



SWORD AND PEN

VOLUME FIVE OF THE GREAT LIBRARY

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EPHEMERA

Text of a letter from Scholar Christopher Wolfe to Callum Brightwell. Available in the Archive.

Mr and Mrs Brightwell,

It is with the utmost regret and sorrow that I must inform you of the death of your son Brendan Brightwell upon this day in the city of Alexandria. I know that it cannot be a comfort for you in this moment of grief, but perhaps it will ease your heart in the future to know that Brendan's courage in his final days and hours was exemplary, and inspired every one of us who had the pleasure of knowing him. He was at his brother's side for the battle, and I assure you that Jess is alive, though laid just as low as you must be by this terrible loss. Jess was with him as he died, and Brendan's passing was mercifully quick and painless.

He was instrumental in the victory achieved today in Alexandria for the continued existence and protection of the ideals of the Great Library, and that is no small thing

to remember. Brendan's loyalty to, and protection of, his brother was extraordinary, and we will always honour his memory.

I pray to my gods and yours that Brendan's soul finds peace, and that you may also do so with this difficult news.

Funeral rites will be prepared for him, and once the immediate emergency is past, I will write to you to finalise these arrangements. We will welcome you to Alexandria for the honours the Great Library will give to your sons – both the dead, and the living.

With all my heart, I grieve with you. And I make you this pledge: I will fight to preserve Jess's life with every ounce of strength I possess. For though we believe that knowledge is all, still we value every life entrusted to our care.

Scholar Christopher Wolfe

CHAPTER ONE

Jess

Brendan was dead, and Jess's world was broken. He'd never known a moment without his twin existing somewhere, a distant warmth on the horizon, but now . . . now he shivered, alone, with his dead brother held close against his chest.

So much silence in the world now.

He's still warm, Jess thought, and he was; Brendan's skin still felt alive, inhabited, but there was nothing inside him. No heartbeat. No presence.

He was dimly aware that things were happening around him, that the bloody sands of the arena were full of people running, fighting, screaming, shouting. He didn't care. Not now.

Let the world burn.

A shadow fell over him, and Jess looked up. It was Anubis, a giant automaton god gleaming with gold. The jackal's black head blotted out the sun. It felt like the end of the world.

And then Anubis thrust his spear forward, and it plunged into Jess's chest. It held him there, pinned, and suddenly Brendan's body was gone, and Jess was alone and skewered on the spear . . . but it didn't hurt. He felt weightless.

Anubis leant closer and said, *Wake up.*

When he opened his eyes, he was lying in darkness on a soft mattress, covered by a blanket that smelt of spice and roses. Out the window to his left, the moon floated in a boat of clouds. Jess's heart felt heavy and strange in his chest.

He could still feel the sticky blood on his hands, even though he knew they were clean. He'd washed Brendan's blood away. No, *he* hadn't. Thomas had brought a bowl of water and rinsed the gore away; he hadn't done anything for himself. Hadn't been able to. His friends had helped him here, into a strange house and a strange bed. He knew he should be grateful for that, but right now all he felt was empty, and deeply wrong. This was a world he didn't know, one in which he was the only surviving Brightwell son. Half a twin.

He'd have taken large bets that Brendan would have been the one to survive everything and come through stronger. And his brother would have bet even more on it. The world seemed so quiet without him.

Then you'll just have to be louder, you moping idiot. He could almost hear his brother saying that with his usual cocky smirk. *God knows, you always acted like you wished you'd been an only child.*

'No, I didn't,' he said out loud, though he instantly knew it for a lie and was ashamed of it, then even more ashamed when a voice came out of the darkness near the far corner.

'Awake, Brightwell? About time.' There was a rustle of cloth, and a dim greenish glow started to kindle, then brighten. The glow lamp sat next to Scholar Christopher Wolfe, who looked like death, and also like he'd bite the head off the first person to say he looked tired. In short, his usual sunny disposition. 'Dreams?'

