

## Prologue

Before he was taken from the cell, Thasos sat in complete darkness.

He could feel a wooden bench beneath him, and a cold stone floor under his sandaled feet. Two hours earlier when his captors pushed him inside, he got a glimpse of his four-walled prison. Now he was blind in its blackness. Iron shackles weighed heavily on his wrists, but he found that if he sat still he could almost forget about them. Wrapped in shadow, Thasos felt incorporeal, more a ghost than a prisoner of flesh.

Yet the din of the crowd beyond the cell's thick wooden door made his heart stutter.

Thasos breathed deeply. He tried imagining that he was not in a dark cell but rather in a boundless cavern, or even above the clouds where the bright planets wheeled in silent revolutions. *That's it!* he thought, instantly warmed. *Think of the stars, and let them comfort you before you die.*

Then the door burst open, jarring his entranced senses. Two men wearing mud-brown robes that covered them from neck to ankles entered, seized his nineteen-year-old body, and hauled him out into the chill night air. He stumbled on his blistered feet. His tunic was ragged, no longer white but dirtied by miles of travel through Egyptian country.

When he had first returned to Alexandria, when the Archbishop's men arrested him, only a small mob had been present. Now, the Kinaron courtyard swarmed with nearly two hundred eager, bustling bodies and, when they saw him, their yells exploded.

"*You returned to peddle your witchcraft?*" a burly, balding man accused. "We'll return you to *hell!*"

Thasos, hands shackled in front of him, was pushed ahead of his robed captors. At the end of the courtyard, he saw the execution pyre — a mound of chopped wood, with a wooden stake like an upright needle rising from its center. Wood was expensive; it had to be imported to Egypt. Perversely, he imagined the Archbishop's expenditure note: *A few hundred pounds of Lebanese wood for the execution of the last heretic!* Beyond the pyre, the stone courtyard ended abruptly at the dark expanse of the River Nile. The sky was clouded and Thasos could see neither stars nor moon, and so the beloved river appeared like a moving sheet of black silk, less like a giver of life than a stream through the bowels of the underworld.

"Burn her last disciple!" a woman shrieked, and Thasos recoiled as she tried to claw at him from the crowd. His guards led him onto the pyre's uneven slope. There, they spun him around so he faced away from the Nile. His wrists were unshackled, only to be bound to the stake behind him.

*Not even allowed to face the Nile,* he thought, closing his eyes and trying desperately to concentrate on his breathing. *Moon or no moon, I should be allowed to see the great river in my final moments.*

Suddenly a new cry lifted from the crowd. Thasos opened his eyes to see two wheelbarrows, piled tall with linen-jacketed scrolls and books, pushed toward the pyre by more robed men.

"The witch's books!" someone yelled. "Burn them with her apprentice!" At that, a man sprang at one of the wheelbarrows and grabbed a fistful of scrolls. He threw them at Thasos' feet.

"Take these back to hell, pagan! They have no place here!"

With the frenetic energy of imitative monkeys, the crowd surged to the wheelbarrows, boldly pushing aside the guards' swords to scoop the books into their arms in a grotesque parody of embrace. Eyes glittering, mouths twisted in primitive glee, they pelted the prisoner. The bound volumes rained on his defenseless body. Scrolls popped free of their sheaths and unraveled, fluttering to his feet. There, they collected like crumpled souls discarded from heaven.

Thasos' heart sank at the sight. *I will not despair*, he pleaded, though his hands fisted impotently behind him. With horror he read the scroll covers and book jackets, the Greek and Latin titles faintly visible by nearby torchlight.. *Eratosthenes!* he thought. *And Archimedes, and Thales and Democritus! And there, a volume of Heron?* There was even a moldy grey book with Egyptian hieroglyphics pressed into the spine, and this Thasos could not read, but he railed in silent agony at the sight of it, desperate to know what those strange symbols said. Long ago, some native scholar labored to write that volume, inscribing some thought or discovery to papyrus, his oil-lamp burning softly, his fingers trembling with excitement at the notion that his ideas would survive him. And through deep centuries the work *had* survived, a beloved heirloom circulating across generations while Alexander lived and died, while Rome rose like a budding flower, while Carthage vanished in fiery cataclysm, while Cleopatra pressed a cobra to her breast, while Egypt became a province of the Empire. . . and *here*, now, this sacred book is to meet its end? *No! My friends, I would eagerly burn to spare you this fate! I am nothing, and you are everything that matters.*

Another book landed on the littered heap. Something fell out of its pages, slid down the slope of parchment, and stopped to rest a few inches from his toes.

