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THE
STRENGTH
OF
THE FEW

HIERARCHY, BOOK II

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OMNE TRIUM PERFECTUM



PART I



FEAR, MY FATHER ONCE TOLD ME, IS SIMPLY OUR REALIZATION of a lack of control. And that is why when we are afraid, sometimes the only way we can cope—the only way to dull the edge of that lack—is to put our faith in those who appear not to suffer it.

WAIT. RUN.

The words are barely visible beneath pulsing crimson. Blood slides down my wrist, crawls across my palm and flicks dark droplets from my fingertips as I lope after Caeror through the red, flickering, fuzzing tunnel. The circle of bronze blades is long behind us. The Labyrinth not far ahead now. My cuts ache. Ulcisor's brother tried to explain why I had to make them. It was a message. To myself. In another world.

It's too bizarre to process yet. It was the steady urgency in his voice that swayed me to action—bloody and surreal and painful though it was. That, and the desperate, desperate need to believe that he truly grasps what is happening here. That he actually knows how to get us out of this nightmare.

That he is in control.

"How do we get past the Remnants?" I pant the words. Still weak from whatever it was that happened to me back there. My voice is small. Deadened by suffocating stone and hazing red light.

"They're in Res." Caeror doesn't look back. "So is the Labyrinth."

I don't have time to doubt him: the tunnel ends ahead, and he's proven right. Nothing guarding the exit. No walls burst from the ground, no waves of chattering obsidian death spring to life as we hurry—me tentatively—out onto the same expanse of stone upon which I was desperately navigating a maze less than an hour ago.

And yet everything is otherwise identical. Same vast, austere hall. Same platform with its red glass balustrade at the far end, which we head straight for.

"Wait. We need to step on at the same time." Caeror pauses as I position myself beside him. "Now." It's a tight fit. "We need to touch the railing together, too. And . . . now."

The balustrade glows. We rise, me catching my breath from the run.

The hall is quickly replaced by darkness all around, leaving us bathed in scarlet.

Caeror turns to look at me. Dark and wiry, scruffy beard and curly hair framing the violent old scar that stretches from cheek to where his left ear should be. Different from Ulciscor in so many ways and yet with those same intense brown eyes, it's impossible to mistake them for anything but brothers. "You're real. Aren't you?" His smile is suddenly there, a dagger to the tension. Broad and radiant. He's giddy as he studies me. "Tell me you're gods-damned real."

"Yes?" I'm still disoriented. Don't know how else to respond.

He looks upward, and to my shock, releases a bellow into the devouring abyss ahead. A whoop of unadulterated joy. Relaxing his grip on the railing as he stops, inhales, and then does it again before breaking down into plainly relieved laughter, shoulders shaking. "Yes! Rotting gods, *yes!* Oh. Yes. Gods-damn. Yes. Seven years. Gods-*damn*. What's your name again?"

"Vis."

"Vis! Vis, when we get out of here I am going to give you a hug. It will last far longer than would normally be appropriate. I apologise in advance." He laughs again, a sound somewhere between jubilant and manic. "Rotting gods-damned *gods!*"

I'm nervous and confused and in pain, but something about his pure, near childlike joy is infectious enough to steady me, even as my heart still pounds. "I'm glad you're happy." I follow his lead and cautiously unclench one hand from the glowing balustrade. "What you said back there. You said we're in Obiteum. That this is . . . another *world?*" I bark the last in a half laugh of my own. I must have misheard. Aloud, it's even more preposterous.

Caeror's smile remains as he calms from his delirium. "It's a lot to take in, I know. There's going to be more before I can explain everything, too, but we're in *quite* a bit of danger until we get off this island." Still cheerful, but something about the delivery says he's serious. "Can we leave the questions until we're out? I promise you'll get your answers."

It's not really a request. "Alright."

He gives a genial nod, then sees me rubbing at my arm, which has begun to ache. "Hurting?"

I shrug. "From the cuts, I suppose."

"You sure?"