‘No,’ Jess lied. He tried to slow down his still-pounding heart. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘We drew lots as to who would be your nursemaid this evening and I lost.’ Wolfe rose to his feet. He’d changed into black Scholar’s robes, a liquidly flowing silk that made him seem part of the shadows except for the grey in his shoulder-length hair and his pale skin. He paused at Jess’s bedside and looked at him with cool assessment. ‘You lost someone precious to you. I understand. But we don’t have time to indulge your grief. There’s work to be done, and fewer of us now to do it.’

Jess felt no impulse to care. ‘I’m surprised you think I’m useful.’

‘Self-pity doesn’t become you, boy. I’ll be leaving now. The world doesn’t stop because the one you loved is no longer in it.’

Jess almost snapped, *What do you know about it?* but he stopped himself. Wolfe had lost many people. He’d seen his own mother die. He understood. So Jess swallowed his irrational anger and said, ‘Where are you going?’ Not we. He hadn’t yet decided whether staying in this bed would be his best idea.

‘The office of the Archivist,’ Wolfe said. ‘You’ve been there. I could use help in locating his secure records.’

The office. Jess blinked and saw the place, a magnificent space with automaton gods standing silent guard in alcoves. The view of the Alexandrian harbour dominating the windows. A peaceful place. He wondered if they’d managed to scrub the dead assistant’s blood out of the floor yet. The Archivist had ordered her killed just to punish him. And Brendan.

Brendan. The last time he’d been in that office, Brendan had been with him.

Jess swallowed against a wave of disorientation and nausea and sat upright. Someone – Thomas, again – had helped him

out of his bloody clothes and into clean ones. An informal High Garda uniform, the sort soldiers wore at leisure in the barracks. Soft as pyjamas. It would do. He swung his legs out of bed and paused there, breathing deeply. He felt . . . unwell. Not a specific pain he could land on, just a general malaise, an ache that threaded through every muscle and every nerve. Shock, he supposed. Or just the accumulated stress of the past few days.

It might even be grief. Did grief hurt this way? Like sickness?

‘Up.’ Wolfe’s voice was unexpectedly kind. Warm. ‘I know how difficult that is. But there is no other way but onward.’

Jess nodded and stood up. He found his boots – neatly placed at the foot of the bed – and slid them on. His High Garda weapons belt was nearby, with his sidearm still in place. Heavy and lethal, and he felt a bit of comfort as it settled on his hip. *We’re at war*. It felt like he’d always been at war – his family had always warred with the Great Library, and then he’d fought for a place inside it. Then he’d fought to preserve the dream of the Great Library. And for the first time he wondered what peace would really feel like.

His hair was a spiky mess; he ran his fingers through it and ignored it when it refused to comply. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘I’m ready.’

Wolfe could have said anything to that; Jess expected something dismissive and caustic. But Wolfe just put his hand on Jess’s shoulder, nodded, and led the way.

The house, Jess thought, must have belonged to a Scholar – there was a cluster of black-robed Scholars around a wide table in the main room, anxiously chattering in Greek, which must have been the only language they had in common. A tall man with skin so dark it took on cobalt tones; a small, elegant young

Chinese woman; another man, middle-aged and comfortably round, with distinctively Slavic features. There must have been a dozen of them, and Jess recognised only two of them immediately. None of his friends were here, which came as a vague surprise.

All the talk stopped when Wolfe approached the table. No question that he held authority here. ‘We’re going to the Archivist’s office,’ he said. ‘Thoughts?’ His Greek was, of course, excellent; he’d grown up speaking it here in Alexandria. Jess wasn’t as comfortable, but he was more than passable.

‘Traps,’ the young Chinese woman said. ‘The Archivist was very fond of them. He certainly would have many waiting there, in case he lost his hold on power. Is there any word on where he is—’

‘No,’ Wolfe said. ‘We assume he has loyalists who’ll do anything to protect him. Our advantage is that the less savoury elements of this city are firmly on our side, and without criminals to smuggle him out past the walls, he’s trapped here. With us.’

