,’ he sighed. ‘I — I don’t know.’

‘No,’ she said, her voice soft but steady. ‘It’s much deeper than that. Those were among the last words he spoke before his death.’ She placed her hands behind her back and faced him directly now. ‘Aurastus had always known that his life was shaped by forces greater than his will — that he was marked by destiny long before he could act upon it. To him, the world was a stage, and he an actor bound to his role. He ruled as he was meant to rule, faltered as he was meant to falter, and when his time came, he accepted it all as one accepts the end of a play well performed. That was the meaning of his words. Not fury at the Gods for playing his life like a story... but reverence, understanding. And maybe, a little irony too — for even those not chosen by fate often feel that same pull, as though they too are puppets on a string, acting out the role the universe has written for them.’

Hearing this, Cedric's gaze froze on the visage of Aurastus. *So there was someone else who's felt what I have. That this life is some sort of grand play and that I am but an actor in it. Aurastus... what kind of man were you really? Can I ever be as great as you?*

'Anyways, did you see the ruins on the other side of the valley before?' she asked cheerfully.

He nodded. 'I did.'

'Come closer, you can see it from here as well.'

'Oh, alright...' he responded nervously, trying to assess the stability of the ground beneath his feet. Thankfully, it was all stable, and so he moved to stand beside the girl.

'That used to be the great temple of the goddess Venaria,' she said, pointing into the distance at the temple now partly shrouded by fog.

Venaria. The name struck him. 'I know her,' he said. 'The goddess of fertility... and love. Is she not?'

'Yes! You're right! How did you know?!'

'I studied it. There used to be a great library in Massilia that I visited often.'

'I'm glad,' she said, her voice warm with genuine relief. 'Most people have forgotten.'

He placed a hand upon the ancient stone and closed his eyes. In his mind, the ruin came alive, and he imagined what it had looked like long ago.

The temple stood whole once more — radiant, divine, bathed in a lustrous amber hue. Worshippers filled the steps, their voices rising in chorus. Flames danced in open braziers. Petals drifted across sunlit altars. The goddess was honoured with hymns, with offerings, with love.

Then he saw the very place he now stood, long after the rites had faded. A father, clothed in a white fabric streaked by red, kneeled with his arm around his young daughter, dressed like the mysterious girl, smiling as he pointed to the sky. She giggled, awestruck, as the sun dipped beneath the valley. His son stood beside, arms folded, eyes gazing towards the horizon, purpose burning in his eyes. Their joy, their bond. The echo of their presence, whispered across time, left a very deep impression on him. One, he knew, he would never forget.

He had never truly considered having children. But now, more than ever, he wanted them. Many of them. Sons and daughters he would raise with devotion. Guiding, protecting, shaping — until they were perfect. Absolutely perfect.

He opened his eyes — the illusion dispelled. The ruins were silent. The memory was gone. His heart sank.

What happened here? Why is this place in ruins?

He turned to the girl. She was humming softly now, looking toward the horizon as if listening to a song only she could hear.

‘So... what happened here?’ he asked quietly. ‘Do you know?’

She turned, and this time her eyes did not glint. They held something deeper. Something wounded. Something real.

‘Many things,’ the girl said at last, her voice low and distant. Her expression turned solemn, as though remembering a deep pain. ‘This place... it decayed slowly, over the centuries. Our guardians grew lazy, disillusioned and soon the people stopped coming. The songs faded. The prayers stopped. But the final blow — the final betrayal — came when a terrible group of people looted it. They tore down what remained. They smashed what they couldn’t steal.’

Cedric clenched his jaw. ‘Who?’ he asked, fury rising in his chest. ‘Who did this? Where are they now?!’

The girl turned slowly.

Her green eyes, calm, but storm-like, met his.

‘They are long dead,’ she said plainly. Then, after a breath, she lifted a pale hand and pointed back across the valley, toward the way he had come. ‘But their descendants live in that palace over there.’

Cedric's eyes widened in disbelief. 'The Royal Palace?'

She nodded.

'The followers of Lucerian came and destroyed this place. They called the old gods false. They called Venaria a demoness. And Constarius...' her voice trembled with disdain, 'Constarius ordered it. Even though he had sworn to protect this place.'

Cedric's mind reeled. 'Constarius? No... that can't be. He was a good man. A man of honour. Of devotion. Why would he have allowed such a thing?'

