

**Rosario Magrì**

# **A salty mouth**



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# I

Old Erisia had paid no attention. She had passed by the grave by chance and had seen the old man. He sat on the stone bench, in the grassy enclosure bordered by a low brick wall that preceded the facade of the small building. His neck was leaning against the wall and his eyes were closed. One might think that he was still sleeping.

Erisia had left Ostia at dawn, crossing the Tiber with the first ferry ride. She went to look for some medicinal plants that grow near the sea, where the sand keeps the humidity of the night in the last earth.

The Sacred Island was not an island, although water surrounded it on all sides. After running parallel to the coast, the Tiber twisted towards the hinterland forming a loop, then headed straight for the mouth passing close by Ostia. At the beginning of the parallel section, an artificial canal uncorked the river by putting it in communication with the sea and thus protecting Ostia from floods. On the maps it was indicated as Fossa Traiana, but the inhabitants called it prosaically Flumicellum. The stretch of coast between the sea, the river and the Fossa Traiana formed a quadrilateral: the Sacred Island.

Year after year its area had grown, because the land advanced and the sea receded. Three feet a year - Roman surveyors said worriedly. The mud, brought by the blond Tiber and pushed north by the currents, threatened to bog down the two ports of Ostia. The peasants said nothing. The rows of leeks and melons increased, much appreciated by the gourmets of Rome.

Erisia had gone back towards the fifth hour, between the tombs that flanked the coastal road. They were arranged irregularly in several rows, separated by paths and small grassy areas.

The June sun scorched the bricks of the grave. Erisia had looked cautiously into the enclosure. The old man was still there, seated, motionless. She had entered on tiptoe. She had called. No reply. The hand was purple, the arm stiff.

She had gone back. Cautiously, without turning her back too early. Many things were told about the dead, about their desire to be accompanied by someone on the journey without return. Erisia, like all old people, was in no hurry to leave.

To warn the authorities was a nuisance she would have gladly done without. But leaving an unburied dead would have been sacrilege. And she was more afraid of the dead than the government.

She returned to the road and walked towards Portus. The Bridge of Matidia crossed the Fossa Traiana connecting the Sacred Island with the built-up area of Portus. It was humpbacked, to allow the passage of ships. There were two policemen on the bridge. One was looking bored with the comings and goings of passers-by. The other, leaning against his shoulder, stared at the water and occasionally spat into it.

Erisia stopped in front of the first. She said in a low voice, without looking him in the face: "I saw a dead man."

"Where?"

She nodded in the direction of the Island.

The other laughed: "They are all dead there."

“That one is sitting.”

“Then he is not dead. He's drunk.”

“He's already stiff.”

The policeman who looked at the river had turned around: “Stay here,” he said to his companion. “I'm going to have a look.”

Erisia was trying to get away. The policeman grabbed her by the arm: “Where are you going, beautiful?”

“It's late. I must ...”

“You must come with me. I don't want to go around the whole Island to find him. And if by chance he got up and left I must take it out on someone, right? I do my duty, but I don't like being bothered for nothing.”

The dead man was really there. Erisia stared at him with relief. She knew that the dead can appear and disappear when they want. Instead he was still there, heedless of the flies that walked on his face and on the bald top of his skull, surrounded by a half-crown of white hair.

A group of onlookers had followed them. Someone observed: “He's really dead. He's in the sun and doesn't sweat.”

“He's stopped sweating now.” The policeman said it seriously, the others listened without laughing. Life was tiring, death was the end of fatigue.

The policeman rummaged in the worn tunic: “You are witnesses that he only had six copper coins.”

Someone said: “You have to leave him one. He needs it for the trip.” People used to put a coin in the mouth of the dead, so that they could pay the ferry to Charon.

The policeman got angry. It was up to him to confiscate the deceased's assets, not to arrange they reached their destination. “I'll put it in your mouth, so you'll be silent.”

The other began to switch between swearing and conjuring. The policeman pointed at the corpse: “Anyone know him?” No one answered. “And you, Drafty?”

The head of the long-limbed Drafty had emerged above the wall. “I'm thinking.” They fell silent, waiting for Drafty to finish thinking.

In his thirties, thin and articulated, long face, sparse, blond hair, and a high-pitched, falsetto voice. His mind was a spider's web in which all the facts of Ostia and Portus were entangled, and many others.

“He comes from Rome.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw him there.”

“Where?”

“Under the Arch of Titus.”

“What was he doing?”

“He asked for alms.”

“And what is he doing here?”

“Ask him.”

“I don't think he wants to answer me.”

“Then Pontius Epaphroditus will take care of it.”

“Could you warn him?”

“I was going to Ostia. I'll drop in at the barracks.”

“Be quick. I'm staying here to watch over him.”

“He’s not going to run away,” said someone said.

It was nice to feel alive. The legs moving, the stomach rumbling. That old man would never move again, not even to eat.

They dispersed. The policeman came out of the enclosure. He sat in the shade, leaning his shoulders against a trunk. He pulled bread and cheese out of his tunic. It was hot, but the tops of the pines began to quiver with the first gusts of the afternoon breeze.

## II

The emperor Claudius had decided to create a port in Ostia, to ensure the supplies of Rome. The choice of the place - two miles north of the mouth of the Tiber - was not happy. The currents deposited the mud brought by the river. Moreover, the piers did not sufficiently protect ships from storms. The emperor Trajan had a large hexagonal basin dug behind the existing port and a canal to link them. Another canal connected the new port to the Fossa Traiana.

The maritime trade of Rome was planned and financed in Ostia. In Portus the plans made at the tables became bulging sails, the creaking of pulleys, hard money, stabbing in the alleys. That is why the inhabitants of the port, compared to the people in Ostia, showed the contemptuous complacency that the storm troops show towards the officer corps.

The police of Ostia maintained a detachment in Portus in charge of the difficult task of maintaining order. The detachment was located in a building facing the Bridge of Matidia. Until a few years earlier there was a brothel there, where girls from many countries satiated the overdue hunger of sailors from all countries. Following a colossal brawl that had involved the police rushing in to calm things down, the brothel had been closed by the Prefect of the Ports. The rooms now housed the brigade's straw mattresses.

The bronze plaque bricked in above the door, representing an erect phallus supported by two Cupids, had been removed. In the courtyard the statue of Vulcan, god of fire, had replaced that of Venus. Resting on the anvil, the lame husband of the goddess of love seemed to meditate on his conjugal misfortunes.

Upstairs, Pontius Epaphroditus, chief of the Ostia brigade, was seated at the table in his room. He must have been closer to fifty than forty. Extremely tall and very thin, he casually wore an old rusty armour and a leather helmet surmounted by a small silver sphinx, dented and missing one wing. Sitting in front of him, Drafty, his friend and confidant, took a drink from the mug that Pontius had brought.

"I don't understand." Pontius Epaphroditus passed his hand gravely over the memo. "What was that old man doing on the Sacred Island?"

"Who cares? He's dead, that's all."

"But I am alive. And I must earn the bread I eat. I still don't even know what he's called."

"There is no need to identify him. Six copper coins are not an inheritance that can set lawyers in motion. And where he is now, he doesn't need a name."

"What's the point of an unnamed man?"

"Let's call him Felix. Or Caius. But please explain to me why you are so interested in that beggar."

"I don't know. It's like when you're in the front row of the parade and your head itches. You would give a month's salary to be able to scratch under the helmet. It has started to make my brain itch since I saw him."

"There are more vagabonds in Rome than flies over a carcass. One more, one less ..."

"Sure. But he wasn't from Ostia. What was he doing around here?"

“Maybe he understood that his time had come. And he didn't want to end up in the mass graves of the Esquiline. Here a pyre is not denied to anyone. Just gather the wood that the current brings to the beach.”

“There are many quiet places near Rome, for someone who doesn't want to die in the city. Instead, he travels seventeen miles on foot ... for what? For the sake of taking his last breath with sea air?”

“These tramps are like animals. They feel the instinct to leave and they leave. It may be that he didn't realize he was dying. He set off and the blow came. Maybe he wasn't even aware of it. He didn't have the face of someone who has struggled to leave this world.”

“He set off, very well. But to go where? From the Sacred Island you can only reach Ostia or Portus. I don't think his goal was Portus.”

“Why?”

“People go to Portus to trade or to embark. With the sum they found on him, he could at best buy some lupines, or a passage to the lighthouse.”

“Maybe he just wanted to beg. Portus isn't a bad place for a beggar.”

“So, in your opinion, someone leaves the Arch of Titus to come and beg for the dimes of the travellers of Portus?”

“According to what you found on him, our friend doesn't seem to have done any golden business in Rome.”

Pontius slowly emptied the cup, pursed his lips: “Last year we burned someone in the Field of the Poor who asked for alms in front of the tomb of Cartilius Poplicola. He didn't even have the money for the gravedigger. A month later his nephew arrives: ‘Where is my uncle's grave? A man like this and this’. ‘In the field of the poor’ I say. ‘Half an amphora with a stone on it and the number XVII, you can't go wrong.’ ‘Unfortunate men!’ says he. ‘You treated him like this?’ ‘With a text and all’ I say. ‘You should thank us instead. We collected money ourselves for the pyre, we policemen, so that he could rest in peace.’ In short, he had left his nephew a few million sesterces. The heir was so angry with us that he didn't even offer us a drink.”

“Let's hope that our man has left an inheritance, and that the heir is more generous. But I insist. Portus is certainly not a bad place for a beggar. Those who embark try to propitiate the gods and to avoid the curses that the beggars send to the stingy people. If business went well, they gladly open their purses on their return.”

“All right. However, if this man had tried to sneak in among Portus's beggars he would have ended up with the fish. Not even the beggars of Ostia dare to put their noses beyond the Fossa Traiana, let alone someone from Rome. No, Drafty, the balance does not add up.”

“But after all, what does it matter what he had in mind? He didn't do anything wrong, nobody hurt him. He went to the underworld, have a good trip.”

“How do I know he didn't do anything wrong if I don't know why he came around here?”

“Then you should watch over everyone who enters through the Roman Gate.”

“I would discover some beauties. But as long as I have no reason to suspect something, I act like that Gellius who had a young wife and was confident. Then someone whispered something in his ear.”

“Do you remember how it ended?”

“Killed in an alley, here in Portus.”

Pontius spat out the lupine peels that he chewed: “And then, there is a small detail.”

“Which?”

“How did that guy get to the Sacred Island?”

“Since he came from Rome, he will have followed the Via Portuensis.” It was the direct route between Rome and Portus.

“Of course. So he arrives in Portus and instead of asking for alms, he hunts on the Sacred Island, where you can't find anyone who gives you a dime.”

“It may be that, after sniffing at the Portus wind, he preferred to head towards Ostia.”

“In that case he had to cross the Bridge of Matidia. It is guarded by the police, day and night. Before being burned, the corpse remained exposed here. No policeman recognized him.”

“He may have passed through Ostia.”

“Between Ostia and the island is the Tiber. Batracus swears he hasn't ferried him, such a guy.”

“He may have followed the Tiber off the beaten track. And come to the island asking a fisherman to transfer him.”

“Clever. But a beggar must hit the busy streets if he wants to eat. This one instead hunts in the middle of the bush, risking some bad encounters ... for what purpose? Only those who have to hide themselves avoid the main roads.”

“You have a point.”

“So he was afraid that something would happen to him. Tomorrow I'm going to Rome.”



### III

Pontius Epaphroditus took the Via Sacra, leaving behind him the bulk of the Colosseum, with its gesticulating statues under the marble arches. Although June was just beginning, the heat of Rome was muggy. The square, usually crowded, appeared almost deserted. People had taken refuge in the ambulatory of the amphitheatre, where the huge stone walls maintained an acceptable temperature. Only a few braved the heat to dip their feet in the basin of the fountain called the Meta Sudans. The gigantic statue of Helios, with its head crowned by a halo of golden rays, reverberated the heat wave with its metallic bulk. Originally the sculptor had depicted Nero. Once the tyrant had fallen, the statue - like many courtiers - had changed its head. Now he represented a no less implacable despot: the sun.

Pontius Epaphroditus had not considered the one hundred and nineteen feet of stature of the giant worthy of a glance. By nature he shied away from any exaggeration. In order to avoid rubbing his feet on the red-hot basalt of the Via Sacra, he had climbed the base of the temple of Venus that flanked it. So now not only did he avoid the blaze of the sun, but he enjoyed the coolness of a mysterious game of currents between the grey granite columns of the portico.

At the end of this he found himself under the grandiose arch that spanned the Via Sacra. Above his head the divine Titus and Vespasian celebrated in the high relief of the vault the triumph over the Jews. The winners did not seem to suspect that the severed stump was already sprouting again from the underground of the catacombs.

Pontius Epaphroditus did not think about such problems. Beyond the arch the Via Sacra continued towards the Forum, in a sumptuous perspective of temples and basilicas. The chief of police turned left. The access to the Clivus Palatinus was protected by a praetorian guardhouse. From there a road led up, winding through a large park of pine trees, towards the home of the divine emperor Septimius Severus.

Pontius stopped, lifting the helmet from his forehead with two fingers. The small, broken sphinx that surmounted it fixed its still gaze on the sovereign's home. The head of the guard came towards him: "If you are looking for the master you are way off. He's already in Asia by now."

"I know."

"Looking for someone else?"

"Yes. A beggar."

"The one who sleeps under the arch?"

"That's the one."

"He is not here."

"Where is he?"

"What do I know? It's been three days that he hasn't been seen."

"Only three?"

"Maybe four. Or five. How should I remember?"

"It matters to me."

"Why? Surely you don't need him!"

“In a certain way, yes.”

The other burst out laughing: “Better leave him alone, that one.”

“What's so special about him?”

“The master protects him. What is he accused of?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why are you looking for him?”

“I'd like to ask him some questions. What's his name?”

“They call him the Etruscan.”

“Has he been around here a long time?”

“It will be three years.”

“And before?”

“Ask him.”

“This must be a good place for a beggar.”

“And how! A gold mine.”

“Didn't your colleagues find anything wrong when he occupied it?”

The praetorian sneered: “They arrived with some clubs that looked like the club of Hercules. But they had to go back with their tails between their legs. We had received precise orders.”

“From who?”

“From the master. He's the one who put him here.”

“If he is protected by the emperor, why does he ask for alms?”

“Because he's a weirdo, haven't you figured it out yet? He predicts the fortune to a chick for three dimes. Then again - in front of a senator's purse, he doesn't say anything.”

“How did he get to know the emperor?”

“We saw him arrive, it will be three years from now, between two of our men. Quiet, as if going to the tavern. The master has always been fond of astrology. He makes them appear before him to test them. It was his chance, the one that happens once in a lifetime. Instead, nothing.”

“Nothing what?”

“Here comes the fun part. As to the others, it was immediately clear what had happened. Some came back with great pomp. Some with lash marks on the bare back.”

“And he?”

“Quiet. The same face, the same tunic, barefoot. We had been ordered to prevent anyone from harassing him. And to let him go up when he wanted.”

“Does he have customers?”

“Many came. But nobody was sure to get an answer. Sometimes he didn't even listen, as if they didn't talk to him. Or he said he knew nothing, and sent them back like that. Instead, with another, perhaps a poor fellow without sandals, he took the time to talk for an hour. From the rich he took a few dimes and returned the rest: weirder than that ...”

“Have any big guys recently come to consult him?”

“Few came by. Too rustic. The rich want to be served and revered. But it will be a month, one arrived from your area.”

“Who?”

“An Arab. But not one of those ragged men who sell coloured glass necklaces. He must have a heavy purse, judging by the litter and those bodybuilders that spared him the trouble of walking.”

“A big, fat man with a black beard?”

“Something like that. The day before a servant arrives, he asks: ‘Does the Etruscan live here?’ ‘There he is,’ I answer. The servant says to him: ‘My master wants to talk to you.’ The Etruscan is quiet, lying on the ground, with his eyes closed. The other insists: ‘Pays well. Everyone knows that Sulleus the Arab is generous.’ The Etruscan opens his eyes, looks at him. ‘Look,’ I think, ‘his appetite has woken up.’ Instead he says: ‘Am I the one who needs him or is he the one who needs me?’ The other was dumbfounded. ‘Then he must come to me.’ He closed his eyes and the conversation ended there.”

“The next day I see the litter arriving. Eight Ethiopian slaves who looked like as many Colossi of Rhodes, with large gold rings on their ears. The Arab gets off: a chunk of man over six feet tall, with a large black beard. The Etruscan was picking some herbs among the trees. The Arab walks towards him. I stop him. ‘To go further you need permission.’ He stares at me with eyes that looked like burning coals, points his finger at the Etruscan: ‘Does he have permission?’ ‘He doesn't need it,’ I say. ‘He is a friend of the emperor.’ He burst out laughing: a roar that makes my ears ring: ‘Fine friends has your emperor!’ ‘Mind your words,’ I say. ‘And anyway, it's none of your business.’ Meanwhile the Etruscan, without haste, had come towards us. They set themselves apart, they spoke in a low voice. Then the Arab got back on the stretcher and the Etruscan holed up under the Arch.”

“After getting paid, I guess.”

“The Arab pulled out his purse, but the Etruscan took nothing. If he got paid later, I don't know.”

“Did they meet again?”

“Not here.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I have spoken to my companions. Such a giant does not go unnoticed.”

“You're a pal. If you happen to be in Ostia, come and see me. I know where the hosts keep the good wine.”

## IV

Only fifteen miles separated the white marble of Rome from the red bricks of Ostia. After passing the Roman Gate of the town and taking the Decumanus Maximus, the first side street on the right, bordering on the Baths of Neptune, led to the police station.

Half military, half civil servants, the brigade enjoyed special privileges of which they were proud. For example, their tavern did not keep the distance from the barracks provided by the military regulations. Indeed, it even occupied rooms adjacent to the entrance.

Pontius Epaphroditus found nothing to complain about. The brigade remained within reach even in the hours off duty. And from the chatter of the idlers who frequented the tavern he could always filter some interesting information.

Sitting at a table, Pontius chewed lupines listening to Drafty. They were discussing Sulleus the Arab. Drafty's voice was out of tune more than usual.

Sulleus held a monopoly on the import of incense from Arabia. A difficult trade, protected and vexed by ancient rules in which the realism of profit clashed with archaic privileges and superstitions. Even the mythical Queen of Sheba, with her train of warriors and eunuchs, had come to Jerusalem to deal with the problems raised by this traffic with the old Solomon. Because the translucent resin that burns slowly under its own ash has always accompanied man's conversations with the divinity.

Drafty had travelled the Incense Road three years earlier, with a cargo of wine bound for India. It had been one of those decisions that slowly matured under the blond hair and exploded suddenly, like the bubble rising from the silt to the surface of the pond. Suddenly the thing had seemed necessary and inevitable. He had embarked on a friend's ship in Portus, without even the faintest idea of where India was. But he knew how to be a blacksmith, a carpenter, a cook, he slept four hours a night and was as industrious as a mouse.

From Alexandria they had gone up the Nile to the cataracts of Siene. Next they had transferred the load on camels. When they reached the shore of the Arabian Gulf they had taken to the sea again, relying on the monsoon that had gently pushed them to India.

Here the shrewd Drafty, who frequented only women of the brothel and had sworn to die a bachelor, fell in love head over heels. He was in the office of the Indian merchant with whom his friend negotiated the sale of the wine. The room opened onto a reed-roofed veranda, cheered up by a fountain. The girl handed the merchant a glass of tamarind. She had a motionless smile, straight hair, firm and shiny teeth. The strong chest swelled the robe.

"Bring a glass to our guests too," the merchant had said.

She was his granddaughter, an orphan, without possessions. A dead weight that the family would have willingly disposed of. But over there, without dowry, Venus too would have remained a spinster.

Drafty's proposal had been accepted like the summer rain. The girl hadn't even been asked. The family had taken on the costs of the wedding. Relatives and friends had bowed with stereotypical smiles in front of the spouses, uttering

incomprehensible words. A Brahman peeled like a pumpkin had sung incomprehensible chants. Two white oxen had dragged the wedding cart to the harbour. Done deal.

During the return journey everything had changed. The girl had shown, more with gestures than with the few Latin words she had learned, an inflexible character mirrored in the impassive face. She demanded more and more expensive gifts at every stop: flasks of flavours, filigree necklaces, silver studded belts. A sumptuous brocade robe purchased in the port of Alexandria had finally emptied Drafty's purse.

As soon as she arrived in Ostia the girl had looked around. A reputable trader had eagerly gotten involved. He didn't skimp on money when he wanted to get something. She had gone to live with him. Then she had dumped him, and now she had Sulleus the Arab support her.

Drafty had turned to the aediles. After a quick investigation they had laughed at him. The girl said that only the engagement ceremony had taken place in her country. Who could have denied it?

He had awakened as if from a dream. Sixteen months had passed, and he found himself as if he had never left, without money and without a wife, with great confusion in his head. People had started to mock him. He, at first so quarrelsome, let them talk, seemed drained. Until one day a cold blue flame had flashed in his eyes that was frightening to see. He had grabbed the provocateur by the throat. They had taken him out of his hands just in time. They had stopped making fun of him. He had become, at least apparently, the man of before. The incident was closed.

Pontius Epaphroditus carefully steered the conversation, pouring wine and pulling his interlocutor out of the matrimonial shoals. But Drafty did not give up. That trip had opened his eyes to many things. He said:

"I'd like to know what Sulleus is doing in Ostia."

"Import incense. A business that pays off, they say."

"He needs incense to pay for entry to the baths." The entrance cost a quadrant, the quarter of a dime. A way of saying that Sulleus obtained only the small change of his income from incense.

"You mean he is involved with other deals?"

"Go to Arabia and get informed."

"It must be a good place for a rheumatic like me. But I don't have time now."

"It is the hinge of the world: one foot in the East, the other in the west. And do you know what you find in all the ports of the Arabian Gulf? The warehouses of Sulleus the Arab. There's everything in there. Ivory finer than the African one, precious stones, silk fabrics, pearls, sandalwood and ebony, perfumes, spices, slaves. Besides incense, of course."

"Why doesn't anyone think of competing with him?"

"It is easy to make a competitor disappear in Arabia. Even an entire caravan. Then you blame the wind."

"The wind?"

"Yes. The desert wind. It comes suddenly, suffocates men and beasts and buries them in the sand."

“Sulleus has been here for two years. As far as I know, he has never had any problems with justice.”

“Because he has broad shoulders. Those who have narrow shoulders like me run into justice. But I keep my eyes on him. Someday he'll pay me the debt.”

“Be on your guard. He is a powerful man, you said it yourself.”

“I am on my guard. He doesn't know he has to be on guard against me. But you should keep an eye on him too.”

“Why?”

“Previously in the office of Ostia there was a certain Assad. He sent him back to Asia and took his place. What interest can a man like him have in being locked in a closet in Ostia?”

“Maybe he suffers from the heat. Here the weather is better than in Asia.”

“There is always an incense brazier in his office. Lit also in summer. And besides, those who want to enjoy the fresh air and have the money of Sulleus don't stay in Ostia. They take a villa in Antium. Thanks for the wine.”

He slipped out. He moved like a cat, without bothering anyone.

## V

At the second hour - as always - the chief of police left the barracks of Ostia. He wore the usual tattered and shabby uniform, with a cracked leather jacket reinforced with rusty metal sheets, the helmet surmounted by the small silver sphinx missing a wing and the scabbard of the sword hanging from the loose belt. He had already done the morning inspection in the barracks. Everything was going according to plan, and that was reassuring. Especially after a night in which Morpheus - an exceptional fact for a methodical man like Pontius Epaphroditus - had been slow in arriving.

He poked his head out of the entrance, peering, as he always did, left and right. Then he entered the Decumanus Maximus in the direction of the Forum. It was the usual road that he took every morning to present the report of the night to the Prefect of the Ports, Petronius Mamertinus. Thefts, fights, fires: ordinary administration. The important things, those affecting Rome, passed over the head of the brigade chief. They were managed directly by the prefect.

Petronius Mamertinus had reserved the right to personally examine all the matters concerning the Sacred Island. He had motivated the decision with the particular character of the area, that the scarcity of inhabitants, the natural obstacle constituted by the river and the instinctive respect for the City of the Dead had made it an ideal refuge for thieves, bandits and smugglers. An energetic police action could have cleaned it up, but Petronius Mamertinus had never implemented it - and he had his good reasons. Some big Roman characters were making money - it was said - on activities that were not exactly legal. Excessive zeal could have jeopardized a career that had happily reached the top of the prefecture of the Ports. "Rome knows," the prefect said in one of his rare moments of sincerity. "If it wants me to move, it only has to give me the order. In writing." The order had never arrived.

Then there was that espionage case. Pontius Epaphroditus had unwittingly found himself in it and he had figured it out. The asthmatic prefect, however, had died of a broken heart a month after presenting his resignation (recommended from above) from the position that had been the goal of his life. The chief of the brigade therefore had no one to whom to report the news of Ostia, and he chewed on it together with his lupines.

He walked unhurriedly, scrutinizing everything carefully. But he could not drive away from his eyes that figure sitting on the stone bench in the grave enclosure. What had he come to do on the Sacred Island?

Turning behind the theatre, he entered the Square of the Guilds. It was a grassy rectangle bordered by a portico, located between the theatre and the Tiber. When a sudden downpour interrupted the performance, the spectators found shelter below the portico, while Medea, waiting to resume her desperate monologues, retired to the basement of the theatre to exchange the latest gossip with her companions. Under the portico the commercial offices opened up, which dealt with the import, export, storage and sale of the goods that flowed to the two ports from all over the world.

Pontius Epaphroditus walked down the portico with his head down, examining the mosaic signs of the offices on the floor. He stopped when he saw a depiction of a censer from which a small cloud of smoke rose.

The door was open. The chief of the brigade stuck his head in. Two lights broke the darkness of the room, devoid of windows. An iron lamp was lit on the table in front of which sat a scribe, with a pen in his hand and the other between the skull and the ear. He was transcribing documents on a parchment register. More dimly, the glare of another light was projected from above onto the wall opposite the door. Here a wooden ladder led to the upper floor.

“Are you looking for someone?” asked the scribe.

“If not, why would I have come in?”

The other was in the mood for subtleties: “You may have the wrong office.”

“There's a censer out there. It's not possible to make a mistake.”

“If you came for me, go up.” Descending from above, the thundering voice was superimposed on the sheep's voice of the scribe. It had to come from the depth of a powerful chest.

Pontius Epaphroditus felt the first step with his foot and began to climb. Turning at a right angle, the ladder gave access to a mezzanine, also blind. In the back of this, a man seated at a splendid ebony table stared at the visitor. A silver lamp illuminated the olive-coloured face, framed by a very black beard. The neckline of the tunic, deeper than that of the Roman robes, left the top of a wrestler's chest uncovered. A small brazier placed on a bronze tripod spread an exquisite smell of incense in the room.

The two looked at each other. Then the chief of the police said quietly:

“I am too old to stand before a seated man.” He pulled a stool over with his foot and sat down, moving the sword's sheath aside so that the hilt rested on the thigh, within reach. He added: “Unless it's the emperor, of course.” He stopped for a moment before concluding: “But that's not a man.” From the tone no one could have deduced whether it was a statement or irony. The chief of police's voice was always the same, monotonous.

“What do you want?”

“Are you all so polite in Arabia?”

“We are courteous to guests.”

“And who am I?”

“Someone who entered without being invited.”

“If I had to go only where they invite me,” said Pontius quietly, “I would spend my days at Diophantus's place.” He was the owner of a brothel in Portus.

“What did you come for?”

Pontius Epaphroditus stared at the blue flame of the brazier: “Where's the water?”

“In the square is a fountain.”

“And that fire?”

“It goes out on its own when the incense is finished.”

“The regulations of the aediles prescribe that where there is a flame there is also a bucket of water.”

“What happens to those who transgress?”