‘Or we’re trapped with him,’ said one of the Scholars – Jess wasn’t sure which.

That earned a sharp look from Wolfe, and Jess knew the man could cut a person to ribbons with a single glance. ‘Don’t think he’s all-powerful. Without the apathy and passive consent of Scholars and High Garda, the Archivist would never have felt free to murder as he liked,’ Wolfe said. ‘We’ve taken that from him. Don’t grant him more power than he ever earned.’

‘Easy for you to say, Scholar.’ That grumble was from the Slav, whose Greek was only lightly accented.

‘You think so?’ Wolfe’s voice had gone sharp and dry, his face the colour of exposed bone. ‘*Easy*. For me. Search the Archives. I was *erased* by him, like hundreds of others you’ve never even

noticed missing. None of this is easy. Nor should it be. Killing a god-king ought to be *difficult*.'

It hit Jess with a jolt that the Archivist had another title: *Pharaoh of Alexandria*. The god-king. And no doubt the bitter old man took that deification quite seriously. *But we will kill him. Somehow.*

For Brendan, if for nothing else.

'Look for pressure plates under the floor,' the Chinese scholar said. 'He took most of his cues from the great inventor Heron, who built so many wonders of this place. The Archivist took his lessons seriously; his traps will be ingenious, but also quite conventional. He may also have a specific command you'll need to give to freeze the automata, should they be triggered for defence. I have no idea where you'd find that, but it should be your immediate priority.' She hesitated. 'Perhaps . . . you should let the High Garda do this, Scholar.'

'Because their lives are less valuable than mine?' Wolfe shot back, and she looked down. 'No. I know what I'm looking for. They may not. I know the old bastard better than any High Garda could. He was my mentor, for a good portion of our lives. I know how he thinks.'

Jess tried to imagine that; Wolfe, having the same relationship with the evil bastard Archivist that Jess had with Wolfe. He couldn't bring it into focus. For one thing, he couldn't imagine Wolfe as a young man. He abandoned the effort as a bad idea, and as he looked around, he spotted someone standing in the doorway, watching the discussion.

Dario Santiago.

Not his very favourite person in the world, but Jess felt much more comfortable about the Spaniard than he had before; they'd been enemies, cautious allies, friends, enemies

again, but through all of that, Dario had been *present*. There was something comforting about that now, in this silent new world that lacked his brother. Jess walked over to join him. The young man had his arms crossed; he'd changed clothes, too, into a posh velvet jacket and silk shirt and finely tailored trousers. He looked rich and entitled, just as he was. But Dario had never pretended to humility.

'Brightwell.' Dario nodded.

Jess nodded back. 'Santiago.'

They both watched the Scholars arguing for a moment. Odd, Jess thought, that though Dario was entitled to wear the black robes, he didn't have them on. He wondered if that had significance, or if it was just because Dario didn't want to take away from the cut of his jacket.

Dario finally said, 'All right, then?' He rocked a little back and forth on his heels, as if tempted to move away from the question. Or from Jess. But he stayed put.

'All right,' Jess affirmed. He wasn't, but Dario knew that already, and this was Dario's way of showing some kind of empathy. It wasn't much, but from someone like him it was a fair attempt. 'Where's Khalila?'

'With Scholar Murasaki,' he said. 'They're helping to organise a full Scholars' Conclave. Word is we'll elect a new Archivist today. Tomorrow at the latest. We need an unquestioned leader if we intend to hold Alexandria independent; the nations sending their ships are all too eager to *help*.' He shook his head. 'They're cloaking conquest as rescue, you know. Their strategy is to sweep in and claim Alexandria as a protectorate. Once they do that, they'll pull us apart and squabble over the bones.'

'We can't let that happen,' Jess said.

'No. Hence the election of a new Archivist.'

