



INTERLUDE

Confessiones Ad Mortuos

I lie, listless, in the unyielding bed of the Academy infirmary, staring at the ceiling. The silence is hollow and complete. Not just of the empty beds stretching away in the long room either side of me, but of the entire Curia Doctrina above. Of the entire school.

My missing arm throbs. The ache in my chest a pain of a different, far deeper loss. Eidhin's up there, somewhere. Sleeping now. A week since the Iudicium, and he's still refusing to leave until I do. He is a good friend. A true friend.

But down here in the dim and the heavy quiet, I am alone.

I'm not sure how long passes before there's a sound at the door, uneven padding footsteps growing louder until Ulnius's white-cloaked form penetrates my vacant staring. The Academy's craggy-faced physician stops his limping and peers down, worry undisguised.

"I hoped you'd be asleep," he observes quietly.

"Not yet."

He studies me, scratching his crooked nose as if trying to decide something. What to give me to force me to unconsciousness again, probably. Even with his constant surprise at how well I'm doing, physically, given the trauma I've been through—not that it feels like it—he insists that I'm going to need all the rest I can get for some time to come.

"We've just had word from Caten," he says abruptly. "Callidus's funeral is tomorrow."

It takes a few moments for the words to seep through my apathy, jolt me into paying him my full attention. “Then I’m going.” I try to push myself up. Forget I have only one arm. Collapse clumsily back onto the bed with a frustrated groan.

Ulnius just shakes his head.

“You can’t keep me here.” I make it into a seated position successfully, this time, and glare.

Ulnius still says nothing, instead shifting me gently into a more comfortable pose and then unwrapping the bandage around my shoulder. I look away, despite myself. I still find it too hard to look at. Dizzying, nauseating, when I see nothing where my arm should be.

“He was my friend,” I continue between gritted teeth, though the physician is gentle and the wound hurts no worse due to his ministrations. “I need to be there.”

“You need to say goodbye,” says the Septimus softly, carefully probing my stump with practiced fingers, “but you could do that here, too.”

I frown, finally looking back at him as he, apparently satisfied, begins the process of rebandaging. “What do you mean?”

“I mean talk to him.” Ulnius expertly finishes his work and then sits on the bed next to mine, leaning forward earnestly. “You lost someone, Vis. You lost him so quickly and unexpectedly and it’s not fair—not just because he’s gone, but because of what was left unsaid.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Of course I do,” he chides gently to my angry tone. “None of us say the things we would, if we knew it was our last chance to say them.”

I glower, not at him, but past, toward the darkly glinting symbol of the Hierarchy on the far wall. My dreams of seeing my family again have chased me for too long not to recognise the truth in the man’s words. He’s lost someone too. Not recently, I think. But the statement comes from something deeper than merely quoted wisdom, from more than sympathetic pain.

Even so, I can't help but give a small scoff, an instinctive act of self-defence. "And then it will stop hurting?"

"No." He says it with the ruefulness of a man who knows it only too well. "But it might help you feel it the way you need to." He leans over, clasps me gently on my good shoulder. "If you don't think it will help, then don't. But it is worth trying."

"And if I still want to go to the funeral?" I hold his gaze. Determined.

He sighs. Stands. "I'll be back early in the morning. I've already organised a Transvect to Agerus for Eidhin, anyway. So you can make your decision then."

He gives me a tight, understanding smile, and leaves.

I lie back tiredly and stay there for a long time. Sleepless. Just examining the roof again, tracing the minute lines of the grain in the impossibly smooth, Will-carved surface. Ulnius will let me go tomorrow if I insist. He wouldn't have told me about the funeral, otherwise.

He is, I think, a good man.

I slowly, painfully, push myself to a seated position again. Swivel so that my legs are dangling, and I'm facing the bed next to me. The walls of the infirmary are solid stone. No way anyone can overhear me in here, even if there was some reason they were trying to listen in to a lone, bedridden patient.

I close my eyes.

