

Veritas by Robert Reed

The author tells us he did some rather determined research for “Veritas,” which was a small departure for this prolific writer and compulsive liar. “The Rome I chose is an earlier, less cosmopolitan world from the one usually portrayed by Hollywood. The empire was newborn; everything was possible. Violence and ritual were the rule of the day. The poverty was enormous, and crushing, and a few strong individuals could, and did, run the whole damn show. Naturally, I’d love the chance to visit the settings of my story—Rome, Alexandria, the passionate times of early adulthood.”

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I

You deserve the truth, but the dumb truth is that I don't have an exact date. We were freshmen, and it had to be the spring semester. March or early April, I'm guessing. It was evening, probably late. A CD was playing, but I'm not even going to guess the song. I know that I was sitting at my desk, and my roommate was stretched out on his bed. He was reading last week's assignment for World Lit. The Aeneid. That's one little detail about which I am sure. I can't recall what I was studying, but I have a clear memory of staring down at blurring pages, trying to concentrate. Then this odd sensation came to me. It was as if a bird was scratching at the back of my head. Here, right under my left ear. And after a moment or two of trying to ignore the bird, I turned around in my chair.

“Lucian was eighteen, like me. But where I was a big, plain-faced boy, shy and intellectual, my roommate was this staggeringly handsome character with rugged Greek features and an easy, pushy charm. When I turned around, I found Lucian staring at me. Staring, and smiling. His dark eyes were huge and bright, and they were slicing through me. It seemed to me as if Lucian was glowing, as if some powerful white fire was burning inside him, seeping out of his pores and those big eyes and between his wide white teeth. He startled me. He actually had me scared. I gulped, and then under my breath, I muttered, ‘Are you okay?’

“I loved Lucian. Not in a physical sense, no. But in every other way, I adored the man. We didn't know each other until that year, but the gods had decided that we were destined for each other. The God of Student Housing had thrown us into the same tiny dormitory room, and we became instant and perfect friends. To me, Lucian was a wonder. A revelation. The man had already lived in four different countries, mastering as many languages. He could tell story after story about exotic lands that I would never see. His family wasn't wealthy, but they had comfortable money, and he was always generous with his allowance. And even better, Lucian was generous with all those pretty girls that gathered around him. Believe me, there is no quicker, surer way to win the devotion of a horny young man than get him laid from time to time.

“I looked at my friend, and I asked him, ‘Are you okay?’ “Lucian was wearing baggy shorts and a baggy shirt with its sleeves cut away. A hat was perched on that thick black hair. Our school mascot sat above the brim, and the hat was tilted back at the usual cocky angle. I had walked in Lucian's shadow for months, and I knew him better than I knew my own brother; but at that moment, he was wearing a strange wide smile that I didn't recognize—a crazed, spellbound expression drained of all humor.

“I said, ‘What?’

“He said to me, ‘Nothing.’

“‘Then quit staring at me,’ I begged.

“‘Was I staring?’ he replied. Then he closed *The Aeneid* and threw his legs off the bed and stretched his

back. 'Didn't mean to bug you,' he promised. 'I was just thinking.' "'Thinking what?'" I asked.

"'What we should do,' he began. 'Not tomorrow or next week. But eventually. What we should do is gather up a group of people, and train them, and then travel back in time and conquer the Roman Empire.'

"Those were his exact words.

"I just sat there. And then he asked me, 'What do you think?'"

"'Fine,' I said. 'Why not?'" Then I shrugged my shoulders and turned back to my book, a tiny voice inside me shouting:

"'Son-of-a-bitch! He means it!'"

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II

Jonathon Colfax pauses.

Technicians have crowded around one of the cameras. With a purposeful panic, they remove an iron panel and reach inside the machine's guts, fingers prying and poking, soft voices cursing the gods and their own miserable luck. None of them look at their emperor. Perhaps they believe that no one will notice the commotion. But Colfax takes an interest in their work, grasping a sweating glass of water and ice, and after a moment, with the barest grimace, he announces his small but important displeasure.

Octavian steps forward. With a reasonable tone, he remarks, "Two more cameras are still at work, your excellence."

Colfax reaches over his head, tapping the fat microphone. "What about the audio?"

The project director rushes into view. He has traveled all the way from Alexandria, bringing his cumbersome tools and earnest crew for the purpose of filming the living god who rules the world. Egyptian by blood and Roman by bearing, the director has no patience for incompetence, particularly from his subordinates. With a razored fury, he demands explanations. He and his technicians employ Greek, distinctly American words like "camera" and "shit" mixed into the conversation. When he finds his answers, he turns to Colfax and bows. "The microphones and tape machines are strong," he announces, using his best American. "And the sick camera can be healed, your excellence!"

Colfax sips the cold water, saying nothing.

"Elsewhere," Octavian commands. "Drag the machine away, and repair it somewhere else."

"Yes, of course." The Egyptian bows only to the emperor, as if he had just given the order. Then he waves at his underlings, making them grab hold of the machine and its thick cables, a withering stare and a tight-lipped fury prodding them to work. "Hurry, hurry," he urges. Then to deflect any blame, he tells a random face, "This is entirely your fault."

Colfax twirls his glass, watching the ice cubes climb the slick walls.

"Your excellence," says another voice.

He sets the glass onto the milky-white marble, admitting, "I may have lost my place. Could you remind me, my dear—?"

Only one woman is present, and she sits at the far end of the table. Like the cameramen and anxious technicians, she was born in Egypt, but her status is entirely different. By birth, she is a queen. By trade, she is a journalist currently residing in Rome. On a daily basis, her face and rich alto voice bring news to Romans everywhere. Like her mother, she is only a little beautiful, but she also possesses her mother's genius for winning the souls of men. With a winsome look, she can feed any man's vanities. Leaning against the marble table, she can stare at the elderly emperor, and, with nothing but a gentle warm smile, she reminds him that he is the undisputed center of Creation.

"Lucian," she says, using an impeccable American. "You were telling us about Lucian, and yourself, and your journey through Time."

Colfax nods, glancing at the nearest camera. It is a bulky, cold contraption, the film whirring inside it like a stiff blood, making its way through an apparatus built from iron and carved wood and lenses polished by the hard, deft hands of highly trained slaves.

"It had to be in that spring," Colfax allows. "That's when time travel became possible. Physicists had just discovered the means, and news had leaked out. The first time machines were already being built. Of course they were going to be expensive and experimental, and a multitude of governmental powers were in control. But still, time travel had become a genuine possibility. It was real enough that two young men could sit in their dorm room, drink cheap beer, and plot their conquest of an ancient world."

The journalist covers her mouth, eyes wide in fascination.

Colfax wears an old-style tunic with a toga neatly folded over his shoulders, fine wools dyed white as cream and trimmed with a narrow purple stripe. Octavian suggested this wardrobe: Citizens from every corner of the Empire would eventually see this interview, and more than not, Romans were a decidedly traditional people. And in the same spirit, the woman wears an equally traditional garb: A simple gray tunic tied at the waist and beneath her breasts, the blue palla draped over her left shoulder, her black hair tied back in an elegant bun.

"Your excellence," the woman purrs. "Your audience would love to hear your explanation of time and how a soul can travel through it."

"Ah, but time travel is an easy trick," he jokes. "Each day is a journey in time, isn't it?"

She laughs appreciatively.

Colfax waits for a moment, and then offers the most familiar explanation. "The universe is a house. A great, glorious house filled with countless rooms." He lifts a hand, sketching that house in the air. "Each room is eternal. Each room embraces a single instant in Time and Space. You and I are standing together inside one room. Behind us is a single door leading back in time, but not far back. No, it only leads to the previous instant. While ahead of us stand an infinite number of doorways, each leading to a different room that embraces the next instant.

"Every possible future is waiting for us there. That's what the physicists of my time discovered. And when they played with the mathematics, they realized that there was a third type of door. With the proper tools, a person could cut a temporary hole in the ceiling and crawl up into the future. Ten seconds or ten million years could be crossed in a blink. But if that person punched a hole in the floor, he could drop backward in time. He would find himself standing inside an older room, a past instant. But as always, a single door would stand behind our time traveler, leading to the past he knows; while straight ahead would be countless doors, each leading to one of the myriad possible futures."

"A remarkable discovery," the woman offers.

“It's a remarkable house,” Colfax adds, showing a narrow smile. “Our physicists learned just how remarkable and enduring it is. For instance, let's imagine that you journey back in time.” He says her name quietly, with affection. “Sarah,” he says. “You drop into your past, and instantly, the past divides. Where there was one room, now two exist. One room is unchanged, blissfully ignorant of your existence, while the other simply adapts to your presence. You might bump into the furniture, and of course the men will smile at you, and most important, now all of those doors standing before you will lead to futures of your own making.

“It is, I think, an elegant, lovely arrangement. The universe is a house built of possibilities. Everything possible will happen, and every moment is eternal. And in one fashion or another, we are all travelers in time.”

Nobody speaks.

His eyes narrow to thoughtful slits. “When Lucian and I were sophomores, our physics department offered an undergraduate class in time mechanics. Lucian decided we should take it. ‘Laying the groundwork,’ he called it. A graduate student fresh from a summer at Sandia taught the class. That's one of the labs where they were building a prototype time machine. The woman was an excellent instructor, smart and charming. I am not a gifted scientist myself—”

A disagreeing murmur drifts from the shadows.

“But I did well in that class,” he admits with an easy, proud smile. “Quite well, actually. I discovered a talent for thinking impossible thoughts. I learned quite a bit about time and quantum wellsprings. I took copious notes that I loaned to Lucian, since he rarely made it to class. Sometimes I'd repeat the lectures to him, trying to make him appreciate this very complex business. Which is the best way to learn any subject, I think. Teach it, and it becomes yours.”

The smile fades. “More than once, I warned Lucian. I told him that we couldn't invade Rome. When we dropped into the past, we would lose the present. An entirely new timestream would erupt. A multitude of unique and unfamiliar futures would erupt from our first instant there, and there was no knowing what those futures might hold.

“‘But our earth is still here, right?’ he asked.

“‘It is,’ I admitted. ‘Our timestream is always going to be safe and intact. It's just sitting in a different part of the universe. For all intents and purposes, it's unreachable. Invisible. Lost.’”

“Lucian enjoyed a big laugh. He had a wonderful, infectious laugh. He used it until I was laughing with him, and then he slapped me on the knee, asking, ‘But isn't that best? I mean, if we're going to do this thing ... and we are going to do it ... well, then, shouldn't we be willing to give up everything...?’”

“I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

“‘Great undertakings demand commitment and sacrifice,’ he assured me. And then he said, ‘Sacrifice,’ again. As if everything important was embodied in that one word...!’” Colfax allows his voice to trail away.

For a long moment, the only sound is the rattle of film passing through the two working cameras. Then the journalist prompts him, saying, “Commitment,” with a genuine curiosity. “I know a few stories about those early years. And there are some third-hand accounts. But I was hoping to hear the truth from you. Your excellence. About Lucian, and the rest of the inner circle....”

Colfax waits for a moment. Then with a deceptively quiet voice, he admits, "Lucian never finished that class in time travel. In fact, he got a spectacularly awful grade on the final exam."

Technicians and younger servants bristle. It feels like a sacrilege, hearing that the Great Lucian could fail at anything.

But then Colfax shakes his head, adding, "The man was a genius in different ways. Better ways, I suppose." He shrugs, and sighs. "That year and for the rest of college, we shared a little apartment off-campus. I had one more exam to take, and Lucian asked me when I was coming home, and I told him. When I got home, on schedule, I didn't think about knocking. I simply unlocked the door and walked in, and I found Lucian on our old couch, screwing our professor. Like two dogs screwing. They were naked, and he was behind her, pumping away and winking over at me, as if we were trading this funny little joke."

The old man breathes through his nostrils, and he tries to make his shoulders relax, and after a long moment, he mentions, "Theresa was a genuinely beautiful woman. And she was wondrously smart. And like all of us, she was absolutely in love with Lucian."

Colfax looks away from the cameras, muttering under his breath.

"The Empress of Tears. Isn't that how you refer to her today?"

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III

The emperor's face has always been narrow and bony. What little remains of his hair is snow-white and cut short, and his thick white whiskers are shaved each morning by a trusted Nubian. Artful touches of makeup help disguise his age and faltering health, but sometimes the hot lights will catch him honestly, and everything is apparent. Always thin, he looks emaciated now. His chin and cheeks are too sharp, and the normally bright blue-white eyes have grown pale and unfocused. By nature, he is a quiet, thoughtful person. Senators and slaves alike have difficulty reading the man's emotions. Those few who know him well have learned to watch his eyes, measuring his mood by following his gaze and noting how often he blinks. At this moment, the old man appears sad. His face is like stone, pale and cold, but he blinks slowly, betraying exhaustion and a deep sorrow. Perhaps he regrets having agreed to this interview. Naturally, he can end it with a word. He can say, "Enough," and Octavian will wave in the Praetorians. In an instant, the various machines will be turned off, the film and audio tapes confiscated and destroyed. Within the hour, their guests from the Great Library will be driven back to Naples and put onboard their sleek clipper ship, then paid in gold for their troubles and ordered to say nothing about what has happened here and what failed to happen.