Jess felt the impulse to smile. Didn't. 'And you're not in the running? I'm astonished.'

'Shut up, scrubber.'

'Touchy, Your Royalness, very touchy.'

There was something comforting about the casual insults; it felt like home. One constant in this life: he and Dario would always be slightly uneasy friends. Maybe that was a very good thing. He trusted Dario . . . to a point. And of course Dario felt the same about him.

'Your cousin's ships are in that fleet,' Jess said. 'I don't suppose you're feeling some family loyalty today?'

'If you're asking if I'm going to betray the Great Library to the Kingdom of Spain, then no. I won't,' Dario said. 'But I don't want to fight my cousin, either. Not just because I like him. Because he's a good king, but he's also clever and ruthless. He'll win, unless we make the cost of winning unacceptably high. And I'm not altogether certain what he'd consider too high.'

My brother already died for this, Jess thought. *The price is already too high*. But he didn't say it. He swallowed against a sudden tightness in his throat and said, 'Where are the others?'

'Glain and Santi are organising the city's defences. Thomas . . . God knows, most likely off tinkering with one of his lethal toys – not that it isn't worthwhile. Morgan is with Eskander at the Iron Tower; they're getting the Obscurists in line.'

'And what are you doing that's useful?'

'Nothing,' Dario said. 'You?'

'Same, at the moment. Want to come with us to the Archivist's office?'

'Is it dangerous?'

'Very.'

Dario's grin was bright enough to blot out Brendan's absence, for just a moment. 'Excellent. I'm as useless as a chocolate frying pan at the moment.'

'In that jacket?'

'Well, it is a very fine jacket, to be sure. But not *useful*.' Dario's smile faded. He looked at Jess, straight on. 'I really am sorry about Brendan.'

Jess nodded. 'I know.'

'Then let's get on with it.'

First Wolfe, now Dario. There was something comforting about their harsh briskness today. Thomas would be different, as would Khalila and Morgan; they'd offer him the chance to let his grief loose. But Wolfe and Dario believed in pushing through, and just now that seemed right to him. Eventually he'd need to confront his demons, but for now, he was content to run from them.

Wolfe joined them, took in Dario's presence without comment, and simply swept on. Jess shrugged to Dario and they both followed.

Off to defy death.

Seemed like a decent way to start the day.

The sunrise was cool and glorious, reflecting in chips of vivid orange and red on the harbour's churning waters; the massed fleet of warships that had assembled out in the open sea still floated a good distance away. The Lighthouse had sounded a warning, and it was well known – at least by legend – that the harbour's defences were incredibly lethal. None of the assembled nations had decided yet to test them.

They would, eventually. And Jess wondered how they were ever going to defeat such a navy. The Great Library had ships of its own, but not so many, and certainly if it came to that kind of a fight, they'd lose.

Dario was right. The trick was to make the cost too high for anyone to dare make an effort.

The residential district of Alexandria where they walked had a street that led directly to the hub of the city: the Serapeum, a giant pyramid that rose almost as high as the Lighthouse. The golden capstone on top of it caught the morning light and blazed it back. As the sun rose, it bathed the white marble sides in warmth. From where they walked, Jess could see the Scholar Steps, where the names of Scholars who'd fallen in service to the Library were inscribed. He'd never have his name there, of course; he wasn't a Scholar or likely to become one. But if there was any justice left in the world, surely one day Wolfe would have that honour. And Thomas. And Khalila.

Dario would no doubt believe he'd deserve it, and he might even be right.

'Jess,' Wolfe said. 'Heron's inventions. You're familiar with them, I would assume.'

'Which ones? He had thousands. He was the da Vinci of the ancient world.'

'The lethal ones.'

'Well, I know as much as anyone, I suppose. Except Thomas, of course. He'd probably give you a two-hour lecture about it, and tell you how to improve them.'

'A fascinating lecture for which I have neither time nor patience. This isn't a quiz, Jess. I will depend on you – both of you – to *think*. Because we go into extremely dangerous territory.'