"Hail, Callidus." I draw in a shaky breath, just the name sending a wash of grief through me. I see his torn up body in my arms. See him struggling to breathe. See his unmoving chest. With an effort, I rip the image from my mind. Furiously scrub at my eyes and picture him as I knew him. As he should have been. Dark and slim, curly-haired, that irrepressible grin that made it seem as though everything in the world amused him. I force a shaky smile in return.

I stay like that, not saying anything, for a long few moments. Heart hurting.

“I suppose the first thing I need to tell you is that my name isn’t Vis.” I give a small, rueful laugh. “Gods. Surprise. My real name is Diago. Diago, son of Cristoval, Prince of Suus. I know you wondered about my education, even if you were too good a friend to ever push me about it. Well—there it is. Four years ago, the Republic invaded. Took my home, murdered my family. I barely got away. I’ve been hiding ever since.”

I swallow. Old pain next to my current grief, but still.

“The years straight after Suus were... hard,” I continue, a small smile to tell him that I’m underplaying it. “Most of what I told you about that time was true—I really did end up in an orphanage in Letens. Though, the Matron there was putting me to work in the local prison, because I wouldn’t cede my Will to her. Wouldn’t go through the Aurora Columnae like all the other orphans did. I just couldn’t. After what the Hierarchy had done, it felt like... it felt like I would have been giving that last piece of myself to Caten. So without the Matron knowing, I arranged to skip some nights at the prison, and instead earn extra coin fighting in underground bouts at the Letens Theatre. The plan was to save as much as I could, and eventually run. Find somewhere I could hide where I wouldn’t have to cede.” I rub my face. “Stupid, I know. Would never have worked. But it was all I had.”

I try to imagine Callidus’ reaction to all this. I can’t.

“The prison was where I really met Ulciscor. He was there trying to find proof that the Principalis killed his brother—which, I found out later, was also why he adopted me. But at the time, he was just trying to get to one of the prisoners. Someone in a Sapper.” I grimace as I remember Nateo. “They were speaking Vetusian, and I wasn’t careful enough to hide that I could understand it. He needed someone he could force into coming here to look into Veridius, and I needed a chance to avoid ceding once I turned eighteen. Seemed like a happy coincidence, at the time,” I add wryly.

I roll my neck. Stretch muscles that have grown stiff and weak from too long lying in bed. I'm still weary, but it feels good to be sitting.

"Not that I was unhappy to be free of Letens," I eventually admit to Callidus' ghost, "but you may recall that the Transvect we left on got attacked by the Anguis on the way here. Which itself wasn't... ideal, but what I didn't mention about that day was that I spoke to them. The Anguis not only knew exactly who I was, but it turned out that they were the ones who had set up Ulciscor to find me in the prison." I shake my head at the memory. "Oh—and that it was Ulciscor's gods-damned *wife* doing the setting up. Not that I knew about the connection, back then. I said I wasn't going to help the Anguis, and she gave me a month to reconsider. Told me to meet her at the naumachia, or she'd let Caten know who I really was."

"She let me go, in the end, but I was pretty badly injured. Barely got the Transvect moving again, and woke up in this exact gods-damned bed. Met Veridius, and..." And Emissa. Along with Indol and Belli. I make a face. "Just before we left again, Ulciscor told me what I had to do here at the Academy. The places he needed me to look into, that he thought might hold some clues about his brother's death. There were some ruins about a mile from here, and then there was another site over on the other side of the island."

I draw a slow breath. It was an even more imposing task than it seemed, in retrospect. Near-impossible. I wonder if my adoptive father ever really believed I'd be able to do it.

"After that, Ulciscor took me to Villa Telimus. I trained there with Lanistia for weeks. I told you about her and trust me, I did *not* exaggerate about how hard that woman is. They'd even built a secret replica of the Labyrinth under the estate, so I could practice." I snort at the absurd enormity of that particular endeavour. "Between Lanistia and Kadmos, the Dispensator there, I was working from the moment I woke up until the moment I closed my eyes. But then Aequa's father turned up one morning, trying to figure out what Ulciscor was up to with me,

and I took the chance to get myself invited to the Festival of Jovan. To the naumachia. Which...”