But the emperor doesn't end the interview.

Instead, he seems to will himself into a change of mood. After a lengthy pause, he smiles again. The blue eyes brighten, if only for a moment. Again he looks across the marble table, and with a tender voice, he tells his interviewer, "I was a junior when I met your father. Forrester was an old freshman. He was practically thirty, which made him seem very old and extraordinarily wise."

He laughs.

Most of the audience laughs with him, but quietly. The journalist just smiles at the mention of her father, and

after a moment, she confesses, "From what I understand, he rarely spoke about those times."

"Really?"

"I left that world for this one," he would tell Mother. She tried to make him talk, but he would just shake his head, asking, "Why dwell on things lost?"

"Sounds like your father." Colfax sighs. He opens his mouth and closes it, and then he opens it again. "Lucian found him. Forrester had been in the Army for twelve years, part of an elite unit called the Rangers. He had experience in combat, and he was strong in every way you can be strong, and he was accustomed to leading young men in desperate circumstances.

"The university was a great hunting ground for talent. Any large school has thousands of young people, each sick with dreams and half-born talents. Lucian tried to teach me his tricks. 'Go up to a stranger,' he said, 'and talk honestly. That's all. Tell him that you've got an adventure waiting, if he's interested. Invite him to one of our meetings. Mention time travel. Mention Rome. But don't give away specifics. Tell him that he'll discover what he needs to know at our next meeting.'

"Except, of course, we admitted almost nothing at the meetings. They were for show. Once a month, we gathered in the basement of a local pizza parlor. Lucian paid for everyone's dinner and the beer, and he gave a speech about the majesty of Rome and its history, and he showed a few slides of ruins and artists' renderings, and then with a big smile, he described how we would jump back in time to give the Romans all the wonders of our age. We would make the Empire into a larger, stronger nation. And oh, by the way, once we arrived there, all of us were going to be worshipped as gods."

He laughs, shaking his head. "The meetings were proving grounds. After the speech, Lucian went from table to table, offering light conversation while making a hard assessment of character. Of spirit. Only a couple of dozen people earned their way into our inner circle. Forrester was one of three men with military training. He also was a history major, which made him doubly useful. And best of all, he had a backbone, and if he had a reason, he would challenge Lucian.

"It sounds easy enough,' your father said to us, early on. 'We simply march back two thousand years and kick Roman ass. Of course we'll win! We've got machine guns and airplanes and napalm. What legion can fight against those kinds of fury?"

"But it won't be that easy,' Lucian countered, winking at the rest of us now. 'That's what you're hinting at. Aren't you?"

"I'm not hinting. I'm telling!' I remember Forrester chewing on his lower lip, building up a head of steam. 'Okay, suppose we can actually get hold of a time machine. Which is a big suppose. And suppose we actually do send ourselves into the past. We've still got trouble. Everyone has to make the jump together; otherwise, we'd end up in different timestreams. And we can take only so many people and so many weapons. Yet the way I understand it, there's no way to jump back to the present to pick new supplies at the WalMart."

The Egyptians make furious notes. "What is a Wal-Mart?" they want to know; but nobody dares interrupt the emperor now.

"Those are genuine problems,' Lucian agreed. The inner circle was meeting at our apartment. Our graduate student was sitting beside him on the old couch. Lucian threw a fond arm around her, saying, 'Theresa here can fill you in on all the sweet technical details.' Then he promised, 'Time machines aren't the problem. The prototypes have been a dream for the scientists. The next generation of machines will get simpler and cheaper. But I agree with you, sure. We absolutely have to take everything with us.

That's why we have to be thorough. Once we go, there's no coming back again.'

"Forrester shrugged his shoulders. He was a surprisingly small man. Many good soldiers are small, I've noticed. But he had a presence. A power. If he'd walked out of that meeting, chances are he would have taken a few of our followers with him. 'We can't carry enough bullets,' he warned Lucian, and all of us. 'There's fifty or a hundred million people in that empire. And I don't care how many guns and bombs we drag along. If they want us dead, they'll find a way to overwhelm us!'

"But Lucian was ready. It was like a well-planned ambush, actually. 'First of all,' he said, 'you have to realize something. These old empires were frail things. Most of those millions were slaves or as poor as shit, and they didn't particularly care who was sitting in the palace. Invaders were always coming in and killing a few thousand of the elite, then grafting their heads onto the headless State.'

"'Maybe so,' Forrester admitted. 'But at those pizza parties, you talk as if nobody is going to die. We just show up and smile and do some magic tricks, and these

unsophisticated souls are going to fight for the chance to do our bidding.'

"'It won't be that easy,' Lucian agreed.

"'So we need to take more soldiers,' Forrester said. 'Or better still, we need to recruit murderers and other shits. We need the sorts of people who can happily machinegun our enemies.' He shivered for a moment, then asked, 'Is that your general plan?'

"'I want the best possible weapons,' Lucian admitted. Then he looked at the rest of us, his expression never more sober or self-assured. I didn't know what he was going to say. He had kept this part of his scheme secret, waiting for the perfect moment. 'What we need most,' he allowed, 'is a weapon of pure terror. A weapon that will win every battle for us, and leave our enemies without a shred of hope.'

"'We can't get nukes,' Forrester growled. 'So you must be thinking of poor-man weapons. Botulism. Smallpox. Which one of those horrors are we going to take with us?'

"'The man had a point. And this wasn't the first time that I was bothered by these awful thoughts.

"'We aren't Romans,' I blurted out. Finally. Then I looked at my best friend in the world, and feeling like a traitor, I admitted, 'I don't want to kill and maim. If that's what we're talking about ... using plagues to keep control....'

"Lucian just stared at us.

"With a look, he made each of us feel as if we had let him down. As if we were shoving knives into his belly and his aching heart. And then he caressed Theresa on the shoulder, and with the easiest, most relaxed voice, he said, 'Think about it. Isn't it obvious?'

"Then before any of the ignorant could guess at the answer, Lucian explained what he was planning ... what was sitting in front of our very stupid eyes...!"

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IV

Colfax pauses, allowing his audience a moment to consider the simple, bloodless horror embodied in his silence. Then he sighs and lifts his glass, finding it empty, and as his hand descends, a second hand darts from the shadows, yanking the glass away even as a third, unmatched hand sets before him another tall

glass of filtered water and crystalline ice.

He says, “No. Something sweet.”

Nothing happens.

“A fizzy sweet,” he adds, and a burly hand produces a new

glass filled with a bubbling brown treat. After a sip, he looks at his drink. “We brought the formula with us,” he mentions. “It was a gift from a friendly corporation. They were tickled by the idea of Romans enjoying their carbonated prune juice.” He sets the glass on the white marble and sighs, and he says, “What we brought,” as he glances up at the watching cameras.

“You brought the future to us,” the journalist mentions, her purring voice somewhere between awe and gratitude.

“Pieces of the future, yes.” Colfax hesitates. “Lucian routinely promised that we would leave in just another year or two. ‘We’re well on our way,’ he kept chiming. But the promises always came with winks and sideways smiles. The inner circle understood: Nothing this enormous would happen quickly or easily. Lucian would say, ‘Soon,’ just to keep everyone focused. What he wanted, and what he cultured, was a wartime mentality—that potent sense that every moment mattered, that every decision was a fulcrum on which our dreams teetered.

“Nothing sobers the mind more than knowing that you must bring everything on a one-way voyage. Machinery and power production and people with skills and the intellectual skeleton of a high-technology world: All of that had to be purchased, or won over, or in a few cases, stolen. Everyone involved in the project had suggestions. Every voice in the inner circle wanted to take some critical piece of our world; and Lucian, being Lucian, agreed with each of us. We needed modern crops as well as trusted heirlooms. We needed libraries, both as paper books and CD-ROMs. We had to have codes of conduct and top notch medical equipment and kickass uniforms. And most important, we required talented recruits. But each recruit always knew two or three others who would ‘love’ to make the journey with us, who would be ‘thrilled’ to belong to this wonderful adventure ... and after several years, we found ourselves at the helm of an organization complete with offices and half a dozen warehouses and more than a thousand earnest, dues-paying members.

“Science sculpted our mission, too. We weren’t just traveling through time, we were also moving in space. When we arrived in the past, our bodies and machines and overstuffed suitcases would displace whatever was there before us. With a structured violence, we would explode into existence, pushing aside people and buildings and the land beneath our feet. That’s why we had to aim for the sea. Water and the warm Mediterranean winds would offer a soft, safe landing. But that meant that we had to have a solid seaworthy boat to carry us those last few leagues toward Rome.

“A boat large enough to carry hundreds is no longer a boat. It is a ship. Lucian’s family had money, and everyone else contributed what he or she could bear. But most of us were fresh out of school. Each of us had a few gold coins to offer, but it didn’t make for a fortune.”

Colfax sips the fizzy sweet.

One of the cameras makes a worrisome clatter, but before anyone can attempt to fix it, it seems to cure itself with a sharp, sudden ping.

“Lucian finally admitted, ‘We need help.’ Only the inner circle was present. He looked past us and repeated himself. He shook his head and said, ‘We need help,’ and I heard the ache in his voice. We’d

invested seven years in our project, but a thousand years wouldn't be enough. We'd begun losing believers faster than we could find new ones. Our cash flow was suddenly a mess. I didn't know it at the time, but Lucian's family, understandably troubled by this crazy venture, had taken away his trust funds. But Lucian refused to be stymied. Every problem had its answer, and every answer was best delivered with a determined smile. 'We need a new partner,' he told us, grinning broadly. 'We need a dreamer with cash and resources and the simple will to use his great gifts.'

"Is there such a bird?" Forrester asked.

"There is," Lucian purred, showing us a cocky wink. 'And I think I know who he is.'

"I don't know where he found the billionaire. I suspect that Lucian launched a thousand letters and e-mails, contacting important assistants in hopes they might pass along a message to their very busy bosses. Whatever his methods, he eventually made contact with a youngish, high-tech billionaire curious enough to give us thirty minutes. The four of us went, but it was Lucian who did the bulk of the talking. And in many ways, it was his finest speech. He was charming and humorous, and he was captivating, describing the majesty of Rome and the wonders that we would bring to that golden age. I was convinced. I was enthralled, and energized. I didn't even hear the billionaire say, 'No.' But then I noticed the faces of my friends, and it dawned on me that something awful had just happened.

"I have a rule,' the billionaire was saying. 'I don't pay for trips that I'm not going to take, and honestly, I have no intention of going with you.'

"That brought everything to a sputtering stop.

"Why would I leave this world?' he asked us. 'My fortune is here. My power and name are established here. What you want to achieve, I already have. And this is, I think, a much nicer life than anything you or I can find in the past.'

"Those prescient words struck me and rolled off.

"Forrester looked wounded. I felt frustrated and disgusted, and for a moment, I genuinely hated that rich son-of-a-bitch. Theresa was watching Lucian, and she was scared. If anything, he was hit worse than the rest of us. For the first time in Lucian's life, his charms had failed him. Real doubts were chewing at his insides. He was plainly devastated by the blunt rejection. He was furious and miserable and lost. I wouldn't have been surprised if he had stood up right then and flung himself through the office window. That's how awful he looked to me.

"It was Theresa who saved the day.

"She loved Lucian. They had been married for two years, and really, she adored the man. She would do anything to help him. That's why she leaned forward and smiled at our rude host. Her hair was black and long and thick, and she had smart brown eyes that could grab a man. She grabbed the billionaire with a piercing stare and a piece of cleavage, and then with a smoldering voice, she said, 'Sir. You must have a few friends, and I bet they're rich, too. Among them, is there anyone who might be interested in what we're offering?'

"The billionaire shook his head, saying, 'No.'

"But then he thought again, and with a little shrug, he said, 'Mark Lightbody. I don't know him well, but he's got a bug for adventure. Inherited wealth does that for some. If you wrap things up in the right kind of package, the man might take a passing interest in your bullshit.'"

* * *

Colfax pauses.

The journalist reads his face and posture, and she decides to mention the name, "Marcus."

"That was his idea," Colfax reports. "'Call me Marcus,' he announced at the first meeting. 'It'll help get me into the right mindset.'

"As a joke, under my breath, I said, 'Marcus Lightbodicus.'

"And he laughed hard, saying, 'Sure. Why not?'" Another pause.

