

The Library of Lost Books

I

Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord?

arise, cast us not off for ever.

Wherefore hidest thou thy face,

and forgettest our affliction and our oppression?

(Psalm 44:24-25)

The friar looked around. A faint luminescence filtered from under the door. Was it already daylight? He sighed. How was he going to determine that for sure? The truth was that he had no idea what time it was. Nor where on earth he was.

"Deus, in adiutorium meum intende. Domine ad adiuvandam me festina. O God, come and save me. Lord, come quickly to my aid," he whispered, slowly crossing himself. From top to bottom, from left to right, lingering almost on Our Lord's wounds. They had drugged him; there was no other option. And that was no longer the prison cell where he had been locked up only the previous day. He felt groggy, more disoriented than ever. With his head spinning and an overpowering sense of nausea. Why had he been transferred? In such an unusual manner, to boot? There was no justification for it because, to his knowledge, no official sentence of conviction had yet been issued against his person. Moreover, he remembered well that he had not yet seen the face of a single inquisitor in an official capacity who normally belonged to his own order. Besides, was he really sure that the place where he was standing at that moment was really a prison? The friar inhaled slowly, several times. He took courage and, overcoming his uneasiness, ventured to move one foot forward, into the unknown. The other was chained to something.

There was humidity, a strong smell of urine permeated the air, mixed with a sweetish stench, as of decomposed flesh. He made a second step and heard the sound of iron rings dragged on the floor. From somewhere came a pattering of small paws, probably of fleeing frightened rats. He dared a third step, but the chain didn't allow him to proceed further. An expletive died on his lips. Words that a person of his status should never have uttered. But the Lord would have understood, given the circumstances. His eyes were gradually getting used to the dimness. The environment in which he found himself must have extended another three or four steps further from the point he had reached. However, it was more difficult to make out how much space there was to his right and left. His ears were buzzing and, turning back, he sat on the floor with his back against the wall. He felt what was around him. Walls and floors were made of polished stone. Where had they taken him? No noise could be heard from outside, unlike the previous days. Could it be that he was no longer inside the walls of the settlement?

He could not understand what they wanted to do with him. If they had been in a hurry to kill him, they would have had every chance to do so immediately. During his relocation, his tormentors must have had plenty of opportunities. Instead, he was still there, well alive though worn out, but he had few illusions about his fate. What he had discovered was too dangerous, too shocking for them to afford the risk of him revealing it. No, they could not take that risk, as he knew all too well. Those were people, demons who had no qualms whatsoever so that they could continue undisturbed in their diabolical madness and heinous crimes.

But then, why were they still keeping him alive? They had already stained him with infamous charges from which he could not even defend himself. Why take him away from the inquisitorial prisons, then? Who had authorized it? He knew he was not dealing with ordinary people. Instead, he was dealing with very powerful men, who would easily be able to cancel every trace of his arrest and detention if they needed to. This wasn't a problem for them, and he was aware he couldn't have done anything about it. Yet he could not make sense of what was happening. Would they have strangled him inside those walls as was now the custom in centuries-old prisons where they kept condemned prisoners? It had been a very long time since the pyres burned in the squares of the Patriarchate, among excited crowds of onlookers who had come for the occasion. By now even public power preferred discretion, acting without anyone noticing. Was this his fate, ultimately? Handed over to the secular arm for the execution of a sentence he had never even heard? Surely the members of the congregation, if it could be called that, had wasted no time. Nothing strange in that, since their grip on power was virtually total, ready as they were to eliminate without hesitation those who, like him, had dared to lift the veil to observe a shocking reality that should have remained secret. But, as even the Gospel clearly stated, the prince of this world is Satan. And he, a man of Christ, had experienced it on his skin.