"I don't know. It just started." It's not something I've had time to focus on, but the way he asks makes me do it now. "The whole thing hurts, actually."

He nods again, unsurprised, as he draws an object from his pocket. "Strap this to it. Skin to stone." It's an amulet of some kind, hung on a leather band that threads through a slot clearly made for the purpose. I squint through the glowering red. An intricately carved scarab beetle, only about an inch across, peers back.

"What is it?"

"Vitaerium." He holds up his own arm, displaying an identical amulet. "Whatever you do, make sure it's not loose."

"Why?" No masking my unease. Vitaeria are for keeping people alive. Usually very *sick* people.

"It will prevent any damage from Res or Luceum from bleeding through." Caeror touches the scar tissue over his missing ear meaningfully. "Not to mention that the air here is . . . shall we say, less than nice to breathe. Outside, without one of these, your throat and lungs are going to start blistering within an hour or so. But Vis?" He raises an eyebrow. "Those were questions, and we're not out."

I bite back both an uneasy retort and my desire to find out more, and swiftly loop the supple leather until the scarab sits snugly against my skin. From what little I know, there's a chance these only work on people who have been through the Aurora Columnae. "The problem is—"

There's a jolt as the stone settles. A thrill that arcs through my body.

The pain fades.

"Better?"

I massage my left arm. As surprised as I am relieved. "Yes."

"Then listen carefully."

The short remainder of our ascent through the void is filled with a combination of hurried explanations of what to expect outside, and simple directives. The air will hurt to breathe, but that's normal and I'll adapt. There will be a descent via some sort of platform from the entrance and he hopes, wryly, that I do not have a problem with heights. It's dawn or not long past, and it will be my job to watch the skies and let him know if I see any sign of movement. Anything at all.

He says that last part three times, and even his evident good mood fades to seriousness in the emphasis.

Caeror pauses for long periods between each instruction, clearly thinking. A half smile locked on his face. It's his ebullience, as much as anything else, that reassures me. Allows me the composure to suppress question after burning question, and choose to believe that Ulcisor's brother knows what he's doing.

"Almost there," says Caeror suddenly, glancing up.

On cue, the surrounding void is broken by a sheer wall sliding down into the balustrade's bloody glow; the platform slows, coming to a stop adjoining the narrow opening that I know leads out. I let Caeror take the lead.

"Scintres Exunus." Caeror calls the words ahead. A deep grinding answers, and dawn floods the stairs in front of us. The light reveals smooth walls to my left and right. No eyeless corpses lining the way.

Caeror notes my surprise. Stops. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing." His gaze is a silent interrogation. "There were dead bodies here."

"Obsidian blades in them?" His expression twists at my confused affirmation. "Another adaption." His gaze flicks to my bloodied left arm, but he seems to discard the idea as soon as he has it. "Well, we were always going to need a little luck. Nothing we can do now except get the hells out of here ourselves. Come on."

I follow him. The air has been growing gradually thicker, but about halfway up the stairs it hits me. Dense and cloying, suddenly sharp as it sticks to my lungs. I cough, then briefly panic as I struggle to inhale. My throat burns and closes up.

"The sweet scent of Obiteum." Sympathy in Caeror's blithe observation.

I lean with hands balled into fists against the nearest wall. Head down. Teeth clenched. It's like the insides of my chest are being cauterised.

"Alright." I eventually rasp it, forcing myself to straighten. I don't know how long it's been, but the pain has abated. Not disappeared—every breath is still an act of coarse internal violence—but bearable.

Caeror eyes me. "Your head's clear?" When I nod, he sweeps a curl of black hair from his eyes and starts up the remaining stairs. Energetic and determined. "Then onward."

We reach the top, and I see the entrance ahead opening out into the dawn. I slow. Trying to process that empty triangle of morning sky with no end. My discomfort, briefly forgotten.

The verdant hillside from which I entered the dome is gone, replaced by . . .

nothing. Air. We must be a thousand feet up; as I edge toward the entrance, the view reveals miles upon miles of devastated dirt and stone far below. The forests and rivers are gone. Not a hint of green anywhere.