The girl's expression darkened. 'He was a coward. A betrayer. He was no better than those who swung the hammers. His devotion was not towards the Gods but towards a demon who masqueraded as one.'

Then, as quickly as it had come, the bitterness left her. She smiled faintly, as though the pain had never been there at all. 'Now,' she said, brushing past him, her tone light once more. 'I have to go. My sisters will be worried,' she said as she began to descend the broken staircase. 'Farewell,' she added gently, glancing over her shoulder with that same enigmatic smile.

'Wait!' Cedric called, stepping forward. 'What's your name?'

There was no answer.

He quickened his pace, turning the corner in time to see

—
Nothing.

The girl was gone.

His heart quickened as he descended swiftly, eyes scanning every direction. There was no sign of her. Rain began to fall in a fine mist. He searched behind the bushes, down the path. He even peered down the side of the cliff, checking to see if she had slipped off.

But she was nowhere to be seen. The girl had vanished, as if she had never been.

What the hell...

He stood there for a moment, breathless, mind whirling. The air around him grew colder. The sky, once clear, was now grey and overcast. Cedric lingered back to the plateau and stayed there a little longer, eyes drawn once again to the shattered statue beside him. *The performance is over — give your applause.*

He felt the meaning of that line seep into his soul. It spoke to him like nothing had ever before. As the rain thickened, his clothes became soaked, and so, he was finally forced to leave the wondrous place. With one last look at the ruined sanctuary, he descended the hillside path in silence. The forest, which had once seemed so alive, now

felt hollow, like something beautiful and pure had departed from it.

By the time he reached the lower stairway that led back to the palace, the rain had turned even heavier. His boots were soaked. His clothes clung to his skin. But he did not quicken his pace. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the rain halted.

Yet his mind still lingered elsewhere.

How does such a place exist so close to the palace...? And that girl... Who was she?

How could she speak so innocently, so openly, about things so ancient?

Why have I never seen anyone like her before?

Where did she go?

He had no answers. Only questions.

By the time he returned to the college gates, the vision had already begun to feel like a distant memory. Faded, like a half-remembered dream. And when he reached the great doors of the college, a fear entered his chest.

Standing there, waiting under the eaves — dry, composed, arms folded — was Sir Malvern. Cedric had completely forgotten to keep track of the time. He reached inside his coat for his pocket watch and saw that he had been gone for three hours — though it had scarcely felt like one. Nevertheless, the knight had arrived early. An hour

early. *Is this how military men are? Punctual beyond measure?* Cedric swallowed, straightened his coat, and stepped forward.

Malvern greeted him with a nod — impassive, measured. There was kindness in his eyes, but it was remote, tempered. His posture was rigid, his voice low and composed, his every gesture shaped by discipline. A knight loyal to the bone. Loyal not to Cedric, but to his Lord.

Beside him stood his squires and attendants — young Gaulic boys, no older than fifteen, yet already possessing the weathered expressions of men. *They look more hardened, more assured, than most of the soft-featured sons of high nobles that study here in the Royal College.* They were clothed in simple but finely-stitched tunics bearing the crest of Gaul.

The knight commander of the archer corps, Malvern, noticed Cedric's soaked attire and told him that they would wait for him to change. Cedric despised being unready, despised making others wait. A pang of ineptitude struck him. Bowing in apology, he hurried to his quarters.

Moments later, when he emerged again, they did not linger. Together they moved swiftly along the rear of the Palace, following the winding stone paths that led toward the barracks of the *Vigilarii*.

Cedric knew them well, always spoken about with a certain fear, though rarely explained in detail. They were the personal guard of the Crown — five divisions, fifty men each, placed under the direct command of the five Manus

Regius. In total, two hundred and fifty men made up their ranks.

He had seen many soldiers in his time. The idle guards at city gates, the stiff enforcers that patrolled the checkpoints, the ornamental knights that marched in parades for show more than strength. But these men — these *Vigilarii* — were something else entirely. They carried themselves differently. Their movements were sparse, purposeful, even idle — they felt ready for war.

Their armour echoed the form of the *Manus Regis*, though plainer, stripped of excess. Each bore a polished chestplate and reinforced greaves, but beneath the steel shimmered chainmail woven tight. Below that, cloth garments layered with subtle purple linings.

Their barracks stood just beyond the western flank of the Palace, set into the curve of the hill. It was a stark, square building built from dark limestone. Its front face was marked only by a single tall tower with arched windows and narrow stone balconies on either side that overlooked the Palace grounds. The place looked less like a residence and more like a small bastion, as if it were built to endure a last-stand siege if the Palace and the city were ever to fall.