I trail off. The naumachia. Even after all I’ve been through these last couple of weeks, my mind still shies from the memory.

But if Callidus were here, these would be the things I would want to tell him. That I *had* to tell him.

“As soon as we were in the Catenan Arena, I got away from Aequa. Met with Relucia and Melior, before it all started. Melior’s real name was Estevan; he was an advisor to my father back on Suus, which is why he targeted me to help them. Relucia gave me something that I think protected me, somehow. A stylus. But I swear I didn’t know what they were going to do.”

At that last part, unbidden, a note of pleading seeps into my voice. Would Callidus have looked at me differently, after hearing this? Catenicus, secretly meeting with the Anguis right before the attack that gave him his name. Part of the Anguis’ plan all along, however unwitting and however unwilling. A carefully constructed, entirely hollow hero.

He’d hate it. Be horrified by it. Of course he’d look at me differently.

It wouldn’t have stopped him from being my friend, though.

Vek.

When I realise that, feel the certainty of that knowledge, the grief hits me all over again.

“Estevan guessed I would try to stop him,” I say eventually, brushing away the last of my stray tears. “Or at least, he accounted for it. He was prepared to die. I didn’t even really kill him. I was just trying to make him stop, and he...” Estevan’s hands gripping my own, as I held the stylus at his throat. That *thrum*, the quivering and twisting of the air, those strange but brief

visions of somewhere like Caten and yet very definitely not. Screams and fire and dust and the overwhelming scent of blood all around us as he thrust the stone spike deep into his own brain.

“So I got the credit. The glory.” I say it bitterly. “I still don’t know how Estevan did it. What power he used to kill all those people. But I recovered. Woke up back at Villa Telimus, and eventually kept training.” I smile tightly. Relieved to let those memories go again, for now.

“And then a few weeks later, I met you.”

My throat is dry, my voice now whispery in its hoarseness. This is by far the most I’ve spoken since I woke—far more than this morning, when I had to inform Veridius and the senators of what I wanted to do next. They’ve all left, now. The senators returned to Caten, bearing my wishes to be placed in Governance, to work for Callidus’s father. And Veridius has gone... wherever he’s gone. Even if he’d told me, I wouldn’t have believed him.

I take a careful sip of the cup of water by my bed, though I still don’t have the stomach for the bread that’s growing stale there. Ulnius was right. Talking like this is helping. Banishing just a little of the fog of weariness and grief. It hasn’t made me any less determined to go to Callidus’s funeral tomorrow, though. How could I not?

I take a deep breath. Then another. Calming. Bracing.

I stand.

My vision swims and I almost topple, preventing it only by steadying myself one-handed against the bedside table. Vek. I knew this would be different but... *vek*. Being upright has suddenly made me more aware of my body. Brought into sharp, unpleasant relief the truth of what my life will be like going forward. This is real. I feel... exposed. Terribly vulnerable.

Emotion almost overcomes me and it's all I can do not to collapse back on the bed, and curl up in a ball, and let all of this go.

"You remember the first day I got here, Callidus?" I ask softly. Trembling as I lean against the table. "You remember how Veridius put us together, knowing Eidhin was going to try and start that fight with you in the mess hall? Gods. Almost worked, too. Almost expelled on my first day." I cough a laugh. More at the situation now than the one back then. "Though, having to go and work in the stables every dinnertime was barely a better punishment. Isolated me almost perfectly. I felt so alone, back then. Except for you. And sometimes Emissa, when she..."

I falter. Stop. Slowly let go of the bedside table, and, wobbling slightly, touch the mostly-healed wound in my stomach.

A different kind of scar, that one.

"You obviously know a lot of what happened while I was here." I force myself onward, ruthlessly pushing down the hurt and betrayal of having to wonder, again, whether any of it was real. Knowing it probably wasn't. "At least, you do until after those weeks of me being stuck in Class Six with that ass Praeceptor Dultatis—the day Eidhin and I ran the Labyrinth, and the gods-damned man said we'd cheated by using Cymrian. That... that almost broke me. So I snuck out of the school that night to go and have a look at the ruins Ulciscor told me about. Risky, I know—stupid—but I had to do *something*. Oh, and it's how I actually got this," I add, displaying my palm with the old, white scar across it, as if to show him. "Going over the wall. Not falling over in the mess hall onto my gods-damned knife. I am *not* that clumsy." I stagger slightly and briefly use the table again for support. "Or, I wasn't."