"Mark was this tiny fellow," Colfax reports. "Barely five foot four. He was Forrester's age, but he acted like a spoiled teenager. He needed to interrupt. He loved to boast. He was unreasonable and brash and blessed with this crazy energy that actually worked, on occasion. For instance, it was his idea to use cruise liners. They were cities onto themselves, able to house thousands and carry cargo, too. And he didn't want us to settle for a retired liner with a creaky hull. He went shopping and came home with not one ship, but three gigantic liners. 'The industry is in a funk,' he announced. 'And so I thought, hey, why not three for the price of two?'"

"Our new partner decided that we needed to completely reconfigure the ships, which took time. He also demanded better munitions and fancier equipment and training, and more recruits and still more training. Every suggestion cost millions. The scope of our operation kept widening and widening. And to an astonishing degree, Lucian was patient, letting Marcus say and do pretty much whatever he wanted.

"The two men were never friends.

"I was Lucian's friend. Theresa was Lucian's wife and lover. And Forrester couldn't have been more devoted to our mission. But practically from the day we met Marcus, there was an understanding. The little man would chatter away, and the rest of us would pretend to listen. We would tell him, 'Thank you,' with gushy, earnest voices. And then we would look at each other. Not winking, exactly. But setting our jaws in a certain way. We knew what was at stake, and we knew just what was necessary to get this job done."

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V

Colfax pauses, throwing a reflective glance at his fizzy sweet.

"Virtue. And Truth. And Justice." The journalist names the legendary ships with a palpable reverence. "All the gold in this world couldn't have built even one of those astonishing vessels. That's what my mother says, explaining those days."

The old man nods, a private smile breaking loose.

"You were thirty-three years old when you arrived," she mentions. "Even with Marcus' help, it had taken another eight years of preparation."

He says, "Yes."

He nods and explains, "Nothing important is easy. We had to make the ships more useful. We had to enlarge and improve their cargo holds. There were no dry docks where we were going, so we'd have to

make repairs at sea, without heavy cranes or external power sources. And there was the problem with fuel. Should we drag along a giant tanker ship, too? But that would limit our mobility, and with a stray spark, we would have been dead in the water. So after several missteps, we decided to rebuild each ship's engine and the Hum-vee engines and the motors inside the little seaplanes that constituted our air force. Alcohol was our fuel of choice. Pure grain alcohol could be made from most any vegetable matter. Each of the big ships had a distillery next to its fuel tanks. Each was a steel cow ready to graze its way around the Mediterranean. Engine performance was hurt, naturally; but even plodding at seventeen knots, we would be the swiftest navy in the world.

“Eight years filled with constant, numbing preparation.

“Every lucid moment was busy. Recruits had to be given suitable jobs, and trained. Chains of command were created and tested and reconfigured and tested again. This is when I finally learned how to give orders. And we had endless troubles with governments and certain people. Nobody liked our munitions stockpiles. To the news media, we were a cult using mind-bending techniques on the weak to steal them away from their families and the present. Armies of lawyers descended on us, trying to steal back our followers and sue us dry. Tax collectors and Senate committees gave us too much scrutiny. And worst of all, we still had to acquire a working time machine—not just a little scientific toy for laboratory work, but a rugged machine with enough muscle to punch a gaping hole in the present, allowing more than a million metric tons of metal and men to descend into the past.

“There were stretches when I doubted that we'd ever succeed.

“And then I looked up one day, and, to my joyful surprise, I realized that we were finally ready.

“It was March, by coincidence. On a sunny weekend afternoon, our flotilla gathered off the coast of Italy. Our three main ships and two freight barges and several dozen auxiliary boats were bunched together. The world's press watched from a safe distance, and between them and us were the sleek, modern ships of three navies. Fifteen years had passed since time travel had become a reality. For the last few years, the public had been able to rent licensed time machines. ChronoAbles, they were called: Chrono for time, and Able for the man who perfected the mechanism. Only a few individuals and some small groups had abandoned the present. The terminally ill would leap into the future, hoping their ailments could be cured there. Misfits went into the past, looking for romance and purpose. But we were a different creation. We were vast and organized, dramatic and ambitious, and the entire world watched as we made our final, fateful preparations.

“I was in command of the Truth. Which means that I told the ship's real captain what to do. Marcus had the Justice. And Lucian ruled the entire venture, as well as our lead ship, the Virtue. Using ship-to-ship, he gave a brisk little speech about duty and adventure. But honestly, it was one of his weaker speeches. He stumbled over his words. He sounded tentative and a little sad. Later, Theresa confided to me that Lucian was sitting on the toilet, suffering some kind of gastric nightmare while giving the speech. Brought on by nerves, I would think. Until that final moment, I doubt that Lucian had ever really understood what he was asking of us. Until that last day, our goal was just a distant abstraction. An elaborate and fulfilling game that came to an end when he put his mouth to the microphone, offering those now-famous words:

““To make a better world.””

* * *

With a wry little grin, Colfax admits, “I wrote those words.”

“It is a fine phrase,” the woman replies.

“‘To make a better world,’ was the prearranged signal,” he explains. “Our ChronoAble was lashed to the Virtue’s superstructure. Theresa had already deployed her sensors and finished her calibrations. Fat power cables ran from every ship’s generators into banks of capacitors, and more cable carried the combined jolt of energy to the machine itself. A disruption was created. For that first microsecond, the disruption was little bigger than the tip of a finger. Then Theresa and her staff gave it an electrical charge, and they launched it.

“In many ways, our time machine resembled a cumbersome piece of artillery. The stainless steel barrel was pointed straight up at the cloudless blue sky, and the disruption burst from its muzzle, resembling a tiny, brilliant flare. And then, the flare began to mature. It sparkled and expanded, acquiring more mass, and its momentum began to fail. We watched, spellbound, while the disruption hovered for what seemed like forever. And then the earth pulled it down again. The disruption was maturing at a set pace. By then, it resembled a cloud of white-hot plasma. Except that it had no real temperature. Its awesome energies were elsewhere, busily ripping a new door in the floor of the universe. Like a cold, heavy blanket, it fell across our fleet, and for that next fraction of a nanosecond, a new doorway lay open beneath us.

“In an instant, without a hint of motion, it was night. We were floating in the same sea, but now there were stars overhead, and our ships and the seawater that we had brought with us were pushing aside millions of gallons of native water. I was standing on my bridge, watching an enormous ripple pass off into the dark distance. And then our navigator came running, almost breathless. He had a calendar based on star charts and the phases of the moon. He blurted out an approximate date. A month and year. ‘From where Polaris sits,’ he sputtered, ‘and where the moon is, and the constellations ... well, it could be 44 BC, and it is definitely, definitely the middle of March...!’”

Colfax waits for a moment, and then he glances at his associate. With a nod, he remarks, “Your great-uncle was a few days dead, and the Empire was in chaos.”

Octavian offers a narrow smile, bowing with a certain curt grace.

“Chaos,” the emperor repeats. Then his eyes narrow, and he admits, “Yet it seemed like a very peaceful chaos to me. That night and those calm seas ... honestly, I felt more like a tourist than a conqueror.”

The pale eyes are distant, and enthralled.

“We left the cruise ships and Marcus offshore,” he continues. “The other members of the inner circle boarded an alcohol-powered yacht, and with little boats flanking us, we chugged our way toward the coast. The mouth of the Tiber lay straight ahead. We navigated using nightscopes and the enduring hills. In the pre-dawn gloom, we landed at Ostia— Rome’s harbor—and if it wasn’t obvious before, we realized it then. We were in a very different world now. Upstream was the cleanest, finest city on the planet. But the Tiber was filthy. We could smell and see the raw sewage that had been shoved downstream by the winter rains. For good symbolic reasons, Lucian was first to step onto the dry land, and he ended up slipping his way through a pile of anonymous shit. Then he looked up at me and laughed, and everyone laughed. And he cried out, ‘Goddamn! This place is a dump!’

“Our Hum-vees were unloaded. Forrester sent out recon squads, and we found the road leading to Rome. The Via Ostiensis. Lucian insisted on driving the lead vehicle, his eyes big as windows and his teeth shining in the reflected glare of the headlights. ‘A fucking rough road,’ he pointed out, more than once. ‘Aren’t you surprised, Jonathon? These ugly little buildings and this awful pavement ... I mean, don’t things look awfully shabby to you...?’

“I had invested fifteen years making ready for this moment. I had studied and imagined and dreamed, and no, I wasn’t even a little surprised. I was thrilled and astonished and pleasantly scared, but really,

everything looked pretty much as it had in my dreams.

“‘The road's not that rough,’ I offered.

“‘We'll have to repave,’ he promised. ‘As soon as we get the oil flowing from Libya, we'll put down a good thick layer of asphalt.’

“Rome wasn't expecting to be invaded. Not that night, and certainly not by men like us. We were wearing Kevlar and tough riot helmets, and we had weapons. I had a pistol. Forrester alone carried enough firepower to take on a legion. But we didn't fire a shot. When we found the city's gates locked, Lucian unleashed his terror weapon. The weapon rode on its own Hum-vee, its generators riding on trailers. Winking at me, he said, ‘Name a date.’

“‘I don't know,’ I muttered.

“He shrugged and walked faster. Theresa was sitting with the weapon. She called him, ‘Darling,’ and they kissed. Then Lucian whispered into her ear, and she flinched, a little bit. Flinched and said, ‘It doesn't have to be that big. I can take away the gates and leave the wall standing.’

“‘But where's the spectacle in that?’ he asked, giggling at her. Then he shouted at Theresa's people, repeating his precise orders.

“The generators and several small capacitors went to work. Lucian himself decided on a date, and Theresa aimed the stainless steel barrel, and she did some quick calibrations, and a minuscule disruption was created inside the weapon's reaction chamber. The flash was sudden and silent. I dipped my head and shut my eyes, missing everything. But like good tourists, we had cameras, and I'm sure you've seen the footage. The gate stands there. And the great stone wall. You can see guards warily peering over the top of the wall. And then the disruption spreads and matures, and a few thousand tons of stone and wood, and muscle and brain, are catapulted through time.

“The ChronoAble was our terror weapon.

“On land, with portable generators, it was a tactical device. But when the device was lashed to the Virtue and powered by the ship's entire electrical plant, it could, in principle, fling a small city into another age.

“The guards and gate and a long portion of the wall vanished. Except for the tumbling of a few loose stones, nothing moved before us.

“Quietly, I asked my friend, ‘What date did you pick?’

“He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Ten thousand years ago, about.’

“Then before I could comment, he added, ‘I liked the idea. The image. A partial wall standing in a wilderness, and no clue as to how it got there.’ He laughed. ‘Quite a puzzle for Mr. and Mrs. Cro-Magnon. Isn't it?’”

* * *

“Then it was dawn,” says the emperor, “and we found ourselves here. Here in the heart of Rome, in the Forum itself. Our best translator—a Latin scholar who giggled and nearly wet himself—began to shout at the few citizens and slaves watching from a distance. He kept telling them, ‘We are gods. We want to meet with Mark Antony and the senators. Get them for us now, and we will be grateful. Ignore us, and you will know our wrath!’

“Lucian was sitting on the hood of his Hum-vee. He had put on a CD, old rock and roll setting a harsh mood. With a flourish, he pointed skyward, and with his other hand, he spoke into a radio, saying, ‘Do it now!’

“His orders would take a few minutes to accomplish.

“Like a tourist, I wandered. I gawked at the Temple of Vesta. The Temple of Castor and Pollux. The Tabularium. And here, the Senate House. It kept hitting me, again and again: I was really here. I wasn't looking at ruins. I was seeing new buildings wearing fresh paint and old buildings lovingly kept young. I caught some young boys staring at me from the shadows, and I lifted my face plate to show them a pleasant smile. And then came the rough, rising sounds of engines, and they scattered, and I walked back over to Lucian, over near the rostra. And a few moments later, our entire air force came streaking over the heart of Rome, each one of the seaplanes pulling a long banner, every banner proclaiming in Latin:

“‘Lucian rules the world.’

“We watched the planes pass overhead, and they turned and came back again, the whine of their motors kept intentionally loud.

“I was standing beside Lucian. Every time I looked at him, he was smiling. Beaming. All of those early jitters had dissolved, replaced with a giddy joy.

“Everything was perfect, I thought.

“‘It's going to be great,’ I mentioned to him.

“But then Lucian gave me a look, and still wearing that wild wide smile, he said, ‘Okay, this is finished. This is done. What in the hell are we going to do now?’”

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VI

Octavian is a smallish man in his early fifties. As a boy, he was genuinely frail, his body tortured by relentless troubles with his stomach; but as an adult, he has grown heavier and considerably healthier. He has a wise, certain mouth blessed with the finest dental work available. His eyes are gray and relentless, shining behind a pair of black-rimmed spectacles. Today, like most days, he wears the customary uniform of the emperor's court: Blue denim trousers and soft shoes tied with gold-tipped laces, plus a deceptively simple blouse made from the finest Chinese silks. A giant brown man stands on his right, holding a heavy red radio that will light up with any urgent news meant for the emperor. The radio is a standard precaution. On this day, thirty-three years after the Arrival, the empire is at peace with its neighbors and itself. Prosperity and the rule of Law hold sway everywhere. No force of nature or man can stand against Rome, and none dare to try.