On the left balcony, two off-duty *Vigilarii* sat hunched over dice, their coarse hands clutched around iron-cast

cups. Cedric paused, squinting at their faces — weathered, grim but utterly foreign.

They didn't look Alban. Were they from Albany? Ordaine? Perhaps even S.D.R. He wondered at it briefly, finding it strange. Then let the thought pass.

Malvern turned to him and, without a word, held out a bow.

It was beautiful. Ornate yet functional. Light in hand but balanced perfectly. It was carved from light, pale wood, and its length was reinforced by silver braces that traced its limbs. Upon that silver, veins of gold were inlaid — winding, ancient patterns that shimmered faintly with every shift of light.

Cedric turned it in his hands, marvelling at its beauty. This bow had been made precisely for the Fire Bearer — for him.

'Begin,' Malvern said, raising his hand and waving it forward.

The knight first had him fire at the round straw targets placed on wooden stands. Cedric did as he was told — standing with poise, breathing steadily, aiming smoothly. His arrows struck true. One after the other. The knight gave no praise, only adjusted the targets. Soon, the practice grew more difficult. He was made to shoot with one eye closed. Then with his balance on a single foot. Then with a

heavy shield raised before him, forced to fire after only a single glimpse. Malvern gave few instructions, only gestures, and Cedric understood. He obeyed. He adapted.

It wasn't easy — but it was invigorating. He was enjoying himself. And then came the final test.

Two squires emerged carrying a new bundle of arrows. These were unlike the others — tipped not with ordinary arrowheads, but with forged metal twisted into an open spiral, like a flame captured in iron. Within each hollowed cage lay a dark wick, coiled and soaked with a dark, viscous oil that gave off a faint, acrid scent as it glistened in the light.

Flame–arrows.

Malvern said nothing. One of the squires silently stepped forward, dipping the already soaked arrow into a small urn of oil, before lighting it.

The fire caught immediately.

Cedric took the arrow and flinched. It was heavier than the others, and far hotter than what he had expected. His fingers burned almost instantly. He tried to fire quickly, but the shot veered wide and fell short — striking the grass and igniting a sudden patch of flame.

'Damn!' he muttered.

The squires leapt forward with damp rags, stamping the fire out swiftly.

And then he heard them. Laughter.

From across the training yard, a group of students had gathered — sitting lazily on crates and benches, their uniforms loosened, and collars unbuttoned after the day's studies. Their faces wore the easy smugness of those who had nothing to prove. He saw familiar figures among them — Gabriel and his retinue, who waved at him in a friendly manner, and the sly eyes of Septimius and the other Sletions beside him. Decimus stood right in the middle of them, next to Gabriel.

The Sletions laughed freely, mockingly, clapping and mimicking his posture.

‘Let them laugh,’ Malvern said quietly. ‘There will be thousands watching on the day. This is a good test.’

Cedric nodded. ‘Sir.’

He tried again and again.

But now something had changed. It was not only that the feel of the flame arrows was different, but it was also that his grip, unsteady from fatigue and fear, trembled. And with so many eyes upon him — mocking, measuring — he couldn't find his rhythm.

His shots became erratic. Inconsistent. Some hit. Some veered off. The burning in his fingers made it worse. The evening bled into night. The courtyard darkened. The sun

gave way to lanterns. And at last, the sky was what it would be on the day of Floralia — dark and starlit.

Still, he trained.

Still, he missed.

The fingers of his left hand, so close to the fire, were red, bruised, and sweltering like they would melt off, but still, he persisted, refusing to give up. At one point, the attendees brought forward a bucket of water for him, and he hastily dipped his hand inside — feeling the instant relief. The squires then wrapped his fingers in a thin white cloth, and he continued.

Wiping sweat from his brow. His frustration mounting, his breath shortening. He fired once more. This time, his arrow struck true. And so it continued for a while longer, on and off. Never consistent.

Malvern stood with arms crossed. His silence was no longer neutral.

Cedric saw it. The doubt.

At last, the knight called an end to it.

The students began to wander off, their laughter fading, replaced by murmured talk and the low crackle of torches.

Cedric said nothing to them. He returned to his room alone and closed the door behind him. The silence there was immense. He undressed slowly, fingers trembling, and sat on his bed. He stared at his bandaged hands, holding

them before his face like a man trying to remember what they were meant for. They felt foreign now. As though they were being used for a purpose unnatural to him.