I fight a wave of vertigo. Of terror. Of denial.

Caeror's claim, for the first time, is real to me.

"Rotting gods." I whisper it disbelievingly into the expanse. "Rotting *gods*."

"Something like that," agrees Caeror from behind me.

My gaze drifts to the distant ocean. This is still the carcass of Solivagus, I gradually understand, but the white monoliths of the Seawall are all that remain of the familiar. Between them and the beach, water simply ripples and swells, but beyond them . . . beyond are *waves*. Dark, lumbering mountains of water. I watch as the closest one hits the line of the Seawall. As it passes the columns it abruptly shrinks, draining away to match the gentle undulation nearer the shore. Where it strikes the stone pillars, though, there are violent explosions of thick, misting spray. It barely has time to settle before the next one hits.

For those waves to be visible at this distance . . . I can barely guess at their height. A hundred feet? More?

I tear my eyes away. Inch closer again to the entrance's edge, secure a handhold and tentatively peer out. Up and down. Left and right. In every direction, the red glass walls curve out of sight almost immediately. I hold there a moment longer in a buffeting wind, searching the dizzyingly distant, barren ground.

"My guess is that they tried to destroy it." Caeror gives me a sympathetic smile, pulling something from his pocket as I slink back to safety. A sliver of what looks like obsidian, triangular and with several needle-thin spikes jutting from it. About the size of a coin.

"They?" I watch curiously. Just as Caeror said it would, my breathing is coming easier now.

"Ka's side. What you'd call the Concurrence." He scratches at his scraggly beard as he examines the triangle, then spots my blank look. "Veridius didn't tell you about the Concurrence? Who we're fighting? Why you're here?"

"No. I told you, he didn't send me. I'm a student at the Academy, and he's the Principalis. That's all." Not quite the truth, but close enough.

"Oh." Caeror studies me. "*Oh*." Not quite dismayed, but definitely taken aback.

He reaches around and presses the obsidian in his hand against the base of his skull, immediately exhaling through clenched teeth and bracing himself

against the wall, the motion allowing me a view of the delicate inscribed lines on the triangle's surface. Writing? Too small to properly make out, but it looks like a series of glyphs rather than letters. Reminiscent of Nyripkian script, I think, but I've not had enough exposure to the language of the far north to be certain.

Caeror takes his hand away, back still to me. The obsidian remains embedded in place, no blood, as he straightens, ignoring my concerned look and moving to the edge. Peering downward.

"So this is probably all a bit of a shock," he says eventually.

I cough a laugh, still a hint of pain in the use of my lungs. "Something like that."

"What do you actually know about all this, then, Vis?" Continuing to peer over the edge.

"Not much." He finally glances around at me. "Almost nothing." He doesn't say anything, just narrows his eyes. "Well, I knew there was a place called Obiteum."

Caeror stares, then gives a soft, incredulous laugh of his own. "Then why in the *gods' graves* did you run the Labyrinth? I'm going to assume it wasn't for fun. Or by accident." He pauses. Thoughtful. "Though, that would be one *bells* of a story."

"I was trying to figure out what happened to you, actually." He leans and gazes out toward the ground again, and I shuffle apprehensively, eyes fixed on his nape. Is it my imagination, or is the writing on the obsidian there glowing a faint green?

Abrupt movement tears me away from my inspection; a four-foot-wide circle of polished black stone appears just outside the triangular entrance, snapping into place level with our passageway. It's inscribed with those same Nyripkian-like glyphs, larger but no less enigmatic to me. It emits a barely audible, rhythmic whine as it hovers.

Caeror watches it and then, apparently satisfied, gestures accommodatingly toward the floating disc. As if politely offering me to precede him through a doorway.

I look at the reflective sliver balancing a thousand feet above the ground, then back at him. "No thank you."

"It's safe."