“We conquered this city in a day,” says the emperor, his voice quietly proud. “People were stunned by our appearance, by our powers. Many of the Senators had fled when Caesar was killed, but the stubborn ones and Mark Antony eventually arrived at the Forum. Lucian met with that delegation. Here, inside the Senate House. He made the rich men sit on the top bleachers, and through our translator, he explained that we had come from a place they could not imagine, and that we were gods, and that if they cooperated, perhaps, they would keep their wealth and some influence. ‘But if you fight against me,’ he promised, ‘I will steal away your lands and your gold, and your slaves, and with my own hands, I will fling your miserable carcasses back to some horrible past when barbarians ruled the world!’

“Antony listened carefully. He was a bully of a man, impulsive and unimaginative. But he forced himself to bow to Lucian and to the rest of us. ‘I am your servant,’ he lied. And then he put on a disguise and slipped out of Rome before evening, heading north toward Gaul and Caesar's old legions.

“On the second day, we secured Ostia and brought in the freight barges and unloaded them. On the third day, we sank the barges, creating a temporary wharf where our giant ships could dock. But most of us couldn't linger near Rome. We had an empire to subdue, and frankly, we were deliciously curious about this great young world.”

Using her famous smile, Forrester's daughter remarks, “I would love to hear about those next weeks.”

Colfax sips his fizzy sweet, and continues.

Octavian listens. He always pays strict attention to the emperor's stories, searching for a fresh detail or an offhand admission—any useful word to help him understand these travelers from a distant, lost future. But as he listens today, he finds his own clear memories of those days. Gaius Octavius Thurinus was an eighteen-year-old boy, a gifted student and Caesar's chosen heir. He was living across the Adriatic, in Illyricum, when word finally arrived of his greatuncle's assassination. It was a tragedy and a crime, but the murder was also an opportunity. What should he do? Advisors pressed close, offering every choice. Some argued that he should lead the Macedonian legions to Rome. But more cautious tongues told him to make the journey alone and unarmed, meeting his potential allies as well as his enemies before making any irrevocable moves.

The boy decided on caution. A seaworthy boat was acquired, and with his advisors and a few guards, Octavian set sail for the Italian peninsula. Rough seas hampered his progress, but by mid-voyage, the skies cleared. The men went out on deck to enjoy the sun and blue skies. It was Agrippa who noticed the winged apparition riding over the endless waves. Everyone heard the rumbling roar of the beast's lungs, and with a growing horror, they saw it dip its wings and move at them, streaking overhead with an arrow's speed.

Omens have weight and worth. The trouble comes in understanding the omen. Twice, the monster passed overhead, and then it turned and raced for the horizon. What did it mean? Octavian's friends and tutors debated the matter. Then, just as they convinced themselves that it was a favorable sign, a small hill appeared on the horizon. The hill quickly grew larger. They soon realized that it was a second apparition, pushing its way through the heavy seas: A great ship, judging by its appearance; but there were no oars flailing at the water, or square sails catching the wind.

Written on the bow, in simple white letters, was the Latin word:

VERITAS

Truth.

Here was a monster sent by the gods. Some of the crew cried out to Neptune, for help or for mercy. A few leapt into the sea. In horror, Octavian watched the giant ship turn to port and slow, the water behind it filled with foam. Then a smaller vessel slipped away from the monster. It was low and bulky but moved with an astonishing speed, spitting water out of its rectum as it bore down on them. Perhaps a dozen gods were onboard, and one of them spoke with an enormous voice, using clumsy Latin to say, “We mean no harm. Is the boy Octavius with you? We wish to speak with him.”

Suddenly, Octavian was a boy again. He was no longer an emperor-in-waiting, nor the chosen successor to Caesar, but he was an eighteen-year-old child trembling from simple terror.

One of Agrippa's soldiers choked down his own fears and leaped into the little boat as it pulled alongside. With a practiced violence, he brought his sword down on an exposed shoulder, but what looked like bulky fabric absorbed the impact without complaint. There wasn't time for a second blow. A second god pointed a piece of metal, and there was a powerful, staggering blast. Then the brave soldier's shoulder was split open, a thin rain of blood spattered on the wooden hull and the cowering faces above.

The gods climbed onboard. Two more explosions were sent skyward, in warning. Then the crew and passengers were lined up, and one god looked at each of them, comparing their faces to what he saw on a slick piece of paper.

The paper held the image of a marble bust.

Pointing at Octavian, he spoke in a foreign tongue. And he laughed. And then he actually bowed to his captive, using his sloppy Latin to say, "My name is Jack Forrester. I am here to invite you and your party to our ship."

The boy felt weak and scared, but he forced himself to speak. Quietly, he asked, "What if I refuse?"

Forrester was an imposing man, strong and amazingly youthful for someone forty years old. He could intimidate with a glower, but his green eyes and his open hands betrayed a genuine distaste for this kind of bullying work. "Then I will bind your hands and feet and carry you over," he remarked. "And if you put up too much of a fight, then I'm afraid Rome will have to live, or die, without your considerable talents." * * *

"You were my idea," the emperor allows. He glances out at the shadows, and then remembering the cameras, he adds, "Octavian," for the benefit of future audiences. "My friend and trusted advisor. How long have we been together now?"

The man in denim trousers says nothing, but he shows his emperor a warm smile and bows at the waist.

"Ever since that great day in April," the old man continues. And then, he coughs. His narrow hand curls into a fist and covers his mouth, tired lungs wracked by a string of little explosions. Instantly, his doctors confer, checking the hour and his charts. A fat pink pill is removed from a jar and sent to the emperor through one of his servants, and like the good patient he is, Colfax picks up the medicine and swallows it along with the last of his fizzy sweet.

The emperor is tired, suddenly. Layers of makeup can no longer hide the hollowness beneath his eyes, and a familiar tremor begins in his left hand, his right hand plopping on top of it to keep it still.

Forrester's daughter watches him with an easy

compassion. Using an apologetic tone, she asks, "Do you wish to continue?"

"Of course," he mutters.

She nods, asking, "What did you mean, your excellence? How was Octavian 'your idea'?"

One more cough is suffered. Then the man nods, throwing a fond glance at his associate. "Actually, I wasn't the first to make the suggestion. Forrester was. We were still college students, and he was our resident history major, and over a slice of pepperoni, he pointed out that we would eventually need advice from the natives. 'Advice, and sometimes more than advice,' he warned us.

"'But we have history as our guide,' Lucian offered with a laugh.

“Forrester took a long sip of beer, shaking his head. Then he looked at me, not at Lucian; I suppose he sensed that Lucian wouldn't understand. ‘History is a story,’ he growled at me. ‘It's a huge story told by millions, each with their own shifting interests, and there's nothing to be sure about. The books will be wrong, in little ways and big fat ones. And we're going to have to find help from someone who knows better.’”

Colfax pauses. Nods. “Once we decided on 44 BC, several voices mentioned Octavian. But I was the advocate who convinced Lucian. The future Augustus had skills and insights, I argued. History painted him as a rational man. He knew his people and their history, he understood the Senate, and if we weren't going to use him, we damn well should put him someplace where he couldn't harm us.”

Octavian puts on a fond, respectful expression—a smile that isn't quite a smile—and again, he bows slightly at the waist, showing anyone watching his pleasure with this very narrow praise.

“Marcus took the Justice into the western Mediterranean, moving from port to port, showing the local authorities who was in charge. I took the Truth in an easterly cruise, on the same general mission. After some false leads, I found Octavian at sea, and I brought him and his companions to my ship, and I made my introductions, welcoming them as honored guests.”

Again, the emperor stares out through the glare of hot lights. “You were sick as a boy. We knew this. So I had you taken straight to our sick bay, and the doctors found the ulcer, and they put you on a regime of antibiotics and vitamins. Bacteria typically cause ulcers. I explained this to you and your companions. At dinner that night, out on deck, under the open stars. My Latin's never been strong—I have no talent for languages—but I think we did an adequate job of communicating. Didn't we?”

Forrester's daughter squints into the darkness, feeling her control of the interview being stolen away.

“Come join us, Octavian! Please!”

The emperor wills it; the woman can do nothing but smile and say, “Yes. Come sit with us, Praetor. For a moment.”

Octavian has no choice. He enters the pool of unnaturally bright light, sitting in the first chair provided, and he looks across the white table, bowing with his head, saying with his best American, “Your excellence. First among equals. It's my pleasure to serve.”

The emperor coughs again, softly, using the moment to consider his next words. “I want, if I could, to apologize to you.”

Genuinely baffled, Octavian asks, “For what?”

“Apollodorus,” the emperor offers.

Forrester's daughter glances at both men. Then she admits, “I don't know the name. Who is he?”

“One of Octavian's tutors,” the emperor allows. “A philosopher, and a brilliant man by most measures.” He glances at his hands, spreading his fingers with palms flush against chill marble. “I enjoyed being the host. But I wanted to astonish my guests, too. So what I tried to do, quickly and simply, was explain how the universe works.

“I had a giant globe brought up on deck, and I showed it to everyone. The Roman Empire was a dark line drawn around a finger of blue water. Any man's hand would cover it up. I showed them the enormity of Asia and the continents they knew nothing about, and the unsuspected rivers and the endless seas. Then a telescope was brought up, and I showed them the planets and moon, and the stars, and I talked

about the enormity of space and time. And then a chimpanzee was brought up. I had purchased it in Rome, from an animal dealer. Four years of college helped me explain evolution to my guests, and I gestured at the animal, claiming that it was their closest living relative. And then, finally, I had a microscope delivered, and I made each guest look at cultures made from Octavian's own sick belly. 'Every man is composed of tiny cells,' I explained, 'and each cell is enormous compared to the atoms that build both them and the farthest stars.'

"Quite the evening, I told myself. I was the wondrous host, and they were my spellbound guests. I was a little boy, smug with what he knows. I know I overplayed my hand. I know because Octavian's tutor couldn't bear this kind of knowledge. I was giving him a universe too vast and far too strange. Sometime that night, alone inside his cabin, he used a shard of glass, slicing his wrists and slowly bleeding to death.

"To save himself from demons, I suppose.

"Demons like me."

The emperor glances at Octavian, finally, smiling with a waxy sternness. "Is it a question of age?" he asks. "Or is it my illness? Whatever the reason, I seem to keep dwelling on things unseemly and sad."

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VII

No one speaks. A nervous gloom takes hold of the Senate House. But then the woman uses her smile and coaxing charms, leaning toward her emperor. "My mother loves to tell about the first time she saw you," she purrs. "You and my father, and the Veritas."

Despite his mood, Colfax smiles.

"Your ship and little airplane caused a fantastic panic in Alexandria," she relates. "But then you came ashore beside our little lighthouse, with Forrester, and with Octavian. Your excellence, you couldn't have been more pleasant and respectful. Mother swears that you seemed genuinely humble, bowing to her, begging for permission to tour the Great Library."

"That was a beautiful, magical spring," the emperor remarks, closing his eyes and lifting a hand to his mouth, preparing to cough. But the cough fails. The hand drops into his lap, and he smiles again. "Every port of call was thick with history and awestruck crowds. There were administrators who needed to be frightened, and that was surprisingly fun. Plus there were rebels and assassins to be taken into custody. Brutus and Cassius. And Cicero. Proven troublemakers, and I was a busy god busily defending the future of Rome."

He pauses, smiling to himself. "My history books made me wary of your mother. But in the end, I allowed her to remain behind in Egypt. She convinced me and she convinced your father that she wanted only to help her people. She seemed to be a smart, creative person. Yes, the Great Library fascinated me. All those wonderful ancient parchments falling to dust. But Cleopatra was just as enthralled by the old books I had standing in heaps in my personal suite. Detective novels. Science texts. And particularly, the histories written two thousand years after her tragic death."

With a fond sigh, the emperor smiles down at his hands. "I returned to Rome," he continues. "Lucian had several hundred prisoners waiting in the city jails. Marcus sailed home the next day, straight from Gaul, carrying Mark Antony and a few ugly generals in his brig. The inner circle assembled for a quiet meeting onboard the Virtue. We sat inside Lucian's private suite and ate pizza and drank the last of our Budweiser, discussing our various prisoners. Their fates had been sealed long ago, but that evening, in

air-conditioned comfort, we decided on their destination.

“Our prisoners were given a few bars of gold and put onboard a fleet of suddenly out-dated triremes. Their oarsmen were praetorians equipped for war. We put them to sea on a calm day, and Theresa brought the ChronoAble from its slumbers, and when it was fully charged and calibrated, Lucian took the controls. He showed us a smile and pressed the proper button, and moments later—with a fantastic flash of light—the fleet melted away.