That night, he lay awake, thoughts churning, unable to still his mind. Then the next few days passed in the same way — repetition, exhaustion, frustration. All while his classes continued and his peers watched. Some judging silently, others openly mocking. Only Edwin and Decimus ever offered him any words of encouragement, saying that he was doing well. Septimus, on the other hand, began to refer to him as a jester for providing them all a free fire show every night after class. He ignored him.

His training continued along a pattern of progression and regression. Again and again. And then, at last — without realising how quickly time had passed — the day of the festival arrived.

Giggling Gaulic girls in white floral dresses led him toward the altar, their laughter soft and musical, like wind chimes caught in the breeze. They fawned around him, fluttering like the attendants of some young god descended from his palace in the clouds. Cedric could not deny the pleasure he felt at the sight of them, at the way their presence made him feel airy — almost making him forget the gravity of what was to come.

Gabriella was one of them. She looked up at him with sparkling eyes, her hair coiled neatly with ribbons of gold and green.

Half-hiding her smile behind her delicate fingers, she approached him. ‘Cedric, you’re not wearing your dress correctly,’ she said, a small laugh escaping her. The other girls, her friends and cousins, giggled behind her. ‘You have to wear it like this,’ she added, stepping forward boldly and pulling the fabric over his shoulder with a precise, teasing touch.

Cedric squared his shoulders and felt the subtle shift of fabric as the toga fell properly into place. He gripped the runed bow tighter in his hand. He had grown very familiar with it now, as if it were an extension of his arms. ‘Is this better?’ he asked them.

The girls gave no answer, only more laughter, and whispers shared behind hands.

He sighed inwardly. *Girls... so impossible to understand.*

Dressed in a pristine white toga, with a golden laurel upon his brow and the gleaming bow in his hand, Cedric felt altered. Like a figure out of myth. Like a God. Tonight, he was no longer a student, he was the Fire Bearer — the last.

From outside the tent, an immense sound rolled over the cloth walls — the mingled voices of thousands of souls all packed closely together in the main square of Constaria. Cedric's stomach turned hearing the noise.

No, he thought. I have resolved myself. Nothing can stop me now. I am not afraid.

The girls nudged him gently forward, leading him toward the edge of the tent. Cedric peered through a small gap in the canvas. There, beyond the veil, stood the altar of the eternal fire — its small flame flickering defiantly in the darkness. Once, long ago, that fire had truly been eternal. But it had gone out when Ascania fell into ruin. What burned now was symbolic, revived only in name — but even so, as he stared at it, a deep, profound grandeur rose in him.

A girl approached him, holding before her a white cloth with a single flame arrow placed on top. *No second chances. This is it.* She held it out towards him, and he took it carefully, holding it with the bow. The weight of the arrow,

the ritual was familiar to him now — he had trained for this — but his hand still trembled. Then, slowly, he stepped toward the exit.

Two girls moved to each side of the tent's front, pulling back the folds in silence. The opening revealed a vast darkness dotted with faint lights. The crowd was a black sea, rippling with whispered conversation, lit only by scattered torches and lanterns hung on buildings. Cedric took a breath, long and steady. Then he stepped out.

The night air was cooler than he had expected. He could hear the fabric of the tent rustle behind him as it fell closed. Ahead, the stage stretched out beneath his feet like the prow of a great ship, facing a silent, dark ocean. Atop it were scattered flower petals.

He walked forward. From this height, he could see the heads of the people clearly — their necks craning, their faces indiscernible. Twenty-five paces ahead, rising above the crowd, stood his target. A massive wreath of flowers bound to a pole, set atop the central fountain. It crowned the head of the statue of Flora, a goddess of antiquity.

Even from here, Cedric could still make out her carved smile, her smooth visage leaning gracefully to one side. Her features were softened by shadow, but the torches at the base illuminated the column just enough for him to see where his arrow must land.

The wreath stood high, perhaps five–six metres from the ground. Behind it was a large wooden board if he were to miss. But he would not miss.

He felt his heart thudding as he reached the final step — the end circle. The moment his foot touched it, the guards lining the stage slammed the butts of their spears to the ground in unison. The sound was a deafening, rhythmic tune which echoed across the terrace homes lining the edges of the square. The sound was relentless. Over and over the spears struck the floor, the clash reaching his ears like a low rumbling thunder. The murmurs of the crowd began to die. One by one, the voices dimmed, until nothing remained but the measured hammering of the spears. Then, that too faded.