An envelope. Yellowed about the edges. Sealed with red candle-wax.

Thasos blinked in surprise. He stared at the envelope with growing anxiety.

Black Latin lettering was clearly visible on the envelope's papyrus. Thasos felt his heart stammer. He blinked sweat from his eyes and finally, ending the untold hours of self-control, his face twisted in anguish.

**TO THASOS**, the lettering said. **FROM THE PHILOSOPHER.**

Breathing hard, Thasos rubbed his shackles into the wooden stake behind him. The shouts continued, parchments rained upon him. Thasos cried out at last, fighting against his bonds to the crowd's enjoyment. A new scroll struck him above his left eye and drew blood. The wound leaked into his eyebrow and spilled like a crimson tear onto his face. Oblivious, he tried to touch the envelope with his feet. His toes knocked it closer, but the hands he needed to open it were imprisoned.

**TO THASOS, FROM THE PHILOSOPHER.**

Four robed monks drew near with lit torches in their hands.

*"Burn him!"* the crowd pleaded. *"Burn him now!"*

Thasos' vision became blurred by tears, and when he looked back to the envelope it warbled as if seen through misshapen glass. The torchbearers approached, their shadows like animated skeletons behind them.

Again Thasos shut his eyes. His heart wailed silently in the cavity of his chest yet he tried, as he had in his prison moments ago, to relax his thoughts. The words burned behind his eyelids:

**TO THASOS, FROM THE PHILOSOPHER.**

*Time*, he thought, *is a merciless ocean, forever pounding on our shores of accomplishment. What man builds at sunrise may crumble by nightfall. I will not weep at*

*that, for there is nothing in the world that doesn't change. My quarrel is not with time.*

Behind his eyelids he could feel the bright torches.

*I will not utter a single cry, Thasos promised. For you, my love, no sound will escape me.*

The monks raised their torches to the sky, as if aping the irreverence of Prometheus on the night he stole fire from the gods. The crowd screamed their approval. The torches fell onto the pyre and the flames ignited like four separate creatures. They wriggled and blackened the scrolls. The ancient words folded and collapsed in sizzling death throes.

**TO THASOS. . .**

The fire climbed steadily towards him, eating parchment and expelling a flurry of glowing embers that drifted off on the river breeze. Thasos breathed deep of the disintegrating manuscripts and took their burning incense into his lungs. The heat roared closer.

Thasos looked away from the crowd, the flames, the scrolls.

He turned his gaze upwards to the sky.

# I

*Two years earlier in the city of Alexandria, Egypt,  
Province of the Eastern Roman Empire*

*Late October, 414 A.D.*

On his seventeenth birthday — by Roman law the day he was now declared a man — Thasos met Hypatia of Alexandria.

He had left his home that morning and walked the stone-cobbled road that ran alongside the River Nile. Autumn was descending on Alexandria and turning the nights cold, but the heat of the Egyptian day never waned and Thasos breathed in the sweet, moist air as he went. It was the flood season of Egypt, when the Nile swelled like a fat serpent from the heavy rains of Africa's interior. The early sun brightened the limestone homes that cluttered the riverside avenue, and Thasos squinted under their painful glare.

Mighty Alexandria sat in Lower Egypt, where the Nile fanned out and emptied into the Mediterranean Sea. This time of year, the canals were brimming, and the Delta became a green, flowering blanket of new life. The local Christians did not fail to see this season as a metaphor for the Christ-king's resurrection, just as the old pagans had likened it to Osiris' return from the dead. With little else in common, all Alexandrians cherished the immortal river which gave them everything from fresh water to lucrative fishing and, when it receded in the spring, black silt that made for rich harvests. For fifteen miles Alexandria stretched. A passing bird could spy a sweeping vista of stone fountains, coliseum-style theaters, craft-shops, and the densely populated residential districts.

It was the only world Thasos knew, the only one he wanted to. Beyond Egypt, all was dark and hideous. The year before his birth, the Roman Empire had been split by the two sons of Emperor Theodosios into Western and Eastern halves, to be ruled by Rome and Constantinople, respectively. It had been a desperate measure to rescue civilization. Barbarian tribes were overrunning the cities of the West, burning the countryside, and straining an ailing economy. Five years ago Rome itself fell to the Visigoths, worst of the bearded invaders, and the total disintegration of the West seemed inevitable. This tragedy had sent shockwaves through the remainder of the civilized world. *The West has fallen!* people cried. *The barbarians have taken Italy! But at least here, in the warm south of the Eastern Empire, we are safe. May the Lord preserve and protect us!*

At seventeen, Thasos was of medium height and possessed a lean, spare frame. His eyes were deep-set, brown, and a shade darker than his hair, which he wore short in the Roman style. He had a cleft chin and his nose was well-sculpted, neither too big nor too small for his face. He had friendly, generous lips and a healthy flush to his skin. His face was clean-shaven. The sky-blue tunic he wore was tied at his waist with a dark blue sash.