I straighten again. Take a breath, and then a step. Another, away from the safety of the bedside. My legs and torso are taut, trying to make up for my body's new imbalance. My head swims again, but only fleetingly. Another step. Another.

“Those ruins... gods. I wish I could have talked to you about them. You would have been fascinated.” My voice is strained, the words coming through gritted teeth, but it helps to focus on something other than the effort I’m having to make. “I did tell Eidhin. Only because he already knew I’d snuck off the grounds, and it was a way to make him complicit,” I admit ruefully, “but still. There was an underground passageway, with glowing writing along the walls in a language I’d never seen before. And then at the end, this chamber. Hundreds of dead bodies lined up around the edges of it, stabbed through with obsidian blades, all their eyes removed.” I make it to the far wall of the infirmary, touch it, and turn to come back. “I triggered... something, in there. There was a map. What looked like three versions of Solivagus, but all different. I would have taken a better look, but then all the corpses started speaking, all at once. *Obiteum is lost. Luceum unknown. Do not open the gate.*” I shiver. “No idea what it all meant, but I’m not ashamed to say I didn’t stay around to find out.”

I make it back to the bedside table. More confident already as I prop myself against it for a short break. I’m going to be sore after walking for any length of time, given the new ways my muscles have to account for my balance, but I *can* walk.

And if I can, then a little more pain is a small price to pay.

My hand curls into a fist so tight that, briefly, my nails dig into my palm. Going tomorrow is the last thing I can do for Callidus. The only way left for me to honour my friend.

“The Festival of the Ancestors wasn’t long after I did that. *That* was...” I snort as I start pacing between the beds, trying to find a natural gait. “Gods. I know you were upset when your father didn’t let you come to Agerus, but... *gods*. That wasn’t fun. It’s where I found out that the Anguis agent I was telling you about earlier was actually my adoptive mother, Relucia. She told me their plan. That they’d wanted me to become Catenicus, so that when the Republic did finally reach a breaking point, I’d be in position to help make sure it shattered.” I exhale. “She told me that all I needed to do was to keep advancing through the Academy. Which is

what Ulciscor wanted, too. So I... I told her about Dultatis. I don't know why. I was trying to explain why I wasn't making any progress, I suppose."

I come to a stumbling halt for a moment, feeling sick. Not just that it happened, but that I had somehow almost forgotten about it.

"She was the one who had Feriun killed, so I could move up. It wasn't a suicide," I add quietly. Confessing that to Callidus's shadow feels even harder than telling him my real name. I didn't know Feriun. I'm not even sure I could bring his face to mind. But he was murdered for my benefit.

I return to my bed again, awkwardly sit, and take another few mouthfuls of water.

"Do you remember how I stayed at Agerus until the very last Transvect back to the Academy?" I eventually ask, the question echoing back to me. "The truth is, I didn't. I took a much earlier one. Snuck onto the back and held onto the outside, until just past the Seawall. Jumped off and swam to the shore so that I could go and look at those other ruins Ulciscor was making me investigate." I allow a small, sad grin as I imagine my friend's disbelief at the insanity of that particular plan. "Not one of my more sensible ideas. But I made it."

I stand, and start walking again as I tell Callidus about the rest of that nightmarish day. The mysterious entrance that opened when I said the words 'Scintres Exunus'. The journey down to the massive hall, and then Artemius, the eyeless man who would only respond to very specific questions. And who then showed me the Labyrinth. The real Labyrinth.

As well as, eventually, exactly what would happen if I failed while trying to get to the other side of it.

I shudder as I describe the Remnants, those black, chittering obsidian clouds of death that stalked the Labyrinth's passageways. That eviscerated Artemius when he 'demonstrated' the process of running it for me.