His only consolation, perhaps a sign of divine Providence, had been that among his jailers he had met a man whose daughter he had saved from certain death a few years earlier. A fellow who, at his request, had supplied him with the means to write down the truth. God willing, those eight papers were now safe. A faint hope only, but that same Providence would one day perhaps allow those scraps of paper to reach the right hands. Only then would his death, his sufferings, though endured with Christian resignation, not be entirely in vain. He was probably just deluding himself, considering the power of the Evil One and his servants. But the ways of the Lord sometimes turn out to be inscrutable. Even if seemingly cruel.

The friar sighed. If he had to be completely honest, he could not say whether what distressed him most was the way he was probably about to leave this world, or the evil reality he had discovered and the vastness of its ramifications. He would never have imagined that so many unsuspected people could be involved in it, all of them branded with the mark of the Beast.

But he was helpless now, imprisoned in that dark, foul-smelling cell, and could do nothing more. His fate was sealed, along with that of all humanity. *The forces of evil will not prevail*, the Lord had said. And for him, a Franciscan, this constituted an act of faith. But now, after what he had discovered, he was no longer sure. He was no longer sure of anything.

He closed his eyes and started whispering the words of the Psalmist, the plea of an innocent man to the Lord. Words learned by heart:

*Deliver me from mine enemies, O my God
defend me from them that rise up against me.
Deliver me from the workers of iniquity,
and save me from bloody men...*

The cleric came to a sudden halt as he heard a metallic noise, something like a bolt sliding. He quickly rose to his feet, flattening himself against the wall. He felt as if his heart had leapt into his

throat as his muscles stiffened like timbers. He heard the sound of approaching footsteps, only to die suddenly behind the door in front of him. And soon afterward the clanking of keys and the light of lamps suddenly flooded the cell, almost blinding him for a few moments. It revealed the silhouettes of half a dozen men, all hooded and not dressed like peasants, servants or thugs. No, their clothes and footwear revealed a certain affluence while one of them had definitely taken the orders. No one uttered a single word. Only the friar, after crossing himself, merely whispered invoking divine forgiveness. What good would it ever do to speak? Or ask for explanations? It was all so clear in the end. The Franciscan remained silent even when several hands grabbed him unceremoniously and blindfolded him before taking him away. He prayed that everything that was happening to him was not in vain. And that someone would pick up his desperate message, as and when it pleased God. For that God, to whom he commended his soul, could not wish for anything else. He certainly could not allow evil to prevail. His own son had promised it. He had died on the cross for it, mocked by all, as the worst of criminals. But then, why was his hand delayed in annihilating all the horror he had seen? In erasing, once and for all, the unholy priests of Satan with their hands stained with innocent blood?

Be not far from me, Lord,

for trouble is near; for there is none to help.

II

Half-heartedly, Geremia sipped the glass of orange soda the waiter had just placed on his table. He stretched his legs, extending them as far as possible, and closed his eyes to fully savor the autumn sunshine. The temperature was unusually pleasant for that time and latitude. Quite a difference from the previous day, dominated by a dense haze that seemed to want to get right into his bones.

He caressed the picture he had placed in front of him, gently, barely touching it with his fingertips, as if afraid of hurting her again. A picture with the patina of several years, with colors that time seemed to want to take back and carry away. Leaving him alone, with his remorse and a now faded figure. Sara. Yes, he had loved her, now he could say it with confidence. Although he had only fully realized it when she was gone, after an accident had snatched her away from him forever. And it had only been his own fault. The unforgivable fault of a drunken man, of a no-good.

He looked ahead, heedless of the cars that continually crossed his vision. Bigger and more aggressive cars, with lonely people behind the wheel, dazed by the pounding, ever-changing music spewed by the stereo. Exactly as was happening on any other damn road in this world. What had he come there to do, after so many years of absence? What had he ever hoped to gain from that trip, from that return to his birthplace? The truth, he had to admit, was that he didn't know exactly either. Not anymore, at least. At first it had just been a desire to get a change of scenery, at least for a while. To get away from the hellish city that was Florence after the latest events. And after more than two weeks spent there, perhaps it was time to put his few belongings back into a suitcase.