“The first time you pay a fine.”

“And the second one?”



“Double.”

“And the third?”

“Shop closed.”

“It’s better to pay then.” He opened a small safe, took out a gold coin: “That’s enough?”

Pontius Epaphroditus took the coin, he pulled his hand back: “How careless. It fell. And in this darkness, who can find it?”

Fiery eyes stared at him: “So what do you want?”

“We found a dead man on the Sacred Island. Sitting in a grave enclosure.”

“Well?”

“Won’t you ask me who it was?”

“Why should I ask?”

“Aren’t you worried about the fate of your acquaintances?”

“My friends are fine.”

“What about your enemies?”

“I don’t care.”

“Anyway, you knew this man.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Knowing facts about others is part of my job.”

“Let’s assume you knew him. So what about him?”

“That man lived in Rome and died in Ostia. What had he come to do?”

“Do you ask me?”

“If he were alive I would ask him. Since he is dead, I ask those who knew him.”

“I know a lot of people.”

“Even beggars?”

“I can afford to give alms.”

“Also soothsayers?”

“Is it a crime to consult a fortune teller?”

“No. I guess not. Everyone does it.”

“So?”

“Well, the fortune teller is dead. And I don’t know what he died of.”

“Try to consult another fortune teller. Alive, of course.”

Pontius Epaphroditus bowed his head for a moment. He raised it, focusing his eyes - two narrow slits between his eyelids - on the giant facing him: “A few weeks ago you went to Rome to consult him. Why?”

“What if I don’t want to answer you?”

“I would consider it a clue. Of course, against you.”

“You are very sure of yourself. Too much, maybe.”

“If it were like you say, I wouldn’t need to ask questions.”

“I was waiting for ships from Alexandria. They were late. I wanted to know if they would come.”

“And he?”

“He assured me that I would receive the goods.”

“Did he divine?”

“Yes.”

“Did you pay for it?”

“He would have had what he asked for only after the ships arrived.”

“Did he agree?”

“Yes.”

“How would he have known that they had arrived, staying in Rome?”

“Wasn't he a fortune teller?”

“Ah, yes. I hadn't thought of it. When did the ships arrive?”

“The first, ten days ago. The other, two or three days later.”

“Then he came to Ostia to collect the reward.”

“Could be.”

“Where should you have met?”

“Here.”

“Not on the Sacred Island?”

“Why should we meet on the Sacred Island?”

“I have no idea. Anyway, he didn't come?”

“No.”

“So he didn't get the reward?”

“No.”

Pontius Epaphroditus got up. “You omitted a small detail. You offered him money. It was he who refused it.”

“You have good spies. Are there any other errors in my deposition?”

“I'll be able to tell you next time. By the way, find a bucket for me. Full of water, of course.” He went to the ladder, feeling the ground with his foot. He heard the big voice behind him: “Look out for the steps. Someone broke his neck in here.”

## VI

Drafty's cold blue eyes stared at Pontius, seated before him at the tavern table. At that moment no one could have said what colour the eyes of the chief of police were, while his mouth continued to ruminate the usual lupines. The drooping eyelids seemed to want to protect his brain's methodical work from any indiscreet investigation.

"So?" Drafty asked.

"So what?"

"What did the Arab say?"

"Words. But he admitted to having consulted the Etruscan in Rome."

"About what?"

"The arrival of two ships in Ostia."

"Do you believe him?"

"No. He also said that the Etruscan had to go by to collect."

"It may have been a good reason to travel."

"It's a plausible explanation, but it doesn't convince me."

"Why?"

"It's easy to balance the books: changing the numbers suffices. They must be checked, one by one. Let's drink on it." They both fell silent, sipping the wine.

"Are you Pontius Epaphroditus?"

The chief of police looked at the girl. Out of principle he always thought before answering. A bit small, slender as a willow. Tunica with belt, very worn. She could have been seventeen, eighteen. "Yes."

Without further ado the girl took a seat next to Drafty. She had two calm blue eyes which indicated assuredness and trust in people. But the nose, capriciously turned upwards, put a note of impertinence in that placidity. And on those discordant lines flamed a forest of red hair, a sign of obstinate character.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Roumatha."

"What do you want?"

"I'm looking for an old man. A beggar who predicts fate in Rome, under the Arch of Titus."

"What's his name?"

"They call him the Etruscan."

Pontius's eyelids slowly opened. "Why are you looking for him here?"

"He's not here?"

"I didn't say that."

"Because he had to go through here."

"To go where?"

"I don't know."

"How do you know he was going to go through here?"

"He told me."

"What exactly did he tell you?"

"He said to me: 'I have to leave.' I asked him: 'Are you going to be away a lot?' 'Maybe forever,' he replied. 'I don't know yet. I'll go to Ostia, then I'll see.' He put

a hand on my head and murmured something I didn't understand. Maybe he spoke in his language. Then he changed the subject. Do you know anything about him?"

"He is dead."

"Dead?" She bowed her head, pressing her lower lip between her teeth. She stared at Pontius again. The blue eyes had gone dark.

"Dead how?"

"I don't know. We found him already cold."

"Killed?"

"He had no injuries."

"Poisoned?"

"Why do you think of an assassination? At his age people can die of natural death at any moment."

"No. Something happened to him. He felt a danger, I'm sure of it. He knew that ..."

She was silent, stifling tears.

"Have you eaten?"

"No."

"Go to the innkeeper and get something. It's on me."

The girl didn't move. She murmured: "I don't understand."

"Neither do I. Didn't he tell you what he was going to do in Ostia?"

"No."

"Didn't he tell you that he had to collect money?"

"Money, him? He spat on it. He could have become rich, if only he had wanted to. Instead he preferred to live on alms. I don't think he would have taken even a single step for a sack of gold coins."

"But you didn't ask him the reason for his departure."

"No. He liked me, but I was in awe of him. He was someone who knew the future, spoke with the dead. He certainly wouldn't have confided in a girl like me."

"If he was a wizard, he had to know why he was leaving."

"Once I wanted to test him. I asked him if it would rain the next day. He laughed: 'People believe that I read in the future as in a book. Fools. The future is dark, pitch dark. Every now and then there is a flash inside me. Then I see, but only what the flash shows me. People don't understand this. They say: 'You predicted the future for him, why not for me?' They don't know that it is not me who creates the light. It flashes when and where it wants'."

"It may be then that he did not foresee his death."

"Could be."

She fixed her blue eyes on Pontius: "But I foresee how certain things will end."

"What do you mean?"

"If you offer me something to eat, I gladly accept, because I have an empty stomach and I don't have a dime. But I have a habit of sleeping alone."

"You'll sleep alone tonight too."

Roumatha went away. Drafty looked at Pontius: "You were right. There's something underneath. But what is happening?"

Roumatha's red crest had appeared for an instant in mid-air and was immediately gone. She elbowed her way. The girl was coming back with an air of despair: "You'll have to pay me another porridge."

As she passed between the tables a drunkard had reached out: "Where are you going, little donkey? Your stable is here." The plate had flown against his face. "You'll pay for that, bitch." Roumatha had jumped on the table, turned around quickly. Kicking back, she had planted her heel in the man's chest, who had fallen on the bench out of breath. She had turned to look at him, laughing: "Don't you know that donkeys kick?"

They returned to their table after ordering another porridge.

"You are quick," said Pontius. "What is your profession?"

"Riding on horseback."

"Meaning?"

"I am standing on the back of a horse. Trained, of course. Even when he jumps over the obstacles on the track. The horse has become crippled, they have had to kill it. So I was out of a job."

"Where are you from?"

"From Dacia. But I started travelling the world early."

"And your parents?"

"They are dead."

"What happened?"

"My father was a knife thrower, my mother was his target. He had to throw as close as possible, of course without hitting her. One day he missed his aim. Deadly, in that profession. He killed himself with one of his knives."

She bowed her head over the plate. "Good porridge."

"How did you get to know the Etruscan?"

"One night we happened to be in the same tavern. There was only one free seat at his table. Then we became friends."

"Did you know that someone was threatening him?"

"No."

"Do you know if he owned something of value? Something that would tempt people to kill him?"

"He? I'm sure he was poorer than me. I already told you, money didn't interest him. However ..."

"Go on."

"Once he bent down to pick up a spoon. When he got up, I saw that a silver necklace hung from his neck. He started laughing: 'It's my only wealth,' he said. 'Family stuff.' 'So,' I said, 'once you were rich.' 'My family was,' he replied. 'But I went away to do my thing. I don't care about money.' He put the necklace under his tunic and changed the subject."

"What did this necklace look like?"

"A half silver disc, about this wide." She spread her thumb and forefinger as much as she could.

"Was there any figure? Any writing?"

"I only saw it on one side. There were two fish engraved on it. Strange fish."

"What was strange about them?"

"They swam in opposite directions. But they had their tails entwined."

"Did you find out what fish they were?"

"No. But I think they were sea fish."

"Why?"

“There was a wavy line underneath. The waves make you think of the sea rather than a river.”

“Didn't you ask him what those figures meant?”

“I already told you: he was not a guy who shared much. Besides, we didn't see each other very much. I had to make a living.”

“As to that. What are you going to do now?”

“Take care of myself.”

“Not here. This place is not suitable for you.”

“Why?”

“Because you're a girl.”

“Great discovery. So?”

“You could have some unpleasant encounters.”

She laughed, her eyes turned bluer than ever: “I can defend myself, you saw it a little while ago. Even with knives, if necessary. My father taught me.”

“You cannot always defend yourself, love. Here they find only complacent women. They are not used to refusal.”

“It's up to you to protect me. Aren't you the chief of police?”

“There is also another danger. The story of the Etruscan does not convince me. I still don't know what he had come to do on the Sacred Island. I don't even know how and why he died. It may be that someone wants to know from you what I would like to know. It may be that he doesn't believe you if you tell him you don't know. It may be that they try to force you to talk, one way or another. I mean, you have to disappear, at least for a while.”

“What if I don't want to leave?”

“I could get you out of sight.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Where will you send me? I have no home, I have no relatives. If you bring me to Rome, I'm here tomorrow. You should assign me an escort, like that of Velia Tarquinia.”

“Do you know Velia Tarquinia?”

“I was under the Arch with the Etruscan when she passed. I asked the name from a litter bearer. Such a beautiful lady, dressed like a queen.”

“Did he say anything else, about her, besides the name?”

“No. But everyone knows that Velia Tarquinia is the friend of the emperor.”

“Listen, Roumatha. This matter is damned complicated. Could ...”

“I loved that man as if he were my father. I must know if there is something dirty underneath. I think I will be able to help you.”

“How?”

“By climbing a wall. Or slipping into a tight hole. Or walking on a rope stretched between two windows. In short, going where others can't go.”

Pontius called the innkeeper with a nod: “This girl is staying here. I pay. Mind that nothing happens to her. She's under my protection: pass the word. Understood?”

“Understood.”

## VII

At the first hour, as always, Pontius Epaphroditus left the room he used in the barracks of Ostia and set foot in the courtyard. He kept his old habits even now that his position had changed. His prowess - or blind luck, the malicious said - had allowed him to unmask the culprits of that espionage business. His salary had risen by a third. And the emperor Septimius Severus, a good connoisseur of men, had shown no hurry to name the new Prefect of the Ports.

The chief of the brigade had therefore become the head of public order in both Ostia and Portus. In practice, he answered directly to the Prefect of the City, Flavius Juvenalis, and to the Praetorian Prefect, Cassius Longinus.

This new power he used discreetly. Congenital rusticity and innate caution had always kept him away from the traps of ambition. To Drafty he had said: 'When you get up suddenly there is a risk of banging your head.' Even the uniform had remained the same, with the decrepit jacket, the rickety sphinx on the helmet and the rusty sheath dragging on the ground. And the jaw continued to ruminate the usual lupines.

In a corner of the courtyard, the mattress maker stuffed with horsehair the big bags of leather destined to receive the tenants who threw themselves from the windows to escape the flames. Some brigades replaced the rope of the fire pumps or split wood with axes. Others practised the climbing and descending along ropes and poles. The morning patrols had gone out on reconnaissance. In the stables the stablemen groomed the mules of the wagons and scraped the lean skin of Bucephalus, the horse of Pontius Epaphroditus.

A servant from the barracks came to announce to the chief of police that a person asked for him.

"Man or woman?"

"A lady."

For the slave, the ladies and gentlemen were a separate category, distinct from men and women. Pontius Epaphroditus ignored these differences. He made his way to the atrium with a step no faster than he would have used for an inspection of the kitchen.

He judged her with a glance. Tall, slender, in her forties. In her haughty face, strongly marked by prominent cheekbones, black eyes stood out, hard as spear points. They had fixed themselves on the face of Pontius Epaphroditus and it was clear that they were not used to lowering themselves. The chief of the brigade half-closed his.

"Don't you want to know my name?" she asked. "We two don't know each other."

"What's the hurry?"

"Do you have a minute?"

"I have a few."

He stared at the left shoulder of the woman, where the robe was fastened by a splendid golden clasp on which the figure of a Chimaera had been embossed. An Etruscan jewel of inestimable value.

The lady followed his gaze: "My family was Etruscan. From Veii."

“I thought so, with that name.”

“Which name?”

“Velia Tarquinia. Isn't that your name?”

“So you know me.”

“There are only fifteen miles between Rome and Ostia.”

“Do you also know why I came here?”

Pontius shook his head: “Not yet.”

“I'm looking for an old beggar. A fortune teller. He too is an Etruscan.”

“What's his name?”

“Larth. I learned that they found him dead on the Sacred Island.”

“Are you a relative?”

“The only relative.”

“What do you want to know?”

“What was found on him.”

“Six dimes.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing else.”

“No valuables?”

“He didn't seem like the type to own them. Why do you ask me?”

“Because I have reason to think he owned one.”

“What are you talking about?”

“An Etruscan silver necklace. Very ancient.”

“We didn't find it on him.”

The disappointment hardened the features of Velia Tarquinia: “Then I came for nothing.”

“The body was abandoned for some time, before it was found. It may be that someone has robbed him.”

“I am willing to pay a large sum to get that item.”

“How come you care so much?”

“It was part of my family's heritage.”

“And how did it end up in the old man's hands?”

“He descended from the branch of the Tarquini who handed down the office of haruspex. He had long since renounced his family's heritage and lived alone. But that necklace he kept. I knew he was old: I tracked him down and offered to buy that item at any price. He didn't want to give it up. Then I learned that you found him dead.”

“I can look for the necklace, if you describe it for me.”

“I have never seen it. I only know it's a half silver disc.”

“How big?”

“I don't know.”

“Why did he refuse to show it to you?”

“He told me he couldn't do it. He didn't explain why.”

“You don't even know if it has any writing, some figure?”

“No.”

“What reason did that relative of yours have to keep it so jealously?”

“He was a strange guy. He predicted the future, spoke with the dead. He was probably forbidden to discard it.”



“Such an object cannot have great market value. Yet you told me that you are willing to pay a large sum.”

“A legend is handed down in our family. The end of the Tarquini is shown on that silver necklace.”

“And you ...”

“I am the last of my family.”

“Is it so important for you to know when you die?”

“For us Etruscans death is more important than life. The real death, however, is that of the person who allows his people to be extinct, breaking the thread that binds generations. I have done everything to avoid this death. But I'm sterile. Even the great Galenus confirmed it to me.”

Pontius Epaphroditus had made the acquaintance of the famous Claudius Galenus, physician of the emperor, during the investigation for that espionage case. He limited himself to commenting: “If he said so ...”

“Whoever gives me that item will be compensated more than he can imagine. As for you, your trouble ...”

“My job doesn't trouble me at all. And it's already paid for by the government. All inclusive.”

“Little, I guess.”

“Enough for me.”

The gaze of Pontius Epaphroditus, without focusing on anything in particular, did not abandon the woman. The colourless voice resumed: “Married?”

“Why do you ask me that?”

“Simple curiosity.”

“Not me. The empress is.”

“She couldn't be the empress if she wasn't married.”

The obvious observation seemed to exhaust the curiosity of the chief of police. The questions of Velia Tarquinia were not.

“Do my Roman vicissitudes prevent you from dealing with the problem?”

“Why should they stop me?”

“Of course you will know that lately I frequented the Palatine Hill.”

“So?”

Velia Tarquinia's voice became less harsh: “I underestimated you. Maybe you're worth more than your uniform.”

Pontius Epaphroditus lowered his eyes to the cracked jacket, to the rusty scabbard of the sword. He said: “I hope so.”

“I will stay in Ostia. In the house of Sulleus the Arab. Do you know him?”

“Yes.”

“Will you keep me informed?”

“When there is news.” He stared at Velia. A long look, placid like a long wave: “May the gods be with you, lady.”

“I heard that we have a guest in Ostia.” The chief of the brigade did not respond to the hint. He always left the initiative to the other.

Drafty continued: “What is a woman like her doing here?”

“She'll enjoy the sea air.”

“There are better places, for that.”

“The rich are strange.”

The other did not give up: “If she came here, she will have her reasons.”

“For example?”

“In Rome the air was bad for her. And do you know since when?”

“No.”

“Ever since the master left for the war.”

“How do you know?”

“I know.”

“Anyway, in her position ...”

“Once. When she was the master's friend. But then they broke up. Now he is far away. And the lady has her hands free.” The nicknames avoided naming compromising people. The master was the emperor, the lady the empress.

“Jealous?”

“Jealous. Better not put your finger in this thing. There is a risk that it will be cut off.”

“Yeah. However, in Ostia I am the person in charge of public order. So I have to know if that beggar was robbed. I must know who did it. And I must recover the stolen goods. After all, they pay me for it.”

“In Rome ...”

“I know, my superiors are there. If one of them wants to take responsibility for the investigation, he's the man. All he has to do is let me know.”

“Trust me, in this matter there is the paw of Rome. Those authorized by Rome, even if they steal or kill, are not thieves or murderers. They follow orders, like you.”

“When they give them to me, the orders, I will carry them out. So far, however, nobody has given me any. So I decide on my own.”

“Good luck.”

## VIII

Cassius Longinus, Praetorian Prefect, had carried out with the usual diligence the orders left by the master, so that in his absence everything would proceed in the best way. Like a good bulldog of power, he was slow but obstinate. He also had the physical structure of a bulldog: short neck, mighty chest, square jaw. But improvisation was his weak point, because Cassius Longinus was all reasoning and no imagination. And now he found himself without instructions, faced with the problem of the sudden arrival of the noble Velia Tarquinia in Ostia.

He had thought long and hard about asking for instructions by sending an urgent courier to Asia. He had given up on it. It would not have been prudent to name the last lover of the divine emperor in writing. Especially since - as far as known - their relationship had become stormy in recent times.

He had studied every other possible move, carefully weighing the pros and cons. He hadn't made any decisions. His experience told him that many problems solve themselves.

"I wasn't wrong to wait," he thought with satisfaction as he received the morning report from an Imperial Service officer.

"We followed that lady, according to your instructions."

"Followed? Watched over, you mean. An important person like her must be protected, not spied on. Especially when she is outside Rome."

"Of course, sir. She went to find the chief of the brigade. That Pontius Epaphroditus ..."

"I know him. There's more?"

"No, sir."

"Keep watching her. With discretion, of course."

He had received the laconic reports of Pontius Epaphroditus. A Roman fortune teller had been found dead on the Sacred Island. The noble lady Velia Tarquinia had come to inquire if an ancient Etruscan amulet had been found on the corpse. But at the time of discovery there were only six copper coins in the dead man's tunic. Now Cassius Longinus had the pretext that he had been waiting for to ask for an audience with the empress.

He knew that anything could be talked about with Julia Domna, confident of secrecy and impunity. In return, she expected a slowly emerging gratitude, but great and tenacious like the hatred she felt for rivals.

She was the only daughter of a prince of Edessa, who also held the office of priest of Baal in the city. The oracle of the temple had prophesied that the dowry of that girl would be the world. Many had thought of a trick of the father to get his daughter, ugly as well as intelligent, married. But Septimius Severus, the dark tribune of the Syrian legion, believed in astrology. Fate had confirmed the prediction by handing the dowry over to the groom.

Julia Domna was in the labyrinth that adorned the garden of the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill. In the company of her maidservants she was picking roses from a hedge with silver scissors.

Cassius Longinus had left the escort at the entrance of the labyrinth. Now he wandered around, trying to reach the empress. But the treacherous tangle of paths designed by the architect Apollodorus forced him to deviate abruptly from the objective or even turn his back on her, against any rule of protocol. Furthermore, every time he was in sight of the empress, the court etiquette imposed a routine bow on him. The repeated ceremonial was taking on a grotesque appearance.

Julia Domna did not seem to notice his embarrassment. The stubby hand protected by the deerskin glove continued to cut roses. Finally he turned to one of the maidservants: "Take me there, sweetheart."

She had made him sit on a marble bench, in front of her, in the centre of the maze. With a nod she had dismissed the maids. She had listened to the report without moving a muscle in her face.

Now she was talking. Slowly, as if she could hardly find the words. Instead they were all there, in her head. But she had to go through them, before she got them out of her mouth. To make sure they expressed what she wanted to make known, and only that.

She had received a purely oriental education in an Asian town besieged by the desert. She had lived in a decrepit pomp, emptied of ancient power, crumbled by the blows of the legions. But the provincial woman, who had ascended the throne of Rome, had surrounded herself with Greek and Latin writers and philosophers. She had spoken little, listened a lot, memorized everything. With a relentless will the style, the class of a queen, had been built.

"That's all, my dear?"

"Actually, empress ..."

"The trip to Ostia of a Roman lady in search of I don't know what family jewel. You won't have come this far in this heat just to give me such news!"

"That lady has a certain political relevance that would seem to justify ..."

"My dear, how badly you lie. Such problems are the responsibility of your officials and spies. They don't concern me. Rather, say that Velia Tarquinia was the emperor's last lover."

"I would never have dared ..."

"You don't need to apologize. In fact, I am grateful to you for your concern. But I don't think the issue is so important. My husband is younger than I am. An exuberant man, by Baal, a big ape, always alert. He needs something else than a lazy and not very bright Syrian woman. I serve for official ceremonies and to produce the heirs to the throne. The rest is obtained elsewhere."

Cassius Longinus had placed his right hand on his stomach. A bit to reconfirm his inalterable loyalty to the happily reigning power. A bit to calm the burning pain of an ulcer that the concerns of the office periodically reopened.

Julia Domna was silent now, narrowing her eyes. She had to compare her immovable fatness of an oriental idol with the rival's supple defiance. Court flatterers did not have an easy task when they had to exalt the beauty of the empress. She limited herself to comment: "Once he liked them very young. You can see that time also passes for him."

She continued, after a moment: "You know me, Cassius Longinus. You know I don't have a habit of making scenes. My husband believes that I am unaware of his escapades. Instead I know them all, one by one. Not immediately, perhaps, but I

always end up being informed about them. I have stretched a net around him: he cannot take two steps out of the thalamus without me hearing the bells ring. This however is not a case like the others.”

“I was just saying, ma'am ...”

She seemed not to have heard him: “I was a little woman, when he married me. A little princess from little Syria. I wore a golden robe, but on the world stage I was only an appearance. In those days, such an injustice would have made me cackle like a hen. Eastern females catch fire easily and have long tongues. But now it's different. Because I am not only the woman of Septimius Severus. I am the empress of Rome”.

Little by little the fat little woman lined up the troops. She went on the attack: “Dearest, let's get down to business. You never bothered to warn me about my consort's escapades. Why did you get into action this time?”

“Of course you know, empress ...”

She snatched the weapon of courtly hypocrisy from his hand: “I know. Because she is not a luxury slut like the others. Is that perhaps the motive?”

Cassius Longinus retreated, parrying as best he could: “All the offenses ...”

“My dear, let's look each other in the eyes. The offenses to my honour have never worried you. They are a personal matter between me and the emperor, not a political fact. But this Velia Tarquinia is not the usual slave in the house, good for the warrior's relaxation. She is a lady of the most ancient Etruscan nobility. She comes from your own roots, gentlemen of the Tiber. She could awaken some desire for power in those smug senators, capable only of lamenting the past like old men. Such a woman represents a potential danger to the stability of the Institutions. And you, who are the guardian of these institutions, have felt this time the duty to safeguard my honour.”

Cassius Longinus had moved his hand from his stomach to his heart, preparing to recite the scene of the devotion. The empress took the floor for him: “I will leave tomorrow for Ostia. Remember what I told you, but forget who told you. Everything will be done at the right time and place.”

The voice became drawn, conventional: “Dearest, it was a pleasure to see you. We saw too little of you recently. Come back soon. The men are all at war, and we poor women are left without company. May the gods be with you.”

## IX

Flavius Juvenalis, Prefect of the City, reluctantly got on the litter. He was trying to convince himself that he was going to Ostia on official duty. In the absence of the emperor, it was more than ever necessary for everything to be quiet. Street riots were not his responsibility. For this there were the praetorian cohorts of Cassius Longinus, reinforced as needed by the legion assigned to the Castra Albana. But what had to be prevented was any modification of the delicate balance of political forces that converged on the throne as the spokes of a wheel converged on the hub. Velia Tarquinia was too prominent a character for the empress's jealousy to strike her with impunity. Only her last lover, the emperor, could have decided her fate. Instead he had left without leaving any provisions on the matter. And the whole senate would have felt offended if the last descendant of one of the oldest families in Rome would have been humiliated by a provincial. Even though the provincial had been elevated by fate to the rank of empress.

To make things worse, the Arab had also got in the way. Sulleus had expressed his point of view, diplomatically but clearly. As a foreigner - he said - he knew he had no right to interfere in Roman affairs. But Velia Tarquinia was not only a beautiful lady. She had hosted ambassadors from Eastern countries several times in her palace. These friendships had proved fruitful in certain commercial and political negotiations between Rome and the Orient ...

Flavius Juvenalis had interrupted him: "As far as I know, at the moment there is war on the Eastern front."

The Arab had burst into one of his torrential fits of laughter: "In my country they say: 'Only children and soldiers play war'." In short, Sulleus had reason to believe that a ban on the noble Velia Tarquinia would have led to consequences that are not easily foreseeable in relations between Rome and the Eastern world. And it would have made future peace negotiations less easy.

The more he thought about it, the more Flavius Juvenalis felt the anger mounting inside. There were the daily problems created by a million idlers, ready to take to the streets for a price increase of salted herring, or because of the defeat of the Blues in the Circus Maximus. There were the manipulations of the troublemakers, the commercial and political wheeling and dealing, the rampant corruption, the fight including punches to survive in the court. And now the empress was also involved. "Great woman," he had to acknowledge to himself. "Too bad she's ugly." Velia Tarquinia, on the other hand, was beautiful.

He was mentally preparing the short speech he would give to Julia Domna. The Syrian woman was ambitious. It was necessary to convince her that the renunciation of a private vendetta would exalt her role of sovereign, too much above the subjects to be able to have rivals. It was important to walk on the thread of flattery without falling into the abyss of disapproval. At other times such tasks had exalted his paradoxical, tightrope walking taste, in a precarious balance between the futile and the grandiose. This time, however, he felt a kind of nausea towards that mixture of gossip and diplomacy.

He placed himself in front of an imaginary mirror. "Remember you are old. You don't even have a tooth left. And then, Velia has now tried everything. Even the

emperor's bed. She is not the type to go down, after having climbed to the top. I would never have believed it, though. Ambitious, but with an exquisite taste. What had she found in that African rhino? Or rather, what had she been looking for? I will try to learn something from the empress. It is a risk, I know. But Fortuna helps the daring." The heroic maxim applied to a court adultery made him smile.

"I will explore the terrain. Although I would like to explore something else." He looked at a wrinkled hand, furrowed by hard, raised veins. The fingers deformed by arthritis were adorned with precious rings. One contained a powerful poison in the bezel. His shield against the blows of Fortuna.