Then that long trip back to the Seawall. Stumbling across Diago, the alupi pup who would later save me. Using the Will-powered grapple that Ulciscor had made, that allowed me to get back onto the final Transvect from Agerus without anyone in the Academy suspecting a thing.

Gods, I was so tired, afterward. Still hard to believe I made it through all of that.

But I did.

I come to a sudden decision, and head for the infirmary door. Not locked, thankfully; as much as I doubt Ulnius intends to keep me prisoner, he also wouldn't be pleased that I'm not trying to sleep. I probably *should* be trying to sleep. But I'm going to Agerus tomorrow and if that's the case, I need to be certain I can do more than just pace in circles.

The Academy's stone hallways are as quiet and echoing as the infirmary. Eidhin will be in the boys' dormitory. Ulnius is probably asleep. There will be guards at the Academy's entrance, of course—but otherwise, I'm fairly sure even the staff have been sent away until the island is officially declared clear of the Anguis.

I pass the seven-tiered mess hall. Carefully and slowly climb the stairs, and make my way through the hollow vastness of the Curia Doctrina, until I am out into the massive, building-enclosed square of the Academy's quadrum. I breathe in the cool night air. The stars are out tonight. Only the burbling of the fountain and the distant hiss of crashing waves disturbs the silence.

"You were standing right over there, when I beat Ianix to get into Class Five." My gaze lingers on the spot where Callidus finally appeared, halfway through the fight. I'd argued with him, that morning. He'd been frustrated that I was lying to him, knew the skills I'd been displaying here didn't match with the things I'd told him about my past. But even after that, he'd come to support me. Stood behind the bulk of the crowd, at the top of the Temple of Jovan's stairs, and leaned against that column as he watched.

Celebrated my victory, too, even as almost everyone else was left in shocked silence after I took out months of barely restrained frustration on the unfortunate—albeit cheating—Ianix. “I was so glad you were there. Gods, that was a satisfying day.” I give a soft laugh. “You never did tell me how much you won, betting on me.”

I start to walk across the cobblestone square. Ungainly, but in no real danger of falling now, and I find myself dwelling on those weeks after. Constantly tense as I worked my way through Class Five, still pushing manically hard—but also maybe the most at ease I ever felt here. Flirting with Emissa. Friends with Callidus and, more gradually, with Eidhin, as we practiced his Common. Confident I could keep rising. Confident that I had done everything I could to satisfy Ulciscor, too—comfortable that I was already past the point of needing to risk life and limb to get him his answers. Believing that all I really needed to do was rise high enough, and everything might actually work out.

Deep down, back then, I really still thought there would be a way I could just... disappear. Run from it all.

That didn’t last long, though.

“Do you remember how, as soon as I got into Class Four, Indol invited me to go and train with him and some of the other Thirds over the trimester break? At gods-damned *Suus*?” I shake my head at the memory. The sheer shock and panic the prospect of that return had given me. “You can probably imagine by now, I wasn’t exactly overjoyed at the idea. Still—I thought it was just a coincidence, and I was meeting Relucia again soon at the Festival of Pletuna, so I assumed she’d try and help me get out of it. But then it turned out that she was the one who had set the whole thing up. The Anguis needed me to spy on a Military meeting that was happening there.”

I absently go to run my hands through my hair, and wince at the pain in my left shoulder. “Relucia threatened to kill one of my friends if I didn’t do it. So I agreed. And then I

followed her. She met a man with a scar along his face, who..." I frown, thinking about how the stranger had vanished in one place, and then reappeared in another. Just like he had during the Iudicium. "I still don't know who he is. What he is. But he and Relucia were talking about using a ship as an anchoring point. I didn't have a clue what it was about, at the time."

Gods. If I'd just been faster, more daring, in listening in to that conversation. Would I have overheard something that would have warned me about the attack on the Iudicium?