He lit a cigarette. The second one of the day. After all, these inconclusive days had been good for something. He had in fact never exceeded the limit of one pack a day. An encouraging achievement, even if his initial resolutions had been far more ambitious. But if the goal, now no longer postponable, was to quit smoking for good, he could only get there in stages. And what he had managed to do already constituted an undoubted success.

He had even managed to force himself not to touch alcohol until dinnertime, or at least until six o'clock in the evening. Moreover, he succeeded in doing so for the better part of the past few days. After all, he was no longer in civilized Florence where it was easy to make oneself invisible in the general decay, in the meanders of the despair that unites men and things in indifference. There, on the other hand, at the foot of those rugged mountains shaping the almost insurmountable limit of the world, in a place where everyone knew each other, certain things were immediately noticed especially if they concerned outsiders. And rumors, in such a place, spread with impressive speed. He, who so many years earlier had walked out of his parents' home slamming the door and vowing that he would return a winner, head-on, could not afford such things. There had already been an alcoholic: his father. And, for the malicious tongues, that would have to suffice.

He had to admit he had deluded himself. Except for a few relatives, who barely remembered him, or a few childhood friends, too anxious to dismiss him to return to their busy schedule, that wasn't his home anymore. Too many years had passed and time had taken away any remaining ties. Even his Friulian had become broken, he noticed. At that moment and in that place he felt like a complete stranger, despite his hopes. And he probably was. Exactly as in Florence. Perhaps it was life itself that no longer belonged to him, wherever it was taking place. Assuming that any form of life could ever have been his. He had to confess that several times in those days he had been tempted to leave earlier than planned. But he knew very well that for someone like him there was no better place to go. One place was as good as another, that was the sad reality. Like a piece driftwood.

Then, the day before, that strange message had arrived. From a local person completely unknown to him. But the library and the name mentioned in the text had immediately caught his attention. And brought up memories that seemed to have been dormant by then. How could he ever forget Valerio Torean, the librarian of the Guarneriana Library? Valerio, who had instilled in him a love of books and ancient languages? A hopeless disease, that one, a cancer that would never leave him. He still remembered the afternoons spent among the shelves filled with paper treasures coming from a distant and mysterious past, from the half-light of the scriptoria of monasteries now in ruins or the studies of humanists. In the company of the librarian who made him peruse the scrolls of ancient codices, with respect and caution, and who taught him the rudiments of Latin. Those circles had become the place where he could find what a perpetually drunken father and a weak and submissive mother could never give him. So many years later, he could say that it was there, among the centuries-old dust of those shelves, that he had truly been formed as a man. And that, for the first time, he had sensed his authentic calling. The calling of Geremia, whom his father would have preferred to be a laborer, repeating that studying wouldn't do him any good. And the same Valerio had wanted to talk to his parents to convince them that their son should attend classical high school. Their son possessed an innate talent that should not go to waste. He was a strong-willed boy and could have aimed very high. And he was ultimately a special being whose inclinations should be indulged.

Geremia thought of many of his peers, left behind in that town thrown at the foot of the mountains, who had actually been laborers and over the years had managed to put aside a fair amount of money, and then bought themselves a nice little house with a garden, without ever having had any particular financial problems. They had been free to take their families on vacations to exotic and fashionable beaches in a beautiful car and to spend their evenings with friends without skimping on the price of wine. And they would have grown old with the certainty of a decent pension. A retirement he would never see, anyhow. His had probably not been the best choice. Perhaps his father, in the end, was right. And, if he had listened to him, he would not have been forced to live on precarious, poorly paid jobs, always without a penny in his pocket and hope for a better future. He tried to remove that thought from his mind. It was just painful memories. An unnecessary burden that would have been better forgotten.

