



SMOKE AND IRON

VOLUME FOUR OF THE GREAT LIBRARY

RACHEL CAINE

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EPHEMERA

Text of a letter from Red Ibrahim in Alexandria to Callum Brightwell in England, delivered via secure messenger.

*My most honoured cousin in trade,
I am advised by my daughter Anit that you have engaged
in a dangerous game with the Archivist Magister of the
Great Library.*

*I do not think, given your history and your legendary
cunning, that I need to remind you of the danger this brings,
not just to you but to all of us. While we sometimes use the
Library in the pursuit of our trade, we must never allow
ourselves to be used in turn. An ant cannot direct a giant.*

You have placed your son in the gravest of danger.

*As one loving father to another, I beg you: call off this
plan. Bring your son home. Withdraw from any further
engagement with the Archivist. I will likewise have Anit
deliver her captives back into your custody, and you may
do as you like with them, but pray do not continue to
involve my family in this foolhardy venture.*

*The Archivist may talk most pleasantly with you. A
viper may learn to talk, but it is still full of poison.*

Blessings of the gods to you, old friend.

Reply from Callum Brightwell to Red Ibrahim, delivered via secure messenger.

My son Brendan can well care for himself, but I thank you for your concern. Should the worst occur, I still have his twin Jess. He's not presently pleased with me for sending his brother in his place, but I expect that will pass.

If you plan to lecture me, you might have taken greater care with your own sons – both lost to you now, advancing the cause of your own business. Don't lecture me on how to protect my own. As to your daughter, she entered into this arrangement on your behalf, and with your full authority; you may take up any misgivings you have with her, not me.

I expect you to uphold the agreement as she has made it. Anit and I are of like minds in this, and as she is the heir to your vast empire of commerce, you should listen to her. She's clever, and as ruthless as you, in many ways.

And you wouldn't like to make enemies of our families.

I think upon calm reflection you will see the wisdom of gathering the Library's favour as chaos gathers around us. The world is more unsafe now than it ever has been in living memory. Being allies with the Archivist means that their guard will be lower when we decide to turn these tables to our advantage, as we might at any time.

Peace be upon you, my friend. Let's see how this plays out.

PART ONE

JESS

CHAPTER ONE

It had all started as an exercise to fight the unending boredom of being locked in this Alexandrian prison cell.

When Jess Brightwell woke up, he realised that he'd lost track of time. Days blurred here, and he knew it was important to remember how long he'd been trapped, waiting for the axe to fall – or not. So he diligently scratched out a record on the wall using a button from his shirt.

Five days. Five days since he'd arrived back in Alexandria, bringing with him Scholar Wolfe and Morgan Hault as his prisoners. They'd been taken off in different directions, and he'd been dumped here to – as they'd said – await the Archivist's pleasure.

The Archivist, it seemed, was a very busy man.

Once he had the days logged, Jess did the mental exercise of calculating the date from pure boredom. It took him long, uneasy moments to realise why that date – today – seemed important.

And then he remembered and was ashamed it had taken him so long.

Today was the anniversary of his brother Liam's death. His older brother.

And today meant that Jess was now older than Liam had ever lived to be.

He couldn't remember exactly *how* Liam had died. Could hardly remember his brother at all these days, other than a vague impression of a sharp nose and shaggy blondish hair. He must have watched Liam walk up the stairs of the scaffold and stand as the rope was fixed around his neck.

But he couldn't remember that, or watching the drop. Just Liam, hanging. It seemed like a painting viewed at a distance, not a memory.

Wish I could remember, he thought. If Liam had held his head high on the way to his death, if he'd gone up the steps firmly and stood without fear, then maybe Jess would be able to do it, too. Because that was likely to be in his future.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture it: the cell door opening. Soldiers in High Garda uniforms, the army of the Great Library, waiting stone-faced in the hall. A Scholar to read the text of his choice to him on the way to execution. Perhaps a priest, if he asked for one.

But there, his mind went blank. He didn't know how the Archivist would end his life. Would it be a quiet death? Private? A shot in the back? Burial without a marker? Maybe nobody would ever know what had become of him.