He saw himself "after", on the smoking and crackling pyre. More and more often the charm of the macabre diverted his thoughts towards that final. He was past seventy: he noticed it when he climbed the stairs or mounted on horseback. There could not be much time left. The juice of life had to be squeezed to the last drop.

Red blood, red grapes. The rhetorical image brought a ripe bunch before his eyes, which then became a swollen breast. That of Velia. He had never seen it. He would never see it. "At the banquets the servants get the leftovers. And I am a servant." He corrected himself with a grin: "No. I am the head of the servants. So ..."

The empress had taken up residence in the River Palace of Ostia, located near the mouth of the Tiber. She hadn't come for a vacation. She could not stand that second-rate palace, beaten by all winds, facing a sea that seemed to her, daughter of the desert, like a liquid chasm. But in a few days the Mysteries of the Good Goddess would be celebrated in Ostia. It was a tradition that the empress presided over the inaugural ceremony.

As always, Flavius Juvenalis did not have to go to the anteroom. He already knew how the Lady would have set up the conversation. Julia Domna was aware that she could not compete with the dialectical finesse and refined culture of the Prefect of the City. She would have barricaded herself behind an ostentatious mental slowness, to conceal her logic without gaps until the final thrust.

"You too in Ostia, dearest? There must be something serious to get you out of Rome. They tell me you no longer like to travel. Perhaps you are convinced, with your poet, that those who cross the sea change the sky, not the soul: *'coelum, non animum, mutant qui trans mare currunt'*."

With that 'your' she distanced herself, she the Eastern one, from the descendant of the old Italic race. But Flavius Juvenalis, trained in the court duels, immediately replied respectfully: "The duty, my lady, the duty. When the master is absent, the zeal of the servants must double. Every beginning of fire must be extinguished before the flames flare up."

"I thought that putting out fires was the responsibility of the police."

Flavius Juvenalis had been advised that Velia Tarquinia had contacted the chief of the Ostia brigade. "You know it too," he thought. "And she wants me to know she knows."

"Of course, my lady. But the regulations of the aediles compel the citizen to use every precaution so that the flames do not gain a foothold. I came to Ostia for this."

"Only for this? I can't believe my ears. An important man like you ... the praetor does not deal with the details, *'De minimis non curat praetor'*. Is that not what you say, you Romans?"

She still distanced herself, like a foreigner intimidated by the majesty of Rome. But Flavius Juvenalis, as a good fencer, did not give way: "I was told that in Ostia there is a noble Roman lady: Velia Tarquinia."

The heavy eyelids rose slowly. A huge amazement appeared in the thick features: "You are not going to tell me that Cupid's arrows have pierced you again!"

"Empress, noble ladies do not agree with my grey hair. Some maid, rather. It takes pepper to stimulate the satiated palates. I deal with the noble Velia Tarquinia only for reasons, let me put it like this, that are professional."

"So, political reasons."

"Correct, empress."

"Explain yourself more clearly. Ours, my dear, is a weak headed sex. Too many emotions and poor reasoning. And I do not understand anything about politics. If my husband would be here ..." She raised a soft, impenetrable shelter of mock modesty. Like those leather mattresses that the besieged lower in front of the walls to cushion the blows of the rams.

Flavius Juvenalis attempted the last assault: "Velia Tarquinia has never given problems, in the past. And now, I'm sure, she only asks ..."

"... to be forgotten. My dear, it is not easy when you carry around a name and a body like hers. Every lady should repeat that proverb of you Romans every day: 'If not chastely, at least cautiously', '*Nisi caste saltem caute*'."

"Political reasons would advise ..."

"I told you, I don't understand anything about politics. You've been playing hard-to-get, Flavius Juvenalis. And yet you know that I am always glad to see you. You are so cultured, so witty. Come back soon to visit us. We created a small academy at the court. Something straightforward, unpretentious. We invite writers and philosophers, discuss our problems with them, get advice on our difficulties. There we will be able to review the matter, after things have come to a natural conclusion."

"Forgive me, empress. Wouldn't it be better to discuss it first?"

"Do you think that would change anything? My dear, the world goes on *motu proprio*. We are parasites of the coachmen, with the illusion of driving the cart on which our tiny paws rest. May Helios be with you." Of her oriental origin she had kept the veneration for the Sun, father and master of the universe. Flavius Juvenalis bowed.



## X

The Prefect of the City carried out the prescriptions of the court ceremonial as an atheist priest fulfils the duties of the cult: precise, but without attaching importance to it. On the other hand, that ambiguity of the East towards the West disturbed him. Besides, an ugly woman planned to humiliate a beautiful woman. This was against the mental order of Flavius Juvenalis. He pushed the curse back into his mouth: "You'll pay for that, provincial." The escort of the praetorians awaited him. He hoisted himself into the saddle: "To the fire station."

The ride passed through the Road of the River Mouth, turned onto the Decumanus Maximus in the direction of the Roman Gate. Behind the wrinkled forehead of Flavius Juvenalis the plans overlapped. Under such circumstances a bizarre, sometimes sinister, but vital mood bubbled inside him. Without such surges, life in the midst of dusty office practices would have seemed as bland as cabbage soup. He laughed at himself: "Asking a policeman for help? Why not? After all, the legion also needs auxiliaries."

In front of the barracks there was an excited altercation with the guard. Pontius Epaphroditus had not been seen exiting the barracks, but he seemed nowhere to be found. Finally he came out on the porch, fastening his belt: "I'm sorry, sir. I was in the latrine."

"Is there another place, besides the one you come from, where we can talk undisturbed?"

"Certainly sir. My room."

The Prefect of the City was staring at the wooden idol standing against the wall. Pontius Epaphroditus had snatched it from a band of savages painted like their god, after having put an end to the attempt to adorn the palisade of the village with his head. It was the only loot he had gained from that war campaign. He explained: "It's called Atzcor, or something like that. There was no time to learn the exact name."

"Britannia, I suppose."

"Britannia."

"Strange people. But strange things happen to us too."

"What has to happen happens, sir. I don't find anything strange."

"I heard you have an important guest here in Ostia."

"The empress?"

"That is not a guest. Wherever she goes, she is the landlady. I speak of the noble lady Velia Tarquinia."

"Yes. I heard it too."

"I would like to know why that lady took up accommodation in Ostia."

Pontius Epaphroditus narrowed his eyes: "What the intention of my horse is, I learn from his ears. They point to what interests him. But the women, ladies, even looking at the ears, who understands?"

"Are you sure you don't know?"

"I, sir, am not sure of anything. Not even of what I know."

"And what do you know about this matter?"

“A few days ago they found a beggar from Rome on the Sacred Island. Dead.”

“It was reported to me.”

“He was a fortune teller. They called him the Etruscan.”

“Go on.”

“It seems that in Rome he felt threatened. He abandoned the Arch of Titus, where the emperor had placed him, and set off. I don't know where he wanted to go, but he certainly died before he got there. Before the Etruscan left, Velia Tarquinia had had a meeting with him.”

“About what?”

“She says she offered to buy a silver amulet at any price in which the end of her family was prophesied. The Etruscan too, in fact, belonged to the gens Tarquinia. He refused not only to sell it, but also to show it. The lady came to ask if we had found it on him. But only six dimes were found on the dead man.”

“What do you find suspicious in all this?”

“I can't say, sir. These are things that are perceived by the nose. I notice the smell of burning.”

“Explain yourself better.”

“Where is that amulet? Did he hide it in Rome for fear of being attacked? Or did he take it with him, and did someone steal it from him? But around here a thief takes everything away, even small change. However, he had six dimes in his tunic. So let's try another hypothesis. The Etruscan was hunted by someone who wanted to take possession of the amulet. The small change didn't interest him. He finds him dead, takes possession of the object and delivers it to the person who hired him. Paid robbery becomes paid theft.”

“Paid by whom?”

“That is the point. Lady Velia Tarquinia was willing to buy the object in question at any price. After the refusal of the Etruscan, the only way to get hold of it was the death of that obstinate relative. Logically, therefore, she should be the main suspect. However, she did nothing to dispel the suspicions, indeed she reiterated her interest in the amulet. It may be that, to deflect the investigation, she claims that she is eager to purchase the stolen goods she already has.”

“What are you planning to do?”

“When I go hunting, I stand by the bait and wait.”

“In this case, would the bait be Velia Tarquinia?”

“Exactly.”

“Could I at least know which game you hunt for?”

“I'm not a picky man, sir. I take what emerges.”

The elusive logic of Pontius Epaphroditus did not offer a foothold. Flavius Juvenalis changed his tactics: “Get out of your shelters, friend. We are not children who play hide and seek. I have reason to believe that lady Velia Tarquinia is in danger.”

“Just like the beggar?”

“Maybe.”

“I am grateful to you for warning me. I don't want anyone to think that I want to put my beak into things that are not within my competence. You never know.”

“Are you scared?”

“Normally I don't like playing the hero. If such a lady has enemies, she can only have them in Rome. And I'm only the chief of the Ostia brigade. Suppose that enemy – perhaps a woman, because there are powerful women in Rome - speak to those in power. “Pontius Epaphroditus is an exceptional man. What is he doing in Ostia? Promote him.” Next I find myself hurled overnight in some office in Rome where I am a chairwarmer looking at who goes by. And you can't even protest, because you know what the answer will be: ‘We promoted you: aren't you happy?’.”

“Wrap it up.”

“I'm wrapping up, sir. According to what you told me, this matter is bigger than me. So I would do well to stay away from it. However, nothing prevents me from speculating. No more, just to keep the mind busy. If I am allowed to express my opinion, I don't think we are faced with simple coincidences.”

“What coincidences are you talking about?”

“Sulleus the Arab admitted to having consulted the Etruscan. The Etruscan was coming to Ostia, where Sulleus lives. Velia Tarquinia also arrived in Ostia, and she went to live in Sulleus's house.”

“Sulleus is a friend of Velia Tarquinia. He learned that she was coming to Ostia and he made his home available. It could be a simple act of courtesy.”

“I don't rule it out. But there is more.”

“What?”

“In two days the women of Ostia will celebrate the Mysteries of the Good Goddess. Officially, the empress came here for this. However, she will only preside over the opening ceremony. Then, when things get underway, she will leave the party. It is her prerogative to let herself be represented for the rest of the ceremony by a lady of the Roman nobility. As far as I know, this year she did not bring anyone. The malicious people, who are never absent, say that she plans to find her here in Ostia.”

Flavius Juvenalis winced. Pontius Epaphroditus resumed: “It was bad in Britannia. But at least the terms were clear: “I kill you, you kill me”. Now, however, nothing is straightforward anymore. I promote you to punish you. I take revenge by putting you in my place.”

He was silent for a moment. “But, if you think about it, I think the Empress would do well to choose another lady for that ceremony.”

“Why?”

“Sulleus the Arab, who is an important man, will be able to explain it better than me. I am only the chief of the Ostia brigade.”

Flavius Juvenalis stared at him: “Now I understand why your head didn't end up on the palisade.”

## XI

The reports of the informants piled up on Flavius Juvenalis's table. Something strange was happening in Ostia. Something that was related - still in a confused way - to the death of that beggar of the Sacred Island. It looked as if other important characters, besides Velia Tarquinia, were involved in the story. And right now the empress, instead of convincing Velia Tarquinia to collaborate to unravel the tangle, had made up her mind to take revenge on her rival! The Prefect of the City mounted again: "To Ostia."

Notified by a courier, Julia Domna was waiting for him in the River Palace. An apathetic, solemn imperial mask had descended on her face. She stretched out her hand, invited him to sit down. On the big watery eyes the eyelids dropped heavily, as if to conceal every human expression. The plump hand, adorned with huge rings, stroked the back of the cat Anouk. "My dear, I do not ask you the reason for the new visit. I guess it is the same as the previous one."

"The same, empress. But new circumstances make it urgent ..."

"Our mutual friend is too apprehensive. I am not aware that she is in any danger. Many people watch over her."

She spoke slowly, only moving her mouth. An oriental idol with immobile wisdom. She went on: "Of course, she could have been more cautious. There are meetings that a well-to-do lady should avoid - at least from a moralistic point of view. But I am not yet that old, that I do not understand certain situations."

"Empress, that person's mistake was certainly serious. But the special circumstances made it difficult ..."

"Ah, yes. The tender antelope chased by the African lion. A truly pitiful case. Which heart would not be moved? This is why I decided to publicly attest to my solidarity."

"Really ..."

"You seem perplexed, my dear. Let's face it, then. The solidarity that is granted to an alter ego that replaces you and represents you."

"In the Mysteries of the Good Goddess?"

"My dear, nothing can escape your eyes of Argus. It is not for nothing that my lord and master put you in that place. You don't want to judge me badly, I hope." In the pauses of the sleepy voice could be heard the snoring of the purring cat, squinting with pleasure.

"My lady, I only follow orders. But I would like to point out ..."

"I have never contested the right of the aforementioned lion to hunt for the food it needs, in addition to the legitimate meal. This female was the most coveted prey to which the king of the forest could aspire. After me, of course."

She pronounced that 'after me' with the same uniform tone, slightly drawn. It would have been impossible to distinguish between pride and irony.

"If I am allowed ..."

"Come on, my dear. To demand that I push my condescension to the point of closing my eyes is to demand too much even from a devoted wife. Velia Tarquinia was supposed to be the dessert that finishes the lunch. She tried to serve as a main course in my place. Well, I ratify her choice. She will take my place in the Mysteries of the Good Goddess."

The roots of this cult were lost in the mists of time. They were the remainder of a matriarchal era in which women used men to procreate, next driving them back into the ranks of the working beasts. In their temples access was forbidden to any being of the male gender, whether human or animal. During the night of the mysteries, women indulged - it was said - in the most extravagant variations of lesbian love.

“You seem surprised, dear. Yet sometimes the simplest solutions are the best. We women, anyway, are endowed with a very limited intelligence. You are writers, philosophers, politicians, leaders. We at best can aspire to the role of inspirers. With one exception: Sappho.” She enjoyed the allusion, exhibiting a mocking modesty.

“Tomorrow evening the Mysteries of the Good Goddess will begin. No male can enter the sanctuary: his virility would be immediately sacrificed. Only that daredevil of Clodius, disguised as a harp player, succeeded. You are an erudite man: you know Cicero's invectives towards the reckless. But now with the empire there is more discipline. Male or female, everyone must stay in his place. In there Velia Tarquinia will be safe.”

“Safe from men.”

“My dear, we are harmless. Nature did not provide us with offensive weapons. At the most she could undergo some caresses. Women's things, which leave no mark. She will not file a complaint for so little, having tried quite different caresses.”

“Do you know, empress, what will happen tomorrow in the sanctuary of the Good Goddess?”

“We will sacrifice a sow to the goddess, we will offer her an amphora of wine. But in the prayers we will say that we have offered milk and honey. It is not good in there to name a licentious animal like the sow, nor the wine that makes women lose their modesty. Oh, hypocrisy, what an ancient evil. Next I will retire. And they will get drunk with wine and music and will go on all night rolling around. No rape, no pregnancy, if they have had the foresight not to let another Clodius enter. But I think the necessary checks will be made.”

“It does not seem to me in accordance with the law that a noble woman ...”

“My dear, you are a politician. So use cold reason and leave emotions to our weaker sex. Women have always felt like citadels besieged by unscrupulous enemies. Since entering puberty, they have to do one thing: defend themselves. Against common danger they gladly make an alliance. Look at two men walking side by side: if by chance they touch each other, they immediately apologize. Look at two women: they go hand in hand, like legionnaires when they huddle to form the ‘tortoise’. Your sex is an archipelago, ours is a continent. This is why the boundaries among women are - how to say this? - fluid. Well, tomorrow night in the temple of the Good Goddess these boundaries will be abolished. What risk is there? Only border skirmishes, no invasion. Because nature has granted us nothing else. This is the banal and dramatic contradiction of us women.”

“A free woman, however, will be forced to suffer sexual violence.”

“The law forbids killing a virgin. The executioner sees to it, before execution, and the legality is safe. An ancient rule that has the value of the law allows the consort of the head of state to be represented in the Mysteries of the Good Goddess by a noble woman of her choice. So the choice is up to me, because I share the bed and

the throne with the emperor. Other women shared his bed, but not his throne. That is the difference between me and them.”

Suddenly the anger that Flavius Juvenalis had felt inside him gave way to a cold determination. He played all-or-nothing: “Empress, you have set out the problem with a clarity that contradicts what you said before about the intelligence of your sex. Now allow me to speak not as a courtier but as a subject devoted to the throne.” “Speak.”

“The poor hate the rich because they don't possess their wealth. For the same reason many women hate younger and more beautiful ones. I know I risk my position and my life by talking to my lady and queen like this. But I appeal to your acume as sovereign. As a woman you can ignore reality. As empress of Rome you cannot ignore it.”

“What reality are you talking about?”

“You reminded me that I'm a politician. You invited me to use reason. Reason says that the empress must remain out of the fray. She cannot replace the crown with the helmet, because she must not admit to having rivals. Velia Tarquinia is a friend of Sulleus the Arab. She is involved in an obscure affair that can have important political repercussions. Does a private vendetta suit your rank? Your reign?”

The apathetic mask had fallen once again over the fat face, over the bovine eyes. “A question too difficult for my limited mind, my dear. Let the immortal gods judge.”

“Including the Good Goddess?”

“Including.”

The interview was over. Flavius Juvenalis stepped back, bowing.

## XII

The house of Sulleus the Arab was one of the most beautiful in Ostia. It stood on a parallel road of the Decumanus Maximus, in a central but quiet position. The external wall, whitewashed like that of the oriental dwellings, stood out on the adjoining ones that showed the red of the bricks. Pontius Epaphroditus stopped in front of the door, flanked by two yellow marble columns. Sitting on the sidewalk, across the street, two men were playing dice. One got up, starting beating on the shoulder of the chief of the brigade. He asked, "Where are you going?"

"Why do you ask me?"

"You didn't answer me."

"Neither did you."

"I will if you show me the medallion."

"Which medallion?"

"The one you wear under your tunic. By the look of it I would say that you are one of those with the medallion."

"And if so?"

"You have to show it. Identify yourself. Otherwise for me you are an ordinary citizen."

The medallion with the emperor's effigy was the mark of the men of the Imperial Service. A special body, reporting directly to the Praetorian Prefect.

"I'm not a citizen."

"Whoever plays dice must show the number he threw, instead of thinking that he will be believed on his word. Introduce yourself or leave. I have the right to arrest the citizens who harass me. Look, I'm not alone."

"Neither am I." A police patrol had appeared on the street corner.

The men of the Imperial Service seemed to be brave, but a bit slow in the brain. The two hesitated. A fight was about to break out. They were ordered to monitor Velia Tarquinia's moves without being noticed. If they would exhibit the medallion, they would have made the surveillance that should remain as discreet as possible, official. The man turned his back muttering: "We will meet again."

Pontius Epaphroditus said, "You know my address," and knocked.

After walking through the vestibule, the visitor had the impression of entering a different world. Wide arched openings connected the internal garden with a large apsidal room, the ceiling of which was supported by fluted columns. From a wall of the garden, in which niches with moss-encrusted statues had been opened, a veil of water dripped into the basin of the nymphaeum. Oriental splendour shone in the mosaics of the brightly coloured floor. But an ancient statue of Ostia, with a crowned head, the rudder and the horn of abundance, testified that Sulleus honoured the city that hosted him.

A chief of the servants, his head wrapped in a red turban, led the way for the chief of the brigade. Shortly thereafter Velia Tarquinia entered the room. The hard eyes fixed on Pontius Epaphroditus. She asked without preamble: "What news do you bring me?"

"Actually, ma'am, I have come to ask you for information."

"I've already told you everything I know."

Pontius Epaphroditus looked around: "Beautiful house."

"You have nothing more to tell me?"

"And what luxury. We see few houses in Ostia like this. Except for the imperial palaces, of course."

"Let's get to the information, since you don't bring news."

"I met the owner of this building. His trade does him good, apparently."

"Everyone knows that Sulleus the Arab is rich. So?"

"I'd like to know why you came to live here."

"It's simple. Sulleus is my friend. He knew I was coming to Ostia and he put his house at my disposal."

"Both you and Sulleus talked to Etruscan before he left Rome."

"I guess we weren't the only ones talking to him."

"Of course not. A simple coincidence. Besides, you had different reasons for questioning him. You offered him money to purchase an item he owns. Sulleus instead consulted him for a prediction concerning his business."

"So?"

"Two separate things can have a point of contact. Maybe hidden. It was generous of Sulleus to make his beautiful home available to you. With all the staff, I guess."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Nothing. I go where the road takes me. Are you sure you haven't talked to Sulleus about the silver object you wanted to buy from the Etruscan?"

Velia Tarquinia's features stiffened: "What if I had told him about it? What interest could he have in that object?"

"I don't know. But I can make assumptions. Since you have business in common, he may be interested in knowing when you will die in advance."

Velia Tarquinia thought for a moment. Then she said, "I see you understand men."

"With this profession ... But there is another point that is not clear to me. Of course you will have explained to the Etruscan why you were interested in that object. Presumably you would have been his heir."

"Yes."

"But to him it didn't seem to be a sufficient reason to sell it to you. And not even to show it to you. Why?"

"Maybe it was forbidden to him."

"What would have changed if you had known your fate beforehand? Destiny cannot be escaped."

"You should be an Etruscan to understand it. With us the tombs are larger than the houses. Because for us, death is more important than life. It frightens us, and at the same time it fascinates us."

"Dying is easy: everyone succeeds. Life, on the other hand, is full of problems. I, for example, don't just have to solve the problem of that silver necklace. A religious ceremony will take place here in Ostia tomorrow evening."

"The Feast of the Good Goddess."

"Exactly."

"How does this concern you? You are not a woman."

"Not me. The empress. She came to Ostia to attend."

"It is not for you to guarantee her safety. She has her escort."



“It is not her safety that worries me. Reasons of, let's put it this way, etiquette prevent her from staying in the temple beyond a certain time. It may therefore be that she intends to delegate and be replaced her, from that moment on, by a lady of the Roman nobility. Of course, it must be a very visible person.” He looked around. “A person who lives in a house like this, for example.”

Velia Tarquinia was silent.

'It would be good, ma'am, for you to move to a more modest place. Of course, without revealing the reason for the transfer to Sulleus. These are delicate matters.”

“Where would you recommend me to go?”

Pontius Epaphroditus pulled up a stool, sat down:

“It's a long story. Seated, talking is easier.”

## XIII

That evening, in the police station, Drafty asked Pontius: "Any news?"

"Nothing important."

"But I have some."

"Let's hear it."

"Do you know the Wife Seeker?"

"That old drunkard who goes around picking up scrap?"

"That's him."

They called him the Wife Seeker because, when, to make fun of him, they asked him what he was looking for in the waste, he invariably replied: "I am looking for a wife!"

"Well?"

"I met him by chance this morning in a tavern in Portus. He had asked for wine. Urbanus, the innkeeper, replied: 'First pay your debts, then I'll reopen your credit.' The Wife Seeker was sick, his hands were dancing. The innkeeper laughed: 'Get yourself a rich wife if you want to drink for free.' So I made him sit opposite me. He's a person who knows all the secrets of the Sacred Island. I asked him if he knew anything about that beggar found dead. At first he swore he knew nothing. But soon he no longer controlled the wine: a cup is enough to loosen his tongue. 'Well,' I continued, 'there would be something to be gained if we knew what he died of.' 'What do you want him to die of?' says he. 'Of shortness of breath. He didn't have a mark on him.' In short, he says he found him sitting on that stone bench, already cold."

"So he's not a suspect."

"He's not the type to kill anyone. But I'm not done. While there, he heard some noise and hid in the bushes behind the wall enclosing the tomb. He saw two people coming. Bad guys."

"Did he know them?"

"No. They entered the enclosure, they realized that the Etruscan had died and they left."

"Did they say anything?"

"Only one spoke: 'It saved us the trouble. Better this way.'"

"Where did they come from?"

"From Ostia, it seems."

"Were they on foot or on horseback?"

"On horseback. And the beasts were drenched in sweat."

"They came from afar, then. Armed?"

"They don't travel in uniform like you, those guys. They pull the weapons only when they want to use them."

"Anything else?"

"I kept mixing. When I saw he was drunk, I asked: 'So they didn't rob him.' He laughed: 'From the way he was dressed, he seemed more of a tramp than me. But you never know: every now and then these stray dogs have a surprise in store. I had just put my hands on him when I heard the sound of horses. I hid, and when they got back in the saddle I ran away, in case they would change their mind.'"

“Do you think he told the truth?”

“No. But by now he was too drunk to find out more. He might even have told stories and believed them himself. But you only found six dimes in his tunic. The Wife Seeker leaves not even a cent on a dead person.”

“Vultures only strip the corpse if nobody disturbs them”, Pontius added. “But he had to stop the search. And I found this on the ground.” From the folds of his confused clothes he pulled out a string about a foot and a half long, very filthy.

“What is that?”

“A piece of rope, I would say.”

“I see that. Where did you find it?”

“Right outside the enclosure of the tomb, in the grass.”

“There is a knot. And also a cut.”

“A clean cut, made by a blade. By a person who didn't have time to untie the knot. Something was probably hanging on it.”

“From the neck of the Etruscan?”

“I think so. But the Wife Seeker said those two didn't search him. So the thief can only be him. We must question him.”

The search was futile. He had disappeared without a trace.

Flavius Juvenalis had always admired the beautiful Velia Tarquinia. From a distance, though. Velia had been the friend of some important dignitaries of the court in Rome, before becoming the emperor's lover. The Prefect of the City followed some simple rules in this matter. They had allowed him to overcome the storms that had abruptly interrupted the political navigation of some of his eminent colleagues. One of these rules warned against making public enemies for private reasons. But now, having grown old, he was beginning to feel the tiredness of that too long navigation. Without the prospect of a future anymore, he had to take every opportunity that the present gave him. Thinking back to Velia Tarquinia he felt a kind of ironic disappointment at the thought: “Why they and not me?”

He occupied one of the primary positions in the court hierarchy. He was rich. Age had not affected his intelligence: it had only made it more bitter and biting. Would that damned body shrunken by age really have been an insurmountable obstacle for a cultured and ambitious woman like Velia Tarquinia? He laughed at himself, insulted himself with obscene epithets. But the worm continued to gnaw inside.

The latest news that came to him was too big. With his escort he crashed into to the fire station of Ostia. In the courtyard Pontius was witnessing the testing of a freshly repaired pump. From time to time he passed carelessly under the sprays, crossing an iris of colours. He looked fresh and dripping.

The Prefect of Rome asked him abruptly: “That lady?”

The chief of police seemed very surprised: “Which lady?”

‘He knows very well,’ thought Flavius Juvenalis furiously. ‘But he wants me to say the name out loud.’ “The one who had gone to stay in the house of Sulleus the Arab.”

“She no longer lives there.”

“You'll know where she went, I guess.”

“Actually, sir, surveillance was entrusted to people much more qualified than I am. I still ...”

“You know. And you can tell me.”

“Very well, sir, someone claims to have seen her enter the tavern of a certain Aphrodisius ...”

“What's a lady like her doing in a tavern?”

“Indeed, sir, what is she doing there? Especially since the tavern of Aphrodisius is not one of those places that well-to-do people frequent.”

“You mean it's a brothel?”

“Not officially. But if a customer gets sleepy, he finds rooms above where to sleep. And if he is cold he also finds those who warm his bed.”

“Are you kidding?”

“I never joke, sir.”

“What is she doing in there?”

“Women are bizarre. Especially when they are rich. But I can also understand it. She could not stay where she was. Maybe they would have come to pick her up for a certain ceremony.”

“Does such a tavern seem to you a suitable place not to catch the eye?”

“I don't think so, sir. Not for nothing do they call them public women.”

“So?”