I bare my teeth in resistance, but he raises an eyebrow and points until I

scowl a reluctant accession, moving grudgingly over to the new, and very small, extension to the ledge. "This isn't a Will platform." Caeror's eyes have remained a calm, clear brown as he watches me.

"Not as you would think of it." He taps the triangle on his neck. "From the war with the Concurrence. It really is safe. And just to reiterate, we don't have an *enormous* amount of time," he adds, the hint of a concerned edge to his voice.

Vek.

I crouch. The platform's surface seems to tremble slightly under my examination. The ground I can see beyond is distressingly, breathtakingly distant.

Vek, vek, vek.

I've trusted Ulcisor's brother this far, I suppose.

I place a steadying hand against the slanted doorway, then one cautious foot onto the circle before glancing back, still half hoping I've misunderstood. Caeror just nods me on cheerfully. I brace myself and gradually shift my weight forward, until it's clear that the obsidian isn't going to move beneath it.

Heart in mouth, I step fully on.

Out from the protection of the passageway, the wind immediately threatens my sense of balance; as soon as I'm completely on the disc I carefully sit, facing away from the exit to give Caeror room, lungs burning again from the close-to-panicking breaths I'm having to take. The surface beneath my palms is cool, uncomfortably smooth except for the furrows of the inscriptions.

A moment later, I feel Caeror's back settling against mine as he joins me.

It's only when I finally pluck up the courage to twist, glancing over my shoulder, that I realise we've already begun our descent. The shadowed pyramidal hole is twenty feet above us now. A red glass wall fills my vision, curving away, infinitely more vast than my memory of it.

"Don't forget, Vis. The skies on your side are your responsibility." Caeror's voice is taut with concentration as he senses my shift.

"What am I looking for?"

"Gleaners." He remembers who he's talking to. "Enemies. Really, *really* unpleasant enemies. Who can fly. So if you see *anything*, even just a dot on the horizon, you let me know."

I face forward again and fix my eyes on the blank blue expanse. "Even if it's just a bird?"

"It won't be." He gives a strained chuckle. "Gods. Birds. What wouldn't I give."

An uneasy silence as I process that. “So what happens if I see one of these Gleaners?”

“We hope we’re still high enough that the fall kills us.” A pause, and then he grunts. “Sorry. That wasn’t very tactful. I’m just a little busy.”

I shudder and nod, though I know he can’t see it.

“So you know my brother. And you’re here because of me.” The glassy-smooth dark stone beneath us quivers, sending a panicked jolt through me. Caeror growls. “I . . . should probably focus on this. Why don’t you tell me how in the hells you got here, while we’re on the way down. And then I can fill in the gaps of what you need to know after. The very, very large gaps,” he mutters to himself.

I heed the tension of his voice and don’t argue, giving him the most straightforward possible outline of my past year as we descend, excruciatingly slow, toward the arid ground. Ulciscor finding me, charging me with investigating what he believed to be Caeror’s murder at Veridius’s hands. My discovery of the ruins, and then the Labyrinth. Ulciscor’s insistence that I run it. It’s easy enough to tell the story without having to reveal my past—another world or not, Caeror was once as Hierarchy as they come, so there’s no reason to risk complete honesty—but I don’t otherwise try to obfuscate. There doesn’t seem to be much need, here.

As I talk, I continue vainly scanning the horizon. The day is clear and unsettlingly empty. No movement higher than the towering, glittering waves in the distance. I don’t dare glance downward.

Our platform shivers again only once, when I first mention Lanistia.

“You knew Lani?”

I regain command of my briefly terror-locked muscles, heart pounding, as the obsidian resumes its smooth downward motion. “She trained me. I can tell you all about—”

“No.” Soft, even through the tension of what he’s doing. “Thanks, but . . . not right now.”

And then, finally, the grey-brown of the earth is close enough for me to touch. I slide off the glinting circle with a relieved exhalation, luxuriating in the feeling of solid ground beneath my feet. Our platform thuds to the dirt behind me.

I turn. Caeror’s still sitting on it, head bowed. His entire body is trembling. The black stone at the nape of his neck still there.