Or maybe he'd end up facing the noose after all, and the steps up. If he could picture himself walking without flinching to his execution, perhaps he could actually *do* it.

He knew he ought to be focusing on what he would be saying to the Archivist if he was called, but at this moment death seemed so close he could touch it, and besides, it was easier to accept failure now than to dare to predict success. He'd never been especially superstitious, but imagining triumph now seemed like drawing a target on his back. No reason to offend the Egyptian gods. Not so early.

He stood up and walked the cell. Cold, barren, with bars and a flat stone shelf that pretended at being a bed. A bare toilet that needed cleaning and the sharp smell of it was starting to squirm against his skin.

If I had something to read . . . The thought crept in without warning, and he felt it like a personal loss. Not having a book to hand was worse punishment than most. He was trying not to think about his death, and he was too afraid to think about the fate of Morgan or Scholar Wolfe or anything else . . . except that he could almost hear Scholar Wolfe's dry, acerbic voice telling him *If only you had a brain up to the task, Brightwell, you'd never lack for something to read.*

Jess settled on the stone ledge, closed his eyes, and tried to clearly imagine the first page of one of his favourite books. Nothing came at his command. Just words, jumbled and frantic, that wouldn't sort themselves in order. Better if he imagined writing a letter.

Dear Morgan, he thought. I'm trapped in a holding cell inside the Serapeum, and all I can think of is that I should have done better by you, and all of us. I'm afraid all this is for nothing. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry for being stupid enough to think I could outwit the Archivist. I love you. Please don't hate me.

That was selfish. She should hate him. He'd sent her back into the Iron Tower, a life sentence of servitude and an unbreakable collar fastened tight around her neck. He'd deceived Scholar Wolfe into a prison far worse than this one, and an inevitable death sentence. He'd betrayed everyone who'd ever trusted him, and for what?

For cleverness and a probably foolish idea that he could somehow, *somehow*, pull off a miracle. What gave him the right to even think it?

Clank.

That was the sound of a key turning in a heavy lock.

Jess stood, the chill on his back left by the ledge still lingering like a ghost, and then came to the bars as the door at the end of the hall opened. He could see the hinges move and the iron door swinging in. It wasn't locked again when it closed. *Careless.*

He listened to the decisive thud of footsteps against the floor, growing louder, and then three High Garda soldiers in black with golden emblems were in front of his cell. They stopped and faced him. The oldest – his close-cut hair a stiff silver brush around his head – barked in common Greek, 'Step back from the bars and turn around.'

Jess's skin felt flushed, then cold; he swallowed back a rush of fear and felt his pulse race in a futile attempt to outrun the inevitable. He followed the instructions. *They didn't lock the outer door. That's a chance, if I can get by them.* He could. He could sweep the legs out from under the first, use that off-balance body to knock back the other two, pull a sidearm free from one of them, shoot at least one, maybe two of them. Luck would dictate whether he'd die in the attempt, but at least he'd die fighting.

I don't want to die, something in him that sounded like a child whispered. *Not like Liam. Not on the same day.*

And suddenly, he remembered.

The London sky, iron grey. Light rain had been falling on his child's face. He'd been too short to see his brother ascend anything but the top two steps of the scaffold. Liam had stumbled on the last one, and a guard had steadied him. His brother had been shivering and slow, and he hadn't been brave after all. He'd looked out into the crowd of those gathered, and Jess remembered the searing second of eye contact with his

brother before Liam transferred that stare to their father.

Jess had looked, too. Callum Brightwell had stared back without a flicker of change in his expression, as if his eldest son was a stranger.

They'd tied Liam's hands. And put a hood over his head.

A voice in the here and now snapped him out of the memory. 'Against the wall. Hands behind your back.'

Jess slowly moved to comply, trying to assess where the other man was . . . and froze when the barrel of a gun pressed against the back of his neck. 'I know what you're thinking, son. Don't try it. I'd rather not shoot you for stupidity.'

The guard had a familiar accent – raised near Manchester, most likely. His time in Alexandria had covered his English roots a bit, but it was odd, Jess thought, that he might be killed by one of his countrymen, so far from home. Killed by the English, just like Liam.