“I think someone wanted to let everyone know that the lady in question was in a criminal den. I don't think the empress wants to be represented in a religious ceremony by a woman who frequents such places. And then, sir, I inquired. Before participating in the Mysteries of the Good Goddess, women must abstain from men for three days. Those who frequent the tavern of Aphrodisius, therefore, cannot enter the temple.”

“An unscrupulous move.”

“The saying goes: ‘Sometimes the shortest way is the Cloaca Maxima’.”

They heard a noise of horses. A squadron of praetorians burst into the courtyard of the barracks. At their head was the eldest son of the emperor: prince Antoninus Bassianus, nicknamed Caracalla.

## XIV

From the secret diary of Claudius Galenus, doctor of the emperor.

*This morning I had an interview with the eldest son of our emperor. It was the prince himself who asked for it, claiming that he had to talk to me about matters of the utmost importance. I hadn't seen him for nearly two months. I found him terribly changed.*

*I fear that Septimius Severus, like many fathers, is poorly informed about his son. Caracalla has the stocky build, the short neck and the grim expression of those whom nature has predestined to violence. Moreover, he has those mystical tendencies that make violence more blind and fanatic.*

*The interview was difficult but instructive. Caracalla is inclined to lose his temper, with the preoccupied face of those who follow the thread of their thoughts and do not want interlocutors but listeners. He told me he doesn't intend to follow his father to the East. He wants to complete his political training in Rome, in view of 'great future developments'. He said it precisely like that: 'great future developments'. I think I understood that he had a dream to which he attributes a prophetic meaning. And that he feels called by the gods to a great destiny.*

*He asked news about his father's health. I limited myself to saying that I had considered him fit to face the labours of a war campaign in the East. He didn't even bother to hide his disappointment. A cloud passed across his face when I asked him if his brother Geta would also remain in Rome. It is clear that he devours with desire the stages that separate him from the throne. And that when his father dies he will first try to get rid of his brother.*

*For him, however, the empire is not the ultimate goal. At a certain point he said to me: 'This world needs to be reformed from the ground up. There must be one god in heaven, one emperor on earth. If the great Alexander had lived longer ...' He stopped, then went on with a cold smile: 'I read that the great Alexander kept his head tilted on his right shoulder. Did you know that?'*

*I replied that I was not informed on the subject. He murmured some incomprehensible words. Abruptly he turned his back and left without saying goodbye. On the way out, I noticed something to which I hadn't previously paid attention. For some time now the prince has kept his head tilted on his right shoulder.*

*Even with his father, Caracalla's relationships are not easy. One day he told me about it. Septimius Severus was inspecting in the Circus Maximus the legion allocated to the Castra Albana. Caracalla was next to me, facing one of the Palatine terraces that dominate the Circus. Suddenly he turned to me with two burning eyes. 'Him. Always him.' He kept staring at me, but he didn't seem to see me. 'I have him constantly before me. It's a nightmare. He is taller than me. A giant. I have to look up to face him. Whatever project I have in mind, I can't do it. He is there. Before me. On top of me. I have the world before me, like a ripe watermelon. I could sink my teeth into it, let the juice run down my chest. Instead I can't. One man between me and the world. A man like me, not a god. He will become that after he dies. When? He gulps down the cup of power. I must lick my*

lips. Until when? By now he has had his share. If he died tomorrow, his tombstone is ready. On the other hand, if I die, I will have been only his son. The son of the divine emperor Septimius Severus. For all eternity. I must ascend the throne. It's my life raft, not to die forever.'

He held his head in his hands. He looked like a turtle, with his small head stuck between his shoulders, his back huge and curved. 'You will protect my secret with your life.' The grasp of his hand squeezed my fingers: 'Don't die too soon, Claudius Galenus. You were his doctor, you will be mine. You must come with me to India, in the footsteps of Dionysus. I will conquer the centre of the circle, the navel of the world. There I will understand everything.' He raised the cup he had placed on the parapet. 'A libation to you, Dionysus, son of Zeus, more powerful than Zeus!' He threw the cup into the void. 'We are accomplices. Don't forget.'

The madness of the prince jeopardizes the future of the empire. Talking to Septimius Severus is useless as well as dangerous. His proverbial clarity grows dim over this topic. Every man is mirrored in his own descendants, and Septimius Severus does not accept to see his own image distorted. When he dies, Caracalla will start a relentless war against his brother - and everything suggests that he will win.

The world in the hands of a madman. Isn't that funny? Sometimes the idea of death can be relaxing: whatever happens, it cannot affect me. Yet I still have the curiosity to know the ending of the comedy. Through what secret passage will Destiny get us out of this dead end?

## XV

Flavius Juvenalis bowed before the prince, who had dismounted from his horse: "We were talking about the noble lady Velia Tarquinia. Of course you will know ..." Caracalla ignored him. He stared at the chief of the brigade. He had met him during that espionage case. Between the prince and his humble subordinate there had been a paradoxical stormy clash over the identity of the culprits. The restrained but inflexible logic of Pontius Epaphroditus had won over Caracalla's blind impetuosity. Instead of reacting with fury - as he used to do when he lost the game - the prince had nominated him for a salary increase, which Septimius Severus had ratified.

"We meet again, Pontius Epaphroditus."

"At your service, sir."

"What news do you have?"

"Things, sir, are clearly seen from above. In my position, we collect only small bits of information, here and there, as they come."

"Don't be modest."

"It's like being on the front line, sir. One does not realize what is happening. We just try not to get too many blows, and to score a few."

"So?"

"I don't think the lady in question felt safe in the house where she was."

"Safe from whom?"

"From powerful enemies, sir. She believed that she would be less exposed in a more modest home. Lightning strikes the peaks."

"The mud also has its dangers. Let's go see her."

"I need time to saddle my horse, sir."

"Take one of these. Petronius will go on foot."

Pontius Epaphroditus looked at the splendid war horse they had brought him:

"Actually, sir, I'm used to calmer mounts. At my age ..."

"Get on."

Pontius turned to one of his men: "You know the orders."

"Certainly, sir. I'll take care of it right away." He hurried away.

The chief of police got into the saddle. He kept the bridle short, to restrain the animal that pranced and snorted. The praetorians chuckled, convinced that this inexperienced rider would soon be thrown to the pavement. They stopped laughing, the horse stopped bucking. Pontius Epaphroditus did not like to give a show. But he did not let himself be taken by the hand by anyone, human or animal.

The tavern of Aphrodisius was located in a sordid alley lined with high and dilapidated rental houses. The praetorians dismounted, blocked the alley. At the noise Aphrodisius appeared at the door, humbling himself with bows. Caracalla planted himself in front of him: "How many girls do you have?"

"Only three, sir." He turned his gaze on the military: "Easy going and experienced, however."

"Don't worry, these are on duty. I, on the other hand, am on leave. And I would like something special. They told me there is also another woman. Arrived from Rome."

“Actually, sir ...”

“Well?”

“That's not a whore. She's a well-to-do lady.”

“Are you trying to make fun of me? She is in a lupanar. What else could she be if not a whore?”

Flavius Juvenalis had turned pale: “I know the noble lady Velia Tarquinia. She's only here to ...”

“Old age has weakened your eyes, Flavius Juvenalis. You are no longer able to distinguish a lady from a prostitute. Get out of the way.” He entered, brushing Aphrodisius aside. Upstairs, in a corridor illuminated by a Priapus-shaped lamp, three small rooms opened. On each door there was a name and a price written in charcoal. The prince kicked them open. Enraged he turned around: “She's not here!” He grabbed Aphrodisius by the neck: “Tell me where she is, if you still want to breathe!”

“I don't know, sir, I swear. She came and went as she wished. I certainly could not ... They told me that I shouldn't meddle.”

The prince turned to the chief of the brigade: “Your paw is in this matter. Watch where you put your feet!” He rushed downstairs. They heard his voice: “Find her!”

Pontius Epaphroditus looked at the ground, as if he wanted to measure the space that separated him from the ravine. He spat out the lupines he chewed: “Those who hunt crashing through the bushes do not eat roast in the evening.” He took the priapic lamp, walked down the corridor to the end, followed by the Prefect of the City. A prosperous Venus appeared, meticulously painted in all the most hidden details. Pontius Epaphroditus gave two quick blows on it, then two more, staccato. The crystal navel of the goddess started to shine: a light had come on inside. Then they heard the sound of a bolt. A large woman opened the painted door. Seeing the sphinx on the helmet of Pontius who had bent down to enter, she lowered her hand, already outstretched to receive the tip. The chief of police lifted it towards her: “This gentleman is generous, Attia. And he's richer than I am.”

“It don't need much.”

“The lady?”

“She's gone.”

“After talking to one of my policemen?”

“Not at all. He arrived a little while ago, panting like a bloodhound. But she was long gone.”

“When exactly?”

“An hour ago.”

“Why?”

“I don't know.”

“Was she frightened?”

“She didn't look like she was afraid. But she had put a veil on her head and face, as if she didn't want to be recognized.”

“Did she say anything?”

“No. She didn't even thank me.”

“And you?”

“I followed her on the ladder, without making myself visible.”



“Good. What did you see?”

“A litter.”

“What kind of litter?”

“Two-seater. With the curtains down.”

“And the lady?”

“She got on the litter.”

“Could you see if someone was already inside?”

“No. She was shrewd. She climbed in on the opposite side.”

“Were there men or mules at the poles?”

“Men. Tall and robust, by Jupiter.”

“Have you seen them before?”

“No. But I wouldn't mind seeing them again, young men so well shaped.”

“We could look for them, if you help us identify them.”

“I really wouldn't know ...”

“This gentleman who accompanies me is an important man. Try to get your memory back. I already told you he pays well for the information.”

Two coins changed hands. Attia's face brightened: “Now I remember. One of the litter bearers came to this house a few months ago to find one of the ‘donkeys’. Then she went away, and he was never seen again.”

“Do you know his name?”

“No. He said he was a slave of a certain Apuleius, freedman of the imperial house. But maybe he said it to show off to her. Many men are braggarts.”

“You are right. Stay healthy.”

Flavius Juvenalis was too much of a courtier to be a hero. The cynicism of the gambler made him prefer the retreat over death in the field. His retreat, however, was never an escape. He said to the chief of the brigade: “I have to go back to Rome. If someone gives me news of that lady he will receive a nice reward. And I will forget his name.”

As he went to join the escort he thought of the empress. A lazy, yet efficient woman. Repulsively efficient. Once again she had scored. But how had she managed to convince Velia Tarquinia to get on that litter? He imagined her, surrounded by slaves. An oriental gynaeceum, with its perfumes and poisons. Sweetness was her favourite. Beautiful girl. Always standing next to the mistress, who rested on the sofa swallowing small oriental sweets who fell apart in her mouth, caressing her splendid blue-eyed cats.

Suddenly those images disappeared. Velia Tarquinia flashed through his mind. And in the old heart he felt an unequivocal twinge. It was no longer the disenchanted admiration of an old womanizer, but a painful need for possession. ‘I am not yet mature’, *‘Nondum maturus sum’*, he consoled himself ironically, scared in spite of himself of what he had felt inside.

## XVI

That afternoon in the usual tavern Pontius Epaphroditus reviewed with Drafty the latest events. “Apparently,” said the chief of the brigade, “they managed to bring her to the sanctuary of the Good Goddess. Do you know it?” The question, superfluous, was not answered. In Ostia Drafty knew everything and everyone. A break followed. Then Drafty stared at the chief of police: “You are not thinking of going to look for her in there!”

Pontius Epaphroditus spat out the lupines he chewed: “I was a soldier in Britannia. They are unfriendly people. When I got on the ship that brought me back to the continent I didn't look back. But I'd rather go back than find myself tonight among those maddened women.”

“And such a lady let herself be taken to such a place without protesting?”

“I don't know. This story does not hold up. The empress cannot be represented in a sanctuary by a woman who has come out of a brothel. Velia Tarquinia cannot have agreed to spend the night in there. It's absurd.”

Drafty remarked gloomily: “Women are quick to change their minds.”

“All we can do is ask her. But if even the emperor cannot enter the sanctuary tonight, how can I enter it? I would have to deprive myself of my natural attributes, or lose them at the hands of those Bacchantes. No, Drafty, I'd rather be in Londinium.”

He poured another cup: “As to Britannia.” He slowly emerged from his memories, like a dolphin from a calm sea. “Our centurion, a certain Gaius Rufinus who later left his bones in the Black Forest, told us: “A position is like a woman: it always has a weak point. Discover it and overturn it.” The arrival of Roumatha interrupted them.

“Well?” asked Pontius.

“I made some inquiries. This morning a two-seater litter stopped in front of the sanctuary. A tall, veiled woman got out and entered it.”

“Who says it was Velia Tarquinia?”

“Nobody. But the other woman who was in the litter was blonde. So ...”

The sanctuary of the Good Goddess stood slightly outside the Marine Gate, opposite the Pavilion of Cartilius. It was a trapezoidal area enclosed by a high wall. Leaning against the wall was a nymphaeum, the water of which was drunk prosaically by mules and horses that passed on the Decumanus. Two women stood outside the single entrance. Circus wrestlers, judging by the volume and the muscles. They peered at passers-by, casting contemptuous glances on the male ones.

“Are you going to force the blockade?”, Drafty asked puzzled.

“Are you crazy? I'd have to open my way with the sword, because those fanatics would not go back an inch. I would lose my position, and probably also something I care more about than the position.”

“So?”

“Let's continue the round.”

When they reached the back of the sanctuary they heard a subdued call coming from above. It was Roumatha. She had climbed a tree growing near the wall.

“What are you doing up there?”, Drafty asked. “That is not a place for girls.”

She laughed. “It's not a place for kids, you mean. I am also a woman of the circus, like those two heavyweights who guard the entrance.” The people of the circus were divided into lightweights and heavyweights. The lightweights did exercises of agility and dexterity. They were horsemen, acrobats, jugglers, and magicians. The heavyweights were wrestlers, broke chains, supported the human pyramid. The two categories respected each other without envy. They showed solidarity in feeling superior to ordinary people.

“What do you see from up there?” asked Pontius.

“A nice stack of twigs to fire the oven.”

Pontius Epaphroditus scratched his nose: “Come to think of it, I am the chief of the fire brigade in this city.” He climbed the tree with unsuspected agility, went down again: “All clear.”

Drafty seemed more disgusted than perplexed. “You don't want to ...”

“Do you know what the duty of fire brigade is? Not to protect women who are in trouble. If there is anyone the women should be wary of, it is the firefighters. We just have to deal with the fires.”

“To put them out. Not to light them.”

Pontius ignored the clarification: “The regulations of the aediles say that in the event of a fire, the policeman has the right to enter anywhere. There is no public or private building to which access may be prohibited.”

“You're not thinking of setting fire ...”

“I don't think anything. Where I see the fire, I run to. And I can't stop the fire from burning where it wants. There are many absent-minded people in this city. And many arsonists. Now, let's suppose that by sheer coincidence a fire breaks out in there tonight. And that, still by sheer coincidence, I am patrolling that area with a dozen policemen. What should we do? It is clear: jump inside, contain the fire and make sure that the women can get out of the sanctuary unharmed. The Good Goddess will not dare to expect that her devotees let themselves be roasted to escape the repulsive hands of the fire brigade of Ostia!”

Drafty looked at Roumatha: “She has red hair like fire.”

“We have burned many villages in Britain. Without entering, too dangerous. A few rags soaked in oil and a torch are enough. Fire flies.” He looked up: “At the second hour of the night. Okay?” From above came a laughing voice: “Count on it.”

Normally Flavius Juvenalis did not speak to informants. Day by day his collaborators filtered and compared the various sources and provided him with a summary report. For the Spaniard, however, he made an exception. With his strange personality and prodigious culture, the Spaniard stood out in the mass of salesmen who crowded around the power like flies on carrion. Failed poet and unscrupulous courtier, he lived on the edge of the palace, serving and despising it. The message had been delivered to the prefect's house in Rome by a boy, who immediately took off like a bat in hell. It was a rolled papyrus sheet, tied by a red cord sealed with wax. The prefect broke the seal and read:

*The mother knows how to wait. The son however is in a hurry to confront his father.*

*You will find me today in the Serapeum of Ostia, between the eighth and the tenth hour.*

The sender knew that the next day the Prefect of the City, with an escort of praetorians, would accompany the empress from Rome to the River Palace of Ostia. In the evening the procession would continue to the sanctuary of the Good Goddess.

That afternoon Flavius Juvenalis left the escort a block away. He entered the Serapeum of Ostia alone, with an old Gaulish cloak thrown over his shoulders. He recognized him immediately, from behind. The long thin figure with the back slightly curved, the sparse hair hanging on the neck. He walked below the portico with his hands crossed behind his back. Flavius Juvenalis turned around. He waited for the other, after the tour, to come towards him. The Spaniard stopped a few steps away from him, in front of a stall where an old woman sold dates. He bought a handful.

“Money sweetens life,” he said. The Prefect of the City made no comment.

“Love also sweetens life. At least that’s what the poets say. But they can't be trusted.”

In silence Flavius Juvenalis waited for the other to close in on the target.

“Love is secret and security. Uncertainty is the enemy of love.”

“I am not interested in your metaphors. Come to the point.”

“You have to keep that woman in a place where *he* can't go.”

“*He* can go anywhere.”

“Do you think so?”

“Who gives you the right to interfere in this business?”

“What business?”

“The fate of a free woman.”

“If she is free, why must she hide?”

“A question is not an answer.”

“What I know belongs to me. I can sell what belongs to me.”

“The price?”

“Three gold pieces.”

“A considerable amount.”

“You offend her if you maintain she's not worth it.”

“What guarantee do you give?”

“The result. You will pay later.”

“You have my word.”

“Enough for me.”

He took the prefect's arm, dragged him to a corner. He had long, gnarled fingers, strong as harpoons: “*He* can go anywhere. He has only one limit: himself.” The small bright eyes stared feverishly at the interlocutor.

“Go on.”

“It's his Achilles' heel. He hides it from everyone. He would also hide it from himself if he could. One day he will dominate the world. But it will always be dominated by a nightmare.”

The low, hoarse voice seemed fascinated by the secret it revealed. “It is older than he is, bigger than he is. It is the Colossus of the port. That bronze giant rising from the sea and holding the globe in his hand. Obscenely naked, with the seagulls screeching around and taunting him, exposed to all weather conditions like a beggar who does not even have a rag to cover himself. It doesn't feel the cold, it doesn't hear the seagulls. It overlooks everyone and doesn't care. The prince never names it. When he is forced to allude to it, he calls it the *enormous*.”

“Now listen. The base of the Colossus contains three rooms. They serve as a warehouse and to house the workers who carry out repairs. Anyone who takes refuge in that place would be safe from the prince. He would get the tertian fever at the mere idea of disputing something with the *enormous*. He would vomit till death or hide in the Treasury of Saturn before doing such a thing. A boat and a file are enough. Take her there, as soon as possible.”

“Is Caracalla aware you know his secret?”

“Even if he knew, he couldn't do anything to me.”

“Why?”

“Everything that has to do with the *enormous* partakes in its power and unleashes its revenge. He would have to find another reason to get rid of me. But he would not be able to hide the real one from himself.”

He put the last date in his mouth: “At a certain point, life becomes a sweet ruminating, it makes you sick. Ugh!” He spat out the yellow, frothy saliva: “See you soon.”

## XVII

That evening the women's procession of Ostia paraded on the Decumanus Maximus, headed for the sanctuary of the Good Goddess. Usually the empress was followed by the lady destined to replace her at the end of the official ceremony, when the orgiastic part of the rite would begin. She was chosen among the ladies of good society known for the open-mindedness of their customs. It was the official consecration of a sexual freedom which until a century before would have been unthinkable.

That evening the place of the substitution was empty. The empress proceeded in the middle of the escort, followed at a distance by the procession of women. Waving the torches, they sang the praises of the goddess in an ancient dialect. That absence would have aroused the usual gossip. But here and there were faces never seen before, square shoulders and muscles of porters, which led people to prudent respect. With his squad of praetorians the Prefect of the City had escorted the empress. The chief of the brigade, however, remained in the crowd. Emerging from the sea of heads, the thin face topped by the silver sphinx had scrutinized everything, noticed the presences and absences.

An hour later, the official ceremony was over. The empress had returned to the River Palace. Whoever wanted to leave the sanctuary could have done so. Then the doors had been closed. They would only reopen the following evening. Velia Tarquinia had not been seen going out.

“Fire!”

Flavius Juvenalis winced. He was in plain clothes in the tavern of Alexander, which occupied one of the towers of the Marine Gate, near the sanctuary of the Good Goddess. He had already checked that the boat with four trusted oarsmen was ready on the nearby beach. They would take Velia to the platform of the Colossus. The usual excited animation that accompanied every fire broke out all around. The Prefect of the City had seen many, in peace and in war. All far more dangerous than what had developed in the sanctuary enclosure. Yet he felt excited as a recruit at the first fight. A learned whim reminded him of the verses with which Aeneas recalls the fire of Troy before Dido:

*The broad Sigeon reddens with the glare.  
Then come the clamour and the trumpet's blare.*

The picture in front of him was much less dramatic. And the only trumpet, out of tune, was the one that announced the arrival of the fire wagon. But Eros, a mischievous boy, made fun of him, as he had deluded and disappointed the caste Dido. The hardened courtier, the skilled sceptic, craved the idea of seeing a woman again. A woman - he thought angrily - who would have laughed at him when she knew why he had taken her away from the empress's revenge. And for this woman he was risking half a century of career!

He reviewed the last lovers. By now he had to choose skilful ones, if he wanted to revive the tired manhood. Skilful and available at every whim. To him, a man of

refined tastes, those women left, afterwards, a disgust similar to that caused by certain perfumes too overdone, whose shelf life had expired. Once again he made the diagnosis: "Old age in itself is a disease", *'Senectus ipsa morbus'*.

In recent years he had grown accustomed to looking at life from the height of disenchanted wisdom. Now, like a spectator who had fallen into the arena, he was suddenly involved in the show he had believed he was attending. He could no longer distance himself from good taste and sarcasm, as he did when his position forced him to witness the massacres of the gladiatorial games. 'I don't want to give in to that obese Syrian and her idiotic son. I must find her. And then let her go incognito to some remote place. Nobody, not even me, must know where she is. And if they find her dead? Why her? It would be better if I died. Life is taking my hand. When you can no longer brake the horse, it is better to unsaddle immediately.' He laughed at himself: 'Words. Just words. As always. Now, however, let's see what happens.'

The predictability of the scene that unfolded before his eyes gave it a mechanical, theatre-like appearance. In the square of the Marine Gate there were people who ran away, people who ran to see. Against the dark background of the surrounding wall the glow of the flames rose which sent sparks towards the starry sky. Finally the customers began to return to the tavern. They said the fire broke out in the sanctuary courtyard. Luckily, at that moment, the fire patrol was passing by with the pump carriage. They had extinguished the flames without difficulty, using the water from the nymphaeum against the wall. "Because of the furious rolling over each other," someone grinned, "those women overheated." Everyone laughed. Pontius Epaphroditus arrived later. He was alone and frowning.

"Well?"

"She's not there."

Flavius Juvenalis felt his skull reverberate, as if the club of a Batavian had come down on his helmet. But his face remained impassive.

"And she never arrived. She made fun of us."

"Are you sure?"

"I searched everywhere after I smoked out those wasps. Nothing. We were directed on a false track by someone who wanted to follow the real one in peace."

"What if they killed her?"

"In a sanctuary? It would be a useless sacrilege. There are many more comfortable places to make an uncomfortable person disappear."

"What now?"

"The woman who got off the litter with a veiled head and entered the sanctuary was not Velia Tarquinia. Velia was the other one, with the blonde wig."

"So the lady knew they wouldn't take her there. That's why she did not resist when they came to get her!"

"Indeed. It's all a comedy. And we are only in the first act."

"It may be that the empress managed to convince Velia Tarquinia to collaborate on some plan that we don't know. And that Velia has accepted, so as not to end up in the sanctuary."

"It's possible."

"Or that someone had the courage to stand up against the empress."

“That too cannot be excluded.”

“In your opinion, who could have had so much courage?”

“Oh, sir, I don't reach that high. I don't know what's going on in the palace. Yesterday, however, it seemed to me that prince Antoninus Bassianus felt, let's say, a certain interest in the noble Velia Tarquinia.”

Flavius Juvenalis's wrinkled face twitched for a moment.

Pontius continued: “Who else could defy the empress's anger with impunity? In light of logic, therefore, the prince should be the most suspect. But this world does not proceed according to logic. Here is the trouble of a job like mine. You are dealing with strange people. And then the balance does not add up, you lose the thread, and in the evening ...”

“What's on your mind?”

Pontius Epaphroditus scratched his chin: “I don't know, sir. I go where the facts take me. But I enjoy making conjectures. Okay, let's say someone fell in love with that lady. I would understand it, because the noble Velia Tarquinia is truly a beautiful woman. Someone who was not in love would reason: ‘Those are too powerful: better to leave the field.’ A lover, however, is not a reasonable person. He would study some plan to snatch her from the clutches of those powerful people. And if one plan fails, he would study another.”

“Which lover are you talking about?”

“I wouldn't know, sir. I said so, just to make the brain work. I have few clues, I have to keep it generic. Then, as the pieces are gradually found, the mosaic becomes complete. And maybe a face turns up that you never thought of.”

There was no emotion on Flavius Juvenalis's face. But behind the professional mask, thoughts swirled. “I'm in it,” he thought angrily. “In it to the neck.” He remembered the verse with which he mocked acquaintances who were at the mercy of love sickness:

*‘Love conquers everything; let us, too, yield to love’.*

*‘Amor omnia vincit; et nos cedamus amori’.*

Unperturbed, Pontius Epaphroditus continued to unravel his thoughts: “Time to go to the River Palace. Hear if all the staff that left on duty have returned. Learn who is missing and where he was going.”

“Do you know anyone who can do it without arousing suspicion?”

“There are no volunteers for such missions. I'll go.”

He took the last sip calmly. The prefect looked at him with envious admiration:

“Are you never tired?”

“In Britannia it was worse.”



## XVIII

The head of the escort came in to ask if there were any orders. Flavius Juvenalis replied: "Wine for all." He thought: 'He will believe that I am here for some important state affair. And instead ...' He strove to find a plausible reason besides the real one. Velia Tarquinia was not just any woman. She could have become a serious rival for Julia Domna. And that madman of Caracalla, always with the ghost of his father before his eyes ... He concluded: 'May the gods preserve the African rhino for a long time.'

The idea of serving Caracalla made him sick. 'If it will be him,' he thought, 'I withdraw to private life.' To do what? Seneca advised the countryside and studies as a remedy for the decadence of court life. But Flavius Juvenalis had never been a contemplative type. Culture had served him to look at the world of villains and hypocrites with ironic detachment. To laugh at their syntax errors, their greed for money, their unscrupulous ambition. Instead he, while serving the power, could write Greek epigrams against the crude Praetorian Prefect and against those pimps of followers. But he would never have composed elegies in praise of rustic life. The countryside meant heat, flies and fatigue. The villagers smelled like goats. And the wise Arcadian shepherds were rude scoundrels, ready to pay respect in front of you and to stab you in the back.

An endless time passed. Then a mass of red hair plowed through the room like a flaming comet. Without further ado Roumatha sat down at his table. "Pontius Euphrosinus will be here soon."

"Did you find that woman?"

"How should I know? I'm not her sister."

"And where did he go now?"

"How should I know? He is not my brother."

"You don't want to speak? I can compensate you well."

"Keep your money. I'm just saying what he told me to tell you."

"Are you perhaps his slave?"

"Bite your tongue. By your standards I am a free woman."

"Then why are you taking orders from him."

"Because I love him."

"But he could be your father!"

"Like that woman could be your daughter." Blue eyes stared at him, calm, relentless. She went on: "His head is cool. He knows what he is doing."