Why had the current librarian asked to meet him so suddenly? Valerio died long before. One day thirty years earlier he had been found hanging inside the library. Hanging from a shelf, amidst the books that had been the one true love of his life. No one had ever been able to discover the reason for his death, and no notes or traces of any kind were ever found. After all, his was a reserved character. To whom on earth should he have addressed his last words? Valerio's wife had left him a few years after their marriage without having borne him a child between her betrayals. There were whispers that he had been accused of sexual harassment of very young library patrons and that one of his victims was about to denounce him. This could have provided a convenient explanation for that desperate act. But why, after his death, nothing concrete had emerged on the matter, at least to his knowledge? Yet, in all the time in which he had attended the library, he himself had not only never been harassed by the man but, despite spending a lot of time alone with Valerio, had never perceived anything strange in his behavior. Instead, he had always seemed to be a very helpful person and absolutely correct in his attitudes. It was hard to believe those accusations. Something did not add up, it was obvious.

Unfortunately, at the time of the suicide he was far away and, moreover, had only learned about it much later. Not least because his father, of course, had been very careful not to tell him. In that case, he could have brought his testimony. Instead, Valerio's death was hastily dismissed. He had

taken his own life - it was muttered - because of some remorse, because of something wrong he had done that haunted him. Period. In places like that, they were always in a hurry to forget certain things. And people who commit suicide always have something to make up for. But now that name had come up again, unexpectedly. It really seemed that the ghosts of the past were just waiting for him to come out of the chill of the graves and materialize. It had happened before. Far too many times.

Why this meeting? Other than a vague reference to the librarian, those few words said nothing more. And he was damn curious, he had to confess. But soon he would have all the answers, at least he hoped so, from a person who had not even told him his name. Let alone an address for possible confirmation. Although he qualified himself as the librarian of the Guarneriana, he had merely signed his name with the initials, A.O., Assuming it did not stand for 'Alpha and Omega.' Of course, his was just an obvious joke. But why hadn't the guy written his full name?

Geremia looked at the note, delivered by the owner of the b&b the night before and had been left - he had been told - by a fellow who came in just after he left and whose name he could not quite remember. All he knew was that he worked in the library in San Daniele. In *that* very library. He folded up the piece of paper and put it back in his pocket. It was only a matter minutes now. A drop of wine would surely had helped to dilute the tension. He cast a glance in the direction of the glass of orange soda that mockingly challenged him from above the coffee table. A drink, he thought, almost certainly sold by a multinational corporation that had produced it by ravaging some land around the world, deforesting it and filling it with poison that would remain in the soil and waters for generations and generations. Moreover, they certainly did it by exploiting local labor in exchange for peanuts. In short, at that moment he was making himself complicit in a crime and the ultimate triumph of globalized capital. Quite a different matter from a good glass of Chianti bottled with respect for the territory and following strict specifications and centuries-old wisdom. Unhurried. Although even there, among those sweet vineyards, the tentacles of speculation and consumerism for its own sake were arriving. But he had solemnly sworn not to touch alcohol until dinnertime. And that was enough.

"Good morning, Dr. Solaris," said a voice behind him. Geremia winced. All intent on observing the road ahead, he had not noticed him coming.

"Good morning, Mr..."

"Ostermann," the other replied.

"No, I remember that part... Sorry, but I don't remember the name instead." It was a trick that always worked.

"Andrea. Andrea Ostermann."

The mystery of that Alpha and Omega was unraveled - pondered Geremia - in a way that was all too commonplace. "Very well, Mr. Ostermann. What will you have?"

"Just coffee, thank you," he replied. "No sugar, please."

Geremia nodded to the waiter, who immediately walked over to take the order. He carefully studied the man across the street who had placed the backpack he had brought with him on the floor. Rather than a librarian, if anything, he resembled a seminarist - that was his first impression - with those thick-lensed glasses and that funereal shirt worn beneath an equally blackish jacket. How old would he have been? Roughly thirty-five, he judged. Forty at most.

"So you are the current librarian of the Guarneriana," he asked after a moment of silence.

"Let's call it that," the would-be seminarist said. "Although there are other colleagues, of course, and a director."

"That must be quite a responsibility with all those priceless volumes."

"That's right Dr. Solaris. On the other hand, you have frequented that library for a long time and I imagine you know it very well."