Once a set of Library restraints settled around his wrists and tightened, he felt strangely less shaken. Opportunity was gone now. All his choices had been narrowed to one course. All he had to do now was play it out.

Jess turned to look at the High Garda soldier. A man with roots from another garden, maybe one closer to Alexandria; the man had a darker complexion, dark eyes, a neat beard, and a compassionate but firm expression on his face. 'Am I coming back?' he asked, and wished he hadn't.

'Likely not,' the soldier said. 'Wherever you go next, you won't be back here.'

Jess nodded. He closed his eyes for a second and then opened them. Liam had faltered on the stairs. Had trembled. But at the end his elder brother had stood firm in his bonds and hood and waited for the end without showing any fear.

He could do the same.

‘Then let’s go,’ he said, and forced a grin he hoped looked careless. ‘I could do with a change of scenery.’

They didn’t take him to the gallows. Not immediately, anyway. And though he half feared he’d never see the shot that would kill him from behind, they reached the end of the hall and the unlocked door without incident. *Lucky that Captain Santi isn’t here to see that breach of security*, he thought. Santi would have had someone’s head off for it. Metaphorically speaking.

And now he wished he hadn’t thought of that, because it added another possible execution method to his imagined deaths.

It was a long march through quite a number of checkpoints, each strongly manned with soldiers and automata; the sphinxes watched him with red, suspicious eyes and flexed their lion-claws. Of all the automata he’d faced before – lions, Spartans, once a hawk-headed Egyptian god – these were the ones that most unnerved him. Something about the human pharaoh’s face made them especially inhuman. They’d have no trouble tearing him apart in these close quarters, coming as they would from either side.

Jess added it to his preferred ways not to die and was grateful when the route took them out through an iron gate and into dazzling sunlight. Dying in the sun was always better than dying in the dark, wasn’t it? He sucked down thick Alexandrian sea air in convulsive breaths and turned his face up to the warmth; as his eyes adjusted, he realised he was being marched through the small ornamental garden that led around to the side of the giant Alexandrian pyramid that held the Scholar Steps. Too brief a walk, one he didn’t have much time to savour, before they

passed into the darkness of another doorway near the base of the vast, looming structure.

Then he knew exactly where he was. He'd been here before.

The guards marched him through a long lobby guarded by gods and monsters in their niches and down a hall inscribed with hieroglyphs to a final door. Another, larger sphinx sat in an alcove, and a warning growl sounded until the soldier in charge held up his wrist to show the gold bracelet there. The sphinx subsided, and the door opened.

Jess stepped into the outer office of the single most powerful person in the world.

His guards didn't follow him in. When he looked back, they'd already turned to walk away, and the door was swinging shut.

There were guards, of course; these wore the distinctive red-slashed uniforms of the High Garda Elite, sworn to the personal protection of the Archivist, and they took custody of him without a word. Jess almost missed his old escort. He'd trained as a High Garda himself, had worn the uniform, had eaten in the same dining hall as those men. The Elites were more akin to fanatics than to soldiers. They had separate quarters. Separate training. And they were dedicated to one man, not to the protection of the Great Library.

The Elites hardly gave him a glance as they formed a tight cordon around him and marched him through the outer office, where an assistant's desk sat empty, and then through a set of massive double doors decorated with the Library's seal.

He was escorted to a heavy, ornate chair and pushed into it, and the guards immediately withdrew to stand in the shadows. They went as immobile as automata.

Jess raised his gaze to find that the head of the Great Library wasn't even bothering to look at him.

The old man looked different, Jess thought. Greyer, but somehow stronger, too, as if he'd taken up a new exercise regimen. His hair had been cropped close now, and his skin had a darker hue than before, as if he'd spent time out in the sun. Sailing, perhaps. He must have a ship or two at his disposal.

The Archivist signed official documents with quick scratches of his pen.

Jess expected to at least have the old man's attention, but the Archivist said nothing. He simply worked. In a moment, a young woman walked in with a silver tray, and put a small china cup of strong coffee on the table next to Jess.