"Give me a minute," he mutters between laboured breaths, sensing my concern.

I nod mutely, scrutiny moving on to our surrounds. We've descended into an enormous crater of blasted rock and dirt, at least five miles wide and completely devoid of life or landmarks. Its surrounding edges peak at least a hundred feet above us, concealing what lies beyond from view.

The great shadow at the upper edge of my vision soon drags my gaze higher, though.

Blotting out near half the sky above us—its lowest point a hundred feet in the air—hovers an impossible, gargantuan red glass sphere.

I take a half step back. It's at least . . . three thousand feet in diameter? More? Nothing supporting it in the air, nothing suspending it as far as I can see. It's staggering. Disorienting to the senses.

"You didn't see anything?" Caeror has recovered enough to stand. Wan in the early morning light, the triangular stone still affixed to the back of his neck.

"Nothing."

Caeror kicks dirt and stone over the glinting circle on the ground until it's concealed. Some of his former, irrepressible excitement returning as he inspects his handiwork, then beams at me. Cheeks dimpled as he claps me on the shoulder. "Almost there. You're doing better than I did, when I came through."

"You had to go through this by yourself?"

"Gods' graves, no. I had help too." His expression twists into something sad, so brief I almost miss it, and then he's moving on.

"How did you know I was coming through today?"

"I didn't. I've been here for . . . almost two weeks? Had supplies in there for at least another month. A holiday I get to take every year and a half," he adds with a weak grin.

I consider. "The window for when the Academy runs the Iudicium?"

"Exactly." He stretches, then beckons. "We just need to reach the ridge over there. Still as quickly as we can, though."

Our footsteps crunch and shale skitters as we set off westward. Caeror casts a sidelong glance at me. "So what did Ulciscor threaten you with?"

"Sapper."

His step hitches. "Rotting gods." He exhales. Eyes wide as he continues, staring ahead in horrified introspection. "Rotting gods-damned *gods*. Vis. I am so sorry." Honest apology in his voice, in the slump of his shoulders.

"You couldn't have known what would happen."

"I did, though. It's why I tried to tell him what Veridius and I were doing." He plucks at his sleeve. A frustrated motion that's eerily reminiscent of his brother. "He always was gods-damned scary once he got his mind set on something. But you should know—that's not him. Not really. I'm sure he's been through a nightmare, but he would never, ever do that to someone."

I just nod. A hint of desperation in his insistence that I'm not going to argue, despite my doubts. I can tell he wants to keep questioning me, to find out more about Ulciscor and the world he left behind seven years ago. But that can wait. "When I got here, you said there was a war? Is that what happened here?"

"Yes. Yes, of course." His brow is furrowed. Deciding where to begin, I think. "I should warn you—some things I know from what Veridius and I translated from the ruins, and some from what I've been told since arriving. But a lot of it . . . a lot of it comes from guessing at the spaces in between, too."

"Alright."

"Alright." He lets out a long breath. Loose stone crunching underfoot in the vast hush of the crater. The cheerless slope is getting steeper. "I suppose the war is the easiest place to begin. It started thousands of years ago, against an enemy called the Concurrence. They were bent on enslaving everyone, and from what Veridius and I could tell, at one point they were winning." His mouth twists. "So our side split the world into three near-identical copies. Res—where we're from; Obiteum, which is here; and Luceum. Don't ask me how," he adds with a wry smile.

I nod a reluctant acceptance. Unfathomable though it still seems, it fits with everything I already know. Everything I've seen. "How would doing that help, though?" Then I pause. "*Near-identical?*" It's not what he said before, when I first arrived.

"Physically the same, down to the last detail. But the nature of *Will* was what they were trying to limit. The three worlds were created because they wanted to diminish it, restrict how it could be used. Split its capabilities." He presses on before I can ask any of my myriad new questions. "People called it the Rending. Afterward, the war continued, but the resistances on the three worlds began to have their own levels of success in the fight. Different capabilities with *Will*. Different choices. Everything diverged."