From his home in the poorer, plebeian quarters of the city, it was a thirty minute walk to the Great Library; his appointment with the Librarian was, judging by the faultless clock of the sun, in fifteen minutes. Irritated by his slipshod management of time that morning, Thasos broke into a light run, passing West Harbor where merchant vessels from other nations had arrived, their colorful banners flapping in the sea-breeze.

I won't be late, he prayed, though a crease of anxiety marred his warm, open face. Within minutes he could see the building on the hill above the city's royal district. The Great Library was long and rectangular, with a porch shaded by a row of ionic columns. A gabled roof topped it, bronze and bright in the sun. The front courtyard was

enclosed by a peristyle, rows of marble columns that formed a decorative perimeter. Leading up to this courtyard was an aisle of stone steps, hewn delicately into the emerald hillside.

Thasos had never been inside the Library. It was a strange irony, given that his father Admetus had worked there. Thasos had been very young then, a boy whose only interest was in playing with the other children of his neighborhood. . . pretending to be gladiators or legionnaires or Persian magicians. Then his father died and going to the Library was impossible; Thasos' mother had forbid it.

But not today, he thought. Today I am a man.

At the feet of the hill was a wall of shrubbery with a circular entrance carved into it. Beyond this green portal, Thasos could see the start of the hill stairs.

*Three minutes left*, Thasos guessed. He increased his pace, his slender legs propelling him like an Olympic athlete through the entrance. He was in mid-leap up the first few stairs when he realized someone was coming *down*, and it was too late to avoid the inevitable collision. He heard a girl's scream, then felt the impact that sent him and his victim sprawling into the steps.

"I'm so sorry!" Thasos sputtered.

A young Egyptian woman wearing a white cotton tunica stood up and shot him a Medusa-like glare. "Lunatic!"

"I'm sorry, truly, truly sorry. Forgive me."

She gathered herself, brushed off her clothes. "Are you at the Library to learn how to *walk*?"

"It might be better than trying to fly, no?"

"Perhaps!" the woman laughed, disarmed by his levity. When he had apologized again she said, "You're a new student?"

"If my appointment goes well. I mean, yes, this will be my first day at the Library." *And the Library is the heart of Alexandria*, he thought, remembering his father's deathbed words. *It is the soul of the civilized world, Thasos*. For a moment, Thasos was overpowered by a haunted memory. His father, dying in a bed soaked with sweat. Thasos' mother, wailing and begging her husband not to leave her. A physician at the bedside, cloaked in shadows like a bird of prey.

The memory flickered away. Thasos felt the onset of an awkward silence between him and the woman. He offered a smile. "A friend is waiting for me. Impatiently I fear."

"Then you must fly again, I fear," she replied. By her tone she clearly wanted to extend the encounter. Her hazel eyes shimmered with interest.

Thasos sighed, torn by choices. "Perhaps we'll collide again if Fortune is kind?"

"Perhaps."

For a moment Thasos stalled. But he knew he was already late, and he did have a friend, Arion, awaiting his arrival. Thasos bid her farewell and, with a cautious look at the stairs ahead of him, scrambled up the hill without further accident.

"Now here's something to see!" Arion exclaimed from atop the stairs. "Thasos the glass-worker at the Great Library! One of us has gone mad!"

Sweating lightly, Thasos grinned at his friend. "To justify this climb, there had better be ambrosia, not just books!"

Arion smirked. Two years older than Thasos, shorter by several inches, Arion was round about the waist and had stringy, shoulder-length black hair. “No ambrosia. Just every book from the four corners of the Earth!” The two friends embraced warmly and Arion bid him a cheerful birthday.

“Seventeen,” Thasos repeated, gazing past Arion at the pale courtyard and the colonnaded porch of the Library. A set of double doors, ornate and inlaid with lapis lazuli and gold, glinted in that shade. “I pledged to my father that this place would possess me for one year, beginning today. Now, shall we enter?”

In the deepest chamber of the Library, the teacher named Hypatia sat by the steady burn of a lantern and desperately regarded the half-written scroll in front of her.

Though a lengthy cedar desk lay nearby, she sat on the red-carpeted floor with her bare feet drawn under her. Her lantern was a lonely illumination. The surrounding chamber was shadow-drenched. . . the walls lined with shelves, and each shelf straining under the weight of oak scroll cases and piled leather-bound volumes. The air was mildewy sweet.