'Can't drink it, love,' he said with a shrug of his shoulders, and twisted to show her his bound hands.

The Archivist sighed without looking up. 'Remove his restraints, will you, please?' The order was directed at no one in particular, but a guard immediately stepped forward to press his Library bracelet to the shackles, and they snapped apart. Jess handed them over, and the guard took up his invisibility game again. Jess picked up the coffee cup with a fleeting quirk of his lips at the lovely assistant – she *was* beautiful – and it was only after he saw the hurt in her eyes that he realised he should have remembered her.

And *Brendan* Brightwell certainly should have remembered her. He couldn't forget, not for a second, that he was now intent on carrying on an impersonation of his twin brother, and his brother, God help him, had carried on a secret affair with this very same young woman. Whose name he couldn't remember, no matter how he tried.

Get your head in the room, he told himself. He wasn't Jess any more. Couldn't be. Jess Brightwell was a dead man in Alexandria; he'd come here to set plans in motion, and he'd

done it the only way he could: as his brother Brendan. His life now depended on everyone believing that he was his twin, as unlike him as it was possible to be. Sarcastic, sharp, brash, always ready with a grin or a joke or a knife in the ribs.

He returned his focus to the Archivist Magister, the head of the Great Library of Alexandria, as the old man – still without looking up – said, ‘Explain why I shouldn’t have your head taken off here and now, prisoner.’ He frowned down at the document he was marking and put it aside to take up another.

Jess held onto the brash smile that was his brother’s shield. ‘In here? You’d be days cleaning the carpets.’

‘Don’t be obtuse.’

‘Well, then. You’d just be robbing yourself. I’m here bearing gifts. Valuable ones, at that. And I have much more to offer.’

‘Heretics and criminals have nothing to offer me,’ the Archivist said. He still hadn’t given him real attention.

‘You must not have read my father’s message.’

‘Your father is a heretic and a criminal. Did you miss my point, boy?’

Jess drank the coffee. It was strong, and familiar as home. ‘Not at all,’ he said. ‘But we’re both aware the Great Library has dealt with far worse than my da to get what it wants.’

‘And what do you and your book-dealing father imagine that to be?’

‘The thing that will destroy this place.’

The Archivist finally put his pen down and looked at him directly – a cold stare, empty of pity or mercy. This was a man who’d sentenced Scholar Wolfe to torture once, and Thomas, too. Who’d killed countless innocents who’d stood between him and the Library’s goals, and showed no sign of ever caring.

‘Go on,’ he said.

‘The Library has rested for nearly four thousand years on the supremacy of alchemy, and the Obscurists who practise the highest levels of it. Everything you do rests on some aspect of their power: the automata who keep cities in fear. The portals you send your armies through. But most of all, the *books*. When only the Library is the source of learning and knowledge, you have a stranglehold on the world.’

‘I might argue with your sinister interpretations, but not your facts,’ the Archivist said. ‘The Library *is* the source of learning and knowledge. The automata help keep order. The Translation Chambers are an efficient way to move our people from one point in the world to the next. And your point is . . . ?’

‘That one simple invention brings it all down,’ Jess said. ‘Something so blindingly simple that it ought to have been invented thousands of years ago, if it hadn’t been deliberately and continuously suppressed by the Library. And you.’

The Archivist sighed and made a point of going back to his papers. ‘If you insist on talking in riddles, then this conversation is over, and I’ll send your body back to your father for a proper burial. It’s the least I can do.’

Jess sat back and smiled. ‘We have a working model. In fact, it’s churning out copies of things that have been secret for a thousand years – you remember the Black Archive books my brother and his friends stole from you? At this very moment, your power is being eroded one page at a time. If you’d like to ignore that, please yourself.’

The old man was good at this, Jess thought; not so much as a flicker, a flinch, a twitch. But the card had been played, and he’d done it as well as he could do it, and all he could do now was sip coffee and pray that he hadn’t just signed his own death warrant.