Flavius Juvenalis spoke in thought to himself. "This is what has become of you, Prefect of the City. An impertinent girl makes fun of you. And you, instead of having her whipped, you hang on her lips to find information that will make you find ... who? A lady who could be your daughter. And who has something else on her mind right now than your amorous ravings!"

He had grown accustomed to not taking anything seriously, not even himself. But at that moment he was suffering. And for him, who adored pleasure, suffering led to anger. His nature as a gambler had nipped in the bud the philosopher whom the strong intelligence would have known how to shape.

The place in front of him was empty. Roumatha was gone. He had to wait.

“There is no time to lose.” In that colourless voice, Pontius always seemed to give a day order. They left the tavern. The sky was full of stars, wiped clean by a fresh wind that came from the sea. The rhythmic beating of the waves on the beach could be heard in the distance.

Drafty was waiting for them in the colonnaded square overlooking the marina. In one hand he had a lantern, in the other he held a bloodhound on a leash.

“What's the use of that dog?” the prefect asked Pontius.

“To find Vella Tarquinia.”

“Are you kidding?”

“I never joke, sir. I know, dogs are normally used to drive out hares or pheasants. But every dog is fond of its owner, and in that respect Pulcher is the superlative. When the master leaves he crouches in front of the door and waits for him. He doesn't even move from there to eat. On his return they eat together. They must keep the door closed, because if he finds a crack, he runs out to look for him. Once, when he had gone to Laurentum, he was able to reach him there.”

“Who is his master?”

“A certain Apuleius.”

“That freedman of the Imperial House ...”

“... whose slave was among the bearers of the litter on which lady Vella Tarquinia climbed.”

“It could be he ...”

“Not too fast, sir, I didn't say that. I only know that, since he left this morning, his tracks have been lost. Nobody knows or wishes to say where he went. It could be therefore that he was involved in the disappearance of Vella Tarquinia. Of course, it's only a hypothesis. But in this matter we know nothing for certain.”

“Apuleius is part of the imperial house. Could he have disobeyed orders?”

“With your permission, sir, I am going to ask him.”

“How did you get that dog?”

“I know Apuleius' wife. She hasn't seen him since this morning. But she is used to her husband's long absences. It seems that sometimes he is even two or three days away, without saying where he is going. I pointed out to her that I urgently needed to track him down. She put the leash in my hand: ‘He knows where he is,’ she said.”

“In my position I can't ...”

“Better to be a small group, tonight. And walk on tiptoe.”

“The empress awaits me at the River Palace. I will wait for your report there. Whatever the time.”

Pulcher had made his way to the river bank. He was impatiently pulling on the leash.

“It's strange,” said Pontius. “Usually when they let him go to meet his master he jumps and barks. Now, however, he just seems to be in a hurry to find him.”

They went up the Tiber, skirting barges and boats tied to the mooring pylons. From the warehouses came the furious barking of the guard dogs. The moon had not yet risen, but a diffuse light announced it. They passed in front of the marble storage. Prostitutes of the lowest order sat on the newly rough-hewn columns. A hoarse voice rose from the dark: “Are you hunting for women with your dog?”

“Sometimes,” commented Pontius, “someone believes he is joking, and instead sees the truth.”

Drafty speculated with incomprehension: “That Apuleius is mad. To stand up against the lady is to risk your life. For a woman, then ...”

“What else should one risk it for?”

Drafty returned to his thoughts. Pontius continued: “If Apuleius did it, it means that he thinks he has his back covered.”

“By who?” The question remained unanswered. By now they had passed the last houses of Ostia. The quay had given way to a sandy shore with sparse bushes. The even, monotonous whisper of the water that lapped the stone was replaced by the abundant noises of coastal life. The gurgling of the river between the crevices of the bank, the croaking and splashing of the frogs, the modulated call of a bird among the reeds.

“Hopefully Apuleius hasn't crossed over to the other bank,” said Pontius. “The dog would lose track.”

”Why do you think he would have crossed? What was he going to do on the Sacred Island?”

“I don't know. There's a stack of incomprehensible details in this maze. Velia who climbs onto the stretcher without protesting. Apuleius disobeying the empress's orders ...”

“Do you think the two had a deal?”

“A deal for what? I know Apuleius. He is not a hot-head. He is a settled man, he has a family. He knows well that, after the fuddle, he would find himself with his head on the block.”

“So?”

“I told you, the balance does not add up. Let's assume for a moment that nobody is behind Apuleius. The two agreed and try to hide. Apuleius is an avid hunter. He knows the banks of the river perfectly, from here to Rome. There are fishermen's huts, marshes, old meanders, where a manhunt is not easy. Especially when it is necessary to operate in secret. But how come a smart man like him hasn't thought of bringing his dog along? Yet he knows very well that in a twenty mile radius Pulcher is able to drive him out!”

“In short, what do you think?”

“That Apuleius did not take personal initiatives. And that for the moment the two still get along. If she would have tried to resist him, he would have had to tie her up or stun her and carry her. Instead the footprints are light, and I have not seen anywhere the imprint of a body placed on the ground.”

The dog had started to moan: a whining choked by the collar. He tensed his legs trying to jump. They began to run in the direction of a dark shape, outstretched in the mud.

## XIX

Apuleius lay face down, with his head in the water. They rolled him over on his back. The tunic was pierced on the belly in several places. Pontius Epaphroditus stood up: "Ugly end."

Drafty looked around: "I'd like to know where his killers are now."

"And where she is. But first let's try to understand what happened."

Some of the reeds near the corpse appeared broken, but there were no traces of dragging. As far as could be seen in the light of the now high moon, there were no other bodies on the shore.

"He didn't try to escape," observed Pontius. "He is only wounded in the front."

"How many people?"

"One, I would say. At most two. They didn't cause much damage to the reeds."

"Was Apuleius carrying a weapon?"

"He always wore a dagger. Probably this one." He pulled the weapon out of the mud, examined it carefully. "It didn't help him. But why so many stabs? One or two is enough."

"For us too, if we don't get out of here," Drafty said. "Whoever killed him cannot be far."

Pulcher had lain down in the shallow water, resting his dripping nose on the dead man's chest. Drafty tried to drag him out.

"Leave him alone. He went there to die. He won't even take a step if you attach him to a pair of oxen."

They began to search the surrounding shore. At one point Pontius said: "He passed through here." He pointed at the excrement of a horse. At that point the shrubs bordering the river appeared to be trampled.

"How can you tell it's the killer horse? Who knows how many people bring them to drink."

"In this tangle? There are more comfortable passages. And then, a horse that drinks is not eating. This one however had time to chew." He pointed to some branches cut off at the height of a horse's head. The greenish foam had not yet completely dried. "The killer tied the horse to this tree. He dismounted and attacked Apuleius on foot."

"Why on foot?"

"To surprise him, I think. Or because he only had a dagger. You cannot stab a man when you're on horseback."

"You're right."

"If he killed him to take the woman away from him, he must have left with her. Let's look for the tracks."

The lantern illuminated imprints of horseshoes. They turned away from the river. They followed the imprints to the point where they entered a country road parallel to the Tiber. Other horses had recently passed here. It was impossible to recognize them. There was no time to reflect on what to do. The horsemen had caught sight of the lantern light. They galloped back.

From high up the horse Caracalla stared at Pontius Epaphroditus. Usually his flat face was an open book on which you could read the changing feelings that agitated him, from the darkest anger to the most unbridled hilarity. Now, however, nothing was read there. Caracalla was on his guard. He admired Pontius, but not confessing it to himself. He envied the cold self-confidence of that scruffy plebeian who, after a basic greeting, apathetically stared into space, leaving him the first move. "The hare must not be far away, if you are here."

"Actually, sir," said Pontius modestly, "I have not yet managed to drive it out. I found a dead man instead."

Caracalla did not seem to attach much value to the news. "What do you know about this matter?"

"Not much, sir. In fact, less than before."

"What do you mean?"

"Earlier it seemed that the lady in question did not want to go to a certain place. Then she pretended to go, and instead she didn't go. That makes it damn complicated."

"How do you explain it?"

"I'd have to be in that woman's head to find out."

Caracalla had jumped off his horse. He paced back and forth. Abruptly he stopped in front of Pontius: "Did you have that salary increase?"

"Thanks to your generosity, sir."

"Would you like it to increase again?"

The chief of police bowed his head: "Once, sir, I was playing dice at the tavern. I was so blatantly lucky that the pile of coins in front of me kept growing, so much so that the top coins rolled down. Unfortunately I forgot that Fortuna is female, and consequently fickle. I kept playing and lost even what I was wearing. Since then I have learned my lesson. When I have won something I get up and go."

"It's not always possible to get up. Sometimes you have to keep playing the game."

"Provided that the game matches your purse. There is a proverb that says: 'When the bulls collide, don't get in the way'."

"Better to be on the side of the winner. The herd will be his."

"I, sir, am paid only to do my duty."

"Yes, you are a clean one. A servant of the state: *senatus populusque romanus*. What senate, idiot? An assembly of dazed old men who hasten to vote for what is put under their noses, without even reading it. Which people? A hodgepodge of miserable people who applaud when their bellies are full and revolt when they hear them grumble. You are not like them. You have a head above your belly. You have to take a stand."

"Thank you for the advice, sir. I'll think about it. But meanwhile there is a dead man on the river bank."

"Well?"

"Dead as in killed."

"The magistrates will deal with it."

"I'm afraid that won't be enough, sir. There is a complication."

"Which?"

"The dead man is a certain Apuleius, freedman of the imperial house."

"What was he doing around here?"

“Escorting that Roman lady ...”

“Did he escort her? On whose behalf?”

“I don't know yet, sir. Of course, a man like him carried out ...”

“Do you want to insinuate that he went around at night with that lady by order of my mother?”

“No, sir. I have only reason to believe that the lady in question feared being forced to participate in the Mysteries of the Good Goddess. This may explain why she headed for the countryside. But I don't understand what she was doing in the company of that Apuleius.”

“Women are often dissatisfied with their husbands.”

“The lady is not married. She has a comfortable house in Rome. She had no reason to go and hide in the Tiber bushes to get some freedom.”

The prince laughed. “Some women like to get mad a little when they make love. Besides, wasn't the lady you are talking about staying in a brothel?”

As if the torches of the praetorians dazzled him, the chief of police squinted. “The investigation will try to shed light on this point too. As far as I know, however, Apuleius must have been attacked by someone who wanted to take away the woman.”

“Maybe the lady has changed for the better.”

“I don't know, sir, because I don't know yet who that someone is. I only have a few clues. He must be a robust man, because Apuleius was too. He must be of short stature, because the wounds are inflicted in the abdomen. And he must have arrived on horseback, because we found traces of it on the scene of the crime.”

“What are you planning to do?”

“Search the bank for the lady.”

“Do you think you can find her here?”

“If they killed her, they couldn't have taken her far. Nobody goes a long way with a corpse on the saddle. And the wheels of a cart leave their mark.”

“What if she's still alive?”

“Or the attacker just wanted to use violence against her, and in that case he left her in the neighbourhood. Or he intended to kidnap her, and then had more problems than a murderer. A woman on your horse is bulky, especially if she has good reason for wanting to get off.”

“Don't you see other alternatives?”

“Two. The first that they got rid of the body by throwing it into the river. We will do apposite searching.”

“And the second?”

“That the lady managed to escape while the two fought.”

“She would have made little way. Once he got rid of Apuleius, the killer would quickly reach her.”

“Of course, if she were foolish enough to run away on foot.”

“So, how?”

“The killer arrived on a horse, tied it to a tree and confronted Apuleius. The lady may have taken advantage of the fight to jump on the saddle and run away.”

“If so, she would by now have raised the alarm. Instead nobody knows anything. How do you explain that?”

“Maybe the lady doesn't trust the authorities anymore after what happened.”

The prince threw the bridle to a praetorian and motioned to the chief of the brigade to follow him. He seemed to be in great agitation. He slowed his pace when he came out of the circle of torchlight. He asked: "You know I'm capable of killing, don't you?"

"Each of us is."

"Anyone is capable of killing so as not to be killed. *Mors tua vita mea*. But I speak of killing in cold blood. To get someone out of the way who is creating problems for you."

Pontius Epaphroditus was silent, carefully observing the pebbles on the shore.

"I like you, because you are not like the others. And I'm sure you can keep your mouth shut. I never liked that woman. I don't like women whose heads are stuffed with ideas and their mouths full of difficult words. The woman must be simple, natural, like water or the sun. Otherwise a man is better. We understand each other more easily. I knew my father had possessed her. I wanted her to pay her tribute to me too. Show her the difference between the setting sun and the rising sun. Besides, what if I killed her? Only my father has the right to kill? Of the men he led to Asia, how many will remain to fertilize the banks of the Euphrates? But they die for the honour of Rome. The honour of that great whore Rome. But when a noble Roman lady has to wander like a prostitute on the banks of the Tiber to escape the revenge of a jealous wife, why doesn't anyone find fault with us?"

He stopped in his track: "I'm sorry to tell you, my friend, but this time you have been mistaken. True, I was looking for Velia Tarquinia. But I didn't kill him, that Apuleius. When I arrived at the shore he was already dead."

## XX

A praetorian walked over quickly. He whispered something to the prince, who motioned to Pontius to follow him. They went upstream along the path that ran along the river. Pulcher was still there, next to the corpse. It was clear that he was alive only because of the long shivers that occasionally shook him. They went on, came to a small landing. A boat was tied to a pole planted in the mud. Beside the boat was Drafty. "You can see that the moon is bad for your health," he muttered. On the bottom of the boat lay a poorly dressed man, barefoot. A boatman probably, or a fisherman.

"Stabbed," said the praetorian. "In the back."

"What do you make of it?" the prince asked Pontius.

"It's what Apuleius was waiting for. Apuleius was probably looking for this landing when he was killed."

"I'm curious to see how you will handle this." He mounted his horse. "So many stories for two or three deaths. You will see it in Asia. All together on the pyre, like many bundles. Iaah!"

The chief of police followed him with his eyes.

"Could he have killed both of them alone?" Drafty asked.

"Who knows? He thinks he is capable of anything, but perhaps he is not." He lifted the body, placed it gently on the bank.

"And she?"

"She may have escaped swimming."

"A lady like her bathing in the Tiber? At night?"

"Better to end up in the Tiber than in the Acheron. I understand that Velia Tarquinia is an excellent swimmer. They saw her defying a sea that kept the fleet of Misenum at anchor."

"How do you know?"

"I inquired. One thing I can't quite understand. Apuleius needed a boat. He wanted to go to the Sacred Island, and he certainly could not take the ferry. But once on the island, he and his partner were trapped."

"It's not difficult to hide there."

"Until? A few hours, a few days at the most, assuming that they had brought food, or at least hunting or fishing gear. And then?"

"She certainly had a specific goal. Which couldn't have been to spend the night with him in a hut."

"Let's assume that they wanted to finish their business on the Sacred Island. And then? Escape by sea? The island has no landing places for ships. Another boat should have been arranged in advance somewhere along the coast. Too complicated."

"So?"

"Maybe the boat wasn't just for crossing the river. Once they had done what they wanted to do, it had to take them somewhere else."

"Where?"

"Let's see. Descending the river is easy. But Ostia must be passed. Impossible to go unnoticed."



“Do you think they intended to go upstream?”

“Why not? Not up to Rome, of course. Upstream of the first bend is the Flumicellum canal. It takes you to the sea without you having to lift a finger. From there, getting to Portus is a trifle. The ideal place to embark, after having erased your tracks.”

“If that was their plan, something didn't work out. Apuleius and the boatman were killed, the boat remained where it was. But what were they going to do on the Sacred Island?”

Ponzio was indifferent to questions he didn't want to answer. “Since it's a beautiful evening and we have a boat, you know what we'll do? A rowing trip. You can sleep. I'll do the rowing.”

He untied the rope, rolled it up with the usual meticulousness.

“Sleep? It takes a few minutes to cross!”

“Who said anything about crossing?”

“You said ...”

“I said what they could have done, not what I am going to do. Right now we have too many eyes on us.”

The boat started following the current. Pontius confined himself, with long and sparse strokes, to keeping it in the middle of the river. He had obtained a torch from a praetorian, but he had extinguished it and thrown it in the back of the boat.

“The moon provides free light and does not smell of pitch.”

As they skirted the deserted quays, they gradually saw the dark bulk of the River Palace become larger. The balustrade of the large terrace overlooking the water was lit by torches stuck in iron rings. They heard a voice from the shore: “Come closer and be recognized. There is an arrow for you. And a boat to chase you, if you try to escape.”

The chief of the brigade steered the boat in that direction. A bearded man came out of the bushes, holding a bow. The silver sphinx shone on Pontius's helmet.

“I didn't know it was you,” said the man.

“But I don't know who you are.”

“It does not matter. Good night.”

Spinning fast like lightning the oar struck the man, causing him to collapse. The chief of police lit the torch to check that the fallen man's head was out of the water.

“I don't want any more dead tonight. Do you know him?”

“Yes.”

“Who is it?”

“Someone who sells himself.”

“When he wakes up, make him tell who bought him. I'm going to report.”

Flavius Juvenalis could not stand the heat. He stood in the dark, in the most ventilated corner of the terrace on the river. He missed his beautiful house immersed in the coolness of the pine trees of the Esquiline, far from the croaking of frogs and the torment of mosquitoes of Ostia. He was torn between the wearisome desire to hear from Velia Tarquinia and the painful need to convey news to the empress.

The report of the chief of the brigade, resigned and clear as always, increased his concerns without dispelling his doubts. Had it been up to him, he would have

mobilized all the men at his disposal to comb Ostia and its territory foot by foot. But such a measure would have increased the risk of Velia being killed - if she was still alive. And it would have created a disclosure of the case that should absolutely be avoided. "Do you think the lady is still alive?"

"I don't rule it out."

"Then why did you stop searching?"

"It's a big fish, sir. There may be other fishermen around. After getting her in sight, I would not like to see her rise to another bait. Unless I would receive such orders, of course."

Flavius Juvenalis told the chief of police to wait for him on the terrace and asked for an audience with the empress.

Despite the late hour, Julia Domna received him almost immediately. Her constant efficiency contrasted with the slowness of the massive body, with the fixed, bovine gaze. She listened carefully to the report of the day. "So Velia Tarquinia did not participate in the Mysteries of the Good Goddess."

"So it is, Empress."

"You should be happy about it, since it worried you so much."

"I would be, if I knew where she is."

"Indeed, it would be interesting to know."

"Must I deduce that your orders have not been carried out?"

"It results from your report."

"I can't believe the will of an empress ..."

"... is subject to the approval of the divinity? My dear, you overestimate me. I too will be deified, but in due course. Post mortem."

"And how did that Apuleius plan to save himself, later?"

"Later, later ... If we always thought about the later, who would be able to live? Live day by day, Carpe diem, my dear."

"Him I can understand. But her?"

"Apuleius was not a bad man for a forty year old. Always better than a woman, however. At least for a type like Velia Tarquinia."

She continued to poke in his wound. She enjoyed seeing the brilliant intelligence entangled in passion like the bee in honey. She heard the pleading voice: the voice of an applicant in the palace.

"I need to know if she's alive at least."

"My dear, everyone has his noose around the neck. Only the sword stroke of death releases it."

"I'd like to see this matter settled before I die."

"Everything is fixed, from the beginning of the centuries. But we are presumptuous, we pretend to bring order and we are unnecessarily upset."

He closed his eyes. Flavius Juvenalis made the business-like bow. When he raised his head he still saw the bovine eyes fixed on him: "Come back to your senses, Flavius Juvenalis, Prefect of the City. A few days ago you told me: 'We are facing a state affair, not a private matter.' I knew you were right, although I had to make you understand that I disagreed. Velia Tarquinia has put herself in the hands of unscrupulous people, and now lets herself be hunted by them. I don't know the reason for this hunt. What do you think?"

“It is possible that they intend to eliminate an uncomfortable witness.”

“If that would be the case, they would have already done so. Instead they are following her, spying on her moves. Evidently they are waiting for her to do something before going into action. I never considered having myself represented by a non-consenting person in the Mysteries of the Good Goddess. In a religious ceremony it would be an unforgivable act of abuse, as well as an absolutely unpopular scandal. But I had to threaten Velia Tarquinia to force her to disclose her plans, to come out. She and the one protecting her. Now, if she is still alive, she must be on the Sacred Island. She entered the trap. I could unleash Cassius Longinus with the legion. Have him search the island foot by foot, block the ports. But it would be like sending the heavily armed cavalry against desert marauders. Too much dust, too much noise. We would find only her most beautiful corpse. Instead I want her alive. Here, in front of me. I want to learn from her what she is looking for and why she is looking for it. Too many people scramble to reveal a prophecy that should concern only the end of an Etruscan clan. Let's look for her then, but without too much fuss. It doesn't have to be an official investigation. That Pontius Epaphroditus seems to me the right type. So sloppy and scruffy, he does not catch the eye. The idea of transferring the noble Velia Tarquinia to a lupanar shows an unscrupulous brain that can move off the beaten track. Besides, remember how everyone fared, including the Imperial Service, in that espionage affair. Tell him that Julia Domna is generous for those who serve her well.”

She paused. “That woman can only be saved if she puts herself in our hands and collaborates with us. Explain that to him, if you can.” She looked out the window: “It's dawn. It seemed brighter in Syria. The light of the desert, perhaps. Or maybe my young eyes. I await news. Goodbye, dearest.”

## XXI

The next morning, at the second hour, Pontius Epaphroditus was in the Square of the Guilds. In front of him the portico showed the usual liveliness. Merchants, ship captains, bankers, charterers, porters, boatmen, unloaders, brokers entered and left the offices, stayed under the portico to bargain, went to celebrate in the nearby taverns the conclusion of the deal, big or small.

Pontius Epaphroditus preferred shade to sun. He followed the portico to the point where the mosaic censer indicated the office of Sulleus the Arab. The scribe was sitting at the usual table, with the pen behind his ear. He followed Pontius with his eyes. Then he said a few words aloud in a foreign language. The chief of the brigade, who had started towards the ladder, turned: "What did you say?"

"Me? Nothing."

"We are two, I was silent. So you must have talked."

"I ... I warned the master that you were going up."

"Next time warn him in Latin or Greek. So I won't need to ask for explanations."

He began to climb the wooden ladder without haste, after having probed the ground in search of the first step. No noise came from above. The glare of the lamp lit upstairs could be seen on the wall. There was no greeting. Pontius Epaphroditus drew the stool near with his foot and sat down, keeping the hilt of the sword within reach. A wisp of incense-smelling smoke rose from the brazier. Sulleus broke the silence: "Did you come to look at me?"

"There's nothing else to see in here."

"Do you have a habit of looking at men?"

"Just to see if they're armed."

"These are my weapons."

He placed two huge fists on the table.

"But when you go around at night they are not enough. You need to be escorted."

"Who says so?"

"I."

"As usual you are well informed."

"As usual. What did you need that man for?"

"Which man?"

"The one with the bow, tonight, on the bank of the Tiber."

"Covering my back. In front of me I can defend myself."

"So you have enemies."

"And who has none?"

"If I were you, I'd be looking for a better bodyguard. He may be a good archer, but in hand-to-hand combat I wouldn't bet a penny on him."

"Why?"

"I met him by chance last night, near the River Palace."

"Did you talk?"

"I didn't. He did."

"What did he say?"

"A lot of things. So much so that I had to house him in the barracks, to give him time to come clean."

“Strange. He is usually a type of few words.”

“At first glance, in fact, he didn't seem talkative. But my oar convinced him.”

“Now I understand. He took a hit on the head and started raving. Give him a good purgative, he'll get over it.”

“I am usually cautious with chatterboxes. But I think he told the truth.”

“And that is?”

“That you're in it too.”

“In what?”

“In the Etruscan affair.”

“I thought you might be referring to the Etruscan woman, instead.”

“It's the same thing.”

“These are matters that I handle directly with those in charge. You have nothing to do with it.”

“I'm sorry, but I must contradict you. I am responsible for the safety of the citizens in Ostia. The Etruscan is dead, and nobody knows how and why. Lady Velia Tarquinia has disappeared, and nobody knows where she ended up. So far no one has said to me: ‘Move over, I'll take care of it.’ So it's up to me to clarify what happened. To do this, I must interrogate those who were connected to these people. You, for example. I will ask you precise questions and demand precise answers. I want to know: First: when you last saw lady Velia Tarquinia; second ...”

Sulleus burst into one of his thunderous fits of laughter. The flame of the lamp jumped, the column of smoke rose more fragrant. “Slowly, my friend, slowly. One thing at a time. I saw the noble lady Velia Tarquinia the last time in Rome, about two weeks ago. We talked about business. Surely you will know that we have common interests.”

“Haven't you seen her since then?”

“No.”

“How come she lived in your house here?”

“The inns of Ostia are uncomfortable for a lady accustomed to the luxury of Rome.”

“And you?”

“It's not the only house I own.”

“So you don't know where she went last night.”

“No. Why do you ask me that?”

“Asking questions is my job. And you don't know where she is now?”

“No. Finding missing people is your job.”

“That's exactly why I'm here. You put that man on guard on the river. So you knew you would pass there. To go where?”

“I was expected at the River Palace. Must I tell you by whom?”

“That won't be necessary.”

Pontius Epaphroditus stretched his legs more comfortably: “The last time we met, if I remember correctly, we also talked about that other problem.”

“The Etruscan fortune teller.”

“That's him. On the Sacred Island tonight we found another dead man. A certain Apuleius, freedman of the imperial house. Do you know him?”

“The imperial family often does me the honour of receiving me. I don't rule out having met him on one of those occasions.”

“I'd like to know who killed him. And why.”

“You are the chief of the brigade. I am selling incense.”

“Precisely because I'm the chief of the police I ask you. I have the impression that the two deaths are connected.”

“If you say so ...”

“... I have my reasons.”

“I don't doubt it. But what have I got to do with it?”

“Something. You knew that Etruscan wanted to leave Italy.”

“Can you prove it?”

“One of your ships, the ‘Pharos’, left Ostia with one passenger less.”

“If one pays for the trip and then does not show up for boarding, we will not look for him.”

“Sure. Except that in the register this someone has no name. Nor does it appear that he paid for the passage. Since I don't think you have a habit of letting people travel for free, I deduce that the guy who didn't leave had his trip paid for by someone. He must have had some important reason to give up such an opportunity. Death, for example.”

“Now that I think about it, it's true. I agreed with the Etruscan that I would get him a seat on the first ship that sailed for Alexandria. And that he would go to the office to collect the boarding documents. Do you think that, if he had reason not to trust me, he would have asked me to take him to Africa? He was a fortune teller, wasn't he?”

“Never mind. If he had known he was going to die he would not have asked to embark. He only saw what the flash made him see.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. Anyway, why didn't you tell me right away that the Etruscan came to Ostia not to collect the payment of the prophecy, but to embark?”

“What's the difference?”

“A lot. In fact, only now have you decided to tell me.”

“He trusted me. Isn't that enough?”

“For now, yes. However, I am curious about something else. Why did Velia Tarquinia follow that Apuleius? Where were they supposed to go?”

“Do you ask me?”

“You also didn't remember the reason why the Etruscan came to Ostia, and then it occurred to you. You were in business with her. You must have known her plans.”

“Her business, you mean. Not her private life. I repeat: finding missing persons is your job. And also to find out why they disappeared.”

“That's what I'm trying to do. Slowly, something emerges. For example, I now know that lady Velia Tarquinia was looking for a silver object in which the end of her race was prophesied.”

“An interesting lead.”

“Exactly. This silver object must bring bad luck. It has already caused three deaths: the Etruscan, Apuleius and a boatman from the Tiber who was supposed to take Apuleius and Velia I don't know where. And maybe even a fourth: a vagabond who accidentally found that object.”

“Thank you for letting me know. I will try to stay away from its evil influence.”