Now, there was only silence.

Cedric could hear the fire beside him, crackling soft and steady. The altar flame was to his left, burning fiercely as if in anticipation. The wind stilled as even the torches in the distance seemed to hold their breath.

He was alone.

Thousands of souls — citizens of Constaria, of Albion, nobles, strangers, friends, enemies — all were watching him. And yet not a single voice broke the air.

The silence, the fear, the power. It was not what he imagined. *This is terrifying... Will I feel this feeling often?* He thought to himself. *If I am a king?*

Cedric placed the bow and arrow on the cushioned table by the altar and took a step back. The weight left his hands, but not his chest. He stood still, the light of the altar–fire dancing across his face. Before him lay a dark mass of humanity, thousands of faces gathered as one, silent and waiting. They stared at him, and he stared back. He raised his right hand and began to recite the words that had echoed endlessly in his thoughts for days — lines he had carved into his memory like inscriptions onto stone.

‘Musa memora mihi causas,’ he began, his voice calm but firm, his hand extended towards the heavens. ‘Quo numine laeso,’ he continued, taking one step forward. ‘Dolensve quid regina deum impulerit virum insignem pietate volvere tot casus adire tot labores.’ With this, he clenched his fist before his chest.

‘Tantaene irae caelestibus animis?’ he concluded, voice rising wrathfully.

A breath passed. Then, he turned to face the altar.

He took the bow in his left hand and the arrow in his right. Slowly, he lowered the arrow’s caged tip into the eternal flame. The fire caught immediately, springing to life with a loud whoosh. The heat hit him all at once — his

cheeks flushed, his hands warmed, his eyes glinted with the reflected flame. He stared into it, and, for a moment, the fire was all he could see. Around him, petals stirred.

Drawn by some sudden gust of wind, the sacred flowers of Flora scattered across the floor — the silken whites, the soft pinks, the crimson reds — rose from the ground and coiled through the air in a slow, spiralling current. They gathered around him, encircling him in a living wreath, an impossible tempest formed of flame and flower merged in that moment, dancing together in the air.

He felt it surging inside him, flooding his chest, his limbs, his throat — a rising, sacred force he could barely contain. The folds of his ceremonial robe billowed faintly. An old brooch fastened at his shoulder — a tarnished emblem of unknown origin — glowed softly, as though remembering something he did not. Light and shadow played across his skin, casting his features into the likeness of a figure emerged from myth.

Thin strands of his hair fluttered across his eyes, but they did not deter him. His stance — bow drawn, eyes ablaze — was no longer that of a boy. He gazed forward — toward the distant wreath, hanging above the statue of Flora. He raised the bow and drew the string.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

His heartbeat pounded in his ears like war drums. His arms trembled ever so slightly as he held the drawn bow, his fingers burning with the heat of the flame. His eyes, bright with fire, were fixed solely on the wreath.



Then, he released.

The string snapped back with a clean, tight smack. The arrow cut through the night like a shard of light hurled from Heaven itself. As it sailed forward through the air, it lit up the crowd in the line it travelled. He saw eyes, heads, glints of fabric, a sea of faces turned in awe to follow its flight.

Shhhhhh...

THWAK!

The arrow struck true.

The wreath ignited in an instant, a roaring blaze erupting into the sky. Its petals curled and blackened, parts of it snapping and falling down the length of the statue. A great charred leaf tumbled through the air and struck the water below with a heavy splash.

I did it! Cedric thought. He felt it all through his chest — the fire in his eyes now matched the fire in his soul. He looked out over the people, and he no longer felt fear. He had conquered the darkness and brought it light.

The crowd erupted into cheer.

‘AETERNA ALBION!’ they cried, again and again, voices rising in chant like the songs sung in ancient temples.

Cedric allowed the sound to enter his soul, marking him eternally as he scanned the masses slowly, proudly. Forgetting in that moment what was to come next.

Then —

Crack.

A sound like the snapping of ancient bone filled the square.

The statue of Flora split along the waist. Then, with the wail of a falling stone, it toppled forward and collapsed into the fountain's basin with a violent crash.

The cheering stopped. All fell silent.

A horrified gasp rippled through the crowd, followed by a stunned, echoing silence. The murmurs that followed were quiet and uncertain, like the first winds of a gathering storm.