The Archivist put down his pen. ‘I’ll do you the honour of acknowledging that this is of some interest to me. It is of advantage to the Library, long may it survive, to take control of this machine so that it may be properly administered. It’s to no one’s benefit to unleash such a technology on a world unready to handle it responsibly. Surely even your father can see that?’

‘My da’s not one for social responsibility,’ Jess said, and showed teeth. ‘He’s more interested in the financial benefits. What do you offer for him to destroy it? Has to be more than he stands to gain, mind you.’

‘Blackmail?’

Jess shrugged. ‘You’re the learned man. I’m just conveying the offer. For a price – and a very, very large one – my father will destroy his press, shut down all operations, and hand over the plans *and* the man who drew them up.’

‘Thomas Schreiber.’

Thomas’s name from those bloodless lips made Jess want to abandon this plan and kill this old lizard now, before more harm could be done to his friend. He spent a pleasant few seconds thinking of how to accomplish it. It was thinly possible that he might be able to lure a guard, snatch a gun, and put a bullet in that evil head before anyone could stop him.

Assassination was always possible if one didn’t care about getting away with it. Or surviving.

He held himself still, smiling, though the hate that surged in him physically ached. The old man was tapping his fingers silently on his desk, and whatever he was thinking, none of it showed in his face until he said, ‘What’s your father’s price?’

That was it, then. Jess had been balanced on the edge of a cliff, and now a bridge had appeared in front of him. Narrow,

death still very much a possibility at any misstep, but a chance. *A chance.*

‘Oh, it’s *very* high,’ Jess said. For the first time in his life, having an identical twin was proving to be a good thing. A lifesaving thing, in fact. He copied Brendan’s brash grin and loose, easy posture, and crossed his legs. Took in a deep breath of familiar air. He’d missed Alexandria down to his bones, and it helped steady the shaking anger he kept tightly locked. ‘It might ruin a medium-sized country. But you’ll pay it, because it will bring an end to this business once and for all. I already brought you one Scholar you wanted so badly, and the Obscurist too, for free. As a sign of good faith.’ Wolfe’s betrayal was a burden he’d have to endure for a lifetime. The desperate look in the man’s eyes . . . The Library’s dungeons had broken him before, and only time and love had put him back together again. This time? This time there might be no repairing what Jess had done to him.

‘Yet you didn’t deliver your brother along with them.’

‘Well, family’s family. My father might. But not yet. Early days.’

The Archivist studied him, and those sharp eyes, faded with age but every bit as dangerous as they’d ever been, missed nothing. The old man’s skin might be rough and lined, his hair dulled, but he was a killer. A survivor. A ruthless and morally bankrupt absolute ruler. ‘You know, the resemblance between you two really is remarkable. Without the scar I couldn’t tell you apart.’

Brendan’s shrug was higher than Jess’s, and more fluid. ‘Really? Because we’re nothing alike. My brother’s a bookish idiot and always has been. I’m my father’s son. I’m not sentimental.’ Brendan’s smile stretched his lips. ‘And you have my father’s assurance he sent me. But that’s your business, whether you believe me or not. Please yourself.’

The Archivist smoothly changed tack. ‘You realise that I do have bargaining leverage, boy. I have *you*.’

‘And my father has another son. Not much benefit to angering him, either.’ Jess took a sip of coffee to give himself time, and listened to the Archivist’s silence. Silences, he’d learnt, had layers to them. Some were tense, on the verge of violence; some were slow and calm and peaceful.

This one had edges.

Jess moved his gaze away from the Archivist and studied the office as if he’d never seen it before – he had, once, but he’d been younger then, and desperately afraid. Brendan, having never seen it, would take it all in: the lush carpets in Egyptian motifs, the shimmering wall of glass that offered a view of the blue waters of the Alexandrian harbour and the boats sailing on it. The oversized automaton statue of the hawk-headed Egyptian god Horus, standing with one foot forward. It would be ready to protect the Archivist at the slightest threat, in addition to the waiting Elites.

Jess sipped coffee, but he tasted only bitterness. His pulse threatened to race, but he breathed deeply, the way that his friend Khalila had taught him, and felt the pressure slow. *Wait it out*, he thought. Brendan would.