“A wise decision.”

He got up. He started towards the ladder, feeling the ground with his foot. On the first step he turned: "Where's the water?"  
'The scribe must have forgotten about it. Patience, I will pay the fine."  
He opened the safe, took out two gold pieces: "Double, you said."  
"There is no hurry. You will pay next time."

## XXII

Flavius Juvenalis turned restlessly in his bed. The potion of his doctor, paid dearly, had brought him only a brief slumber, followed by a painful drowsiness interspersed with nightmares. He had spent a bad day, reading silly reports written in an unbearable style. But even if they had been written by Cicero himself, they would have seemed tedious. The Prefect of the City only wanted to hear about Velia Tarquinia. And this news was missing.

To distract himself, he had started composing one of the usual epigrams. Increasingly now, he was making fun of himself. He had written five verses:

*Love plays with me as the cat with the mouse.  
'Leave me, terrible boy, have respect for an old man.'  
He laughs and says, 'You lie like a Greek.  
Why should I leave you? To hear me being cursed?  
In love, ash is hotter than fire.'*

He had torn them angrily: 'I'm a piece of trash. I had the irony left: now even that leaves me. And then they say that love inspires poets.'

It was dark outside. He took the last sip of the potion: 'Once I knew how to distance myself. I directed the battles without getting involved in the fray. But now ... Like walking barefoot in a field of nettles. Enough. Tomorrow I will send for Danae. That would whet the appetite even for a philosopher ninety years old. Who could have imagined, when I was young, that I would end up like this? And that wretched Leontius who said: 'I want to live as long as a tunic lasts for a Jew!'

The numb mind mechanically repeated the joke, until he fell asleep. In a dream he saw Velia. She came out of the Tiber, naked, with her eyes closed, her face impenetrable, her pitch-black hair soaked with sand. She was standing on top of a giant bronze hand. Like an aquatic monster, the *enormous* emerged from the river. Raised by his hand, Velia was now an indistinct image against the background of the sky. And now the hideous metal face loomed over him.

The light of a torch woke him with a start. It was still night. A courier had brought an urgent message from Ostia. The empress was waiting for him at the River Palace. Now. He breathed in relief. He could finally get out of the swamp of waiting, dive into the reality of the problems that tormented him.

"Do I have the litter set up, sir?"

"There's no time. On horseback."

The old body devoured by impatience seemed to have regained the ancient energy. He arrived in Ostia with the escort before dawn. He did not wait for the ferry: "In the water!" It seemed to him that he had gone back in time. When he passed the Rhine at the head of his unit, holding with the fury of reins and whip the horse, frightened by the current.

He was let in immediately. His eagerness to know the reason for the call faded against the empress's soft cordiality: "My dear, sorry if I bothered you at such an hour. I just couldn't spare you this annoyance. But you're all wet! Sweetheart, get



a tunic of fine wool and a cup of Cyprus wine. Over there, my dear, over there. I'm too old for these shows.”

She could allow herself the joke, as an elderly woman now out of the fray. Then she sat down opposite him, pushed away the maids. In the great hall, only the snoring of the cat Anouk could be heard, purring under the caresses of the mistress. “My dear, I am worried. Strange things are happening.”

“Where, my queen?”

“Here. In Ostia.”

‘Send the light troops forward,’ the prefect said to himself, ‘and in the meantime position the war machines.’ He too maneuvered: the usual vanguard skirmishes.

“Empress, you have only to give orders. So that I ...”

“It is always that business of Velia Tarquinia. It doesn't leave me alone.”

“We'll figure it out, my lady. It's just a matter of time. We must act prudently so as not to lead others on her trail. According to your orders, I have charged Pontius Epaphroditus with this mission. As chief of the Ostia brigade he only deals with ordinary administration matters. It won't draw too much attention.”

“Unfortunately, politics got in our way. And I don't understand anything about politics. These are men's things. If I had the Emperor by my side ... By the way, what do the latest dispatches from the East say?”

“The Parthians are withdrawing. Our troops chase them along the Euphrates.”

“The same old story. Then we withdraw and they advance. I do not understand what purpose it serves, since in the end everything returns to the old. But as I told you, I am not familiar with these things. Instead I am worried about what is happening with us.”

‘Who knows what she knew,’ thought the prefect. “These Orientals have a hundred eyes and a thousand ears.’ “My lady, if you have any suspicions ...”

“Suspicious? I don't know whether to call rumours that. I'll pass them on, for what they are worth. Sometimes sieving a mountain of sand turns up a speck of gold.”

‘So many warm-up laps,’ thought the prefect. ‘A true oriental merchant. Before coming to the point, she must pretend not to know, be pitied, flatter.’ He was respectfully silent, so as not to help her.

“When do you think this war will end?”

“When we have forced the Parthians to surrender.”

“It will take a long time, then. Have you ever been to those places?”

“My queen, I thank the fate that it didn't lead me there. I suffer from the heat. I fought on the Rhine, fortunately. Of course, if the emperor needed ...”

“As you know, I come from those countries. I know the East well. This is why I say to you: don't trust us. We are unpredictable. Where force does not help us, we switch to cunning. Do you remember the last espionage case?”

“The one solved by Pontius Epaphroditus?”

“Yes. Now they are trying a different approach.”

“Can I ask you what the sources are of this information?”

“You would laugh if I revealed them to you. Fish sellers, brothel women, slaves. Above all slaves. They are everywhere, they go everywhere.”

‘As if you don't know,’ the prefect thought, ‘how many times Sulleus the Arab has been here.’ He resumed: “Unreliable sources, usually”.

“But they are consistent. In this case they seem to agree.”

“What does the information say?”

“That the Parthians try to find out something.”

“What?”

“When Rome will come to an end.” The big face remained impassive. A hand laden with enormous rings methodically ran up and down the back of the cat. The other, at regular intervals, brought small sweets to the mouth that she extracted from a Chinese box of red lacquer.

“I cannot believe ...”

“That Rome too will come to an end? It will end, my dear, it will end. We Orientals are fatalists. We live in the midst of the ruins of civilizations that were believed to be eternal. You Romans too have before your eyes the ruins that were inhabited by your predecessors: the Etruscans.”

The alarm went off in Flavius Juvenalis's head. Nothing came by chance from the empress's lips. Did she allude to Velia Tarquinia? To the Etruscan? Or to both? “I am mortified, madam. It is me who should have given you such news. Of course, it would be important to know ...”

“How Rome will come to an end? Like some people that are too fat: by excessive comfort. I know, I shouldn't be eating so many sweets. My doctor always tells me. But old age takes away all our vices. Shall I give up on this too? What do you think?”

‘After the blow, the faint,’ thought the prefect. ‘She would have been an excellent fencer.’ He resumed with the courtier tone: “My lady, you can without ...”

“Flatterer!” The short fat finger rose to threaten. “But let's leave this unpleasant topic and go back to gossip. Orientals, you know, are experts in divination. Like their Etruscan descendants.”

‘Keep on beating the nail,’ thought Flavius Juvenalis. ‘We will soon see the tip appear.’

“You know that the divine Claudius our predecessor - a very cultured man, a well of science - has written a 'History of the Etruscans', consulting all available documents. In this book we read that their haruspices had predicted with absolute precision the duration of the Etruscan kingdom. Now, there are those who claim that there is a gap in this work. It is not written that the Etruscans in founding Rome vaticinated not only its power but also its end. Well, imagine that the prophecy is revealed and that it indicates that our end is near. What would happen?”

“May the gods avert it!”. “*Quod dei avertant*, my queen!” He took refuge in rhetorical declamation to gain time. He knew Julia Domna well enough to know that she would have postponed her private revenge only in the face of an imminent danger to the throne. But did this danger really exist? Or was it just a trick to justify the hunting down of rivals for political reasons?

The empress gave him no respite: “My dear, everyone knows that you are a very cultured man. Come to the aid of a poor ignorant woman. If documents attesting to the approaching end of Rome were made public, what would happen?”

Flavius Juvenalis had had time to choose his tactic: “Our enemies would raise their heads, they would join forces. Millions of fanatics, incited by thousands of agitators, would flood our borders, convinced of participating in a looting the likes of which have never been seen. At the same time, discouragement would favour

the defection of our allies. So the prophecy – whether true or false - would come true.”

“What do you recommend?”

“We must first ascertain the relationship between this maneuver, the death of the Etruscan and the disappearance of Velia Tarquinia.”

“I have already told you that I never gave the order to lead Velia Tarquinia to the sanctuary of the Good Goddess. Apuleius, making her get on that stretcher, has carried out someone else's orders. And if Velia followed him without rebelling, it means that she too was involved in the plan. Who is the person who used Apuleius to come to the rescue of Velia Tarquinia? We don't know, but we have some clues. He must be rich and powerful enough to convince Apuleius to obey him. And he must be interested in finding that document that Velia Tarquinia is looking for. Now, what interest can the fate of an old Etruscan family have for this rich and powerful man? None. And here my poor intelligence stops. But you, I am sure, see further than me.”

‘She has led me by the hand to the solution,’ thought Flavius Juvenalis. ‘And now she gives me space, so that I can reveal the mystery. In this way she pretends to be the poor, weak woman who needs advice and help. And meanwhile, remaining hidden, she directs the choir.’ He said: “Empress, after what you said my job is easy. Perhaps the Etruscan necklace does not reveal the end of the Tarquini but that of Rome.”

“I see that the years have not damaged your well-known intelligence. If what you suppose is correct - and knowing you, I am sure it is - at this point Velia Tarquinia as a person takes second place. We have to wait for her to find what she's looking for and snatch it from her hand before she can pass it on to our enemies. For the same reason Apuleius, who has become superfluous, has been killed. It's not much, I know. But that's all my limited mind has been able to come up with.”

‘And she says she's a poor ignorant woman!’ Flavius Juvenalis commented to himself. He noticed with anger that he admired her.

“I look forward to hearing from you the developments of this story. But now go to rest. I admire your zeal, but age has its rights.”

‘I'm her hunting dog.’ He felt the anger rise to his throat, how the admiration for the empress was replaced by the nausea towards himself. ‘I have to flush out the prey to deliver it to her. Now she wants what Velia is looking for. Next she'll want her head.’

The heavy eyelids of the empress lowered in farewell. Flavius Juvenalis bowed.

## XXIII

From the secret diary of Claudius Galenus, doctor of the emperor.

*Yesterday the emperor summoned me to Ostia, in the Palace of the One Hundred Columns. He received me in the large audience room. Now that he is about to return to his natural element, the war, he seems rejuvenated. As I gradually approached, I had to recognize that the halo of armed power ennobles the great African features. He is a leader, and certainly in the East he will once again prove that he is.*

*He stretched out his hand to me familiarly. He was informed of my health, the crisis of which motivated my resignation from the emperor's medical care. He gave thanks to the gods who have so far kept the evil omens suspended over my head. Then he asked for my opinion on some problems posed by the transport of troops by sea and their stay in the warm Asian climate. But these were only preliminary skirmishes. He quickly came to the point. "I must talk to you about Velia Tarquinia. She was once my lover."*

*I forced myself to remain inscrutable. I just said: "I'm here to listen, sir."*

*"It was a mistake, I have no difficulty admitting it. It is not important that I make a mistake as a man, provided that as an emperor I correct my mistake. The Velia business was beginning to have a political cost. A cost that even I cannot afford to pay, because I would pay it at the expense of the state. I knew little about her, I underestimated her. I know all the men in the court, from you to the last freedman. But women, who among us men can say to know a single one thoroughly? Digging my heels in would have been a stupid stubbornness, unworthy of an emperor. Institutions must not have alternatives. The strategic void around a fortress must be around me and the empress. I wasn't the one who looked for her: but I should have rejected her myself. This Velia is not the usual aristocratic slut. In here she could be of some importance, or be used to be of some importance. This I cannot allow, for no reason whatsoever. Much less for my pleasure."*

*I silently listened to my client, master, rival. I had known him for many years, and I had always underestimated him. From the height of my cultural superiority, I considered him a provincial, a soldier. Now I remembered what a tribune had told me, on returning from the African countryside. During the grueling marches in the desert, swept by a scorching wind that rolled the dunes like waves, Septimius Severus marched on foot at the head of everyone. During the stops he did not drink until all the soldiers of the Guard had received their ration. Then only one, moderate sip. Ostensibly, he passed the flask to the officers. The soldiers' eyes were fixed on him. When the time comes, they will let themselves be killed without arguing.*

*He continued: "You will ask me why I wanted to tell you this. We two are not rivals, we could not be. But you've been my doctor and counselor for years. I want you to know that I broke off my relationship with Velia Tarquinia when I realized it was becoming a state affair. There are rules of conduct even for an emperor. One says: 'In the mirror you must see yourself alone'. Another: 'Leave the women*

*of your friends alone: you already have enough enemies'.*" Self-assured to insolence, fraternal to insult, Septimius Severus spread the salt of his imperial logic on my senile wounds.

*"For a few months the City must be perfectly quiet. The time I need to give the Parthians the geography lesson they need. Let me be victorious again, and that gossip about Velia Tarquinia will have become as anachronistic as the hairstyle of an old provincial."*

*I kept silent, thinking.*

*"I can imagine what you think."* With his chin resting on his hand, Septimius Severus stared at me. *"With Velia it went wrong, and now he brings up the duty of the State.' Oh no, my friend. What harm is it if I like women? A eunuch could not bear the weight of the world. But power is like the sun. In front of it all the stars disappear."*

*I ventured to reply: "The sun dazzles, sir."*

*"You have been educated by the best sophists, Claudius Galenus. But that little bit of philosophical contempt that you can disguise so well does not stand up to the reality of life, which is stronger than any philosophy. The sun dazzles the owls, not the eagles. And power, gentlemen philosophers who preach abstinence because you have a weak stomach, is not money to be foolishly wasted for your own pleasure. Who would I be without power? A provincial tribune thrown from one border to another to defend Power. Too little for my taste. But the rich man must not be in debt. Today I paid my debt to you, Claudius Galenus."*

## XXIV

Pontius Epaphroditus shook his head for the last time, spat out the last lupines. Then he blew out the lamp in his room and went to the tavern of the barracks.

That day Drafty had wandered on the Sacred Island with the usual cautious and distracted air. He had exchanged a few words and long silences with certain individuals used to living in a tolerated and paid clandestinity. Then he had returned to the tavern for the evening mug.

“So?” he asked the chief of the brigade.

“So what?”

“No news?”

“About who?”

“What a question. About Velia Tarquinia.”

“Ah, yes. No. I do not think so. Just a few clues.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“If Apuleius, who was not a fool, had seen the boatman dead when he arrived at the landing, he would not have remained on the shore, all the more having a woman with him. He would have jumped with Velia in the boat, taking himself to the middle of the river. Water helps the defense, not the attack.”

“I think so too.”

“He wasn't a great rower, but it doesn't take a lot of effort to get away from the shore. And then the lady was familiar with the sea, she could help him out. In such situations one does not pay too much attention to etiquette.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Apuleius was looking for the boat, but had not yet found it. He may have been killed on his way up the river in search of it.”

“If that is so, the killer, after having killed the boatman, has ambushed Apuleius.”

“Why do you think of only one killer?”

“I don't see reason to think of more people.”

“Let’s think logically. The only reason to kill the boatman was to prevent Apuleius from using the boat. Next he had to pull the plug out of the bottom or make the oars disappear. Better yet, untie the rope and let the boat drift. Instead it was in perfect condition, ready for use. There's more. I have examined the wounds. The weapon Apuleius was killed with is a dagger or something like that, with three faces. The one used to kill the boatman is a knife, or at least a flat blade. Why would a murderer change weapons to kill a second person?”

“Maybe to confuse the ideas of the investigators.”

“Maybe. Or?”

“Or there were two hitmen. One was to cut off Apuleius and the lady by killing the boatman. The other had the task of killing Apuleius. And maybe he killed the lady too.”

“I haven't seen her body yet.”

“But there is something else that is not clear to me. What interest did Apuleius have in involving the boatman in this business? He would always be a witness.”

“Well done. You put your finger in the wound. I myself am not convinced that the facts unfolded exactly as I presented them. Apuleius was a man of the land. An

excellent hunter, but he rowed badly and could not swim. He himself once said it to me: 'Of water I only like the fish.' But surely he was able to cross the Tiber with a boat, especially in this season when the river is lean. And that boatman was really naive. He let himself be stabbed in the back without even trying to defend himself."

"Right. It's strange."

"The people of the river are not curious but cautious. They give no trust to strangers. A boatman involved in an unclear affair at night does not turn his back placidly on a stranger. Unless he knows who is behind him. And doesn't think - wrongly, obviously - that he can give trust."

"True."

"It is a new hypothesis, which blows up all the others. Apuleius needed the boat, not the boatman. He makes him give the knife with an excuse and stabs him from behind. He prefers not to use the dagger: it would be a clue. At this point the boat is all his."

"But he wasn't able to use it. We found the boat tied to the landing, with the boatman inside. And he was killed further downstream. Why did he turn back? To escape his killer?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not? It was you who said that for him the best defense would have been to go to the centre of the river. He was evidently surprised before he could untie the rope. The only thing left was to run away on foot, abandoning the woman."

"Have you seen the wounds? Only a dwarf could strike in the lower abdomen while standing."

"So he was on the ground when he was wounded ..."

"... by a dagger. A man who goes around with a dagger at night is a professional, he doesn't waste his blows. When the opponent is on the ground, he drives the dagger in his neck, he does not take the trouble to puncture his belly. Apuleius however was pierced in the belly: six or seven holes. Too many. Besides, he was a robust and courageous man. And he had the dagger with him. How come he got slaughtered like that?"

"Maybe he was alone against a number of people."

"From the tracks we found on soft ground, I wouldn't say so. One person. Maybe two. Not more."

"So?"

"Sometimes a crime is discovered because the accomplices don't get along, or because one of them wants to get rid of the others."

"Lady Velia Tarquinia against Apuleius?"

"Both were looking for something on the Sacred Island. The famous silver semicircle, probably. However, something important enough to justify the murder of the boatman. And maybe even that of Apuleius."

"So you think Velia Tarquinia killed her companion?"

"Why not?"

"It's absurd! You yourself said that Apuleius was robust and courageous. Moreover, armed. What could a woman do against him?"

"Getting away by following the river, while he killed the boatman."

"What use would that have been to her? He would have caught up with her. He knew those places perfectly, while she probably came there for the first time."

“Let's try to imagine the scene. When he is catching up with her, the lady enters the river. Apuleius tries to grab her, but she is now in her element. She makes him lose his balance, snatches the dagger from his belt, dives, stabs him upwards from below. They say she could swim underwater like a sponge diver. Stabs in the belly, as many as a woman gives who is not familiar with weapons to be sure to finish off her opponent”.

“Why did he follow her into the water if he couldn't swim?”

“Because he was ordered not to let her run away, for any reason. However, if she only would have wanted to escape from him, nothing easier, since she swims like a fish. Evidently, however, she had decided to kill him. That is why she remained within reach. He trusted the low water, but the muddy bottom is treacherous. Once he lost his balance, Apuleius was a dead man.”

“An imaginative story.”

“But providing a logical explanation of the facts we know. And that validates the thesis of the prince. He said he found Apuleius already dead.”

“Do you think he was sincere?”

“In his position he can afford himself this luxury too.”

“It should be concluded that both Velia and Apuleius wanted to go to the Sacred Island. Except Apuleius needed the boat and Velia didn't.”

“Indeed. That also explains why Velia left the boat where it was. To make people believe they didn't ferry the river. Instead I'm sure she's on the island now. It also explains why the prince, who searched the river bank, was unable to find her.”

“But what was she going to do on the Sacred Island?”

“We'll let her tell us.”

“When?”

“Soon.”



## XXV

With his foot Pontius Epaphroditus touched Drafty, who slept between the bushes of the shore: "It's dawn."

The other stretched, yawned. "You never sleep?"

"Only when I can't help it."

At night, starting from Portus, they had followed the Flumicellum canal by boat. Then they had followed the current of the Tiber. Before heading towards Ostia to flow into the sea, the river makes a loop. The two branches of the loop bordered a sandy area dotted with willows and alders.

All night long they had heard a dull, continuous noise. They walked in that direction following the shore. Deviated by a canal, the water made the blades turn of a mill hidden by a group of trees. The building was very old. Part of the walls had collapsed, the rest seemed to be held together by the ivy clinging to the stones. The usual mules, waiting for their turn to be relieved from their task, were not seen. And the man who, attracted by the furious barking of the dogs, showed up was not white with flour like any self-respecting miller. The hard and suspicious face did not promise a good welcome.

"Who are you?"

"Pontius Epaphroditus, chief of the brigade of Ostia."

"What about him?"

"A friend."

"I've never seen you around here."

"Earlier, there was someone above me. I used to go where he told me to go."

"And now?"

"Now I go where I want."

"Even if you have moved up, there is always someone who is bigger than you. What do you want?"

"Come in and talk."

"About what?"

"I'll tell you when I'm inside."

"Do you have authorization?"

"I don't need it. I authorize myself."

"Also to enter here?"

"Why? Is it a special place?"

"You are not going to tell me you don't know where you are."

"At first glance it looks like a mill."

"What if I don't let you in?"

"I'd go in with this." He pointed to the rusty scabbard of the sword.

"I have three bulldogs from Asturias who would tear you to pieces before you could draw it."

"In that case, I will go. But I come back with a dozen policemen and a half dozen Great Danes. Meanwhile, as the dogs tear each other apart, I set your mill on fire. So that, if some wanted man is hidden inside, he comes out."

"Come in. You will answer for what you do."

"I will answer."

Pontius turned to Drafty: "The gentleman invites us to his house."

"I invited you, not him."

"Do you think I would enter such a place without witnesses?"

They found themselves in a whitewashed room, furnished with a table and two benches. Standing, the man continued to stare at them with hostility.

"So," said Pontius, sitting down and stretching his legs, "you make this mill turn."

"You could put it like that if you want."

"So you are required to pay the grinding fee to the magistrates of Ostia."

The man did not reply.

"I understand, however, that you've recently forgotten to fulfil this formality."

"Who tells you I grind?"

"The wheel turns."

"Yes. But the millstones are empty."

"If so, you're right. You are not required to pay the grind tax. But also to run a tavern you have to pay a tax."

"Never been a host."

"Strange. Because some boats that go up the Tiber stop in this place. Since you don't grind, what reason would the boatmen have to stop here if not thirst?"

"You play with fire."

"Oh please. They pay me to put out the fires, not to play with them. But I also know how to light them. I practiced in Britain."

"Did you come for an inspection?"

"You are lucky. Today I don't feel like doing inspections. I'm just looking for a woman."

"There are no women here."

Pontius Epaphroditus shook his head: "A bad place. But I understand you: women have the bad habit of speaking, and those who speak are unwelcome here. However I am not looking for any woman. I know where to find those. I'm looking for a beautiful Roman lady in her forties. She's called Velia Tarquinia."

"Never seen around here."

Pontius Epaphroditus slowly withdrew his very long legs, got up: "Listen to me carefully, because what I am saying now I will not repeat. I want to know two or three things from you. If you don't answer me or if you try to deceive me, you and your mill don't matter to me. I'll bring you in for unpaid taxes and smuggling, I'll set fire to the mill. Since it does not grind, and what is the point of a mill that does not grind? And if your master wants to get you out, he'll have to ask mine first. Made myself clear? Now you talk. My mouth is dry, and I would have been careful not to drink the wine you didn't offer me."

"Have you decided to ruin me?"

"No. I know that the river also has its laws. When I can I close an eye, even if I don't like them. But today I can't. So I demand answers, and I want them to be clear. First question. Suppose I fall into the Tiber. I can't swim and I drown. Or I can swim, but they hit me on the head and I drown all the same. If you were a relative of mine, and you didn't want to let me wander forever along the river like the drowned without a grave, where would you go and wait for my body?"

"Further on. In the bend. They all show up there."

"Why exactly there?"

“They say the river makes them show up so that they don't get lost. Next it runs straight to the mouth: they would end up at sea.”

“Does anyone live in that place?”

“Someone called the Corpse Fisher.”

“What is he doing there?”

“He used to be a fisherman. Now he recovers the drowned, and relatives pay him. Seems this job brings more profit to him.”

“If it does, why do you leave it to him?”

“I'm fine with the living.”

“Bravo, try to keep doing that. So, I would end up with the Corpse Fisher. Now the second question. That lady could swim. Suppose she swam across the river, because someone on the shore was threatening her. There are many bullies around here. Don't you think so?”

“I do my own thing.”

“Anyway, they don't need to confide. You said it yourself: ‘There is always someone who is bigger than you’.”

The man was silent, staring with hostility at his interlocutor.

“Where were we? Ah, yes. The lady manages to set foot on the island and heads for the first home she sees. Maybe this one. You know nothing about it?”

“No.”

“Very well. I will remember this ‘no’, when the time comes. Because I have to find that woman. And I will find her, even if I had to divert the river and let the sheep graze under the blades of your mill. If she has drowned, according to you I'll find her with the Corpse Fisher.”

“If she drowned upstream of the loop. Otherwise they end up at sea.”

“You did well to remind me. But if she is alive, she must have passed along this place. There is no other house around within a three mile radius.”

“I told you, she didn't come here. Such a woman may have tempted someone. She's not ugly, I guess.”

“That's for certain. As it is certain that you would be informed about something like that. Instead you told me you know nothing about it. Or have you changed your mind in the meantime?”

“No.”

“You didn't even ask me what that lady came to do on the Sacred Island.”

“I'm not curious.”

“In these parts people are not curious about the things they know or about what is dangerous to know. Anyway, I will tell you. She was looking for a silver necklace that belonged to her family. Ancient stuff.”

“I don't work with old stuff.”

“By a strange coincidence, the Wife Seeker had found it. The lady would have been willing to buy it for him at any price. Now the Wife Seeker has disappeared and we have lost track of the lady. Doesn't all that seem strange to you?”

“I know nothing about it.”

“I conclude. Whoever makes me find them, the lady and that silver object, will have a reward that will leave him speechless. But if anyone knows and keeps his mouth shut, I'll go for him. He will row on the triremes, the house will be on fire. Nobody

will be able to save him, because in this story I hold the knife at the handle. So take care of your throat. Let's go, Drafty."

## XXVI

Usually Drafty's face expressed only a bored disgust. But that time, as soon as they were out of the mill, he blurted out: "Are we leaving like this?"

"What's the point of staying in such a place?"

There was no way to find out more. They re-entered the current by boat. Before the end of the loop they began to make out a wisp of smoke rising from the shore. At that point there was a hut. In front of it, a net supported by poles barred the stretch close to the bank of the curve made by the river. The smoke did not rise from the hut, but from a pyre that finished consuming itself in a small clearing.

They landed. Drafty looked perplexed at the pyre. "It won't be ..."

"I hope not."

With the sheath of the sword Pontius stirred the ashes. Small, scorched bones emerged from it: what was left of a child. Nobody answered their calls. The chief of the brigade went to the hut. A filthy bed and an unlit hearth: there was nothing else. With an ember of the pyre Pontius lit the fire in the hearth: "Rowing makes you hungry."

There seemed to be nothing edible in that hovel. But the methodical search of the chief of the police produced from the most unexpected hiding places a jar of honey, a basket of dried figs, leeks, onions and even a flat bread ready to be baked on hot stone.

"Let's eat outside," said Pontius.

"Why?"

"Here you can't breathe. Besides, if the landlord sees that we are consuming his supplies, it may be that he shows up."

It worked. Shortly thereafter a man emerged from the bushes. A beard and very long, unkempt hair gave him a wild look. He asked: "Do you think you are at the inn?"

"You can eat better at the tavern."

"Then why don't you go there?"

"Do you see one around here?"

"I didn't invite you."

"We, on the other hand, are more hospitable. Sit next to us. There's something for you too. So while we eat we have a chat."