The moment was broken. Something sacred had shattered. He understood then that this... this would not be seen as a mere accident. It would be seen as an omen. A sign. The death of the goddess was beyond a metaphor now — it had been enacted in stone.

Exactly as the Gaulic lords had intended.

Cedric did not move. He stood like a statue himself, staring at the broken remains of Flora — her serene smile now shattered across the floor. And in her ruin, flashed the earlier ruins he had seen the other day.

An anger rose within him. A rage without words. A pitiless pool of pure wrath and resentment.

What have I done?

As he stared down into the pool where the wreath still burned, the whole world seemed to tremble under his rage.

Then, a figure appeared on the stage.

An old man in rags, his steps uneven, his voice ragged with despair, crawled forward and clutched Cedric's legs with his withered hands.

'You... You killed the deathless Goddess!' he cried, looking up with wild, bloodshot eyes. His hair was sparse and knotted, his mouth a ruin of rotten teeth. 'Look at you — you killed her!'

Cedric looked down at him in silence. He did not flinch.

'Unhand the Fire Bearer, you miscreant!' barked a guard as they rushed onto the stage. They seized the man roughly by the shoulders and dragged him away.

'Deathless Goddess!' the old man cried again and again as he was pulled from view.

Then, Cedric turned. Without a word, he walked back toward the tent.

Inside, the girls rushed to him, clapping and laughing, their eyes bright with joy. They had only heard the roar of the crowd, not the crash of the statue.

‘Cedric! Cedric! That was incredible!’ said one of the girls, whose name he did not know.

He pulled away. ‘I need to change,’ he muttered.

He walked past them and placed the bow down by the tent’s edge. Then, he stepped outside. The air hit him differently now. The scent of burning oil still lingered faintly on his fingers, mixed with the scent of floral incense imbued in his garments.

People stared as he passed.

He felt exposed in the white toga, the golden laurel still on his brow. *I should change out of this.* He made his way to the changing tent. There, in silence, he removed the garb of Gods and donned the dark doublet of his ordinary life.

He felt better at once. He was himself again. Whoever that was.

Then a familiar face came upon him.

Decimus Sletion.

‘You actually did it, huh,’ he said, clasping his shoulder. ‘That was a well-placed shot. I had my doubts seeing you train, but you performed it perfectly, well done.’

Cedric smiled, faintly but genuinely, and gave a nod of thanks. They then began walking side by side, making their way through the row of tents toward the main square, now glowing with scattered torches and islands of mingling people.

A group of youths had formed around him — most, he recognised, as fellow students from College. They found a stone bench beneath a lantern's glow and seated themselves around it, laughing, speaking, passing water and wine. Cedric joined in quietly. As their words floated around him, his thoughts lingered with the fire, the statue, the old man. Yet, with every moment he spent among his companions, the deep wrath within him eased. The tension receded.

The square around them was alive — alive in a way Cedric had never quite known. A youthful joy filled the air, alive with cries and songs that rose with the scent of flowers and smoke. And in that moment, brief and shimmering, it felt as though the entire world was perfect and that nothing impure could ever taint their joy.

Strangely, no one seemed to speak of the fallen statue any more. Little more than an hour had passed since the crash, yet already, people behaved as though it had never happened. Perhaps it was too much to process, or perhaps everyone had simply moved on, for there were always fresher things to dwell on. Thus, the true cause remained ever elusive, like so many other things in his life.

Then, a new group arrived.

Girls, clearly noble by dress and manner, most of whom Cedric had seen before.

They came mingling freely into the group, giggling, twirling locks of hair, eyes wide with curiosity and intrigue. Two stood out to him. One was taller, graceful with a confident air — her name was Severa. The other was smaller — a fragile girl possessing an alluring charm. Her name was Mirabella.

Cedric spoke to them freely, not caring for their affiliations or noble ties. Their presence was pleasant. At one point, he went away with Mirabella to fetch a jug of water. She walked beside him timidly, keeping just a bit behind. Her dress — a soft pink with faded flowers embroidered along its hems — clung gently to her slender form. He could see her shoulders beneath its sheer linen. He glanced at it for too long, and she noticed.

She looked up at him, eyes wide, innocent, startled by his gaze — but not unwelcoming of it. Her look stirred something in him. A sense of closeness, of desire, of longing. At that moment, she seemed to be completely his. It pleased him. He smiled briefly, then returned with her to the others.