'Do you know how to reach the Archivist's office?' Jess had been brought there several times, but there were precautions: hallways that moved, a maze that constantly shifted its path. The Archivist would have had good reason to fear assassination.

‘His private office? Yes. I know how to reach it.’ Wolfe didn’t offer an explanation. ‘Then things get more dangerous. One doesn’t hold power as long as he did without being prepared.’

The city seemed so *quiet*. ‘Where is everyone?’ Jess asked. Normally the streets were crowded with people. Alexandria pulsed with life, had a population in the hundreds of thousands: Scholars, librarians, staff, not to mention all of the people who simply called it home. But today it seemed silent.

‘No one knows what’s going to happen. They’re staying inside, and safe,’ Dario said. ‘Sensible people keep their heads down. Unlike us.’

He shared a grim smile with Wolfe. ‘Well,’ Wolfe said. ‘It isn’t the sensible people who get things done in these situations, is it?’

That describes us perfectly, Jess thought. *Not sensible*. He imagined Brendan would have been right with him, eager to be reckless.

The walk was good; it drove the shadows back and made Jess feel almost human again. Sore, of course; the fight to survive had been hard, and he still bore the wounds. Someone – Morgan, he suspected – had applied some healing skills, or he’d have still been confined to a bed. But he felt loose, limber, ready to run or fight.

He wondered why Morgan had left him, but he knew; she believed her place was with the Obscurists just now. *It doesn’t mean she doesn’t care*, he told himself. But she hadn’t been there when he’d awakened, hadn’t been there when he needed her most to heal his broken soul, and he knew that did mean something.

It meant that he would never come first to her. *Be honest*, he thought. *If she came first for you, you’d have done things differently. You’d be with her right now.*

He wasn’t sure what that meant and was too thin and tired

inside to think it through. Better to focus on a problem he could solve, an activity he could complete. Leave the difficult questions for later.

They passed a company of High Garda troops – no informal uniforms there; every soldier was dressed sharply and looked as keen as knives. No one Jess recognised, but he nodded to the squad leader, who returned the greeting with crisp acknowledgement. A second later, he realised how wrong that was, and turned to Wolfe. ‘I should rejoin my company.’ He was wearing the uniform. The wrong uniform for the day, but nevertheless.

‘You’re seconded to me,’ Wolfe said. ‘Santi doesn’t want you back with his company quite yet. You’re more useful here.’ His mouth curled in a rare, non-bitter smile. ‘He thinks you may be able to keep me from my worst excesses of courting danger. I told him that was nonsense, you were as bad or worse, but he wouldn’t have it.’

That took a moment to sink in, too: Santi trusted Wolfe’s safety to *him*. When he knew that Jess was running on emotional pain and grief. *That’s why*. Because Santi was giving him something to keep him from wallowing in the loss of his twin. It was a brilliantly manipulative manoeuvre. It kept Wolfe with a semi-qualified bodyguard, and at the same time gave that bodyguard a mission when he no doubt badly needed one. *And Dario?* Surely Santiago hadn’t just appeared at random, either. He was the check to be sure Jess was operating properly, a second pair of eyes on their backs. Dario wasn’t the best fighter of the group, but he was a strategist and a decent tactician, too, and that could be valuable on a mission like this.

By the time Jess had examined all that, they’d walked to the street that led in front of the Serapeum. The guard posts were

manned by High Garda, and roaming automata as well; sphinxes stalked on lion paws, rustling metal wings and staring with red eyes in their sculpted metal human faces. One followed them a few paces, which made Jess nervous; he watched it carefully to be sure it hadn't been missed in the rewriting of how to identify enemy from friend. But it soon lost interest and padded away to sink down in a comfortable crouch, watching traffic pass.

'Thank God,' Dario said. He'd noted it, too. 'I loathe those things.'

'You've stopped them before.'