“Until that instant, our Roman friends hadn't fully appreciated our powers. I remember looking over at Octavian. He wore a stunned expression, and despite the heat of the day, he shivered. Through my translator, I explained what had happened. My new friend listened, and then with his own broken American, he asked, ‘Where are those men now?’

“Lucian overheard. He came right over and slapped Octavian on the shoulder, explaining in his loudest Latin, ‘I sent those bastards back to just before Alexander's born.’ Lucian was proud of himself. He was clever and just, and he wanted this chance to boast. ‘It was my idea. I thought it would be fitting. Politicians and one of your best legions ... with their brains and discipline, maybe they can help Rome conquer the world before that fag Greek gets his chance...!’” * * *

Now the cough arrives, hard and wet. A cotton cloth is placed in the emperor's hand, and he coughs into it, wiping away the sputum and a thread of bright red blood.

Pausing, he collects his thoughts.

“I wonder about our species. I'm sure you have learned there are fossils buried in central Africa. They prove that our ancestors were a diverse collection of species slowly growing smarter. But then Homo sapiens emerge. A hundred thousand years ago, in a remote valley, we seem to pop into existence. And then we explode across the world, killing off every last one of our cousins. Which makes me wonder: Are we the descendants of a few political prisoners? Are we walking this earth before our time, set here before evolution could make us?”

He coughs, but only to clear his throat. Then he glances at Octavian, remarking with a cold surety, “We are a murderous species.”

No one speaks.

The emperor continues to watch Octavian. “A week or two later, I think. There was a party in the main ballroom on the Virtue. Giant televisions had been set up in every corner. We were watching movies from my time. War movies, as it happens. Germans were driving across the borders. Not on horseback, but in Tiger tanks. But you didn't seem interested in the entertainment. A more immediate drama held your attention. Marcus and Lucian were drinking together, and talking, and you studied the two of them. I know that you couldn't have heard much, and I'm sure that your American wasn't that sharp. But you could read postures. You saw Marcus cut the air with his hand, and Lucian looked up at the ceiling, and winced. And then you turned to me, and with a calm, dark voice, you mentioned, ‘I think the little man is going to be a problem for you. For us.’”

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VIII

A vigorous cough erupts, and trailing after the cough is a bleak little laugh ending with the muttered name, “Marcus.”

Forrester's daughter sits forward in her chair, delicate elbows resting on the snowy marble.

“It was late that summer,” the emperor remarks. “I was making a tour of the Po Valley, accompanying a team of our engineers and the best Roman architects. We wanted to build a small steel mill. Decisions had to be made; authority had to be wielded. That sort of humdrum. I didn't expect to see Marcus, but one afternoon, as my team and our guards drove along a dirt path, he just appeared. He was returning from Orange and a big distillery project. Coincidence crossed our paths. He said. I didn't say much, looking at him and his enormous entourage, and not for the first time, it occurred to me that his people—his best friends and advisors—had been with him since long before I ever met the man.

“He said, ‘Jonathon! What a sweet piece of luck, running into you!’

“‘How are you, Marcus?’ I asked.

“‘Great! Glorious! Hey, if you want ... I've got a villa a few miles that way. Stay the night. You and your companions. Everyone.’ Then he smiled, trying to charm me. ‘I've got a feast waiting. And girls. And more girls, if you don't like the first batch.’

“‘I'll eat,’ I allowed. And that's what I did.

“At some point in the evening, we went outdoors and sat on folding chairs, watching the sun vanish behind the distant hills. It was the two of us, save for squads of soldiers standing out of earshot. I asked, ‘How did you get this villa?’

“He said, ‘Honestly, I don't remember. I've got so many of these marble shacks....’ Then he broke into a ridiculous giggle.

“I said nothing, waiting for his next words.

“‘Are you having fun?’ he asked. From his tone, I knew that he wasn't talking about just this particular moment. ‘I just have to wonder,’ he explained. ‘When a person dreams of something for so long—something difficult and unique—well, it can be a disappointment to finally arrive and see the sharp reality of things. Know what I mean?’

“‘I'm mostly happy,’ I offered.

“‘I thought so,’ he responded. ‘I usually have a good sense about people.’

“That wasn't true, but I didn't disagree with him.

“The fields belonged to Marcus. They were planted with old strains of wheat and newer hybrids of corn, and the wheat was in better shape. I couldn't tell if the people working the land were peasants or property. The distinctions are small, as it happens. I watched exhausted bodies marching back through the fields. Hungry, broken down people. My single comfort was in knowing that their children, or at least their grandchildren, would be freed from this sort of bone-breaking existence.

“‘I worry,’ Marcus confided.

“I glanced at him, measuring his face. Then I asked, ‘About what?’

“‘Lucian,’ he said.

“I gave him silence and a speculative stare.

“With a smirk, Marcus shook his head. ‘Our good friend doesn't like ruling an empire. Not like he

should.’ The little man paused, pretending to wince. ‘I hate to say it. I do. But he’s bored. Bored and distracted. Things just aren’t exciting enough for him. And don’t get me wrong—I like the exciting life, too. But three girls and a pitcher of wine make me happy. And I’ll show up the next morning and decide matters of policy, issues of state.’

‘I nodded in a noncommittal fashion. ‘Lucian is fine,’ I offered.

“‘He’s bored,’ Marcus repeated. ‘You must have noticed.’

‘I was noticing many things. Again, I nodded. And then with a troubled voice, I asked, ‘What should we do? Do you have a plan?’

‘Marcus gave me a little sideways look, using his clumsy, overdone smile. Then with an overly loud voice, he claimed, ‘I don’t have any plans. I just think this is something to discuss. You know. Calmly and rationally? Like the two statesmen that we are...?!’”

* * *

They have just entered unmapped terrain. Until now, the machinations of the inner circle have belonged to rumor and conjecture. Forrester’s daughter is openly, fervently pleased, sitting back in her chair, allowing herself a moment of selfcongratulation. Then to avoid teasing the Fates, she leans forward again, using a calm, understanding voice to profess, “This is all fascinating.”

“Fascinating,” the emperor repeats. Then he grins, shrugging his shoulders and confessing, “To me, it’s drab. Ugly and petty and drab.”

She won’t hear of that. “Your excellence,” she blurts. “I know it’s not my place to force you to reveal anything. But this is an important subject. It is common knowledge that Marcus attempted a coup against Lucian. Did he enlist others from the inner circle? Or was it his doing alone?”

“No,” says the emperor. “And no.”

Her face tightens, and in the next moment, relaxes.

“There was no coup,” he professes.

“Not a successful one,” she counters.

‘I mean there was no coup. Nothing that dramatic or effective, certainly.’ He appears frustrated, with her or with his own careless tongue. Placing his spidery hands on the tabletop, the sleeves of his toga pulled up, revealing his thin waxy wrists. “I finished my inspection tour and returned to Rome, and when I saw Lucian again—when it was just the two of us—I mentioned my conversation with Marcus. Lucian’s reaction was laughter. He laughed and shook his head, and I did the same, and it felt genuine. And then my friend put a hand on my shoulder, and quietly, he confided, ‘This isn’t the first time that I’ve heard rumblings about that man.’

‘I was disappointed. I had assumed that I was the first one approached by the conspirator. Evading my own pettiness, I told Lucian, ‘What he said is stupid. I mean, look at you. Sitting in the Basilica Julia, presiding over your subjects ... shit, you’re doing exactly what you’ve always wanted to do...!’

“‘My born calling,’ he added, and we both enjoyed a good long laugh at Marcus’s expense.”

The journalist nods amiably, but a flicker of doubt shows itself.

“There was no coup,” the emperor repeats. “Coups are extravagant. They require organization and treachery, and Marcus didn’t have enough of either.” He pauses, sighing softly. “No, the pure, ugly truth is that this was a family squabble. It was bad blood and small feelings, and Marcus didn’t have any chance.”

He sighs, and sighs.

“The fights began after that,” he remarks. “Their battles were mostly private. I saw only one or two of the minor blowups. Theresa was the best witness. When Lucian was traveling, she’d visit me at my residence. She was usually upset. When she cried, that intelligent face of hers aged ten years. I could see the pain, and I’d make some glancing mention of Marcus, and she would shake her head and sob, telling me, ‘That little jerk has to be difficult. He has to complain about everything.’”

“‘What doesn’t he like?’ I asked.

“‘Everything,’ she repeated, as if the specifics were too obvious to repeat, or too dangerous. ‘Marcus doesn’t have the right,’ she would grumble. ‘I don’t care if he was our bank. We don’t need his help anymore, and we don’t deserve his damned opinions.’”

“‘What does Marcus want?’ I pressed.

“‘He says we’re too civilized. We’ve allowed too many natives to keep their land and wealth. Troublemakers need to be killed, he says. Not launched into some other time. Romans understand a sword through the heart, and he says that if we aren’t sufficiently brutal, we’re going to lose everything.’”

The emperor glances at Octavian.

“You were absolutely right,” he adds. “That little man was trouble for us. I knew it then, and eventually the rest felt the same. Inside the inner circle, I mean. We’d been together for nearly twenty years, planning and sacrificing. I don’t think Marcus understood how isolated he was from us. We became adults together, and he was the newcomer. Any bored billionaire would have worked as well as him, or better. That’s what we decided, during our first winter and into the next spring. Marcus was a spoiled little boy, and he was trouble, and eventually something was going to have to be done about it.”

He turns to the cameras. “We still kept meeting for pizza. Every month, on a scheduled night, we’d converge at someone’s mansion on the Palatine Hill, or if Lucian didn’t want to leave home, we came onboard his ship. We drank Roman wine and our latest beers and ate pizza made with the first tomatoes grown on the European continent, and we shared gossip and scraps of gossip, and of course, we spent a lot of time and beery breath making fun of our colleague.

“Really, this couldn’t be any more trivial of a story.

“It was March. We had been here for a few days less than a year. It was a beautiful, surprisingly warm evening in a city that was increasingly ours, and we were standing outside my house—Cicero’s old residence—and Emperor Lucian looked down at the rooftops and shook his head. Then he said, ‘He isn’t happy, you know. And he’s going to get angrier and more embarrassing as time passes.’”

“We didn’t have to ask who he meant.

“‘He has helped us,’ Lucian reminded us. ‘With his money and his energy, he’s been a huge help. But I think we should talk about changes. Because the man just isn’t happy here.’”

“I was a little drunk. I laughed and said, ‘Maybe we should send him home again.’”

“Lucian turned, and with most of his face, he smiled. But not his eyes. His eyes were bright and cold, never blinking.

“I winced, shoulders dropping to my ribs.

“Then with a bellowing voice, he told everyone, ‘I have a generous offer for our colleague. But I won't go alone. Everyone is with me, or this isn't worth doing.’ Then he showed us his wide, winning smile, asking, ‘Who's coming?’

“All of us were, of course.

“Just like that, we were marching together, our guards keeping close. It was late at night. Even the Palatine wasn't electrified yet, and that's why we carried flashlights. En masse, we marched over to Marcus's home and pounded on his gold-encrusted door. One of Marcus's drinking buddies opened it, finding us waiting. ‘Bring us the little man,’ Lucian cried out. And a few moments later, blinking and scratching his rumpled hair, Marcus looked out at our flashlights, asking, ‘What do you want?’

“‘You're not happy,’ the emperor told him, sounding more drunk than he really was. ‘We know that, and I know you think you can do better than me. Hey, Mark ... don't interrupt me, buddy. Listen! You keep your ship. Take the Justice. Find a crew and take all the supplies you can carry, and give me a date. It's your choice, buddy. Name a year, and I'll put you there, and you can have your own world to conquer.’

“Then Lucian threw an arm around Marcus, dragging him out in front of us. The little man was in shock. Stupefied. He couldn't move or speak, nearly weeping as the emperor said with a clear, strong voice, ‘When have you ever heard a more charitable, big-hearted deal?’

“‘How can you even think of refusing me?’”

* * *

Colfax pauses. Sweat seeps through his makeup, rolling across his scalp and down his weary face.

“Lucian gave Marcus three weeks to make his

preparations. Any longer, he argued, and the plebeians would get wind of our troubles. We tried keeping the event secret from our servants and advisors. I didn't mention it to you until afterward, Octavian. Although as I recall, when I did finally tell you, you didn't seem very surprised by the news.

“Marcus decided to jump back fifteen months, appearing before we arrived here. A new timestream would erupt. His timestream. Marcus loved Rome, and now that he knew its language and politics, he convinced himself that he would prosper here without our help.