Yet, after some time passed, a familiar restlessness stirred in his chest as it always did. He could never remain long among crowds. No matter how warm or kind the company was, he always ended up needing reprieve. Speaking, laughing, responding — it drained him. He stood

up without excuse and walked off into the square, leaving the others behind.

As he walked, eyes lowered, he noticed something strange. The ground beneath him glowed with a ghostly white sheen. He followed the light upward and paused.

The sky above had opened.

And there it was.

The full moon, the brightest he had ever seen — quarter ways through the sky. Immense, round, blinding. It shone like a great silver eye, cast high above Aereth, watching.

And then —

He saw her.

Directly beneath the silver glow, she stood. A girl, still and poised, gazing at him. Her head was tilted upwards ever so slightly, and her face possessed an expression he could not name. It pierced him. Her eyes carried something ancient, something distant and powerful, like the moon that hovered above her.

They looked at each other. Not long. But enough. Enough for her to see him.

Then, she turned away.

He watched as Severa — still lingering with the group — approached her. They spoke. Then Severa took her hand gently and began leading her back toward the others.

Cedric did not follow.

He did not want to. Not yet. He kept walking, slowly, aimlessly, in spirals across the cobblestones. He wanted to remain in the festival... and yet, apart from it. This, too, was a pattern of his life. To be present in the world, but not entirely of it.

They forget faces quickly, he thought. No one had stopped him in recognition. No one had approached. No one whispered his name. He had just lit the fire of Floralia. He had just been the centre of the world for that one moment. And now? Forgotten. As if he were just another face in the crowd.

I remember the faces of every Fire Bearer I've ever seen. But somehow, he realised with cold clarity, *they will not remember mine. Life is strange in that way, sometimes I feel as if I am the only conscious person in the world.*

Further ahead, he heard music — lively, erratic, indulgent. A small stage was set in a corner of the square, and around it danced a raucous crowd. Some held chalices of wine, others held grapes, and many wore revealing outfits along with crude crowns woven from vines and leaves. Their laughter was coarse, their movements wild. He stepped closer.

He stood among them but did not participate in their revelry. They spun, embraced, kissed, their bodies becoming indistinct from one another. It no longer

mattered who was whose lover. It was all sensation. All hunger. No shame.

He knew at once what it was. The cult of Bacchus. The old rites. Their god had returned tonight, if only in echo. *So, not all that is ancient is sacred. This sort of debauchery must be suppressed.*

He towered above most of them, and from his view, he judged them. Not with hatred, but with contempt. They disgusted him. There was no reverence here, no sanctity. Only pervasive indulgence.

A girl, dusky-skinned, dressed in silks not of this land, from Parfara or beyond — approached. Her revealing chain dress clung to her figure. Her eyes were dark and soft. She smiled sweetly, innocently, intoxicatingly.

She extended her hand and placed it on his shoulder.

He knew the game. She was beautiful. Almost painfully so. But he would not lower himself to such vices, no matter how beautiful or alluring. *Never.*

He turned away. Said nothing. And walked. Back through the crowds, back toward the benches, back into the night.

The laughter and chatter in front of him at the table still rang clear, untouched by his brief departure. Cedric returned, reassured by the warmth of their company. The weight of the night's stranger moments seemed to lift in

their presence. Among them, his eyes landed again on her — the girl from earlier.

She was speaking with Gabriel now, standing close, the two of them exchanging words. There was nothing remarkable in their posture, but something in Cedric stirred again. He crossed to them at once.

Pulling Gabriel gently by the arm, he asked in a low, urgent whisper, ‘Who is that girl?’

Gabriel looked at him with an arched brow and the faintest smirk. He didn’t answer — but he didn’t need to.

Cedric’s breath caught as memory collided with the present. ‘Valeriya Gaul,’ he said, almost in shock. She had been a younger student in Lauriet, a Srivanian no less. How she had changed. She had been so young then, three years his junior, but now she looked so much older and so much more...

The name had spilled from him without thought, louder than he’d intended. A few heads at the table turned. Decimus laughed and nudged his shoulder. ‘What are you two whispering about?’ he asked.

Cedric, flustered, tried to wave it off. ‘Nothing. It’s — it’s nothing, really.’ But it wasn’t nothing. Valeriya had heard him.

She turned her head, her expression unreadable. ‘Why did you say my name?’ she asked, her voice cutting through the air. Not sharp, but undeniable. Commanding. Distinct.