At last the Archivist said, ‘Tell me, Mr Brightwell, have you ever heard of the Feast of Greater Burning?’

Jess’s skin went cold, and he felt muscles tighten in his back. Tried to keep it from his face. ‘Not familiar with it,’ he said, because he was fairly sure Brendan wouldn’t have known. ‘You’re inviting me to dinner?’

‘Our ancestors here were not known for the savagery of many other cultures, but the occasional sacrifice was known to occur. We give many offerings during the Feast of Greater Burning, and

these days, they are symbolic and ceremonial. A thousand years ago, the feast was a practical way to both continue tradition and dispose of . . . particularly troublesome individuals. If you understand my meaning.'

'You're threatening to burn me alive? Don't dance around it, sir. I'm not likely to faint. Or beg. Kill me, and deal with my father. More to the point: don't.'

The Archivist had been unnaturally still and composed, but he slapped his hand on the shining surface of his desk with a report like a gunshot. He didn't move like an old man, Jess thought. There was real strength behind the blow. 'Don't presume to threaten me, boy, I am the *Archivist of the Great Library!* I command the respect, wealth, and loyalty of the world!'

'You did once,' Jess agreed, and it sounded quite calm. 'But the world is changing. And this is your only chance to control it.'

The Archivist went as still as the Horus statue looming in the corner. Those eyes caught the light from the windows and turned an eerily hollow shade. *Got him*, Jess thought. The one thing that every Archivist for nearly a thousand years feared was change, and it was upon this one whether he liked it or not. With a working press to print copies of books, people would no longer be beholden to the alchemically mirrored copies from the Great Library. They could *own* books, not merely borrow them. They could *write* books without the oversight of Scholars and the censorship of the Library. The Library had started as a preserver of knowledge, a beacon of light, but through the centuries and millennia, it had become a centre of power.

Power rotted from within.

If the Library was going to survive at all, the one thing the Archivist needed to stop was the printing press.

Jess sighed. 'Let's not pretend you don't want what my father

has. You've killed a hundred Scholars to keep the secret over the centuries. We're willing to trade it to you, with all the plans. But if you're not interested, I expect we can sell the idea elsewhere.' He stood up.

The Horus statue turned its gleaming golden head in a sharp, birdlike gesture, staring down at him.

'Careful,' the Archivist said softly. 'If I made you disappear, no one would ever find your bones.'

Jess put both palms flat on the man's desk and leant forward. He had some satisfaction in knowing he was ruining the shine. 'If you make me disappear,' he said, 'you'll be the last Archivist of a ruined Library. If you think that's an empty threat, unleash your metal god.' He heard the rush of human footsteps as the guards came forward, but the Archivist lifted a hand and they stopped.

Silence. Edges, and humming tension. When a full ten heartbeats thudded past, Jess stepped back to his chair and settled in, as if he was at home. 'We can be powerful allies,' he said. 'Burners are rising all over the world against you. Kingdoms are on the verge of rebellion. Your High Garda troops are stretched too thin to protect your vital outposts. We can help.'

'I do not deal with smugglers and thieves.'

'You've dealt with rulers and kings for years. My father's crown is shadows, but it's real enough. Think of it in those terms, and swallow your pride if you don't want to lose all . . . this.' Jess gestured around at the office and the great central pyramid in which it stood: the home of the Great Library of Alexandria, in a city devoted to its glory, in a country made incredibly rich by it, protected by armies and tradition, automata and alchemy.

It was all more fragile than it seemed, and they both knew that.

The Archivist made a small gesture, and the Horus statue's head returned to its neutral position . . . but once you'd seen it move, Jess thought, you'd never forget it again. The point had been made.

Mutual destruction.

'What does he want in return for such . . . consideration?'

'Books,' Jess said. 'Rare and valuable. It's nothing to you; you've got vast storehouses of things no one's ever seen.'

'How many?'

There it is, Jess thought. They had an agreement. Now they were only arguing terms. He relaxed a little, but only a little. 'For the press and plans? One hundred thousand rare volumes, and I'll inspect each one.' He smiled. Brendan's cynical smile. 'Believe me, I'd rather be doing something else. It's my brother who's the bookworm.'