“But he ended up with a skeleton crew of followers, fleshed out—so to speak—with a few girlfriends. Even some lifelong friends didn't relish the idea of taking on Rome by themselves. He had a few guns and our most worn-out seaplane, and maybe half the boxes in the cargo hold were filled with ballast, not machinery. I didn't hear about that particular cheat until later. If I'd known ... well, I probably wouldn't have complained. Marcus was abandoning us, and he was taking a third of our navy, and so yes, maybe I would have approved of Lucian's little deceptions.

“But the rest of the story ... well, I would have been uncomfortable, and ill, and I probably would have raised my voice....”

He pauses.

“I saw them talking,” he continues. “Lucian and Theresa were arguing. We were at sea, following the Justice toward that wet spot where we appeared in this world. Lucian barked orders as I walked into their suite, and Theresa turned and saw me, and I saw she was crying, and she straightened her back and remembered to wipe at her eyes, telling me, ‘It’s nothing. It’ll be fine. Can you move please, Jonathon?’”

“I stepped out of the doorway, and when she was past me, I asked Lucian, ‘What’s wrong?’”

“He looked at me. He didn’t react immediately. Instead, he strolled over to his favorite recliner and sat and stretched out. He was tanned and fit and perfectly happy. With a remote control, he turned on the enormous television at the end of the room, and he said, ‘Sit, Mr. Colfax. Sit and watch.’”

“Marcus and his ship were churning across the water. The images were being piped down from a camera on top of the Virtue’s bridge. I sat in the middle of a long sofa and looked at the screen, remarking, ‘He’s still got a few miles to go.’”

“‘I’m not waiting that long,’ Lucian confessed.

“I didn’t know what to say. I just nodded and looked at the screen, thinking that it really didn’t matter. Marcus could be roaring along at full speed, and it wouldn’t disrupt his jump into the past.

“Lucian panned the camera downward. The ChronoAble was perched on the superstructure, never looking more like a piece of artillery. Theresa and her people were hard at work. I saw her gesture. I saw her shout at someone, which was peculiar.

“Then the machine gave out a thousand little sputters and sparks: It was making its calibrations. We had to guarantee that the travelers arrived at the proper altitude. But the calibration business was taking longer than I had ever seen, and I mentioned it to Lucian.

“He said nothing.

“I asked, ‘Are we having trouble with the machine?’ It wasn’t supposed to wear out for a hundred years, but what good was the warranty here? ‘What’s it looking for? The sea’s the same height as it was last year.’”

“Amiably, he said, ‘Yes, it is the same.’”

“I turned, looking at Lucian’s handsome, grinning face. He was enthralled. He was wearing the same great smile that had lit up the dormitory room when we were freshmen. Spellbound and proud of himself, he gave out a peculiar little laugh. Then he said, ‘I haven’t told anyone yet. Not even Theresa knows.’”

“I swallowed, and I waited, holding my breath somewhere under my stomach.

“‘I just figured something out,’ Lucian confessed. “Just a month ago or so, it came to me. Finally, I know what my true calling is.’”

“‘Your calling?’ I blurted. ‘It’s Rome, isn’t it?’”

“‘Rome is a resource,’ he replied. ‘A raw material.’”

“I asked, ‘What’s that mean?’”

“But he refused to enlighten me. Instead, he said, ‘Watch,’ as the camera returned to the Justice. Marcus kept churning his way through the blue waters. Lucian bent forward and hit a flashing red button on a nondescript control panel, and a moment later, a bright blast of light tore open a new doorway in our

present.

Suddenly, our instant led into a distant instant. Delicate sensors designed and built by never-born physicists analyzed that unique flash of light, filtering and scrubbing the data, searching for the occasional photon that happened to leak through that very temporary doorway. A picture was built. In moments, a grainy photograph showed me where Lucian had sent Marcus and the other traitors: I saw a cold gray sea tossed by waves, and great sheets of snow falling from a leaden sky.

“I blurted out, ‘When is this?’

“Calmly, happily, Lucian told me, ‘Eighteen thousand years ago.’

“I looked at him.

“‘In winter,’ he added.

“I looked away.

“‘If the man can survive,’ he remarked, ‘imagine all the remarkable futures that I have just given wings to...!’”

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IX

The perspiration worsens. Emotion or a fever is to blame. Either way, this is a warning sign, a cause for concern, and the ground rules for the interview are explicit. Forrester's daughter glances at the physicians, who look at Octavian, begging for orders. He nods, giving permission. Then the interview is suspended while ancient thermometers are placed inside the emperor's ears, each wrist held gently while the pulse is counted. Colfax is a compliant, mostly indifferent patient. Like many of the chronically ill, he has learned how to surrender his body to other hands.

“There is a fever,” one of the physicians confesses. “We should stop for today, and wait—”

“No,” the emperor says. “Not now.”

The ranking physician looks at Octavian. “Sire, I don't recommend taxing him anymore.”

Octavian nods and begins to rise.

“I said no,” Colfax erupts, yanking his wrists free of the clinging hands. “Mop my forehead. Fix my face. But I want to finish this business. Now!”

“As you wish,” a dozen voices mutter.

“And take your seat, my friend. You belong to these events. You saw what I saw, to one degree or another.”

“Then I shall, your excellence.”

The doctors retreat, and a squad of makeup specialists descend in their place, working quickly to dry and patch, leaving a face that mostly resembles the public image of the man. More drinks arrive, ice water and a fizzy sweet. A long pile of pills is set between the glasses, and the emperor picks through them, selecting a narrow white tablet that he downs with an artful little sip.

He coughs, but with vigor.

“A few weeks later,” he continues, “Lucian left Rome on an extended cruise. We had planned the event years ago. The new emperor would tour his empire, admiring its beauties while allowing his subjects to see him. Lucian was a living god, and we would play on that angle to a shameful degree.” He glances at Octavian. “The truth is, we took our cue from the great Augustus. Deification of the leader is an ancient, honorable tradition, particularly in the eastern provinces. We were going to marry that impulse to modern tricks—grand speeches delivered to packed coliseums, propaganda films shown at night in outdoor amphitheaters, and glorious new shrines built to honor a god who had traveled two thousand years to help a great people.

“I stayed in Rome. With Forrester, and with most of the inner circle, I began our sprint to the modern world. The first new schools were built, the new generation learning about science and the zero and aluminum and the internal combustion engine. The aqueduct system was married to crude turbines, producing enough electricity to keep the main streets lit at night. Rome had always been such a dark, dangerous lady after nightfall, and we helped change that. Traditional blood sports were banned, or at least minimized, and then to keep our public entertained, I sacrificed a dozen of our precious Hum-vees, racing them inside the great Circus Maximus. Plus, I opened medical clinics and green-lighted the crash production of penicillin and smallpox vaccines, and that's why before our second winter, we were saving more lives than all the other gods of this land combined.

“Lucian and Theresa returned to Rome in the winter.

“He was fit and happy, and as much as any man I'd ever seen, he was gorgeous. The light inside him—that beatific glow that I'd first seen twenty years before, in our dormitory room—was always present now. He smiled relentlessly. When he spoke, he seemed to be singing, his rich voice falling from some lofty, infinitely more important place. But Lucian preferred long silences and dreamy stares, those giant black eyes glittering in whatever light happened to grace them.

“Theresa was the opposite. She was middle-aged, and tired. She had gained weight in the last months. Her eyes were perpetually bloodshot. Her skin was suffering some tropical rash that wasn't responding to medication or any priest's incantations. I know she wasn't sleeping. She told me as much. She even admitted that she and Lucian were having troubles. Her phrasing and the sad nodding of her head made me believe another woman was involved. Or more than one, perhaps. Then after a weary little gasp, she added, ‘I'm just glad to be home. At least for a few months.’

“‘What happens in a few months?’ I asked. ‘Where are you going?’

“She nearly spoke. But she caught herself, and she conjured up a ghostly little smile.

“‘No,’ Theresa told me. ‘God Himself should tell you this news.’”

* * *

A pause. A fist rises to stifle a cough that never comes, and then the emperor opens the fist to reveal a tiny yellow pill that he swallows without water.

“We met here,” he says softly. “Julius Caesar had begun the remodeling of the Senate House, and I finished it, with help from his own architects. Lucian thought this was an appropriate venue. He invited our inner circle and maybe a hundred other time travelers, plus the surviving Senators and our best Roman friends. You were there, Octavian. You had mastered our language, which meant you listened to Lucian's speech twice. A few sentences of American, and then a few sentences of Latin. And of course, cameras recorded everything, saving this historic, perfect moment for the ages.

“Lucian was full of himself. I saw that, and really, it didn't bother me. I was loyal enough, even then, that I could embrace what I adored and ignore the rest. Let him be God, just leave the rest of us to manage his empire ... hadn't that been the plan from the beginning...?”

“It was a fine, competent speech, and it was uninspired.

“Lucian was too confident, I suppose. Too self-absorbed and cocksure. He began with photographs just brought from Greece. One of the new temples was nearing completion. In its essentials, it matched our original plans. Marble columns formed the walls of a crescent-shaped building. The building occupied a wide plaza, and at its center stood a large statue of Lucian standing beside a jewel-encrusted time machine. But when the perspective turned, following Lucian's stony gaze ... well, that's when my heart kicked and my belly ached.

“The temple looked across the Aegean. Down by the water's edge, at some considerable expense, workmen had erected a new shipyard. I counted six caravels in various stages of completion, with berths for perhaps fifty more. Beside the ships stood newly built shops and apartments and stacks of green lumber and empty pens waiting for livestock. A thousand rumors suddenly turned real. I took a deep, useless breath and held it. Forrester was sitting beside me. He looked disgusted, and angry.

“What do you think?” I muttered. He looked at me and said nothing. Then I turned and found my associate sitting among his fellow Romans. Your expression, Octavian ... if I may say it, you looked astonishingly calm, absorbing this revelation with a very public grace. But by then, I knew you. With a glance, I saw that you were at least as appalled as I was.

“Lucian stood beneath the projected images. With the happiest of voices, he explained, ‘I came to Rome with a simple mission. I would make it modern, and I would make it powerful, and if my descendants wished, they could conquer this entire world.’ He repeated himself in seamless Latin. ‘But then I saw an even simpler mission,’ he continued, in American. ‘Why aim for a single world when you can embrace millions? Why stop with this earth when a trillion others are free for the picking?’”

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X

Colfax sips at his fizzy sweet, resting now.

Octavian interrupts the peace. With a careful voice, he says, “Your excellence,” and tips his head. “If I might, your excellence. May I ask a question of you?”

Forrester's daughter bristles.

But the emperor seems genuinely pleased, a wide smile building as he wonders, “What do you wish to know, my friend?”

“You were well aware of Lucian's plans. I had heard a few stories, but you knew the crew of the Virtus. They must have seen everything and talked about it. How, if I may ask, could you be taken by surprise?”

“But I was surprised,” the emperor confesses. “By the scale of the venture, yes. A small temple, a few volunteers ... well, that's what I'd imagined. But when I realized that Lucian intended to send many thousands of people into the past—”

“From a single temple,” Octavian interrupts.

A murmur passes through the audience. No one can remember the man ever interrupting his emperor.

But Colfax doesn't act offended. He shrugs his shoulders, and he sighs, remarking, "How long had I been with Lucian? How many opportunities did I have to stand against him? But I was loyal, even then. Particularly then. Afterward, Forrester met with me, in private. 'I didn't come for this kind of bullshit,' he confessed. 'Our living god is spending fortunes and accomplishing nothing for this world!'

"But I just shook my head, telling him, 'It won't amount to much. Really, how many people are going to willingly throw away the present?'"

Colfax pauses.

Octavian straightens his back, and waits.

"In the spring, Lucian began another voyage around the Mediterranean. At each new temple, the priests would load the caravels and second-hand triremes, and in some cases, the crudest of rafts. The people onboard were farmers and craftsmen, slaves and prisoners. Some came willingly, but oftentimes the new priests would lie and manipulate, or simply use the local soldiers to enforce compliance. Lucian had goals. In secret, he had drawn up explicit timetables and quotas, and if those goals were met, a temple's priests stood to gain huge expanses of land, and gold, and monopolies in one of a thousand new industries.

"It was said that if the Virtue appeared on your horizon in the morning, by nightfall, the population of your district would have fallen by a full tenth."

Another pause.

The woman leans forward, blurting, "You couldn't have realized—"

Octavian grasps her by the wrist and squeezes until she falls silent again. Then he says, "Your excellence." His voice is precise and a little slow, fighting to hide his emotions. "You knew what was happening. You knew. Yet months passed before you responded."

"Absolutely true, and the blame is entirely my own."

No one speaks. Save for the mechanical whirr of the cameras, the Senate House is immersed in a rigid silence.

The emperor glances at the woman, admitting, "I can't blame my friendship with Lucian. By and large, that friendship was finished. I saw him rarely, and when we were together, he was arrogant and indifferent to me. What I could blame, if I wished, was my deep love for the man. Unlike friendship, love is resilient and foolish. Fifty years have passed since I met him, yet I still feel a powerful affection for that swaggering, enthralling creature."

