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'You have shamed us,' a stern voice rebuked.

Seventeen year old Matthew stood immobile in front of the twelve elders of the Senate. The elders were usually fair in their dealings with defaulters but as he looked at the stern faces he knew he would not get off lightly as he could see some were angry and others baffled by his behaviour.

'You took it upon yourself to change your destiny,' said another voice full of shock.

Matthew listened unmoved with bowed head and said nothing in his defence. Some of the men fidgeted, one or two shuffled papers in front of them and others turned to discuss Matthew's case. Snatches of their conversations ricocheted around the gathering:

'Far too young.'

'Disobedient dolt.'

'Deserves no chance at all.'

'Just a child, have mercy.'

But all agreed that they could not approach the higher authority, the true master, to help with the problem. It would seem like an admission of failure in their duty.

Matthew was unrepentant. In his mind what he had done was no less wicked than what others had done. What had upset these good people, he was sure, was the failure of their plans for him, that he had indeed shaped his own destiny, though not intentionally.

Peter, the leader of the elders, tapped on the table. Voices lowered until there was silence.

'We must deal with this matter ourselves,' he said, amidst a flurry of nodding heads.

Matthew waited.

'We cannot appeal to the higher authority,' Peter hesitated before going on, 'because I think, and I'm sure you will agree, we