"And then," I push on roughly, "just when I didn't think that night could get any worse, gods-damned Aequa arranged to have me attacked, trying to prove to Praeceptor Scitus that I was using Will to cheat my way up through the classes. I told you all about—"

"*You!*" The authoritative, angry call from the far end of the quadrum slices the stillness of the evening, silencing my murmuring to the spectre of my friend. "*Halt!*"

I jerk to a stop, squinting to see a green-cloaked guard hurrying towards me. A moment of cold sweat as I assess whether he could possibly have heard any of my muttering. But he couldn't. As alone as I've been, here, I've been incredibly cautious and kept my voice barely above a whisper. I wouldn't have been audible to anyone more than a few feet away.

I hold up my one hand wearily as he rushes over, suspicion plastered on his weather-beaten face. "It's alright. My name is Vis Telimus. I was a student here, but I got injured in the Iudicium; I've been recovering in the infirmary."

He slows, misgiving fading to recognition as he spots the absence in my left sleeve. "Catenicus," he says, finally stopping short. "My apologies. Septimus Filo didn't warn us that you were well enough to be out and about, yet." A definite half-question in the observation.

"An oversight," I assure him lightly.

He studies me. Nearing forty, loose black hair almost to his shoulders. Different from the sentries I'm accustomed to seeing around the Academy, I think. He has the confidently hard demeanour of a man who is here to do far more than just stand guard.

“I see. Until it is corrected, then,” he says quietly, eyes straying meaningfully back toward the Curia Doctrina.

I consider protesting, but eventually nod my acquiescence. I’m tired, but I’ve proven to myself that I can move well enough. Making a fuss just to stay out here a little longer will gain me nothing.

I head back inside.

Lying on the bed is a relief this time, not a failure, as muscles taut from fighting my imbalance are finally able to relax. I allow myself some small satisfaction; I’d been afraid Ulnius was right, that I would be too weak to leave tomorrow. But with some more time to adjust in the morning, as well as Eidhin to accompany me—I have no doubt that he will be going, too—I will be fine.

I twist to the side, letting my gaze roam the empty infirmary. *STRONGER TOGETHER* mocks me from the far wall. My eyes absently trace the Hierarchy symbol above it for a while. I try not to let the old bitterness poison my brief success.

Still.

“It hurt, going back to Suus,” I admit to Callidus softly. My voice sticks. A wave of sadness and anger and melancholy. “It was all so different. Not just changed. *Infected*. Like Caten was slowly killing everything I loved about my home.” I pause, scrunch up my face as I try to explain it to him. “There were physical changes—gods, the palace felt like a completely new building!—but the worst part was how differently everyone behaved. When I was a child, my people were so full of joy. So full of life and energy. There was always laughter in the

streets. Now it's as if there's this constant weight pressing down on them all, and they're just... octavii."

I try not to spit the last word.

"In any case—I did what Relucia wanted, spied on Military's meetings. And it turned out that some of their upper leadership had been supplying the Anguis. Were *still* supplying the Anguis, even after the naumachia. Making sure there was still a threat to Caten out there, so that Military's power within the Senate would stay secure." Disgust drips from my voice. "I didn't overhear enough to know about the attack on the Iudicium before it happened, but... they knew. Indol's father knew. His *father*."

I imagine Callidus sitting opposite me. My friend would have been horrified by all of this. Horrified, but not, I think, surprised.

"There was some good to be found at Suus, though, even after all of that. At least..." I trail off. Those days in the sun with Emissa. Forever tainted. "I found people still loyal to me, to my father and my family. There was a man called Fadrique, an old tutor of mine, who was working with the Republic. I thought he was a traitor at first, but he was just doing what he could to help our people. We ended up talking about the old days for hours." I find myself smiling, though it's still coloured with sadness. That night in the secret tunnels, the room full of my family's possessions that Fadrique had managed to save from the Hierarchy. "It was hard, but... it helped."

I sigh. "After that... well. You already know all about how I saved Emissa. It was lucky I knew the island, knew all about the rip where she was swimming that night, otherwise she would have died." I fall silent, almost doubting even that for a moment. But no. Emissa couldn't possibly have planned it.

I move quickly on.