He pauses, shaking his head with an old embarrassment. "But no, I'm not blaming love, either. My excuse is simpler, and sorrier." He looks at Octavian, and with a confession's tone, he admits, "In some fashion, I believed in Lucian's vision. I lay awake at night, imagining a million earths colonized with my help. Tough peasants and lucky slaves were being thrown back into essentially empty worlds, and if only a fraction of those colonies thrived, think of the legacy. A legacy worthy of gods, I should think."

* * *

Forrester's daughter feels forgotten. She sits back and holds her tongue, those dark, bewitching eyes staring at an empty point between the two men.

The emperor continues. "Lucian and the Virtue left that spring. With Theresa and the ChronoAble, of

course. They sailed from port to port, temple to temple, and at each stop, would-be colonists would come onto the water in whatever boats were available. To save wear and tear on the time machine, calibrations were kept to a minimum. Lucian would stand on his ship's bow and wish the travelers a safe voyage, and he would hit the switch, and then more wooden ships would sail out. Of course, few of those travelers were sailors, and no one had experience with caravels. But, in theory, they were dropped into calm seas near old shorelines. Theresa worked doggedly to keep the travelers safe. She studied geologic texts and begged for more calibrations, and sometimes Lucian relented. Sometimes. But there were days when he grew bored with delays and the clumsy sailors that could never quite get their ships into position. He would pick some random instant in the past and start firing at each single boat. Without warning, colonists were flung back to the same ancient day. Five thousand years ago. Forty thousand years ago. Or more. Of course each firing of the ChronoAble produced an independent timestream. With chickens and a few sheep, plus all of the tools they could carry, those hardy souls were flung into some younger, unspoiled earth.

“Our sensors absorbed the flashes, then scrubbed them for data, building snapshots of the past. Most of the images seemed harmless enough. A ship sat on a slightly different sea, and you couldn't guess as to whether or not those colonists had survived the day. But one of Theresa's technicians would pass me evidence of disasters. Sometimes the colonists were tossed in raging storms. Or they were in the middle of a landless sea, no clue as to which way to safety. And once, there was an old trireme filled with Spaniards, and the image showed the boat and oars and the seawater that came with it, and beneath that disk of warm summer water was air. Their trireme burst into existence maybe a hundred feet above the ocean. The calibrations were wrong, and the poor bastards didn't have a chance ... good strong men rowing maybe once before they felt themselves tumbling from the sky....”

Octavian bristles but says nothing.

“A sad waste,” the emperor concedes. “But on the other hand, weren't we spreading medicines and education through the empire? Given time, we would double the average lifespan, and personal wealth would increase tenfold, and even if Lucian sent half of our people into the past ... well, wouldn't the other improvements make up for those losses and smooth away all those little tragedies...?”

He shakes his head, and coughs, and coughs again.

Octavian interrupts, saying a name.

He says, “Forrester,” with a genuine fondness. Then he mentions, “Late that year, you took the man to Egypt.”

“There was trouble there, yes.” The emperor nods and glances at the daughter, explaining, “We tried to be careful. When we were planning our conquest, we tried to find people without strong Christian beliefs. But maybe a hundred of us had lied. Or maybe they'd found their old faith when they arrived here. Either way, they slipped away from us and converged on the Holy Land. They began preaching about the Son of God, predicting that He would arrive in a few decades to make a kingdom on Earth....”

“Well, that was a sordid, ugly mess to deal with, and I think that your father did a commendable job rounding up the preachers and their converts.”

Again, Octavian says, “You took Forrester to Egypt.”

“He needed a base camp in a place he could trust. He had his own troops, plus Cleopatra's army fitted with muskets and napalm. That's when he and your mother began their affair, of course. That's when they fell in love, and it was love, I think. For your father, I know it was.

“Afterward, I took my own little cruise around the eastern Mediterranean. I visited the new temples and the empty lands surrounding them. Empty of people, and empty of trees. And where there were people, they were slaving in the sun, cutting down the last little stands of forest, making ready for the next awful spring when Lucian would come again.

“I saw all that, and then I came home.

“It was early morning when I docked. Exhausted, I returned to my home on the Palatine, and I soaked in my bath, and I drank too much, and then I came out to find my associate sitting in my home office.” He turns to Octavian. “You were studying, if I recall. You had a CD in the reader, and you were reading Gibbon. I remember that much. But honestly, I can't recall what I said to you.”

Octavian waits for a moment, and then says, “‘It's all shit,’ you said. ‘Everything's turning to shit.’”

“That sounds about right,” says Colfax.

“‘What can we do about this fucking mess?’ you asked.”

“And you told me what to do,” the emperor says.

“I merely advised,” Octavian counters. Then for the first time, he glances at the cameras, adding, “For the good of Rome, what else could I do?”

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XI

The emperor's gaze returns to the woman, and he says nothing, studying her face while his own face slips from emotion to emotion. One instant, he grins. The next brings a wince and a sad shiver. Then he takes a deep breath, and with a calm, practiced voice, he tells her, “When I agreed to this interview, I asked for you. I demanded you. If you weren't available, I wouldn't be here now.”

She nods and smiles. “I could never refuse a request from you, your excellence.”

“Your work is absolutely vital,” he continues.

She can't help but smile, muttering, “Thank you, your excellence.”

“How many film forums have I built?” he asks.

“More than a thousand,” she guesses. “In just Rome, there must be at least twenty of them.”

“And you appear in the newsreels. Your face and voice deliver timely news from the frontiers in Britain and the center of Rome.” He shows her a wide smile, saying, “Thank you. I wanted to tell you thank you. More than most, you've helped build us into a modern state.”

She can't contain her pleasure, her emperor's praise washing over her, buoying up her spirits and her already high confidence.

Then the emperor's face stiffens and grows cold.

Firmly, slowly, he says, “It has always been a subject of conjecture: Who turned Lucian against your father? Every member of the inner circle has been named at one time or another. His own soldiers are suspects. And of course, our Roman advisors. Octavian is an obvious candidate. He has eyes. He has ears. He possesses an absolute, perfect shrewdness that lets him weigh rumors, picking out the chaff

from what is genuine.

“It could have been Octavian. But if you believe that, you have to assume that Lucian would have listened to him, and believed him, and acted on those beliefs.

“As a point of fact, Lucian never had fondness or trust for Romans.

“Really, if you're listing suspects, only two qualify. Unless we include your own father, too.”

He pauses, sipping at the air with quick little breaths.

The daughter begins to speak, her mouth falling open but her words stopped short by the emperor's sudden admission:

“I visited Lucian. I took a set of files filled with evidence, some of it genuine but most of it fabricated. Lucian was on his ship. He never actually lived in Rome itself. His private suite had been enlarged, walls knocked out to form an enormous room with bullet-proof windows on all sides and sliding doors leading out onto an equally enormous balcony. I found him indoors, sitting at a desk, poring over a stack of poster-sized photographs.

“‘Just a moment,’ he said, not looking up.

“He knew I was coming. He knew I was standing behind his left shoulder. But it was important to keep me waiting for a while, treating me with a calculated indifference.

“Finally, he said, ‘Here. Come here, Jonathon.’

“I approached, pushing the files tight up under my arm.

“‘I'm picking images for my forum,’ he reported, grinning down at the posters. ‘I want your input here. What do you think? This one, or that?’

“His forum was being built behind the Senate House. It was an expensive, graceless crash program—a showcase for his conquest of countless earths. One image showed a trireme sitting in a flat tropical sea, and standing in that water, not fifty feet away, was the long neck and tiny, toothy head of a plesiosaur.

“‘Spectacular, isn't it?’ he exclaimed.

“But the other image was stranger. A pair of caravels had appeared in the surf of an ancient sea, and in the foreground, strolling stupidly along the rocky beach, was a burly animal that looked like a reptile in one glance, a mammal in the next.

“‘Permian?’ I sputtered.

“‘Very good! Exactly!’ Lucian had a giggle, winking at me. ‘You know, honestly, I think I'll use them both. Blown up bigger than this. Wall-sized and set in places of prominence.’

“He'd already made that decision. He just needed to enjoy my surprise and my horror.

“What would happen to those people? I nearly asked. How could they survive, lost in an entirely different world? It seemed cruel, and it was definitely wasteful, and normally I would have said a few careful words. But I had more pressing business. With both hands, I dropped the file on his desk, and in the next breath, I told him, ‘Forrester is against us.’

“Lucian laughed. Dismissing me, he said, ‘I know his complaints. I hear them. Hell, he's even told me his

mind—’

“No,’ I interrupted. ‘I mean, he is actively plotting against us.’

“What? Is my general going to march on Rome?’ Lucian pushed the file to one side, informing me, ‘I know the man. I know his opinions and his tendencies, and he's not that fucking complicated. Or treacherous, for that matter.’

“And I knew Lucian. Better than anyone else, I knew that I had to wait for a long moment, giving my old friend time to consider the situation. He knew me. And he slowly, slowly realized that I wouldn't have come if I didn't believe that I had a very good reason.

“He took a deep breath and pulled the file close again.

“What's here?’ he asked.

“Taped conversations,’ I allowed. ‘My notes. And some security reports from Egypt and Jerusalem.’

“Then he turned to me, asking with force, ‘What will they tell me?’

“It's not a coup,’ I explained. ‘You're right. Forrester would never.’ Then I shook my head sadly, reporting, ‘It's your time machine, Lucian. He only wants to blow it up.’”

* * *

Colfax closes his eyes, and opens them.

The daughter of the accused sits bolt upright, motionless, her mouth ajar, a whispering gasp leaking from deep inside her throat.

He continues. “Within the hour, the Virtue was being readied for sea. But it would take three days and nights to finish fueling and load the necessary supplies. On that third night, I had an unannounced visitor. She came alone, no bodyguards in sight. I told her, ‘You shouldn't be out there. It's dangerous,’ and she said, ‘So let me inside,’ and she stepped through my door and pulled the hood off her head, showing me her puffy face and swollen, bloodshot eyes.

“I motioned, saying, ‘Let's go to the garden. We can talk there.’

“I had a servant bring us fizzy sweets, and I sat her down beside a granite fountain, letting the water sounds obscure our voices. ‘Theresa,’ I said. Then I shook my head sadly. And finally, after so many years, I asked her, ‘Do you know how jealous I was? When I got home that day, and I walked in on you and Lucian...?’

“It took her by surprise, that confession. She was startled, off-balance. But then something in my voice or words found purchase inside her. Theresa shook her head, and tenderly, she asked me, ‘Why haven't you ever married, Johnny?’

“I shrugged and smiled shyly. I could have told her that I hadn't found the right girl, or that it wouldn't have been fair to bring a wife on such a risky adventure. I could have claimed that my romance for Rome meant that I had to marry one of its daughters. Any of those responses would have been truthful, to a point. But I smiled at her and said, ‘It's you. I've always loved you, and there's nobody else for me.’

“As if she had never seen me before, she stared at me then.

“Do you mean that?’ she asked.

“I said, ‘Yes.’ And I said it convincingly, my voice helped along by the fact that it was a little true.

“Theresa dipped her head, and sighed, and then I asked, ‘Why are you here?’

“Why was she? She seemed to have forgotten. She shook her head, collecting her wits. Then she spoke to the stone path at her feet, saying, ‘Now Forrester is against us.’

“‘No, he isn’t,’ I replied, instantly.

“Then I told her the details of my elaborate and very dangerous lie.

“I expected her to be surprised and outraged. If she was either, the emotions remained hidden. She looked at her hands. She looked at my feet. Then with a great wet breath, she looked above my head, asking, ‘Why would you do that to our good friend?’

“I said nothing.

“‘Lucian is going to send him off,’ she warned. ‘He’s been talking about nothing else for days.’ She shivered. She sobbed. Her gaze dropped again. ‘How can you let this happen to our friend?’

“‘But I’m not letting anything happen,’ I pointed out. ‘You are.’

“Then I leaned forward, cupping her hands in mine, pressing my mouth against my love’s ear. ‘Darling,’ I whispered. ‘If you don’t want it to happen, it won’t happen. That’s the simple, awful truth, darling.’”

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XII

Exhaustion softens the old man’s voice. The boom above him has to lower its bulbous microphone to capture every word. The technicians quietly gather beside one of the cameras, working at some critical problem. But there is no mention of stopping. If the cameras die now, and if the lights fail, the audience will sit in the sudden darkness, waiting for whatever the emperor says next.

“Your father surprised me,” he confesses. “When Lucian arrived in Alexandria, he had Forrester brought onboard and escorted to his suite, and he confronted him with my lying files. ‘Why do this to me?’ he roared. And when Forrester didn’t respond, he asked, ‘Are you going deny all this evidence?’