'And will again, I have no doubt. But I'm grateful for each and every time I don't have to fight for my life. I'm not as clever with them as you are. Or as fearless.'

That, Jess thought, was pretty remarkable; he'd not heard Dario confess something like that in quite a while. Possibly ever. The Spaniard naturally assumed he was the best at absolutely everything, and even when proven wrong often insisted until everyone half-believed him. It had taken some time for Jess to overcome his general annoyance and realise what a vulnerability that large an ego could be. He hadn't yet used that knowledge against Dario. He hadn't needed to.

But it was always good to spot a weakness, even in an ally and friend.

Scholar Wolfe hadn't been exaggerating; he did know how to reach the Archivist's office. It involved a journey past sharp-eyed High Garda, more automata – including an Anubis-masked god statue that made Jess flash back to his dream and the reality it had mirrored – down hallways that seemed different to what Jess remembered. 'It's a self-aligning maze,' Wolfe told him when he pointed that out. 'There are keys. You look for them encoded in the decorations. The

alignments depend on the time, day, month, and year. Rather clever. Heron himself invented the machinery.’ Jess almost turned to Thomas to comment on that, ready for the German’s effusive happiness; Thomas worshipped Heron almost as a god himself. But Thomas wasn’t with them. And it surprised Jess how much that dimmed his mood.

‘Let’s just get on with it,’ he said, and Wolfe gave him an appraising look, then nodded and led them on without more discussion. The path took them through the forbidding interior Hall of Gods, with all the giant, silent automata on their plinths . . . except for the ones who’d been dispatched to the Colosseum, to kill the Library’s rebels. Those had been hacked apart. If they were ever to be rebuilt, Jess thought, maybe it would be better to sculpt them out of stone or simple metal. Make them symbols instead of weapons.

But he’d rather not see them again, ever.

They arrived in a hub of halls that led out in spokes; those held the offices of the Curia. All of them dead now, or fled with the Archivist. The quiet seemed ominous.

‘This is a bit tricky, as well,’ Wolfe said, and showed the two of them where, how and when to press certain keys on the wall to open the hallway to the Archivist’s private office. ‘Elite High Garda soldiers would normally be in charge of this. Good thing they’re all gone.’

‘Are they?’ Dario asked. ‘How do we know they didn’t flee here and fortify his office? There could be an entire company of the bastards waiting for us.’

It was a decent question, and better warning. Jess drew his sidearm. From beneath his robe, Wolfe produced something else; it took a moment for Jess to recognise it, but the elegantly crafted lines gave it away. Thomas’s work. That was a Ray of Apollo,

upgraded and with better materials. Lethally concentrated light.

‘Better to be sure,’ Wolfe said, and switched the weapon on. Jess made sure his own was set to killing shots, and nodded. When Jess looked back at Dario, he found the Spaniard had produced a very lovely sword, filigreed and fancied to within an inch of its life but no less dangerous for that in the hands of an expert. Which Dario was. He also had a High Garda gun in his left hand, the mirror of Jess’s.

‘You know how to use that?’ Jess nodded at the gun. Dario gave him one of his trademark one-raised-eyebrow mocking looks.

‘Better than you, scrubber.’

Untrue. Dario could certainly kill him with a sword, but Jess was a *very* good shot. Unless the arrogant royal had been drilling in target practice with that likely stolen gun, he wasn’t going to match any High Garda soldier.

Trust Dario to think he could.

Didn’t matter, at least at the moment. Jess followed Wolfe into the hallway that revealed itself, and down the spacious, carpeted expanse. This he remembered. The carpet alone was worth half a kingdom, and the recovered Babylonian walls with their Assyrian lions were just as impressive. An ancient Chinese jade vase as delicate as an eggshell glowed under a skylight.

And there was the neat, clean desk ahead. The desk of the Archivist’s assistant, Neksa – Neksa, whom Brendan had loved. Who’d died for their sins.