My mind reels as I try to put the pieces together. "Obiteum is lost. Do not open the gate," I murmur. The eerie chant of the eyeless bodies in the ruins. I

remember the Rending being mentioned by Artemius and the others guarding the Labyrinth, too. "So the Concurrence won here, and were defeated on Res?" The logical conclusion, given how we're striving to stay out of sight. Clearly in some sort of danger.

The looming sphere behind is a cold, dead sun, too large in my peripheral vision every time I turn my head. There's silence, for long enough that I wonder if Caeror has heard my half question, and then, "What do you know about the Cataclysm?"

I pause. "As much as anyone, I suppose?" Momentarily thrown by the apparent veer in topic. "Something happened three hundred years ago that killed almost everyone. The survivors were mostly children, and the records from before that time were lost. Civilisation collapsed. There are theories about how, and why, but no one really knows much more than that."

"That's not quite true." Caeror hesitates. The gentle reluctance of a man about to deliver terrible news. "Those ruins you said you visited, near the Academy? That place was built to stop a Cataclysm. One the architects knew was coming." He rubs his face, then smiles at me in sincere, rueful apology. "They're culls, Vis. The Cataclysms are culls by an enemy that everyone on our world has forgotten. That one those architects were trying to prevent? It was the *eleventh*. The eleventh in three thousand years. And even with all their knowledge, they failed."

The terrain is more cliff than slope now, and we start to pick our way upward over boulders and exposed rock. Less than five hundred feet to the ridge. I clamber along behind Caeror, trying to grasp it. The enormity of it. No desire to believe, but it's impossible not to, given where we are. The utter desolation around us. "So the Concurrence somehow just . . . killed everyone?"

"From everything I understand, yes. And they will do it again. And *again*." He says it softly. Pauses to lend me a hand up, then glances over my shoulder. "They didn't just win the war here, Vis. I think they won it everywhere."

I stop too, twisting to join him in his inspection. We're high enough, have come far enough that this is a new perspective. The red glass ball above the centre of the crater hangs implacably, glinting in the morning light.

Slow, uneasy recognition penetrates the shock of what Caeror just told me.

I've seen this. The ruins near the Academy—one of those dioramas made of white light. One of the three versions of Solivagus, illuminating eyeless corpses pinned against the wall.

There's more detail in real life, though. I'd already noticed the jagged lines carved into the surface of the sphere, but they're easier to comprehend from this distance. Not writing, but not random either. They form familiar shapes in familiar arrangements.

My lingering gaze finds the coastline of Suus before Caeror touches my shoulder. Nods to the crater's apex ahead.

"I'm sorry. It's a hard thing to hear, but we need to keep moving."

I'm reeling, but there's an anchoring in his calm, sympathetic authority. I take a breath. Nod.

We march on.



OVER THE RIDGE, THE CRATER BEHIND US HIDDEN FROM view, I can see the waves again. Impossible, monstrous from this angle, miles away though they still are. The roar of their shattering thunders across desolate hills.

I gather my scattered thoughts. I do believe Caeror when he says this is another world; the proof could not be clearer. But everything else . . .

"You said I'd been copied." I leave it at that. Make it a question. There may be more pressing concerns, but none that have lodged themselves so disconcertingly in my mind.

"Yes. That device you were in—the Gate—it takes what's inside it on Res, and creates new versions on Luceum and Obiteum. Perfect replicas."

"So there's another version of me—the original one—still on Res?"

"Yes."

"And there's another in some other world, too? In Luceum?"

"Yes."

I shake my head. Sick. Refusing to countenance it, even if I'd concluded hours ago that this was what he'd meant. "I don't feel like a copy."

Caeror flits another glance at me before resuming his surveilling of the clear morning sky. "Perhaps 'copy' is a bit crude. It's more like . . ." He scrunches up his face as he reaches for a better explanation. "We're no less ourselves. Think of it as setting out on a branching path. It's still *you*. Just travelling a different road."