It was not the light, airy voices of Mirabella or Severa or countless other noble girls like them. No, Valeriya’s voice had gravity. It resonated deeply and carried with it the tone of someone who never sought permission to speak.

Cedric looked at her directly now. Her skin was like his, but lighter, smoother. She was striking in some impossible way. He stared at her for a moment too long.

He had never truly considered girls of his own race, for he had been raised to believe he was Alban. But now he understood that he was not, and he never would be — for theirs was a tribe that would never let him in. Still, Valeriya was not what he would usually consider beautiful. Yet, he could not bring himself to call her anything else.

He winced slightly. ‘I — I just remembered who you were,’ he said. ‘I thought I knew you from somewhere.’

Valeriya’s expression remained impassive. ‘Oh,’ she replied. No smile. No frown. Only that unreadable gaze.

His thoughts twisted. Did she even remember him? He had never truly spoken to her in Lauriet. In those distant, peaceful days, he remembered admiring her from afar. But now... something about her didn’t quite fit. Not here, not now.

His eyes did not linger much further on her. He didn't understand why, but they drifted. Drifted back to the softer laughter, to the glint of gold earrings, to the painted lips, to the brighter dresses of the other girls.

The night carried on with music, wine, chatter, and the hum of happy souls. Cedric sat among it all, letting the moment breathe through him. He smiled, spoke lightly, nodded at praise, laughed when they teased. And though the image of the goddess falling would never leave him — he could not lie to himself, he was happy. More than he had been in a long time.

When the time came to part, it came gently. His friends embraced him, some clasping his shoulder, others making bold invitations to stay the night at their noble homes, to drink longer, to dance more. Cedric declined them all. He bowed slightly, gave his thanks, and made his way through the square's thinning crowd.

He did not want to see anyone else. Not now. Their eyes, too keen, too expectant. They would demand too much of him. He slipped past all with a lowered head, offering no chance for their attention. When he broke through the square's edge and into the open streets, something inside him rose.

He ran.

The air was crisp against his face as he passed through winding lanes and empty stalls. Up ahead, towering before him, was the royal arch. As he neared it, his eyes lifted, drawn to the dark, heavy banners of the noble houses high upon the stone.

He didn't linger upon them. He ran up the side stairways of the College, his feet silent against the worn stone steps. The single guard stationed at the top barely noticed him. He moved like a shadow until he reached the outer gate of the Royal College and slipped through the side entrance.

The dorms were filled with complete silence. No one else had returned yet. He preferred that.

Wanting to be at ease, he changed quickly, stripping away the dark doublet and donning his night garments. Its lightness soothed his mind, and he threw himself into bed, seeking an end to the day.

From where he lay, the world beyond his windows opened itself to him.

Above, he could see the stars.

Bright, uncountable, and scattered across impossible distances.

What are they, really?

He knew the scholarly answer. Giant burning bodies, immense beyond thought, floating alone in a black sea. But that meant nothing. It explained nothing.

He imagined being near such a celestial body. By himself. Far from every worry, name, and burden.

A sense of eternal, undying detachment swept through his chest, overwhelming him completely. He quivered, unable to shake the unexplainable feeling.

Memories become sweeter with time. As they age, we forget ourselves, and we see only the joy in the moments we once lived. Our worries fade, our struggles fall away, and what remains is the light of those days — soft, golden, untouchable. That, and a faint longing to return to those days. Yet, they always remain just beyond our reach, like a thread of silk unravelling in the wind that we can never quite grasp.

Cedric smiled. *Today was such a memory. One I will look back on fondly in the not-so-distant future.*

Then, from beyond his window, the full moon emerged again, appearing suddenly from behind a vast, drifting cloud.

Massive. Glowing. Ever-watchful. He gazed at it with reverence.

Then, he closed his eyes.

In his mind, he stood again on the platform, gripped the bow, nocked an arrow, and drew it tight. He loosened it at the moon, and it struck.

But, instead of splitting the celestial stone, it bloomed, and from its impact sprouted vines, flowers, trees. The moon became a garden. A perfect world. A paradise.

He stared as everything else darkened under his vision.

He did not know when he drifted off to sleep, but when he did, only one thing remained behind his closing eyes.

Not the fire.

Not the crowd.

Not even Flora's fall.

No, only the lingering, piercing gaze of Valeriya.



[Handwritten signature]