Geremia leaned over looking the other in the eyes. "Many years have passed, and things must surely have changed. But how do you know?"

There was a moment of hesitation, almost embarrassment. "That's why I asked to meet you," replied the librarian.

"Will you also tell me how you knew I was here? I haven't been back here for a long time."

The other gave a hint of a smile. "A trivial coincidence. Although it has the unbelievable, I must admit. Almost a confirmation that fate does exist. Yesterday morning I saw you leaving the b&b you are staying in. Honestly, at the moment I only had the impression of a person I should have recognized but couldn't identify."

"It happens..."

"Of course. Only later, however, did I remember where I had noticed you before and that your name was that of a biblical character. I went in and asked if I hadn't been mistaken. The person who runs the hotel, and who incidentally frequents the library occasionally, gave me confirmation. So I left a note asking you for a meeting. And, indeed, here we are."

Geremia looked at him suspiciously. The seminarian had not even bothered to leave a phone number, he pondered to himself. "You are right, Mr. Ostermann," he replied. "But aside from the observation that you have a remarkable visual memory, how did you recognize me? How did you know it was me?"

In response, the other rummaged through his backpack and pulled out a cardboard folder tied with a rubber band. He opened it and took out a couple of photographs, which he placed on the table in front of him. "Take a look at these."

Geremia was startled. The person portrayed was undoubtedly him, even though it seemed centuries had passed. One showed a Geremia of perhaps fourteen or fifteen, together with Valerio, inside the great Fontaniniana Hall of the Guarneriana Library. They sat at a large dark wooden table on which lay a beautifully illuminated codex, its pages open. He still recognized it. It was a fifteenth-century missal, the Messale Parmense, with its splendid colors and the refined characters. The other was a photo taken when he had graduated in Florence, sent to Valerio along with a copy of his dissertation that he had wanted to dedicate to him. To him and to Luciano, his advisor, another person who had always encouraged him to persevere and helped him. It was only thanks to the two of them that he had made it, despite a thousand difficulties that seemed insurmountable. But in that image he was alone, he remembered that very well. Even his parents had not found it necessary to take a train to attend the dissertation.

Geremia took the two rectangles of paper in his hand, remnants of a world that had not yet known the ephemeral digital insubstantiality. He did it very gently, as if they were two relics in danger of crumbling between his fingers. On the back of the one from graduation day was written, simply,

‘With gratitude.’ His youthful handwriting, ungainly as ever. On the other, the one with the two of them and the code, ‘Cjatelibris.’ In pencil. Valerio's handwriting, he remembered it very well.

"How did you get them?" he asked, pointing his eyes at the librarian.

"I found them inside some kind of diary that Valerio had hidden."

"I don't understand..."

"You're right," the other replied. "I owe you an explanation. Although I myself don't know what to think, believe me."

Of course - Geremia thought to himself - wherever he went he was always dealing with some nutcase. And with a story from which nothing but harm could come. Perhaps it was still too early to state it, but he had a strange feeling.

"Give it a try," he said, downing a sip of orange soda. At that point, he really missed a sip of Chianti, the good kind, in spite of the time.

III

The seminarist reopened his folder and pulled out an old crumpled notebook with a folded sheet inside. He told him that what he had called a diary was actually a few pages filled with the late librarian's notes. To be more precise, it was a kind of rough copy since the late librarian had typed the same text, fairly short all things considered, on a sheet of paper which, folded into four, he then had inserted between those same pages. Who was it meant for?

"Valerio was undoubtedly afraid, even terrified of something. This is what emerges from the lines he left behind."

"Fear? Of what?" Geremia asked.

"I must say," the seminarist replied, "that the text is not at all clear on this point. There is talk of presences materializing at night, of strange occurrences that happen or were happening inside the library. But there must be something else. Something that apparently upset him."

"Upset?"

"I don't know what to think. As you will have a chance to read for yourself, Dr. Solaris, Valerio mentions some pages he allegedly found inside a codex, written by a friar condemned to the stake in the late seventeenth century on charges of demonic practices and heresy."