Standing over her, Professor Apollonius peered down at her writing with distaste. “*Latin?*” he cried. “Every book should be written in Greek! We *think* in Greek, we speak in Greek! Don’t give the future this guttural language of dogs when you could be giving them *art!*”

Hypatia sighed. She glanced at her red ceramic ink jar as if it could summon a genie to dispel her unwelcome visitor.

“You don’t agree?” Apollonius roared.

“I agree that Greek is the most musical language. Yet the world is embracing Latin.”

Apollonius snorted, not so much at this prophecy but at Hypatia’s unwillingness to really argue. He was a figure burned away by time to a wiry, white-haired stalk. His eyes were immense, too large, it seemed, for his sagging face, and fixed in a permanent scowl. In his hand he clutched a tightly-wound scroll and with it he batted the air as if striking an invisible opponent. “Every time you indulge Latin, you put our own music deeper in the grave!”

Hypatia finally looked at him.

At the age of forty-five, she was still beautiful, still tall and slender like an idealized statue. Her face was oval, with a narrow nose and full lips. Her eyes were dark blue, piercing and mesmerizing, framed under the black arches of her eyebrows. Her skin, darkened to the color of honey by the Egyptian sun, showed the gentle beginning of creases across her forehead and at the corners of her mouth. Her chestnut hair retained all the thickness of her youth, giving her an untamed look. When she scowled, this look bordered on savage.

“Latin is the language people will read in tomorrow’s books —”

“Because we’re *writing* those books in Latin! The West has fallen and we can make the world Greek again! The world doesn’t have to change!”

Hypatia fluidly switched languages to make her point: “*Nihil est quod perstet in orbe.*” *There is nothing in the world that doesn’t change.*

“Indeed,” Apollonius said, recoiling from the Latin syllables like a demon from

sunlight. “Not even Hypatia is immune to that law. Do I see another silver hair sprouting on the Philosopher’s head?”

“Apollonius —”

“I’m leaving,” he said, contenting himself with this parting shot. Then he seemed to remember the scroll he had in his hand. “Oh. . . this is for you.” He placed it on her desk and withdrew into the hallway.

“So glad I could quicken you this morning,” Hypatia muttered. She felt swept up by sudden anger and frustration. The blank page of her newest book lay wanting, like rough stone set before a sculptor who couldn’t think what to chisel.

My seventh book, she thought. Assuming I ever finish writing it. Seven books in forty-five years.

Her earlier books had already made her famous. . . or infamous, depending on who was speaking of them. Her first, written at seventeen and published the next year, had proposed a prime number theorem that instantly became a staple of the world’s three libraries — Persia’s Antioch Library, Greece’s University of Athens, and the Great Library of Alexandria. But her next two books she considered her best — written at the darkest time of her life, the death of her father. *Variation and Independent Variables*, and *Quantifying Disorder: a Study of Given and Eventual States*. They were bold works, brilliant and frightening to many of her peers. Twenty years after their publication, Hypatia could still tip-toe through the Library dormitories and hear resident scholars arguing them, her detractors calling *Quantifying Disorder* “lunacy in ink” while others declared it was the “new science, one day to have its own Hall in the Library.” Her last three books — two of astronomy and one of philosophy, had received quieter reactions.

And what will they say of this book? Hypatia wondered, scowling darkly at her seventh manuscript-in-progress. Each morning she awoke possessed by the need to work on it, driven as if gods were urging her on. She’d struggle, twist her feather-pen, scribble ink onto papyrus and watch her work take slow, agonizing shape. But that was the reality of the scientist. Playwrights could pen a dozen works each year, but scientists needed time to craft a single volume.

And it is time I’m exactly short on! She lifted the lantern and turned its light onto the *clepsydra*, the water-clock. Its steady drip of water from the upper to lower vessel turned a wheel marked with each hour on its spokes. Morning’s seventh hour was already past. She was late for an appointment with a new student.

The day’s schedule flashed through her mind like an unwelcome equation — appointments, classes and meetings. Hypatia grumbled, seeing how her day had already been stolen from her.

She stood at last, her white teacher’s robe covering her from neck to ankles like a monastic garment tied at the waist by a thin gold sash. Quite suddenly, she recognized the waxen seal on the scroll Apollonius had brought her and, with surging eagerness, she broke the letter’s seal and read:

*Hypatia,*

*There will be a gathering at the palace tonight that you will attend. I will not accept a refusal. It is a formal affair, and I am quite certain you will find the other guests to your liking. They will begin arriving at sundown. I trust you will as well.*

*Governor Orestes*

Orestes? Hypatia frowned, puzzled. She knew the Governor was currently in Constantinople holding audience with the Royal Court. Was he returning sooner? Why?