Wolfe paused at her desk and looked at the two of them, each in turn. ‘Ready?’ he asked. Jess nodded. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dario echo him. He felt the hot tension of his nerves, and that was good. Paranoia was a habit these days, but it also might help him stay alive today. *Might*. No fear, though. That seemed wrong, but temporarily useful.

Wolfe pressed a button on Neksa's desk, and the door behind it slid open. Wolfe held up a hand to stop them from rushing in, but he needn't have bothered; neither of them moved. They watched and listened from where they were. There was natural light streaming in from the expanse of windows that overlooked the harbour and the threatening mass of ships clustered on the horizon. Storm clouds forming out to sea as well. That would complicate things.

Nothing moved in the office, and Jess carefully inched forward and flattened himself against the outer wall at an angle, the better to see into the far, shadowy corners within.

'There's no one,' he said. He didn't relax. When Dario tried to move past him, he stopped him with an upraised arm. 'Pressure plates?'

'Hmmm.' Dario looked around. There was a statue of a serene Buddha in the corner of the assistant's office. The Buddha held a heavy jade orb in both hands. Dario went to it and carefully lifted the stone out of the statue's grasp.

He put the ball down and used his booted foot to roll it into the Archivist's office. As it reached the centre of the carpet in front of the massive desk, the automata in the room came to life. Gods, stepping down from their plinths. Anubis. Bast. Horus. Isis. They stared at the inert orb for a long moment with fiery red eyes, and then stepped back up where they'd been. Inert.

'Their coding is still active,' Dario said, quite unnecessarily. It was clear the automaton gods would cut them to bloody strips if they set foot in the office itself. 'Scholar? I think this has to be your job. Since you have the weaponry to match.'

'No,' Jess said, and held his gun out to Wolfe. 'Trade me.'

'I'm not sure that's wise,' Wolfe said. A frown formed, pulling

his brows together. Jess knew that look. It was close to a glare, but lightened with a fair bit of concern.

He felt himself grin. ‘Don’t worry. I don’t want to join my brother. Someone’s got to explain things to my father, and much as I’d like to avoid that, it should probably be me.’

Wolfe didn’t like it, but he allowed Jess to take the Ray of Apollo, and without hesitation, Jess strode into the office, came to a stop exactly in the centre of the carpet, and waited for the automata to react.

They moved fast, but he was faster. He activated the weapon, and a thick, shockingly bright beam of coherent light jumped into being from the barrel; he held the trigger down and sliced it from left to right in an arc, severing Horus at the waist, then Bast, Anubis, and Isis. It took only a couple of seconds, a single heartbeat, and then there were inert mechanical legs and the statues’ upper bodies toppling backward. Useless. By the time he released the trigger, he’d killed four gods.

It felt horribly wonderful. He stared at Anubis’s face. The red eyes were still lit, but as he watched they faded to ash grey. Empty.

For you, he thought to Brendan. Not that any of these had killed his brother, but until he could reach the traitor who had, he’d take what satisfaction he could.

He’d dropped the last automaton in the same spot where Neksa had died here in this room, murdered by a mechanical’s spear just to prove that the Archivist didn’t make idle threats.

I’ll kill Zara for you, brother, he thought. *And then I’ll kill that old bastard. For Neksa.*

But he didn’t say that. Not in front of Dario and Wolfe, who were stepping into the room and observing the damage. ‘Well,’ Dario said. ‘That is quite a thing Thomas has made. He frightens me sometimes.’

‘He frightens himself,’ Wolfe said. ‘Because he always worries how what he creates can be misused. And for someone with his particular genius, that’s a very difficult trait.’ He held out his hand to Jess, and Jess gave him back the Ray. ‘Feel better?’

That was the moment when Jess’s euphoria snapped, and he realised he’d let himself get complacent. *One trap? Just one?* No. The Archivist would have more. And they needed to be alert.

‘Careful,’ he said as Wolfe approached the Archivist’s massive desk. ‘It’ll be trapped.’