"Really interesting," Geremia commented. "But... you will give me the notebook, if I understand correctly?"

"With everything it contains. After all, there are your photographs in there. I don't know why, but since you knew Valerio... I mean it belongs to you, after all."

"You didn't think of handing it over to the Carabinieri?"

"What for?" Ostermann replied. "Such an item would have only confirmed the suicide hypothesis without adding anything to the story other than a confirmation of the rumors about poor Valerio's mental problems. So many years later, what would be the point? No, you are the first person I dare to show it to. And, between you and me, I'm glad I can get rid of it."

"Thank you, Mr. Ostermann. But tell me one thing."

"Please."

"This manuscript referred to by the late librarian, did you find it?"

The seminarist took off his glasses to clean the lenses with his shirt. "As you can well imagine, I looked everywhere. I went through basically every codex in the library, one by one, looked in the most absurd places. But of those papers, eight in number, according to the notebook, there is no trace at all."

"Of course this matter is really strange. It cannot be a simple invention."

"Dr. Solaris, I spoke with a colleague of mine, now retired, who told me that Valerio was no longer the same in recent times, before he took his own life I mean."

"He was no longer the same?" Geremia repeated without understanding. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that he seemed very worried about something. He had become taciturn, almost absent. He was constantly looking around as if afraid of being spied on. And he often stayed in the library well past his working hours consulting ancient codices."

"In this respect he was a real expert on the subject. Much more knowledgeable than a lot of far more entitled people. I never understood why he had given up on pursuing an academic career or anything like that. Rather, could you give me the contact of this colleague of Valerio's? I would like to visit him."

"No problem," the seminarist replied, glancing at his cell phone and scribbling a name and phone number on a slip of paper that he handed to Geremia. Then, standing up again, "Now I have to say goodbye. I asked for an hour's leave but now I really have to go to work."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Ostermann," Geremia said, without standing. "One of these days I will certainly come to see you in the library."

"Ask for me," the seminarian replied, handing him a business card. "This is my phone number. Don't be afraid to call me if you need anything. Anytime." That said, he slung his backpack over his shoulder and left.

Geremia sat motionless, staring at the notebook resting in front of him. He could not have said what he really had in his hands at that moment. And he was fearful of what might come of it. But perhaps those pages could have shed a glimmer of light on Valerio's affair and the mystery surrounding it. Perhaps they might even have helped to clear his memory. He was indebted to the man, after all. A man who, even though he had died so many years before, had still been one of the few friends he had ever had.

IV

Geremia had taken a seat on a bench in a more secluded corner of the square and certainly more suitable for quiet reading, away from the chattering and annoying giggles of the bar patrons. He needed a quiet place and nobody around him. He unfolded the pages of the notebook gently, almost fearfully, as if he were standing before a relic.

Yes. From what he remembered, that was exactly Valerio's handwriting, neat, regular. In short, the typical one of someone who had once been trained in humanities. He remembered that they had joked about it from time to time, comparing it with his own handwriting so messy, disharmonious, even illegible at times. Especially when Valerio would set about correcting the Latin exercises he had done while sitting at the library table, under the sullen gaze of the portrait of Monsignor Fontanini, the founder of that place of culture in the 18th century. Yet, the characters in the notebook seemed to have been distorted by haste, splattered by the need to chase thoughts while trying not to leave anything out.

He opened the typed sheet. Geremia smiled. Those were years in which computers and word processing softwares were now rampant, taking away a world and its established slowness. It felt like geological eras had passed as he observed the yellowed paper in his hands. Valerio, he remembered well, had always been a hardened conservative.