She folded the parchment and thrust it into the pocket of her robe. Then she regarded the blank scroll again.

“Tomorrow, then,” she told it, and pushed aside her thoughts of writing to better concentrate on her impending appointment. She had seen the student’s name on the Library roster — *Thasos, son of Admetus the Scholar*.

Ah! Admetus! she thought, saddened by Time’s thieving hands. Admetus had been a beloved part of the Library staff, his early death tragic. A friendly man with a remarkable talent for memorization. Hypatia recalled how often she would discover his lonely lamplight in a hidden aisle, him not far from it, crouching by a scroll bin, searching for another work to use in his research. “Admetus?” she would say patiently. “Were you intending on sleeping here tonight? The Library is closed!” And then he would smile at her, laugh agreeably, and say, “Sorry, Philosopher. Never enough hours in a day!”

*That was ten years ago he left us!* Hypatia was startled by the decade’s rapid passage. Now his son is of age to study here! It was a bittersweet thought.

Leaning over the desk, the cuffs of her robe dangling, she extinguished the lantern and the room went dark as if it had never existed at all.

“All right,” Arion said, grinning. “Step forward and open your eyes.”

Feeling sheepish, Thasos walked through the Library’s double doors and did as he was told. “My God,” he said at once, and the rest of his breath was snatched away.

The Great Library’s Main Hall was an airy, square chamber. Its floor shone with mosaics of grey tiles, interrupted by straight paths of darker grey like an arabesque. At the center of the room was a flowering garden, nourished by sunlight which streamed in through the long windows that faced east. Thin, grey pillars lined the room like sentries and supported a second level balcony, from which another tier of pillars supported a third level. The roof had coffers, or indentations, shaped like five-pointed stars, and an *oculus*, the sky-light, pierced the center. Nine hallways branched off of the Main Hall, three per level, leading to separate corridors. Tunic-clad students and robed professors roamed about as if in an enclosed metropolis. From where Thasos stood on the bottom floor, he could see an information kiosk manned by two elderly bearded men at the far end of the room. Above them towered a giant mosaic of the Library’s founder, Alexander the Great, in full Egyptian regalia like a pharaoh. The conqueror’s arms were crossed, a crook in one hand, a flail in the other, his fierce eyes set with determination.

Thasos gasped, “Tremendous!”

“It is,” Arion agreed. “I’ve been here three years and the sight never loses luster. Nine halls, one dedicated to each of the Muses. And the entire Library dedicated to Urania, muse of astronomy.” As Thasos looked around in open-mouthed astonishment, Arion chuckled and added, “It’s a rare thing to see you humbled. I’m enjoying this!”

Thasos turned his attention to the people who wandered in and out of the branching hallways. He remembered his father telling him that the Great Library lured travelers from all lands. Now at last, he could appreciate those words. He saw bearded Persians, toga-clad Greeks, dark-skinned Egyptians, a strutting black man in an orange

toga, and even two fair-haired Celts mingling and conversing. It was as if the world's continents had joined at this juncture of the Earth.

"I'm speechless," Thasos admitted.

"Good. Now when's your appointment?"

"Five minutes ago."

"Naturally!" Arion snapped. "Do you know which Librarian was to interview you?" When Thasos shook his head Arion said, "Then stay here and wait for me!"

As he watched Arion sprint away, Thasos felt a childish spirit of adventure bubble in his stomach. He imagined running through the Main Hall watching the patterns of the floor rush under his feet. He could feel the building's history like a veil brushing his face. Seven hundred years earlier, Egypt had been brutally oppressed by Persia, the largest power in the world at that time. Native beliefs were trampled, the Egyptians enslaved to their new masters. Then the young Macedonian Alexander had swept down the coast of Asia Minor like a whirlwind. He had smashed through every Persian army in his way; by the time he reached Egypt, Persia had no spirit to oppose him. They fled the country while Egypt received Alexander as the god everyone, particularly himself, believed him to be. This city of Alexandria — one of *sixteen* namesake cities — was built to commemorate that liberation, and the Great Library conceived as its crowning jewel.

Thasos looked warmly to the long-dead king's mosaic. He offered a small but reverent bow. Then he turned, quite by chance, to examine the gardens again.

It was only a glance in the direction of the flowering stalks and ferns, to openly wonder at this collection of exotic vegetation. How ironic, he would wonder in months to come, that his sideways glance would change the course of his life forever.