‘Oh, I know.’ Wolfe dismissed it with an irritated wave. ‘I know his mind well enough. The old dog never did learn a new trick once he sat his behind in that chair.’

‘You hope,’ Dario murmured, and Jess echoed the sentiment silently. But he knew better than to stop Wolfe as he moved to the desk, looked it over without touching it, and then began to recite a nonsense string of words. Or, at least, it seemed to be nonsense. Jess kept his silence until Wolfe finished. It seemed like some superstitious incantation to him, and there was no sign that anything at all had changed from the recitation.

‘*Careful,*’ Dario said. He’d come to the same conclusion. ‘Scholar. Whatever you’re doing—’

Too late, because Wolfe was sliding a drawer open and pressing a button. At the first flash of light, Jess whirled, ready to start shooting, but there wasn’t any need. It was just ranks of glows turning on in the high ceiling, casting greenish arcs of light down the walls. ‘I disarmed his traps,’ Wolfe said. ‘He never changed his security. I knew he wouldn’t. He never knew that I’d heard him recite it.’

‘When did you hear this?’ Dario asked. Such a carefully neutral tone.

‘Six years ago. Before he broke faith with me and stripped me of my honours. Before the prison.’

‘Long time,’ Dario murmured, for Jess’s ears. Louder, he said, ‘And you remembered it?’

‘I practised it,’ Wolfe said. ‘Carefully. Yes. It was accurate.’

Wolfe sounded all too confident, in Jess’s opinion. Worrying. ‘Scholar—’

That’s when an alarm tone sounded: a high, thin gonging sound that began to accelerate. They all instinctively looked up towards the lights.

A green mist was descending, drifting with deceptive grace in lightly coiling curls. And Jess’s attention was caught by the door to the office.

Because it was sliding closed.

‘Out!’ Jess shouted. At the same time, Wolfe cursed and began yanking open more drawers, gathering handfuls of papers and stuffing them in the pockets of his robe. ‘Dario! Keep that door open! Scholar, there has to be an off switch! Find it!’

‘Get out,’ Wolfe said flatly. He was opening another drawer, moving fast and with great assurance. ‘Don’t let the mist touch you. *Go, boy!*’

‘No,’ Jess said. He gritted his teeth. ‘I’m responsible for your safety.’

Wolfe glared at him for a flash of a second, then turned his attention back to the desk. Jess crouched down, increasing the distance the mist would have to travel. The Scholar continued to ransack the desk.

Dario had placed his velvet-coated back against the sliding door, and now he said, ‘Uh, my friends? I can’t hold this long.’ It was pushing him forward with relentless strength. He braced one foot on the opposite wall and pushed back. The

forward motion slowed, but it didn't stop. '*Get out of there!*'

'Use your sword!' Jess shouted back.

'Swords are flexible, idiot!'

'*To jam the track!*'

Dario tossed it to him without a word – and certainly not an acknowledgement – and Jess threw himself flat to shove the blade into the way lengthwise, jamming the forward progress of the door. It might not last, but it eased the strain on Dario, at least.

'Do you know the history of that sword?' Dario said.

'Do you want it to live to have heirs to carry it, Your Highness?'

Jess rolled back to a crouch. Wolfe was still at the desk. The mist was drifting just a handsbreadth above his curling, greying hair. 'Scholar! *Now!*'

'One moment!'

'You don't have it!'

'Just one more drawer.'

He was *not* going to explain to Captain Nic Santi how he happened to get Santi's lover killed on his watch, especially not when it was purely Wolfe's stubbornness putting them in danger.

So Jess stopped arguing. He rose, grabbed Wolfe by the back of his robe, and shoved him towards the door. When Wolfe struggled, he kicked the back of the man's knees and pushed him down under Dario's outstretched bracing leg. 'Crawl!' Jess shouted.

Then he turned and ran back to the desk, because if Wolfe had been willing to die for whatever was in that last drawer, it was probably important.