'That will take weeks,' the Archivist said.

'Are you in a hurry?'

That earned him a sharp glower. 'Your answer implied you have more to barter.'

'Well, the press and plans are worth that much, to be sure, but the mind of the one who built that wonder . . . that's worth more, even if it's just to ensure he doesn't build more.'

If the Archivist was aware of it, he kept his own counsel. 'Schreiber is valuable to us.'

'Then that's another hundred thousand books. And the others?'

'What others?'

'Captain Santi. Khalila Seif. Glain Wathen. Dario Santiago,' Jess said. He tried not to think of their faces. Tried to care nothing about them, as Brendan might have done.

The Archivist flipped a dismissive hand but then thought

better of it. ‘Santi deserves punishment,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘An example should be made of him. Dario Santiago’s family is royal. Pardoning him could earn us the renewed loyalty of Spain and Portugal.’

‘And Khalila?’ Jess tried to keep his voice calm and light. Difficult.

‘The Seif girl made her choice. She can rot with her father and brothers in prison, until their execution.’

Jess’s chest began to burn as if he was holding his breath, but he was pulling in plenty of air. Khalila, *Khalila*, executed without a thought for her brilliance and compassion. ‘That leaves Wathen.’

‘Drop the Welsh girl into a well somewhere and be done with it. She’s not important.’

You bastard. You cold, stupid bastard. She’s your next High Commander.

And suddenly, the burning in his chest turned to ice. He’d done it. It was agonising, playing to this man’s vanity, drawing him into a discussion that dismissed people he loved to death and torment . . . but now, with the casual admission that murder was acceptable, the Archivist had shown his flank, and he was vulnerable. *A fish on the line*, Jess thought. *Don’t let him wriggle off.*

He nodded casually and tapped his fingers on his thigh. ‘I’ll convey all this to my father. He’ll want terms for the ones you want.’

‘You may use my personal Codex, if you’d prefer. It is not monitored.’

Brendan’s grin hurt his lips this time, but he deployed it anyway. ‘I’m not a fool,’ Jess said. ‘I’ll manage my own affairs. If we deliver Santi, Khalila Seif, Thomas Schreiber, return Dario

to his relatives, and dispose of Wathen, what do you offer in return for all that?’

‘Besides the two hundred thousand rare volumes you’ve already demanded? You go too far, young man.’

‘I am my father’s son, after all. A fair offer buys you what you want. It’s simple commerce.’

‘I am not in *commerce*.’ The Archivist managed to make it sound like a mouthful of filth, but after a hesitation, he donned a pair of thin spectacles and opened a book on his desk. He appeared to scan its contents, though Jess doubted he had to check; a man in his position would know precisely what he had to offer, and what its value would be.

A moment later, the Archivist clapped the book shut and said, ‘I’ve wasted enough time on these fools and rebels. Two hundred thousand rare original books from the Archives, plus a full High Garda company’s shipment of weapons sent for the use of your father, including Greek Fire. And the High Garda turns a blind eye to anything the Brightwell clan does from this point forward, so long as it doesn’t involve outright threat to the Library. Does that suffice?’

Despite everything, Jess found himself unable to reply for a long few seconds. *The Archivist Magister is selling weapons and Greek Fire as if it’s nothing. And guaranteeing protection to black market smugglers.* The betrayal of the Library’s principles ran so deep, offended Jess’s soul so much, that for a difficult few breaths he couldn’t master his distaste.

He rose again, slowly this time, and nodded tersely. ‘I’ll tell my father,’ he said. ‘I expect an answer within the day. Where should I wait?’

The Archivist had already moved on and was taking another book from the stack on the corner of his desk, and a

pen. He made swift notes without looking up. ‘My assistant will take you to more comfortable accommodations,’ he said. ‘For now, you are my guest. A guest with no privileges, and no freedom, you understand. I hold you hostage for your father’s good behaviour. And make no mistake, if I see any signs of betrayal, I *will* kill you.’

Jess bowed slightly. A touch mockingly, as his brother would have. ‘Of course.’