The man pointed to the scabbard of the sword: "If you were alone and didn't have that, you wouldn't speak like that."

"You think so?" He unleashed his belt casually, dropped it. "Keep eating, Drafty."

The filthy foot of the man had flown towards Pontius' belly. But the left hand of the chief of the brigade, cutting the air obliquely, had intercepted it in mid-air. Out of balance, the man made a half turn offering his jaw to the right hand, which threw him against the wall of the hut. Pontius said quietly: "You don't need a sword for these things."

He sat down again, fastened his belt. The man, resigned, wiped off the blood that came out of his mouth: "What do you want?"

"Just some information. I pay well."

"Just as well as you use your hands?"

“Better.”

The man laughed rudely through his shaggy beard: “You could have said it immediately. I would have spared myself that punch.”

“Sometimes there is no time to explain yourself. You are the Corpse Fisher, I guess.”

“That’s what they call me.”

“Do you miss one of those fish?”

“Only when the flood comes down.”

“Who did you burn on that pyre?”

“A child. Nobody had come to claim it. He couldn't wait any longer.”

“And before the child?”

“An old man with only one eye.”

“Women?”

“A few. The last one a week ago. Too swollen. She was pregnant.”

“Listen. We are looking for a woman in her forties. A beautiful lady. Missing for a few days. Did you see her go by?”

“No.”

“You know, I'm a wizard. Able to make a silver coin appear on your hand. Maybe two, if you can please me.”

“Damn it, what can I do about it? If I had one at hand, I would try to make you happy. Anyway, after a few days they all look alike. But I don't.”

“That dead woman pays well. Imagine how much I would pay to those who let me find her alive.”

“Unfortunately she didn't pass here.”

“Are you sure she's not in that net?”

“If a corpse gets entangled, the net becomes heavy and the bell on the pole begins to ring.”

“Don't worry, you can be useful to us anyway. And you can earn your silver coins, so that next time you will make us find something better to sink our teeth in. The woman we are looking for knew how to swim. It may be that she did not drown, but managed to swim to this island. In Rome there is someone willing to pay a nice sum to hear news about her.”

The man's eyes shone, his hands trembled: “I only treat the dead. The miller takes care of the living. He is afraid of the dead, that's why he leaves it to me. But if I would get involved with the living, the bell would ring for me.”

“What are they grinding in that mill? I have not seen anyone bringing wheat.”

The man did not reply.

“That mill is a bit special, they say.”

“I don't know and I don't care.”

“Instead you know and are afraid.”

“Yes. I'm scared. And I also told you why.”

“Right now he is far away. I am here instead. You'd better be afraid of me than of him.”

The Corpse Fisher had turned pale, but did not open his mouth.

“We will continue this conversation in Ostia, in the fire station. You are under arrest.”

“Me? Why? What did I do?”

“Reticence.”

“What does that mean?”

“That you don't want to answer my questions. Besides, you're also accused of homicide.”

“What does that mean?”

“Kill someone.”

“I didn't kill that lady.”

“I didn't say you killed her.”

“Who then?”

“The Wife Seeker.”

“Are you crazy? We were friends. I had no reason to hurt him.”

“I have not finished yet. There is another accusation. Being a fence.”

“But if I don't even know what that means!”

“It means you bought stolen stuff knowing it was stolen.”

“What stuff?”

“Ancient stuff. Valuable.”

The man was silent, staring at Pontius with wide eyes.

“Do you still have that stuff?”

The man shook his head.

“I will ask you one question. The answer is worth three silver coins.”

“My life is worth more than three silver coins.”

“Your life is worth nothing.”

He had jumped on him, nailing him against a log. Drafty had turned his back. He stared at the river. The Corpse Fisher's muffled murmur reached his ears, indecipherable.

Pontius released his grip: “Good boy. I see you are reasonable.” He threw three coins on the ground, one after the other. The Corpse Fisher had collapsed on the sand. He gasped, with clouded eyes, looking for the price of fear.

## XXVII

They went back to the boat. Drafty was puzzled: "Who told you that the Wife Seeker had contacted the Corpse Fisher?"

"Nobody. But both of them were looking for what the others threw away. They must have found a *modus vivendi*. Maybe, as the Corpse Fisher says, they had become friends. The Wife Seeker was a drunkard, not a fool. He understood that that piece of silver was too big a bite for him. It would have stuck in his throat if he had tried to sell it in Ostia or Portus. In addition, he urgently needed money to get wine. He would have sold it to the Corpse Fisher for a few coins."

"Did the Corpse Fisher tell you?"

As usual, Pontius avoided answering uncomfortable questions: "The Corpse Fisher too is a poor man. But he has an important neighbour: the miller. Whoever practices contraband is also a receiver. So that silver came into the hands of the miller."

"Which he'll be trying to resell, I guess."

"We don't know. Perhaps a warning had already been posted. He realized that it is hot stuff. If things went like this, we must assume that Velia is now looking for the miller."

"Do you think the two have already met?"

"I don't know. However, the lady's job is not easy. It may be that Sulleus is also interested in buying."

"On behalf of Velia Tarquinia?"

"If so, the lady would not have moved from Rome. But perhaps there is also another possible buyer. The miller claims to be covered in the back by a hot shot. It may be that he got advice from him and received instructions. Let's go and ask him."

"Do you think he will answer you?"

"Every door opens. Just use the right key."

They rowed upstream to the mill, disembarked. The dogs started barking. The miller came out, furious: "You again? May we know what else you want?"

"We saw her."

"Who?"

"That lady."

"So?"

"We want to know if you happen to miss a horse."

"I don't miss anything."

"How do you know? You'd better check."

"I don't need to check. Go away!"

"Yet this man who is with me swears to have seen that lady enter the corral of the horses, choose the best and leave."

"Why didn't you stop her?"

"Are you able to overtake a person on horseback on foot?"

"It's up to you to arrest the thieves."

"Without your report I can't arrest her. But first we have to ascertain the theft."

"I report nothing. If what you say is true, I will find that woman. And I will give her the lesson she deserves."



“Sure. But I still have to enter.”

“Why?”

‘Because it’s up to me to arrest the thieves. You said that. And I’m looking for the other stolen goods.’

“What stolen goods?”

“We have already talked about it. A necklace, an amulet or something similar. Silver. Ancient stuff. There are two figures of fish engraved with their tails intertwined.”

“Why are you looking for it here?”

“I have my reasons. But you could save me a lot of effort if you gave me that item. Above all, it brings misfortune. The first two that have passed it on are already dead. You’d better get rid of it as soon as possible, if you don’t want to end up in the same way.”

“I don’t have it.”

“I will believe that when I have ascertained it with my own eyes. I’ll leave you the choice. If you give me that item, I’m leaving. Otherwise I search your mill from top to bottom. What do you prefer?”

The two men stared at each other. Pontius added: “Look, I’m in a hurry. And leave the knife alone. It’s shorter than my sword.”

The man sprinted towards the entrance.

“The dogs!” Drafty shouted.

Pontius had already plunged into pursuit of the fugitive. He had to zigzag between stacks of wood and piles of manure. The cursed sword hanging from his loose belt slammed against his legs. Still running, he unbuckled his belt, dropped it. The dogs barked deafeningly, smelling a brawl. Light as a bird Drafty had passed Pontius, but the man was now a few steps away from the kennel. Something shone in the air, the miller fell face down. Pontius pulled the knife from his back. He cleaned it in the grass, handed it to his companion: “Well done. Just in time.”

“I manage.”

Carefully they entered the mill. It was deserted. The barking of the dogs mingled with the monotonous noise of the millstones that turned empty. The warehouse was filled with neatly lined bags. With his dagger Pontius pierced one. A trickle of white flakes came out. “Salt.”

“Smuggled.”

“Of course.”

The government had a salt monopoly. But it had never managed to eradicate the smuggling, which was one of the main resources of the population of the Sacred Island. In addition to receiving stolen goods, of course.

They went back outside. A swarm of flies thickened on the miller’s back. Pontius said: “There is no time for the pyre. Let’s bury him.”

A cold, blue flame had suddenly ignited in Drafty’s eyes, which made them clearer and more fixed. He objected: “I don’t think that’s wise.”

“Why?”

“If this man still owned that silver object, sooner or later someone will come and claim it. Correct?”

“Correct.”

“If he doesn't find the miller, he'll be suspicious.”

“Correct. But if he finds him dead he will become even more suspicious.”

“There are so many ways to die.”

“He died through a knife.”

“We can make him die a second time. Give me a hand.” He grabbed the body by the armpits. Pontius took it by the ankles. “Here we go.” Behind the dog enclosure was a pile of wood. They climbed it, carrying the body. “Down.” They threw him into the enclosure. The barking turned into dull growls. Excited by the blood, the animals began to bite the corpse.

“You shouldn't put too much confidence in such beasts,” Drafty said. “That man was imprudent to enter the enclosure.”

“You're right,” said Pontius. “Now we can go.”

The cold flame continued to shine: “I'm staying here.”

“To do what?”

“To see if anyone comes.”

“What if someone comes?”

“He will have to tell me who he is and who sends him. It could be that the one who sends him is someone I know.”

“And if it's him?”

“He will pay for it, I swore it.”

Pontius Epaphroditus looked at him thoughtfully: “Telling you not to do it would be useless. Do you want me to send you someone?”

“I'll manage by myself.”

“Don't be reckless. I'm going back to Rome.”

## XXVIII

The next morning the chief of the brigade climbed the Clivus Palatinus thoughtfully. The waiting time was long. Prince Geta, second son of the emperor, strictly respected priorities and timetables. Finally a secretary came in to ask the reason for the request for an audience.

“Office matters.”

The secretary returned to report that the prince received no one without first knowing the subject of the interview.

“Report of the chief of the Ostia brigade regarding the inspection of a river mill on the Tiber.”

The secretary returned shortly after and motioned for Pontius to pass.

Pale and taciturn, small and icy eyes, prince Geta, known as Coolmind, was the opposite of his memorable brother. The thin lips rarely opened, more to ask than to answer. They said he was as greedy for money as Caracalla was for power. And that he was involved in obscure traffic that passed through Ostia. On the prince's sharp face there was only a cold haughtiness. After the regulatory salute, the chief of police had assumed the usual modest attitude.

“What do you want?”

“Report, sir.”

“On what?”

“About what happened yesterday in a river mill in Ostia.”

“Speak.”

“I was following the footsteps of a lady of the Roman nobility. She is called Velia Tarquinia. She disappeared from Ostia a few days ago.”

“I am not aware that the ladies of the Roman nobility frequent the mills on the Tiber.”

“Certainly, sir. But she may have been brought there by force. That mill is isolated. As far as I know, nobody goes there to grind.”

“If there has been violence, the magistrates will take care of it. Do you have proof?”

“Not yet, sir. I was just looking for it. The miller wanted to stop me from inspecting the mill. He mentioned your name.”

“About what?”

“He said he was under your protection. And that you would have made me pay dearly for meddling in his business.”

“What business?”

“Contraband, sir. The warehouse was full of salt.”

“What happened next?”

“I wanted to question him, he ran away. He entered the kennel and was torn to pieces by his own dogs. I'm sorry, sir. I was just doing my duty. The lady's tracks led precisely in that direction. Besides, all that salt ... It's against the law, sir. I wouldn't want to get in the way right now. I'm a policeman. I'm just trying to enforce the law.”

“That miller must have been crazy. I don't deal with mills. Were you able to find the lady?”

“I stopped searching. I first wanted to make sure I didn't go beyond my mandate. Can you assure me, sir, that there will be no aftermath of the mill business? I ...”

“I told you: the mills don't interest me. Instead, I would like to have news of lady Velia Tarquinia and of the reasons why she went to the Sacred Island.”

“I'll do my best to find her, sir. With your permission.”

“One moment.”

The little icy eyes did not abandon the chief of the brigade. “Are you satisfied with your salary?”

“Your brother gave me a raise. I can't complain.”

“What about your work?”

“It allows me to think with my head. It's already a lot.”

“If you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

Pontius Epaphroditus saluted and left.

For centuries the Etruscan haruspices had scrutinized the fate of the world. When Augustus had become the master of Rome, they had predicted that within a year his dominion would have doubled. A few decades earlier, their dean Vulcatius had announced the imminent end of the Etruscan nation. Both prophecies had been punctually verified.

That evening Julia Domna had summoned Flavius Juvenalis and Cassius Longinus to the River Palace in Ostia, as well as the dean of the Etruscan haruspices. Caelius Volumnius wore the costume of his office. Sleeveless tunic covered with a bordered cape, conical cap, pointed shoes. He bowed deeply before the empress, bowed his head in the direction of the two prefects. He did not ask the reason for the summons. His profession forbade him to show curiosity.

“We are forced to consult the noble college of the haruspices,” Flavius Juvenalis said gravely, “for a question concerning the very security of Rome.”

Caelius Volumnius sat motionless. On the fat and flabby face the great aquiline nose stood out. The hands were crossed on the belly.

“When your ancestors founded Rome, they cast lots to know the fate of the new city. This prophecy was never revealed. All we know is that it was written in encrypted language on a gold sheet. Another sheet, of silver, constituted the cipher that made it possible to understand the meaning of the gold sheet. The latter was kept in the treasury of the sanctuary of Veii. It was taken by the Romans when, after ten years of siege, they stormed the city. The trail of the silver cipher however has been lost. When the emperor Claudius was preparing to write his 'History of the Etruscans' he inspected the gold sheet. It is not known whether he was able to interpret it, in the absence of the cipher. In any case, he doesn't mention it in his book. Can you tell us something about it?”

“The texts of the prophecies were kept in the sanctuary of Veii. The ciphers, on the other hand, were in the possession of the dean of the haruspices, who passed them on to his successor. No other person could see them.”

“So you should have them.”

“There have been many wars and many riots in Etruria. Some ciphers have gone missing. The one you are talking about is one of those.”

“Recently on the Sacred Island we found an Etruscan soothsayer dead, a certain Larth, of the Tarquini family. We suspect he was in possession of this cipher. Is that possible?”

“I have no clues to confirm it. But I can't rule it out either. The gens Tarquinia is one of the most ancient Etruscan dynasties. Many of them were particularly versed in the prophetic art and were part of the college of the haruspices.”

Deep in her throne, the empress listened with half-closed eyes, stroking the back of the cat she held in her lap. She asked Flavius Juvenalis: “Dearest, the time has come to bring forth your boundless culture. As far as I know, the gold sheet is no longer present in the Treasury of Saturn, where it was at the time of the emperor Claudius. Where did it end up?”

“My lady, when the divine Claudius suddenly died, Nero took possession of that document. He was curious about magic, and was convinced that the East would eventually conquer the world. Therefore he planned to transfer the capital of his empire there. When he committed suicide, great riots broke out. Otho, one of the pretenders to the throne, took possession of the gold sheet. He descended from a noble Etruscan family: he was therefore particularly interested in the problem. He took it with him when he marched against Vitellius who was competing with him for the empire. His opponent's Syrian cavalry tore his army apart and looted the camp. The gold sheet has since disappeared. It is therefore possible that it ended up in the East. And that it is now in the possession of the Persian Magi. Let's not forget that the Etruscans come from the East, and that Etruscan divination is the daughter of Persian magic.”

Cassius Longinus intervened: “The Persian Magi - they say - are capable of communicating with the dead. If that fortune teller that we found dead really was the keeper of the cipher, could they have made him reveal what they wanted to know?”

Caelius Volumnius replied gravely: “They can come into contact with the dead, not force them to answer their questions.”

The Prefect of the Praetorian Guard did not desist: “And you, Caelius Volumnius, can't you appeal to your gods to come back to reveal the prophecy?”

“Impossible. The gods manifest their will only once.”

“Are you sure your archives don't have a copy of this cipher?”

“I'm sure. No copies.”

“Why?”

“Perhaps our ancestors wanted to prevent that knowledge of the end fixed by the gods would affect the fate of the world. We just have to make vows so that the Roman Empire ...”

‘Now the official peroration begins,’ thought Flavius Juvenalis. Boredom got over him, he no longer listened to that funny individual. ‘We are all puppets. Each with his uniform, state employment, ensured salary. Unanimous and disciplined as choristers before the maestro.’ Suddenly the poet's lines came to his mind:

*The dishevelled Maenads run through the mountains,  
A divine fury forcing them to prophesy between peaks and abysses,  
Where no one listens to them.  
But the prophecy swells their breasts and bursts out with wild screams,*

*And among the rocks resounds the voice of the god who foretells the future.*

‘And yet, until recently this hypocritical world was good for me. I enjoyed it, the way we enjoy ourselves in the theatre when we pretend to believe in the fiction that unfolds in front of us. Now, on the other hand, I have become as impatient and eager as an old maid. Even Danae has become insipid to me. I can no longer delude myself: this is love. Damn Eros! I could whip you as your mother whipped you when you made her suffer! Falling in love at my age. How absurd.’ He recited two other Greek verses to himself:

*There is nothing more squalid and ridiculous  
Than the cry of a decrepit cuckold.*

The dean of the haruspices had finished his argument. Cassius Longinus again asked: “Do the Sibylline Books say something about the end of Rome?”  
“There is only one sentence about this topic:

*The fate of Rome is written in the skies.*

“Does this mean that men are not allowed to know it?”

“That is likely.”

“Don't they say anything else?”

“Not about Rome. But they predict the end of Etruria.” A resigned irony surfaced in the response of the obese Etruscan, forced by fate to serve the victorious Roman. Julia Domna's sleepy voice was heard: “Thank you, Caelius Volumnius. It's not necessary to remind you that this interview is covered by state secrecy.”

“We have never revealed a secret, empress.”

“That is true. Now go. And watch the birds fly carefully, in case the gods intend to reveal our future again.”

When the dean of the haruspices had left, Julia Domna asked the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard: “What is your advice, Cassius Longinus?”

“No negotiations with our enemies, nor with their intermediaries.”

“Are you referring to Sulleus the Arab?”

Ostensibly Sulleus was only one of the thousand merchants of Ostia. His office in the Square of the Guilds stood out between the other sixty-nine that opened under the portico only by the censer in the mosaic emblem. But the monopoly of trade with the East through Arabia had made it an indispensable - albeit unofficial - intermediary in the commercial and political relations between Rome and the other half of the world.

“I refer to all those who use the tricks of some charlatan to unleash the world against us. Let us rely on our swords, not the dreams of soothsayers. And no mercy for Velia Tarquinia. She's looking for that Etruscan amulet to sell it to the Parthians.”

“You, Flavius Juvenalis, what do you recommend?”

“Velia Tarquinia can still be useful to us. Whatever the reason that prompted her to look for that silver jewel, she knows too much about this business that is so important to us. There is war between the Romans and the Parthians right now.

But the final decision is not left to arms. Fate has already established who must survive and who must perish.”

Cassius Longinus raised his shoulders: “The world is full of charlatans who pride themselves on knowing the future. Destiny is on the tips of our spears.”

“Maybe. But let us remember that after the war comes peace. Velia Tarquinia is a friend of Sulleus the Arab. And Sulleus proved to be an excellent intermediary between us and the East.”

“Thank you. I will reflect on your advice.” Julia Domna's voice had turned softly ceremonious. “My dear friends, as always I entrust myself to you. I am sure you will give me all the support I need in the present difficult circumstances. May Helios assist you.”

## XXIX

From the River Palace Flavius Juvenalis went to the police barracks and asked for Pontius Epaphroditus. He had gone out the previous night on a patrol, saying he was going on a reconnaissance tour of the Sacred Island. He had not yet returned. The Prefect of the City was exasperated. He galloped to Rome, called the Spaniard to his office. "Do you know anything about a prophecy concerning the end of Rome?"

"I didn't think the old legends interested politicians."

"Right now, yes."

"Strange. You are so prosaically rational ..."

"Like this." He had placed a gold piece on the table.

The Spaniard smiled, baring his teeth, still strong, like an old predator. "One of the Jewish sects is named after a certain Christ, a prophet who lived in Judea two centuries ago. In one of the sacred books of his sect we read that when this Jesus was born in a small town in Judea called Bethlehem, three Persian Magi came to honour him. A comet that had risen in the East had guided them to the place where the baby would be born. According to the followers who took the name of Christians from him, this child was the Son of God, destined to become the King of Kings. They found him in the stable where his mother had given birth to him. They offered him gold, frankincense and myrrh and bowed down to worship him."

"Gold, frankincense and myrrh for a child born in a stable? That's ridiculous!"

"Maybe. But according to the Christians this absurdity hides a meaning. The child would have the three masters of the world at his feet. Gold is Wealth, incense is Power. And the myrrh, which preserves the bodies from corruption, represents the lordship over Time."

"What happened to the baby?"

"He became a preacher. He was crucified at the age of thirty-three by the Roman governor Pontius Pilatus because he was fomenting unrest in Judea. He never succeeded in reigning over his homeland: it seems that he didn't even care. The three Magi, returned to their countries, declared themselves absolutely sure that they were not mistaken. That child they adored was destined to become the King of Kings."

"A crucified king?"

"Other Magi after them explored the future. Their studies confirmed the prophecy. A great king from the East would take over Rome and rule the whole world from there."

"When will all this happen?"

"Nobody knows. Even among Christians there are those who consider the coming of the Son of God to be imminent and those who say that he will arrive without warning, at the end of time."

"Therefore the priestly caste of the Magi is convinced that the triumph of the East over the West is Inevitable. They just try to figure out what is still missing from the fall of Rome."

"That's how it seems."



“And about a prophecy about the end of the Etruscan Tarquinius family, do you know anything about that?”

The hoarse voice of the Spaniard recited a line from Virgil:

*Quid non mortalia pectora cogis, auri sacra fames?*

Accursed thirst for gold, what dost thou not compel mortals to do?

Another coin was placed on the table: “Enough to satisfy your hunger?”

“For now, yes. On certain old Etruscan parchments I have found a series of very ancient prophecies. One, translated into Latin, sounds something like this:

*In sale invenies finem progeniei salis.*

In the salt you will find the end of the lineage of salt.

“What does this riddle mean?”

“Nobody knows. I spent some time trying to interpret it. In poetic language, salt indicates the sea. For this reason, at first I thought of an invasion from the sea or a naval battle in which the ‘lineage of salt’ would perish. But in those rough times, certain metaphors were not yet known. We must therefore stick to a literal meaning. Rome was founded by the Etruscans to control trade on the Tiber. One of the main commodities at the time was salt, extracted from the salt pans at the mouth of the river. The salt could therefore indicate the salt pans of Ostia.”

“And the lineage of salt?”

“The royal family of the Tarquinius founded Rome and reigned there with Tarquinius Priscus and Tarquinius Superbus. The same family at that time held the monopoly of the salt pans of Ostia.”

“So the Tarquinius lineage would be destined to die out in those salt pans?”

“Maybe.”

An urgent courier came up to Pontius Epaphroditus, who had just returned to the barracks. The chief of the brigade read the message. He called one of the guards: “I go to rest. Wake me up in two hours.”

Drafty lived in an alley that led to the Path of the Markers. That night he heard a knock on the door of his hovel. He wasn't expecting visitors. He grabbed a pruning hook, hid behind the door: “Who is it?”

“It's me.” Pontius Epaphroditus bent his thin body to enter: “Thank goodness you're still awake.”

Drafty was half naked, his eyes swollen with sleep and the few hairs dishevelled at the top of his skull: “I got up because I heard a knock. Is there any news at the mill?”

“It's all quiet there.”

“So?”

“I was going for a walk. But walking around alone makes you sleepy.”

“A walk at this hour? Where?”

“On the Sacred Island.”

“To do what, if everything is quiet at the mill?”

“You know that at the mouth of the Tiber they extract salt.”

“Not at night, I guess.”

“Of course, no. But I've talked to educated people. They say that the Etruscans founded Rome to ensure control of the river and its salt pans. At that time, salt was as precious as gold.”

“Did you come to tell me this?”

“I have not finished. It seems that there we will be able to find some traces of Velia Tarquinia.”

“In the salt pans? They are the most open place there is. No way can a woman hide herself. At best, she can keep her corpse in brine.”

“The salt pans of now are no longer those ancient ones. The mouth of the Tiber has moved, as the river gradually brought new land into the sea. Between the banks of that time and those of today there is more than half a mile.”

“So?”

“Where before salt was extracted, leeks are now grown. But there is something left of those times. The dilapidated building they call the salt warehouse.”

“When should we go there?”

“Now.”

Drafty tried a feeble resistance: “At night only cats and thieves go around. Couldn't we wait for tomorrow?”

“It will be dawn before we get to the warehouse.”

They walked through the sleeping city to the riverbank. Then they began to follow it in the direction of the mouth. A boat was moored near the police station. They crossed the river to the Sacred Island. In the middle of the sandy fields that were superimposed on the ancient salt pans, the ruins of the salt warehouse were a dark, shapeless mass, half-buried by the rise of the level of the ground. In the first light of dawn you could make out a portal, some arches, crumbling walls. Collapsed masonry partly blocked the door.

They entered. Maneuvering through the rubble they reached what had once been the inner courtyard. The bases of square piers marked the perimeter. From the arcades you could see the open sky. The ceilings had collapsed, the timber had been used by tramps to keep warm.

“When I was a boy I used to play here,” Drafty said thoughtfully.

Pontius Epaphroditus said nothing. Maybe he had never been a boy. By now the sky had cleared. They had circled the courtyard several times. Only ruins. Drafty stopped in his tracks, dreamily: “Now I remember.”

## XXX

Pontius looked at him in silence.

“I remember, yes. We played hide-and-seek. I was lying behind a boulder. I saw some marks carved on stone. It looked like writing, but it wasn't like ours. It seemed like witchcraft to me then. I was a little scared.”

“Where was that inscription?”

“On one of the short sides. This one, I believe.”

They climbed over the rubble until they reached a remnant of a wall. Drafty stopped: “Here.”

With his index finger on his nose, Pontius gestured for him to be quiet. He drew the dagger.

There was a rustle of footsteps. A voice asked: “Is Pontius Epaphroditus there?”

“Who is looking for him?”

“I.”

“Come out and show yourself.”

“The gentleman wants to see me. Make some light.”

Three torches lit up, muscular arms thrust them out of the ruins behind which the bodies remained hidden. A blond giant in his thirties, poorly dressed but not with a shabby appearance, came out into the open. He asked: “Do you recognize me?”

“No.”

“Then let me introduce myself. I'm the Saltman.”

“What are you doing here?”

“My job.”

“Me too.”

“Let's get things straight. Are you looking for someone?”

“A lady from Rome. Her name is Velia Tarquinia.”

“Around here there aren't many ladies. Why are you looking for her here?”

“She was last seen on the island.”

“If she came here, she must have had her reasons. We didn't force her.”

“It is my duty to find out for myself. Let her tell me.”

“Let's bet five silver coins. If you find her here, I will pay you. Otherwise, you will pay me.”

“I'll pay you ten if you tell me where I can find her.”

“You underestimate me if you think you can buy me with that sum.”

“According to you, how much is the information I'm asking you worth?”

“More than your three-year salary. However, your money does not interest us. We just want to work in peace.”

“What do you do?”

“Freight transport.”

“Salt too?”

“Bags and crates. What's inside doesn't concern me.”

“Look at me. I can check any cargo. If I discover contraband or stolen goods, I confiscate it. I also confiscate the vehicle, of course, and arrest those who drive it. Next I will hear, one way or another, the names of those who send and those who receive the goods.”

“Is that a threat?”

“For now it's just a warning. Thirty police officers around the island could be the next step.”

“I told you: I transport sacks and crates. For all I know, there could also be a person inside, dead or alive. I wouldn't do this work if I was curious.”

“I, on the other hand, doing this work, must be curious. And I have to find that person, dead or alive.”

“Let's make a deal. I will look for her. And if she's still on the island, I'll let you know. If you get her dead, don't blame me. I am a trader, not a killer.” The torches went out. There was a quick trampling in the semidarkness.