“Forrester was in uniform, but unarmed. He examined the transcripts and fondled the various tapes, and then with a calm, clear voice, he said, ‘No, it’s true. All true.’

“Lucian was furious. He shook his head, tugged at his hair, and then with a loud, piercing voice, he screamed, ‘Do you know where I’m going to send you? Do you? Back when the earth was new, you son-of-a-bitch! Before there was air. Before the crust got cold! Hell! That’s where I’m sending you! Hell!’

“Forrester just grinned, and with a little shake of his head, he remarked, ‘It’s a good thing that you’re a god, because you’re not much of a man.’

“Lucian barked orders, and bodyguards led the prisoner away.

“Then he sat down on his yellow sofa, and he said to me, ‘It looks like you were right, Jonathon.’

“I had followed Lucian to Alexandria. It was on my own authority, against his orders. But when I reached him in the harbor, I explained my reasons. If one of his oldest advisors was against him, then I

had to play a role here. If only to watch justice happen, I needed to be present—as a witness and as a counter to any future criticisms from the others in our increasingly tiny circle.

“Are you glad you came?’ he barked.

“When will you send him?’ I asked. ‘Today?’

“This fucking minute,’ he proclaimed. Then he called to the guards on the intercom, giving them clear orders. And he turned on the big television, calling up to Theresa and her technicians. ‘Don’t bother with calibrations!’ he warned. ‘Four and a half billion years ago! Make it happen now!’

“The unrepentant prisoner was led to the great ship’s bow. He was scared, but stubborn. Perspiration was leaking through his uniform. I saw him squint at the bright subtropical sun. He looked up at the superstructure, at the watching camera, and he shook his head for a moment. Then with a massive dose of will, he laughed at us, his cowardly, pathetic audience.

“Are we ready?’ Lucian asked.

“A voice answered. Not Theresa’s, but another technician’s voice. ‘We’re having trouble powering up—’ she began.

“Is there enough juice?’ he roared.

“Barely,’ she allowed.

“Fine. I’ll send him in pieces, if I have to.’

“Lucian had a control panel built into the coffee table. Like ten thousand times in the past, he put his hand on the flashing red button, and he pushed, and there was a flash of quick cold light that filled the television screen for a horrible moment.

“When the light dissolved, Forrester was still standing on the deck. Still squinting and shaking his head.

“I didn’t say a word.

“Lucian seemed to forget I was there. He called up to Theresa again. He said her name, maybe three times. Then she finally answered, a quiet little voice saying, ‘Yes.’

“Something’s wrong with something,’ Lucian raged.

“I know, darling,’ she replied.

“Fix it,’ he told her.

“She said, ‘No.’

“Why not?’ he asked.

“There was a pause. Then she said, ‘Because,’ and I heard a smile riding on her voice. ‘I just got done breaking the damned thing, darling. Is that reason enough?’

* * *

The emperor pauses, managing a few weak breaths.

“Lucian started to run,” he continues. “I knew he would, and I thought I was ready, but I couldn’t stay

with him. He reached the machine and Theresa maybe thirty seconds ahead of me, and by the time I arrived, he was flinging her against the steel barrel, screaming incoherently, then regaining just enough composure to threaten her in the most horrible, unspeakable ways.

“I ran up and stopped short.

“She was crying. Melting, and dying. Give your life and soul to another person, and there is nothing for you when the end arrives. I know this. Not like Theresa knew it. But even for me, standing in that bright sunshine, wiping away my own tears ... I felt a sense of withering loss that years later still slices through me....

“‘Fix it!’ Lucian screamed.

“Theresa said, ‘No. I won’t.’

“Then he made his next error. He turned to her cowering staff, and he asked them, ‘Can you fix the problem?’

“One of the low-ranking technicians nodded nervously, claiming, ‘I think I can.’

“‘Do it. Now!’ Then he took the palm of his hand, delivering a staggering blow to the traitor before him. He dropped Theresa to the deck, and he kicked her face, and finally, I jumped and grabbed at him, begging him to stop.

“He said, ‘Get away from me!’

“Theresa pulled herself into a fetal position, trying to protect her bloodied eyes.

“‘What did you think you could do?’ he roared at her. ‘Any one of your people can run this machine. What the fuck good do you think you were doing?’

“Then the other hands started to grab at him.

“Grab at his arms, his legs.

“We carried him away, squeezing the fight out of him, warning him to shut up and behave. And only then, finally, did Lucian notice who was attached to those grabbing hands. The inner circle. In secret, I’d brought all of them with me on the Veritas. I’d slipped them aboard his ship by telling the bodyguards that this was just another surprise pizza party for the emperor. They had watched everything from the dance hall; a tiny camera and microphone were hidden in my clothes. They were the richest men and women in this world, and they were helping me carry the most powerful ... and we finally dropped him into his favorite chair, and Lucian looked up at us ... and that’s when he stopped being anything but expendable....”

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XIII

Another pause.

Sweat emerges from the fresh makeup, beads up and rolls into the left eye. The emperor removes the moisture with a shaking finger, and then he says, “The official account is that Lucian asked to be sent into the future. And that is, mostly, a true story. He wasn’t called back to the twenty-first century by a brother god. That story is told with a little bit too much gusto for my taste. But in the end, Lucian found enough

poise to ask for a specific date, and we put him on a suicide watch and brought him back here. By then, Theresa had the ChronoAble working again. The machine and a portion of its sensors were loaded into the Hum-vees and trucked to Rome. It was night. The Forum had been cleared and sealed. Our emperor was allowed his chance to say some final words, and after a moment's hesitation, he looked at me and smiled, saying, 'Wherever I end up, I'll be famous. Don't you think, old buddy?'

"I didn't say one word to him.

"Really, by that point, I couldn't get rid of Lucian fast enough."

Now he pauses again, looking at the woman as he shakes his head. Then she says, with genuine feeling, "I wish I could have known my father."

"How old were you when the Christians killed him?"

"Less than a year," she admits.

"Well, Sarah," the emperor offers, "your father lived a good life and he died well. Despite those rumors that he was a traitor against Lucian, I assure you: Your father was nothing but a good loyal servant of an occasionally noble cause."

He sighs, glancing at Octavian now.

"Theresa sent Lucian into the future. The sensors absorbed and analyzed the flash, and this is what they showed us." He reaches under the table, bringing up a small folder in which is a single photograph. The image shows Rome in another two thousand years. "Of course this is just one possibility," the emperor cautions. "The best mathematicians in every world can't compute the total number of futures, just in our timestream."

Octavian has seen the picture many times, but it never fails to astonish him. A city of glass or diamond hangs in the air above a well-preserved set of marble ruins. The ruins are reworked versions of today's forum. Each of the crystal buildings is suspended by invisible means. And visible in the sky between two of those marvels is a green and blue and cloud-clad moon.

A moment passes.

"Theresa decided to return to the Virtue," the emperor mentions. "She would take the ChronoAble with her, and a tiny crew—enough bodies to make a short voyage. 'I'm jumping back to a few minutes after we arrived here,' she explained. 'I'm going to talk to Lucian. I'm going to talk to myself. I'll do my best to warn them that things will get awful, if they aren't careful.'

"I pointed out that it wouldn't accomplish much. Jumping back wouldn't change our past; it would just create another messy timestream.

"But she was ready for me. Quietly, with a weary authority, she explained, 'Every move that we make in this world creates endless new futures. And every move that we don't make does the same.'

"She said to me, 'Johnny, I can only do so much, and that's what I'm going to do. Good-bye now. And good luck with your empire.'"

* * *

The emperor leans forward, only the marble table keeping him from falling out of his chair. Yet no one moves to help him. His exhaustion is so natural, so gentle and calm and inevitable, that it acquires a kind

of beauty that stifles every impulse to help the man.

“My empire,” he says.

He says, “With the rest of the inner circle, I went to Ostia, and together, we watched the flash of light that came as Theresa left our world. She took the ChronoAble and its sensors, and the great ship Virtue, and read any symbolism that you want into the ship's name. She was gone. We were no longer a time-crossing people, and we won't be again for another century or two.

“My empire,” he says with a mystified pleasure. Then he manages to smile, telling the cameras, “I turned to the others then. To my old college friends. And I asked, ‘Would anyone object if I tried running things for now?’

“There were no real objections.

“And for thirty years, that is exactly what I have done.” [Back to Table of Contents]

XIV

The journalist waits for a moment, and then tells her emperor, and everyone in her vast, invisible audience, “You have done wonderful things for Rome, your excellence. Wonderful, glorious things.”

Colfax won't argue the point. He allows himself a grin, and with the smallest of shrugs, adds, “I've had my share of help, of course.”

He says, “Octavian,” and looks over at his associate. “Your excellence,” Octavian replies. Still seated at the table, he manages a little bow, and then with a customary

fever, he adds, “And you will continue to guide Rome for many, many years to come.”

“Doubtful,” says the emperor.

Then he laughs, and with altogether too much ease, he coughs. He coughs and wipes his mouth with his cotton cloth, finding another thread of blood in his mouth. Sadly, he shakes his head. “No more smallpox,” he says. “Cholera and plague are on the run. But despite all of our careful quarantines, we managed to bring the HIV virus. And of course, it got loose in the brothels, and spread, and it was already everywhere before we realized the scope of the epidemic.”

He sets down the cloth, piling his hands on top of it.

“Which leads to another fine question. Why am I ill with this scourge? I've had few sexual partners in the last thirty years, and each of them remains healthy and virus-free. My doctors are skilled and loyal, or so I've been led to believe. Of course there might have been opportunities for someone who wants me dead. An injection of tainted blood. A dentist with a filthy implement. Or maybe, a needle hidden in my bed sheets, ready to deliver its slow, fatal cargo.”

Octavian feels the eyes staring at him. He sits motionless, wondering when the accusation will finally come. For several years, he has waited for the dying emperor to single him out. But he has never imagined the moment looking like this, with cameras watching, and strangers, and the sick old man leaning across the table to place his bloody cloth into Octavian's opened hands.

The Roman knows enough to fear that bright red blood.

But he is enough of a Roman to ignore his terror, calmly folding the cloth while saying, “You are tired,

your excellence. We could rest until tomorrow—”

“No,” the emperor interrupts. “Really there's not much more to say, and I want to say it. Now.”

Forrester's daughter glances at Octavian, and then stares at the emperor. “Whatever you wish to say,” she begins.

“In a few centuries,” the old man begins, “we will reinvent the time machines. And eventually, there will be enough of them, and they will be fancier than our ChronoAble ... and anyway, our descendants will be able to look back along our timestream with an unparalleled accuracy. With enough sensors deployed, future people will be able to study the past in astonishing detail, and there won't be any secrets anymore. Every charity and every treachery ... they still exist in the past, waiting to be dragged into the light....

“Which, I think, is a lovely, perfect way to build a universe.”

He rises, surprisingly vigorous for a man in his sorry condition. Then he steps around the table and clasps a hand on Octavian's shoulder, remarking, “If you were the one who poisoned me ... well, so be it. So be it.”

Octavian starts to rise, to voice his passionate dissent.

“I can understand,” says the emperor, using his taller frame to hold his associate in his chair. “Really, it would have been reasonable of you. You're not getting younger, and I might have lived another twenty years. You were born to rule Rome and the Empire. And honestly, at this point, you would do a better job of it than I can. Because that's what you do on the typical day. I'm little more than a figurehead, and you are the true soul of this state.”

Octavian trembles. He can't help himself.

The emperor turns to the woman, and he says, “Sarah, I have to apologize again. This interview has a second, much more important purpose. I have no heir. I never married, and for every good reason. But I wanted cameras here to record my public announcement. I want to adopt the man who will replace me as emperor when I die. Any day now, perhaps.”

“Your excellence,” Octavian sputters.

“It is you, my friend,” he says, smiling down at his associate. “By my word, you are now my son and only heir...!”

“But if ... I mean ... if you really believe that I had any role in making you sick...!”

“Shut up, Octavian.” The emperor leans against the table, a sudden fever rushing through him. But he finds the energy to remark, “An old friend once told me, ‘History is millions of people telling an elaborate, self-serving story.’”

Then he shakes his head, adding, “You did this thing or you did not. But first, I have a duty toward Rome, and, in truth, I don't want to ugly up my last moments of life by falling into some palace intrigue.”

He winks.

Octavian sits back in the chair, waiting now.

The emperor sits back in his chair, and with a slow wet voice, he says, “Remember where I began my story? In that dorm room, with Lucian?” And he laughs gently, shaking his head as he wonders aloud, “In

how many rooms did nothing happen? How many times did Lucian dismiss his crazy thought, and how many times did I tell him, 'You're an idiot, and shut up'?"

He says, "History is a maze."

Then with a wise, sorry shake of the head, he admits, "Everything that can happen, does. Which should, I think, make us all the more eager to find what is true and decent, and celebrate it with all our feeble breath...!"