The seminarist librarian had told him that it was simply the nicer copy of the handwritten text in the notebook. He would have checked to see if that was indeed the case, but he still preferred to read the typescript with those "e's" typed more forcefully so that, in some places, the character had even perforated the paper. Uneven typefaces imprinted long, long ago, when even typewriters had a way of posing each one different from the other and, perhaps, also possessed a soul. Those had been years in which he, the young Geremia Solaris, was still living on studies and hopes. Hopes that now lay buried in the dust of some attic, or in the dark bottom of a drawer. Sharing the fate of those typewriters. The fate of things that have become useless. Of things that no one desires anymore.

I write down these words because I fear for my safety. Geremia frowned. The first lines did not seem to promise anything good. He carefully read the text to the end, without stopping. When he had retyped the notebook notes in fine print, Valerio must have been in a real hurry to finish. So much so that he had not even bothered to send the carriage back one position when the surely defective typewriter skipped creating one too many blank spaces. What was all this haste about?

Geremia startled when he realized that his teacher might have typed that text just moments before hanging by his neck from a library shelf. He also found time to hide the notebook and what it contained so well that it could only be found again many years later and by pure chance, at least from what the seminarian had told him. But why doubt it? If that was the case, the thought came to him, one of the last things Valerio had glimpsed before he died were those very two photographs with his image as a boy and as a graduate. And his damned father hadn't even told him about the passing of someone so important to him!

No use blaming the dead now. He lit a cigarette, number three of the day, and reread the first few lines before stopping. In those words, in that way of writing, he could not recognize the hand of his teacher, the quiet man who had introduced him to humanities, indelibly marking what would be the path of his life. Like a scratch in the skin. But who can claim to know what goes through the mind of a man who has decided to leave this vale of tears for better options? And even the certainty of nothingness, of total and final annihilation could be such an option, he reflected bitterly.

Moreover, the content was as far as could be expected from such a sunny character as Valerio was. In those long-suffering lines he confessed that he was afraid of what he thought was going on certain times inside the library during the night closure. Because on certain nights something unmentionable happened in there, of this he was absolutely certain. At that time, webcams, computers connected with wireless networks, remote controls and many such devilries did not exist or were not readily available. He had limited himself to stretching invisible wires at eye level and finding them broken the next morning, scattering an almost imperceptible layer of flour on the ground, and things like that. Yes, he was sure there was someone lurking in the underbelly of that history-laden place when, in fact, not a soul should have been there. Presences that, moreover, were not being revealed by the alarm system. And those who prefer to hide and move only when they are sure no one is there are certainly up to no good. Or it is a ghost who scorns the presence of mortals. Valerio claimed to feel observed and followed during the day. And that he was certain that someone had rummaged through his things. More than once.

His master had never told anyone because he was sure they would take him for someone suffering from persecution complex. And he no longer trusted anyone. Already some of his colleagues were murmuring behind his back. Yet he had the distinct feeling that he was being observed even inside the library. An impression that was becoming sharper every day. Probably, thought Geremia, he had come to suspect that he was going crazy. But he was not, and he knew better. The stress of separation from his wife had left its mark on Valerio's life, all right, but that and going completely out of his mind were two completely different things. And the librarian had long since metabolized that traumatic event. Though living alone was certainly not easy, even if there were books to keep him company.

And then, the discovery of that manuscript, which happened by chance inside a volume in the library. Barely eight sheets but which someone must have been very interested in. The author of the manuscript was a Franciscan friar who in those lines claimed that he had been imprisoned on false charges. And that there were very powerful people intent on wanting him dead and no longer in a condition to do harm. But what had impressed him most was the reference to something shocking the cleric had discovered and that, according to Valerio, was continuing even then. By absolutely unsuspected people.

Geremia looked up from the typescript. Unfortunately, the late librarian had not bothered to specify what exactly he was referring to, which was indeed quite a problem. But there was something else that gave him pause. If Valerio had really written those lines just before he hanged himself, in guilt, in shame for molesting boys, why was there no mention of these accusations in the last writing of his life? And no words in his own defense? This was at least peculiar, unless those infamous rumors had arisen only after his death. This he could not know.