“Ulciscor was on Suus for Military’s meetings, too—though he wasn’t part of the upper leadership, so he didn’t know anything about their dealings with the Anguis,” I add. I’m still bitter about what my adoptive father forced me to do, but I’m confident he wasn’t involved in that. “I told him what I’d found here, and he decided that I had to actually run the Labyrinth. Threatened me, if I didn’t.” I feel my jaw clench. “I’d done everything he’d asked, everything that was reasonable. *Everything*. But he was gods-damned obsessed.”

I let out a long exhalation, as if breathing out the trauma of the recollection. It had been so *unfair*.

This is helping, though, I realise. Freeing, in a strange way. I have kept so much of this to myself for so long. Too long. And though this unburdening is to a shadow, just saying the words is a release.

I prise myself into a sitting position again, and briefly eye the bread on the table. Hunger still eludes me, though.

“But I survived Suus, in the end. And I was so happy to see you and Eidhin when I got back. I...” I falter. Heart suddenly catching as I remember the reunion. “I really *was* happy. Gods. I need you to know that, Callidus. Being friends with you, with Eidhin. Even if I never told you all this. It was real. It was the only real thing I’ve had in years. I wish I could explain to you how much that means to me.”

I stop. Scrub my eyes with my one hand, swallow the lump in my throat.

“It’s one of the reasons I felt so terrible, when you told me about Belli—not just for you and how she betrayed you, but that you were letting me in on your secrets, while I was keeping all of this from you.”

I abruptly realise the documents Belli stole from Callidus—documents he’d been naively using to try and convince her of the dangers of the Iudicium—are still secreted in the dormitory. They’re important enough to his father that Belli was able to use them to blackmail

Callidus into dropping down to Class Seven. I promised him I'd return them. I'll need to retrieve them eventually.

"I'm glad we beat her, in that Foundation game. Tricked her into giving up those papers. I know I needed to win anyway, to get into Class Three, but... she deserved the humiliation." Not what came after, though. I get a brief, brutal flash of her body all but torn in half, pinned against the wall of the Labyrinth. She never deserved that.

I quieten, for a while. Take another sip of water, and then extract the wooden toy ship from my pocket. Unlatch the deck and move it aside to examine the name *Diago* carved beneath, and then slide it back into place just as quickly, as if someone might somehow see. I still don't know what to make of its presence.

I tuck it away again, gritting my teeth. It's an excuse, a mental diversion.

Because as hard as recounting all of this has been, what comes next is the thing I truly don't want to remember.

"And then there was the Iudicium," I eventually continue. My image of my friend teetering, me desperately trying to keep him smiling and whole and living. "You, me, and Aequa. Those gods-damned tracking stones. You remember when we split up, after I stole that tracking plate from what we thought was a safety team?" I give a heavy sigh. "That's when I went back to the Labyrinth on the other side of the island. I ran the gods-damned thing. Barely survived, got through to the other side, and..."

I gesture. I still don't have a clue what happened to me, in there, but I try and tell him. That red-drenched tunnel and chamber. The bronze circle of blades with the ancient Vetusian around it. The near-indescribable pain I went through when I stepped inside, and then the writing that started appearing on my arm. *WAIT*, and after a couple of minutes, the first two letters of what I had to assume were *RUN*.

I almost move to show him, before I remember that the limb isn't there any more.

“I barely got out. There were people—dead people, like Artemius—trying to stop me from leaving. They kept chanting something. ‘Complete the journey, warrior’.” I shiver at the remembrance. “It was that alupi, Diago, that ended up saving me. He remembered me from when I helped him, I suppose.” I’m still dubious about that explanation, but lack any other working theories. “I hurt my arm getting away, though.”

My hand goes unwillingly across to the stump on my left. I touch it gingerly, then grimace and let my arm fall again.

“You know, when I actually made it back to you and Aequa, I thought, just for a few hours, that we might even have a chance at winning. We had the tracking plate and the advantage. We had a good plan.”

I hang my head.

“Except it turned out that the Anguis had killed all the safety teams, and were trying to kill all of us too,” I add softly. “Not long after you left to be the decoy, Aequa and I found Sianus and the team who were meant to be following him. Slaughtered.”