“You can trust him,” Drafty said. “He'll keep his promise.”

The writing in Etruscan characters engraved on the tuff stone was almost erased by time. They needed to follow with the tip of the dagger the superficial furrows, now almost levelled. It read:

LARTH  
NETHUNS  
MULVENICE

“It's simple,” the Spaniard said. He had followed the Prefect of the City, who had rushed to the island after the report of the head of the brigade. “Larth dedicated to Neptune. Larth is an Etruscan name. Their god of the sea was called Nethuns, like our Neptune. This must have been the base of his statue.”

“That's it?” Flavius Juvenalis asked.

“That's it.”

The Prefect of the City turned to the praetorians: “Search this place.”

‘What are we to look for, sir?’

“A corpse. Something in writing. A silver jewel. Anything that may be significant.”

Pontius Epaphroditus emerged from the inertia in which he plunged before the superiors: “May I go, sir?” It was a tiring night and ...”

“Go ahead.”

They left. Drafty said: “I'll be you know where,” and set off in the direction of the mill. He understood that Pontius wanted to be alone.

The chief of the brigade sat down brooding on a mooring post of the Tiber quay, near the barracks. A little further downstream the ferry shuttled between Ostia and the Sacred Island. It was day now. Around him there was the usual bustle, but Pontius seemed not to hear the noises, the voices. ‘Larth dedicated to Neptune.’ The old man they had found in the grave enclosure was also named Larth. A descendant, perhaps? Etruscans and Romans worshipped the same god of the sea: Nethuns, Neptune.

He raised his eyes. The baths of Ostia dedicated to Neptune rose between the police station and the river. Pontius had no time to frequent them. He did his washing in the tub in the courtyard of the barracks, in the summer taking a nice shower under the jet of the fire pump. However, he had entered it several times for reasons of duty. They were the haunt of the neighbourhood idlers, but some of them lounged

during the day and worked at night. He remembered that there was an old statue of the sea god in the hall. Something was written on the base. What? He remembered. The base was a mass of tuff similar to the one on which the inscription of the salt warehouse was engraved. A dedication in bronze letters had been attached to the tuff. It read:

DOMINO SALIS  
To the Lord of Salt

He had wondered then what the god of the sea was doing in that place dedicated to fresh water. He had shrugged. The world was full of incomprehensible things. He got up and walked towards the baths, resisting the temptation to quicken his pace. What was the rush? The god was not a fugitive who could escape. He entered the hall, stood in front of the statue and began to examine it. The god was standing on the back of a tortoise. Around the base was a bronze decoration with very worn little dolphins. He counted them. There were thirteen. XIII dolphins. An X and three I's. He found no connection with the end of Rome. He looked at the statue again. The god was holding a trident which was missing the middle tooth. It must have fallen out due to the age, because the others also looked corroded by time. From this too he could not deduce anything. He climbed up onto the base, scrutinized the statue in detail to see if any sign was engraved on it. He found nothing, not even the name of the sculptor. He spat out the husks of the lupines and went back into the barracks.

The obese bulk of Caelius Volumnius stood motionless in front of the Prefect of the City. The imperious nose on his flabby face looked like the rostrum of a war trireme on the prow of a cargo ship. "I can confirm your hypothesis, sir. The statue in the baths of Neptune is Etruscan, very ancient. It comes from the salt warehouse."

"Can any omen be obtained from it?"

"The Latin dedication, of course, is recent. The Etruscan inscription on the base found in the warehouse looks like a common dedication made by the donor. Of course, the gods can speak even through a trivial inscription. From the base of the statue of the divine Augustus in the Forum of Rome a lightning bolt had cancelled the first letter of the word CAESAR. Our haruspices predicted that the emperor would die within a hundred days. Because C in your numbering system means one hundred and AISAR in Etruscan means god. The prophecy has come true. But so far on that statue of Neptune the will of the gods has not manifested itself with any miracle."

Pontius Epaphroditus emerged from his hierarchical reserve: "If I may, sir, I would like to point out that in the Etruscan inscription there are two letters which are also Roman numerals. The word MULVENICE contains an M and a C. One thousand and one hundred."

Caelius Volumnius turned his eyes towards him. That a simple chief of the brigade dared to risk interpretations in the matter of prophetic art must have seemed to him a monstrous presumption, as well as a sacrilege. But his office forbade him to be indignant. The voice was that of a master, resigned, faced with the gross ignorance of a pupil: "At the time when that dedication was made the Etruscans

had not yet adopted the Roman numbering system. In our language one hundred was indicated by a circle cut by a horizontal line, one thousand by a circle cut by a vertical line.”

Pontius Epaphroditus said: “Thank you,” and fell back into his usual apathy.

Caelius Volumnius resumed: “Everything leads us to believe that by the will of the gods the Roman Empire is destined ...” The voice of the haruspex was modulating in a bureaucratic cadence. No prophetic god dwelt in the chest of that man with the prominent belly. It was just a voice of the cheering choir. Flavius Juvenalis dismissed him with a tired gesture.

## XXXI

Drafty had returned to guard the mill. When he had to be absent, a plainclothes policeman replaced him. His blond beard was unkempt, he looked even thinner than usual. The cold celestial light continued to shine in his eyes swollen with sleep.

“Did you see anyone?” Pontius asked.

“No.”

“Maybe the miller didn't have what we are looking for. Or he no longer had it.”

“I don't move from here.”

“Until?”

“Until someone comes. At a certain point they will realize that the miller is no longer seen going around. Whoever comes, I'll make him talk.”

“Leave Sulleus alone. It's too big an animal for your trap.”

“There are traps for wild boars too. Two years ago I swore it to him. I don't think about her anymore. But he has to pay for it.”

“Rest a few hours. I'll wake you up before I leave.”

“All right.” He promptly fell asleep.

They were in a dry ditch in front of which a curtain of brambles had grown that allowed them to guard the kennel and entrance without being seen. Hungry, the dogs kept howling.

Pontius listened intently. He kicked Drafty: “Someone is coming.”

Two men were on their way to the mill. One carried a bow over his shoulder. The other held a hunting spear. They approached the fence, talked among themselves. The one with the bow methodically began shooting arrows at the three dogs. The howls turned into ferocious growls, rattles that gradually faded away.

They waited a while, looking around. Then they entered the enclosure and finished off the dying animals with stabs of the spear. They walked towards a corner of the kennel, where the earth appeared to have been recently moved. They dug it out with the tip of the spear, removing it with their hands. They pulled something out, left the enclosure. One said: “It's done. We can go.”

“Go where?” Crawling among the brambles Pontius had emerged from his hiding place.

The man with the bow replied: “Hunting.”

“Hunting for what?”

“What comes into sight.”

“Even dogs?”

“Those aren't dogs. They are wild beasts. Didn't you see how they devoured that poor fellow?”

“Did you know him?”

“How can I know him? He has no face anymore.”

“But I knew him. I was here when it happened.”

“Really? How did it happen?”

“We had a bit of a lively discussion. He ran away, he locked himself in the kennel. He thought his dogs would defend him. Instead they tore him to pieces.”

“Beasts like that are a danger, especially when they're hungry. Better get them out of the way.”

“You’re right. Killing dangerous animals is not a crime. But stealing, yes.”

“Who tells you we stole?”

“My eyes.”

“You are not so young anymore. Your eyesight misguided you.”

“You knew there were stolen goods in that enclosure. Well kept, no doubt about it. The miller was waiting for you to deliver it to you. You found him dead and had to kill the dogs to get it. You moved without hesitation: so someone sent you. Who?”

“A nice story. You must have dreamed about it tonight.”

“I didn't sleep last night: I can't have dreamed. However, there is only one way to resolve the matter. Search you.”

“People who put their hands on me annoy me. Unless it's a woman, of course.”

“I could do it.”

Behind the ditch from which Pontius had emerged, a large trunk created a fork at a man's height. A mass of red hair had appeared in the opening. A girl with blue eyes and an upturned nose calmly watched the scene.

The man laughed: “Well, come. I'll let you put your hands where you want.”

“First throw the bow to the ground.”

“Don't worry, I'm not angry with you.”

“If you don't do what I said you will regret it.”

The man changed expression: “Go home, brat, or you'll be a partridge on my skewer.”

A knife grazed his ear. The man jumped back, took cover behind a tree. His companion followed his example.

“Mind you, that was no mistake,” Roumatha said. “I just wanted to show you that I'm not joking. And pull that hand back, or I'll nail it to the tree. Do you want to steal my knife too?”

The other hunter's head peeked out from behind the trunk that protected him. There was the snap of another blade that planted itself in the wood. Then the girl's voice: “I could have cut off that ear. But I wanted to warn you too. That's enough. Drop your weapons and come out.”

The first man said: “You know how to handle knives, no doubt about it. But you were foolish to waste them both.” He moved to the right of the trunk to string the bow, dropped it with a scream. The third knife had planted itself under his collarbone. The companion turned to run away. He found himself facing Drafty who had crept silently behind him. Penetrated up to the handle, the blade pinned him to the trunk. Drafty grabbed him by the throat: “Who is sending you?”

The man was unable to speak. The tunic was turning red, the face white. The companion spoke, before Pontius twisted the knife in his wounded shoulder.

The brigade chief stared at Roumatha: “I don't know whether to thank you or slap you.”

She looked at him with loving eyes: “As you wish.”

“You took a big risk. Those are people who don't joke.”

“And you?”

“It's my job.”

“It could have been mine too.”

“Be head of the brigade?”



“No. Throwing knives.”

“Didn't you tell me you ride on horseback?”

Roumatha wore a belt around her waist with four knife holsters, two on each side. She explained: “It belonged to my father. He was a knife thrower. I wanted his profession, but he didn't let me. But he taught me to use them. He said there is no better weapon to defend yourself. Two to warn, two to strike. He said: ‘If they turn around after the first two, the third isn't needed.’ That one didn't turn around.”

Pontius showed her the silver semicircle. On one side were two fish with intertwined tails. “Is that what the Etruscan wore around his neck?”

“Yes.”

On the other side was an omega of blue enamel.

Back in the barracks Pontius saw a large sack, the opening tied up with a rough rope. The policemen had found it in their boat docked on the Tiber. Someone must have thrown it in from a passing boat. On it was written in charcoal: “For your boss.”

Pontius Epaphroditus said: “Take it to my room.”

He dismissed the men, bolted the door. Then he opened the sack. It was full of salt. He put one hand inside, felt something cold. He put in the other as well. He recognized Velia Tarquinia's face, with her eyes closed and her mouth full of salt.

## XXXII

Under the relentless sun the chief of the brigade followed the Decumanus Maximus. He stopped in the tavern that opened under the theatre, to drink a cup of wine kept cool in a cavity dug into the wall. Then he pulled up the sword belt, pushed up the helmet over his forehead with two fingers and left.

He walked unhurriedly along the portico of the Square of the Guilds to the usual mosaic censer. Seeing him, the scribe shook his head negatively: "He's not here."

"Who asked you anything?"

He climbed the wooden ladder, went back down: "There's a fire up there."

"I know."

"And there's no bucket of water."

"I know."

"You'll also know where your master is, I hope."

"The doctor advised him to lose weight. He went to the baths of the Forum. He will take a hot bath, then practice 'pancratation' with the teacher."

"He needs it."

"Lose weight?"

"No. A teacher. Stay healthy."

In the outdoor palaestra the sun was dazzling. The dull sound of blows came from a cloud of sand. The two contenders were naked, except for the helmets that shielded the nose and ears, and the leather strips around the hands.

The instructor, a compact German, was busy parrying the blows of the client, a brown bear who did not give him respite: "You must earn the money I pay you!"

The chief of the brigade watched closely, nodding in approval for the best blows. Sulleus saw him, motioned to the instructor: "Take a breath. You look like a pierced bagpipe."

He turned to Pontius Epaphroditus: "Were you looking for me?"

"You can finish. I'm not in a hurry."

"What do you want?"

"You are under arrest."

"Are you joking?"

"I never joke."

"Then you are crazy."

"I don't think so. Of course, you have plenty of time to get dressed."

"What's the charge?"

"There's a burning brazier in your office. And the regulatory bucket of water is not there. I warned you that the third time you would have to close the shop."

"Where is that written?"

"In the regulations of the aediles."

"You already told me that. I want to know where the written arrest warrant for me is."

Pontius Epaphroditus touched his head: "Here."

"You must be drunk. A written order is needed for an action like this."

“Yeah. The trouble is that the new Prefect of the Ports has not yet been appointed. So who do I get the written order from? I can hardly give orders on my own.”

“That’s your business.”

“Quite right. So, you know what I’ll do? I’ll go to the Prefect of the City and come back. Anyway, I see you have things to pass the time.” He turned his back and walked quietly towards the hall.

Sulleus rushed at the instructor. He battered him with blows with savage fury until he saw him fall at his feet. He went to the dressing room, put on his clothes, went back to his office.

The scribe was not in his usual position. Sulleus climbed the wooden ladder. Seated at the ebony table, next to the lit incense brazier, was Flavius Juvenalis. Pontius Epaphroditus stood in a corner. The thin figure was barely visible in the dim light. “I was expecting you,” said the Prefect of the City.

“If they had warned me, I wouldn't have kept you waiting.”

“I only found out a little while ago.”

“What?”

“That Velia Tarquinia is dead.”

“Dead?”

“They found her head in a sack of salt.”

“And you think I killed her?”

“Nobody accused you of that.”

Sulleus pointed his finger at Pontius: “Yet this man says I'm under arrest. It that so?”

“It is.”

“Did you order it?”

“Yes.”

“For this fire?”

“For a bigger fire. You tried to set Rome on fire.”

“Me? How?”

“Collaborating with our enemies to find out the date of our end. Then you would have turned the world against us.”

“What is the evidence against me?”

“The cipher of the prophecy made when Rome was founded. The same cipher that, for other reasons, Velia Tarquinia was looking for. It was in the hands of two men sent by you to the mill located in the bend of the Tiber. One of the two confessed.”

“I did what Rome ordered me to do. At the trial I will speak.”

“There are no trials for a rat fallen into a trap.”

Sulleus turned his back, walked towards the ladder. He stopped in front of Pontius Epaphroditus: “Stupid, all you had to do was close your eyes and that safe was yours. What have you gained from it?”

“My salary. They pay me to prevent and put out fires. That brazier is lit, and there is no bucket of water. I warned you: the third time ...”

Sulleus burst into a big laugh: “Fill the Circus Maximus with water, then. You will need it when Rome is on fire.”

“The fires in Rome are not my responsibility. I only deal with those of Ostia. And Portus, of course. I must tell you, however, that one of the two men we arrested

yesterday confessed to having been commissioned by you to kill the Etruscan in order to take away the cipher. He was the passenger who was supposed to leave for Alexandria on the 'Pharos', immediately after the crime. For this the Etruscan had left Rome. So it's not true that he trusted you and asked you for a passage to Alexandria. Just to be clear."

The wooden ladder creaked under the Arab's heavy step. At the door were the praetorians.

When six gigantic Illyrian guards came to fetch him from the prison of Ostia, Sulleus expected to be taken to the place of execution. On those expressionless faces he read nothing. They barely produced a few words of Latin. They didn't answer his questions.

To his surprise, the covered wagon that transported him in chains entered the courtyard of the River Palace. He was brought before the empress. In the room were already Cassius Longinus and Flavius Juvenalis.

A heartfelt amazement slowly appeared on Julia Domna's fat face. The same astonishment that was in her voice: "My dear, I have given orders to bring you here as soon as I heard of your detention. Ordering you to be released would have been too little. I have to make my apologies." Immobile, Sulleus stared at the Empress, trying to understand what she was aiming for.

"Only a misunderstanding could have caused you to be imprisoned. A terrible misunderstanding. Now that it's been cleared up, I wish I was the one to drop your chains myself. Taken them off."

The two prefects looked at each other.

"Haven't you heard?"

Cassius Longinus gave the orders. The chains were removed.

The Arab stared at his astonished accusers with a sardonic smile. He said: "Empress, thank you. Certainly you will want to explain to these overly zealous servants of yours ..."

"Everything, my dear, everything. Unfortunately, the prefects present here did not know that your men were looking for that cipher so that you could deliver it to my son Geta. Instead, they believed that you intended to pass it on to the Parthians. A betrayal that - I'm sure - never crossed your mind. So not only do I free you, but I thank you and I renew my apologies."

"So prince Geta testified that ..."

"I talked a long time with my second son. We got that out of the way. You know, in all families situations arise that lend themselves to misunderstandings, to unfair treatment. In a court, then ... But now all this belongs to the past."

Sulleus seemed to be in a hurry. "Empress, since everything has been clarified ..."

"Not all, my dear, not all. This business is very complex. Once one problem is closed, another one opens. However, the cipher of the prophecy is now in our hands. Although, to tell the truth, our enemies would not have benefited from its possession."

Cassius Longinus interjected: "How can that be, my lady? They have the golden semicircle with the text of the prophecy."

"Just a golden semicircle. From the very beginning of this affair I have been researching the Secret Archive. When the divine Claudius wrote his 'History of the

Etruscans', he had in his hands the text of the prophecy, buried for centuries at the bottom of the Treasury of Saturn. We do not know if he was able to interpret it, in the absence of the cipher that had gone missing. However, to prevent a document of such importance from being used to our detriment, he had it re-melted in a melting pot, thus erasing what was engraved on it. It is only a piece of gold that our enemies have.”

“Apparently,” Flavius Juvenalis commented sarcastically, “we fought a ghost.” The empress's bulging eyes slowly turned to him. “Even a ghost can kill,” she said. “But maybe there are two ghosts in this story. Caelius Volumnius raises well-founded doubts about the authenticity of the silver cipher. He says that at the time the prophecy was made no Etruscan haruspex would have used a letter of a foreign language to express the will of the gods. Anyone who has seen that piece of silver has noticed that it has the letter omega on one face. Now, however, the incident is closed. Except for our faithful Sulleus. Who I had appear before me not only to free him and make my apologies, but also to warn him of the danger that is imminent.” “What danger, empress?” asked the Arab.

“I don't know from what source, but the Parthians have learned that you worked with us to find and deliver that cipher to us. Instead, they were deluded that you were working for them. In short, they consider themselves betrayed. Because of this it is best that from now on you do not leave Ostia. For your greater safety, I have ordered our men not to lose sight of you for a moment. I wouldn't want you to pay for your devotion to the throne of Rome with your life.”

Sulleus's fiery eyes lowered. Only now did he see the trap into which Julia Domna had made him fall, reporting him to the Parthian agents as a collaborator of Rome. The seizure of his economic empire throughout the East, the final fall after the long rise. A golden cage, but always a cage, for life. He left in silence, followed by the guards.

The empress looked straight ahead. She tasted the triumph over her rival, hidden under the political plot like a dagger under the purple. But none of this could be read in the fat face, in the bovine eyes. She said: “Order has been restored. Helios be with you.”

## XXXIII

In the police station the Prefect of the City listened to the latest report by Pontius Epaphroditus. He followed the exposition mechanically, but a part of him seemed to be elsewhere.

“And so,” he said as if speaking to himself, “it's over.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you find the body?”

“They must have thrown it into the river downstream of the bend, because it didn't get caught in the net. I had put a policeman on guard. The bell rang, but the Corpse Fisher was in the net.”

“And she?”

“She re-emerged this morning in the sea, among the rocks surrounding the Colossus.”

“We were supposed to transport her. And instead ...”

“The currents, I guess. They carry the mud of the river to the ports.”

“The mud of Rome, yes. So, she got there on her own. Isn't all this strange?”

“It's all strange, sir. Or all natural. It depends on your point of view.”

“Do you know who the killer is?”

“The investigation will run its course. But we may never know who the real killer is. She herself ran to her own death. She was fascinated by that silver semicircle in which the end of the gens Tarquinia was marked. And we couldn't do anything to protect her. It was written, who knows how many centuries ago.”

“Are there any witnesses?”

“It will be difficult to find any. And harder to get them to talk. No one will have seen, no one will have heard. Those who could have spoken are dead. And those who know what's behind the facade fly too high for our arrows to hit them. After all, Sulleus paid for everyone. Reprisals? They would be unpopular, among all those graves. And then, what good would they do? The huts are rebuilt in three days.”

“I don't know. However, I will not be giving those orders.”

“If I may say my opinion, sir, I believe Velia Tarquinia was sincere. She was unaware that that jewel on which the end of her family was written was also the cipher of the prophecy about the end of Rome. So she dragged the cipher seekers after her. She managed to get rid of Apuleius, who was guarding her on behalf of Sulleus the Arab. Who in turn worked for someone bigger than him. But when she reached the bend of the Tiber she was killed. The cipher was already in the hands of the miller, who was to deliver it to the secret agents of Sulleus.”

“It takes a very Cold Mind”, observed the Prefect of the City with tired irony, “to devise a similar plan.”

“I think so too. However, sir, there is still one thing that makes no sense. The cipher had to indicate both the end of the gens Tarquinia and that of Rome. The two dates do not coincide, because the Tarquini have become extinct while Rome - as far as I know - is still standing. There must therefore be two different ways of interpreting those signs.”

“Maybe.”

“We no longer have the text of the prophecy. In the silver cipher there are two fish with intertwined tails and an omega of blue enamel. Let’s assume that the omega signifies the end, even if Caelius Volumnius denies it. But the two fish? Maybe they mean that the gens Tarquinia would have died out near the sea?”

“I don’t know. And now it doesn't matter anymore.”

“For lady Velia Tarquinia, sure. You have solved your problems. But the end of Rome ...”

“Do you know what the Sibylline Books say about it?”

*The fate of Rome is written in the sky.*

“In the sky, you see? And we down here are agitated like fools, instead of enjoying those few years that the gods - their goodness - grant us. If Velia had been less curious about her destiny ...” The painful voice became aggressive: “Are you never involved in it, in what you do?”

“I don't understand, sir.”

“Don't you ever feel personally involved? Don't you have some gap in that ramshackle armour?”

“I don't know, sir. This armour took quite a few blows, but I always remained standing. And I've never had much time to think about myself. After all, what use would it be?”

Flavius Juvenalis's hands trembled. Angrily he felt burning tears cloud his sight. He insulted himself mentally: ‘Stop whining, you idiot. After all, you are still the Prefect of the City. You can also commit suicide, but later. In private.’

Pontius Epaphroditus looked at him between half-closed eyelids. The voice sounded less apathetic than usual: “Life leaves us all with our mouths full of salt. Can I do something for you, sir?”

“Nobody can do anything for anyone. Stay healthy if you can.”

*Emperor Septimius Severus to Cassius Longinus, Praetorian Prefect, salutem dicit.*

(...)

*In your last report you tell me, among other things, about the death of the soothsayer who was under the Arch of the divine Titus and Vespasian. I knew and respected him as an honest and truthful man. But he was about to get involved in a plot that could endanger our safety. He had to be eliminated before our enemies could use his powers against us. I learned he was found dead before the sentence could be carried out. Better that way. Please ensure that any comments on the subject are extinguished as soon as possible. Citizens must only await the news of our victories with absolute confidence. I'll make sure they don't have to wait too long. Vale.*

The emperor's orders were carried out by Cassius Longinus with the usual diligence. The death of Velia Tarquinia too became an event that it was not appropriate to talk about. The news of the victories against the Parthians promptly

arrived to enthuse public opinion and to confirm the reassuring dogma that attributed eternal world domination to Rome.

Flavius Juvenalis had resigned and left for an unknown destination. Health reasons - he had said.

Cassius Longinus had finally decided, after having obtained the approval of the empress, to offer Pontius Epaphroditus the position of Prefect of the Ports. The chief of the brigade had thanked and refused.

“Why?”

“Sir, I'm a hunting dog. I prefer to hunt down the game, rather than have it served at the table.”

The Prefect of the City had not commented. He had sent him a cash reward, inviting him to buy a new uniform. And he had placed the problem of the new Prefect of the Ports among the many that his orderly brain had lined up in front of him, like squadrons waiting for orders.

The evening after this refusal, Pontius Epaphroditus was sitting on a bench in the courtyard of the barracks to take a refreshment. Everything was dark, save for a flickering reverberation from the hall, where the regulatory torches were lit. The head of the brigade was thinking about that strange story.

Coldmind knew he would not survive his father. As soon as he ascended the throne, his brother would get rid of him. He had put Sulleus on the trail of Velia Tarquinia. Possession of the cipher sought by the Parthians would allow him to negotiate an agreement with them capable of guaranteeing him a safe asylum. Instead ... So many deaths for nothing. Velia Tarquinia too was dead. But the end of Rome had not been revealed.

“It's not important anymore,” the Prefect of the City had said. But the problem was still there. An open well, the depth of which no one knew.

The stubborn mind of the head of the brigade continued to look out over that void. A golden semicircle. A silver semicircle. On the silver one, two fish with intertwined tails and an omega of blue enamel. On the gold one, who knows. A silver cipher for a gold enigma. He shook his head. Stuff for magicians, for soothsayers. Like the one they had found dead on the Sacred Island. He was only the chief of the Ostia brigade. Again he looked out over the well. A number. There had to be a number. The number of years of Rome.

Over the courtyard the sky became clearer, as the moon rising from the sea spread its light on Ostia. Two fish with intertwined tails. Absurdly, they swam in opposite directions despite being tied together. But if the silver semicircle was placed vertically, one went up and one went down. Going fishing he had seen dolphins leap from the sea and dive again. The statue of Neptune. A tortoise and thirteen dolphins. The two fish could have been dolphins. Why not?

He mentally reviewed the Roman numbering system. He found nothing there that had to do with dolphins. But the prophecy was Etruscan. What had Caelius Volumnius said about the Etruscan numbering system? A golden crescent overlooked the courtyard. The other half was barely visible next to the shining half disk. He heard the monotone voice of the haruspex again: ‘In our language one hundred was indicated by a circle cut by a horizontal line, one thousand by a circle cut by a vertical line.’ A clear line in the sky divided the luminous semicircle from



its pale twin. One hundred years? They were long gone. A thousand, then. At most, a thousand and one hundred. As in the word MULVENICE of the inscription of that Larth. Simple coincidences? Who knows.

Again he saw the pair of fish with their tails intertwined. And the statue of Nethuns surrounded by dolphins. But of course! It is the moon that raises the sea with the tides. One dolphin going up, one going down. Ebb and flow. One moment. One could not expect to interpret a text that no longer existed! Emperor Claudius had forever erased the message drawn on the golden semicircle. But still ... A sudden thought crossed his mind. What was that sentence of the Sibyl that Flavius Juvenalis had spoken about?

*The fate of Rome is written in the skies.*

He raised his eyes. He wasn't wrong. Now he was sure of it. The moon over his head indicated the years in Rome. Emperor Claudius had said he had deleted the text of the prophecy to discourage those who wanted to interpret it. In reality, the text could not be deleted because it did not exist. There was no need. One semicircle of gold, one of silver. And two dolphins with intertwined tails. That's all.

All? There was also omega. The omega of blue enamel. How could it prophesy the end of the Tarquini, or that of Rome? It was a Greek letter. No Etruscan haruspex - Caelius Volumnius had said - would have used a foreign letter in a sacred document.

He slapped his forehead. What a fool he had been! Now he could see it in front of him, the bend of the Tiber. The rounded tongue of land, narrow at the base of the river, stretched out in a semicircle to divert its course. Its profile was shaped like an omega. The wavy line under the fish pointed to the sea, the blue enamel omega to the river. There the gens Tarquinia had died out, as had been predicted. Everything was finally clear.

He made a quick calculation. About nine hundred and fifty years had passed. Perhaps Roumatha would have dodged the storm too. And then? He tried to imagine the after, but fantasy was not his strong point. Forget it.

Storm clouds raced across the sky. One passed quickly in front of the moon, veiling its splendour for a moment. Pontius Epaphroditus got up, walked towards the tavern: "Rain tomorrow."