I chew over his words. Kindly delivered, but I find little comfort in them. "And this whole world was copied from ours, too?"

"It might be the original. I don't know. But . . . yes. Thousands of years ago now, but yes. That's my understanding of it."

I gaze out at glistening walls of water shattering against the Seawall. Distant spray glitters as it explodes upward. "On a different road for a while, then," I observe softly.

We clamber up another short rise, and beyond, I see what appears to be our destination. A large obsidian circle set into the stone underfoot, only fifty feet away. Polished black notable against the drab surrounds, but it's the lines of shining silver running through the dark mirror that draw my eye.

Even from here, there's no mistaking the familiar, three-pronged pyramidal icon pointing out at the distant waves.

"Give me a moment." Caeror doesn't hesitate to walk on the glossy surface once we reach it. I trail him tentatively as he moves to the apex of the Hierarchy symbol and draws an amulet from around his neck. Larger than the ones we both wear on our arms, it's obsidian too. Etched with a single symbol, what appears to be a crossed crook and flail.

He crouches, then inserts the medallion into an indentation at the very top of the pyramid. A quick twist, and a small section of black stone, barely a few inches across, rotates.

"Done." He scans the horizon, then suddenly grins an irrepressible grin. "Rotting *gods*, I still can't believe you're actually here." He shakes his head, still smiling broadly.

Several points of illumination just above where he set the amulet begin to appear. Barely visible against the glint of the sun, at first, but steadily increasing in intensity until they reveal themselves as more glyphs, like the ones on the triangle that still sits fixed at the base of his skull.

I don't return the expression. Watching the light, and then gaze drifting to the desolation around us again. "Is there any way back?"

Caeror pauses, his smile fading, then exhales and walks over to the glyphs. Crouches down and touches several of them in succession. There's an abruptly growling thrum of building energy, and I flinch as the circle in front of us bursts into motion. The stone, which I thought was a single piece, starts to separate and rise. Sections rotate and slide and snap together in rapid succession, re-forming, building almost instantly into a ten-foot-high triangular archway that darkly reflects the azure sky.

"No, Vis," he says, so quietly that I barely hear him. "There's no way back."

He collects his medallion from its slot and then stands on the silver symbol. The humming sound hasn't stopped; if anything, it's intensifying. Caeror motions for me to join him.

I do so uneasily. The base of the jagged obsidian archway in front of us is lightening. Becoming clear, glass-like. As I watch, translucence flows toward the apex.

"The Cataclysm those people couldn't stop. On . . . on our world." Still hard to say that out loud. "You said it was the eleventh. Three thousand years after the first." The calculation's not a hard one. I've still made it several times since he told me.

There's an apology in Caeror's smile. "I'm not here because I thought we had lots of time."

Vek. "Were they at regular intervals, though?" A little desperate.

"From what Veridius and I translated. Regular enough."

It's an expected confirmation. My heart still drops.

It's been three hundred and two years since the last Cataclysm.

Emissa. *Callidus.* *Eidhin.* *Aequa* and *Lanistia* and even gods-damned *Ulci-scor.* "But you have a way to stop it." *Veridius* was trying to send students here, despite the consequences. *Belli's* torn body hangs on the Labyrinth wall in my mind. It's the only thing that makes sense.

"I hope so. I think so. With your help."

There's a crescendoing whine and then suddenly, just as the entire archway becomes crystalline, it stops.

Nothing but the distant roaring of waves for a second. Three.

Then, violent and abrupt, a haze ejects from the glass. Slicing away from us, smokelike, leaving an ethereal triangular tunnel in its wake. A million ghostly reflections of the arch that arrow directly at the glistening mountains of water in the distance.

The silver beneath our feet begins to throb with rhythmic white. Getting rapidly brighter.

"How?" My heart pounds in time with the pulses beneath our feet. It's all I can do to follow Caeror's lead and stay still.

Caeror's face is lit starkly from beneath. His deep brown eyes assess me as he issues a crooked smile.

"Easy, *Vis.* We kill a god."

The light consumes us.