My voice is dead, hollow, as I go through the events after that. Explain how we tried to warn everyone who was left. How I went to find Emissa, was only able to get close to her thanks to my strange new ability to sense the Anguis roaming around, even if I couldn’t see them. Being found by the scarred madman—the one I’d seen Relucia speaking to at the Festival of Pletuna—after he’d killed Titus and several other students, only for him to then let me go. Insisting that he wanted to ‘see what I could do’, whatever that meant.

“And then I had the Heart of Jovan, and it was just me and Emissa on top of that tower,” I say quietly. “We were alright, and I was going to find you straight after that. Warn you. We could have made it. But instead, she stabbed me.”

My voice shakes, and I take some time to compose myself.

“I’m not really sure what happened after that,” I eventually admit. I was stumbling near the edge. Desperately trying not to fall. “She’d made me toss the Heart to her, onto the ground at her feet, and then... somehow it was in my hand again. Not that it helped.”

Plummeting toward the rushing water far below. Pain. Darkness.

“I should have died. But Diago dragged me out of the river, and then I made it back to you. Just... too late.” My throat suddenly closes up. I stretch out my good hand, as if to stop him from leaving. “Gods, Callidus. You warned me. You told me how Veridius had covered up deaths in the past, and I still asked you to come with me. And I knew you’d say yes. I asked you, and you said yes despite the risks, and you died.”

A long silence, after that, as I let the tears fall.

“We won, though.” It feels so meaningless, and I hate that after everything I went through, after *everything*, the victory is so hollow. “Veridius was in here this morning. Tried to tell me that Emissa stabbing me was all some misunderstanding. That they need my help to stop another *Cataclysm*, of all things.” My bitter scepticism is thick. I still can’t process it. Still can’t untangle it.

I don’t even want to try, yet. Not yet.

Some things are just too hard to face right now.

“But I’m not going to run. Not like I was planning to. I’m going to find out exactly who was behind the attack here, and I am going to make sure they *pay*. I promise.” I exhale, and slowly lie back. Suddenly exhausted again as I stare up at the ceiling once more. *Death is only meaningless if it does not change us*. “I promise, Callidus.”

Time passes.

I’m almost asleep when the door opening stirs me. I crack an eyelid to see Ulnius coming to stand over me.

“Aulus tells me you were found wandering the quadrum,” he says sternly.

“I was bored.”

“You were...” He gives a scoffing, vaguely dismayed chuckle. “Gods. Vis. You *lost your arm*. I cannot emphasize this enough! You need *rest*.”

“I need to say goodbye.” I sit up, holding his gaze. More clear-headed, more calm, than when he was here a few hours ago. “I did what you suggested, Septimus. And it helped. Thank you. Truly. But I am still going to the funeral, tomorrow.”

The Academy’s physician glowers for several seconds before grunting.

“Of course you are,” he mutters. “Rotting gods. As if losing an arm could stop Catenicus from doing anything.” He puts down some fresh bread, this time with a bowl of something steaming to go along with it, on my table. “I have conditions.”

“Which are?”

“You finish this food. You actually try to sleep tonight. You travel with Eidhin tomorrow, and he agrees that you’re effectively in his care for the duration of the funeral. After, you go straight from Agerus to Caten, and you have a physician who you trust waiting there to check on you. Whose name you will tell me, and who *I* will contact in the meantime, to let them know what to expect.” His steely gaze indicates that there’s no negotiating this particular list of demands.

I think for a few moments. Fortunately, none of what he’s asking is onerous. “That’s fair.”

“It’s gods-damned generous,” he corrects me. “And I still don’t like it. At all. But...” His expression softens, just slightly. “I understand, too.”

He takes a breath. Grunts, points at my food meaningfully, and heads for the door.

“Ulnius?” The white-cloaked man pauses in the doorway, turns back. I allow a small, but genuine, smile. “Thank you.”

He examines me, then gives a short nod.

“You’re a good man, Vis,” he says quietly. “Look after yourself in Caten. Don’t let them change you.”

He shuts the door, leaving me once again to my ghosts.