One thing, however, was evident. Those pages required further study. He would have to postpone his return to Florence, which wasn't such a problem, since he had nothing special to do in that city. But, above all, he was forced to dive once again into a past he thought he had removed forever. And which, instead, emerged overbearingly from those lines hastily written by a frightened man who had died by suicide many, many years before.

V

Geremia sat at the dining table of an unassuming apartment, a Formica table with peeling corners, mimicking the now yellowing surfaces of kitchen cabinets that could no longer hide the wear of years.

"In short, Mr. Francesco," Geremia said, pouring a teaspoon of sugar into the steaming cup of coffee in front of him, "you knew Valerio very well."

"Surely not well enough," replied the other, approaching the bottle of grappa, which the host declined with a wave of his hand, "since his death was a bolt out of the blue. In such a way, moreover..."

"I see. But had there been any sign? Anything that might have indicated a bad situation?"

The other shook his head. "Absolutely not. No one would ever have expected such a gesture. Not from Valerio, certainly."

The landlord had a strange, even pained, tense expression as he rehashed that incident. Surely it was a memory that still hurt. "Did you notice anything strange?" Geremia pressed, "Did he seem worried about anything?"

The older man sipped his coffee before answering. "It's been many years, but I remember one day, he had been more taciturn than usual and I took courage, pulled him to one side and asked him if there was anything wrong."

"And?"

"He simply replied that there was no problem and that, if anything, he was just feeling a little tired. Maybe more than usual. Definitely a temporary situation and that he would see the doctor. And that was the end of it."

"Instead..."

"Yeah. Who would have imagined that? It was a trauma for all of us, I tell you. And, even so many years later, it's not easy to talk about it."

Geremia clutched the cup in his hands, staring at the clotted coffee grounds mixed with sugar before looking up again at the man in front of him. "In all sincerity, Mr. Francesco, what do you think of the rumors that circulated soon after, about Valerio's, shall we say, predilections for young boys?"

The other poured himself some grappa and drank it in one gulp. "I never believed those rumors. I think I knew him well enough to say that he was an okay person. Taciturn and reserved as much as you want, but an extremely proper man. He liked to be with boys, that's true. But he didn't have any children, and after his wife left him like that.... Well, he never got to start a family again. For me, he was always in love with that... I don't know what to call it. I mean, Valerio was happy to be with young people, he liked to share his passion for books and everything he knew about antiquity with them. It was definitely a way to feel part of the family he had never been able to build and would, instead, have wanted. That was all. But someone, evidently, must have wanted to misrepresent his attitude."

"I, too," Geremia interrupted him, "was a frequenter of the library and it was he who instilled in me a love for humanities."

"I thought I had glimpsed it somewhere before, in fact," the other did, squaring him. "Tell me the truth: Has Valerio ever harassed you, by any chance?"

"Absolutely never. On the contrary, he has been a great educator, at least for me."

Francesco remained silent, his eyes fixed on the poor surface of the table. "There are very bad people. Very bad indeed."

"In your opinion," Geremia asked, "could Valerio really have taken his own life over this?"

"Who can tell, Mr. Solaris? In the absence of certainty, any hypothesis can be the right one."

"Yet there is something that doesn't convince you, am I right? I can sense it from the tone of your voice."

"It's been many years now," replied the other. "Wait a moment while I get something."

Geremia stood alone for a moment, with the bottle placed in front of him, its contents manifesting all their desire to enter him, to flow through his veins to radiate into every remote recess of his body. No, he had to resist that perfumed siren - he reflected, gritting his teeth. He had set the limit at 6 p.m. and it had to be 6 p.m.. Before that time, he would not touch alcohol. He had sworn it in front of Sara's photograph, that sacred icon smiling like a Renaissance madonna he kept in his jacket pocket, inches from a heart that probably wasn't working as it should have. He preferred to avert her eyes from the disturbing presence and pointed them upward, in the direction of some not particularly tasteful paintings, showing boring flowering fields and rows of mulberry trees planted under the winter sky. On a shelf sat several packages of medications, of the kind prescribed to those with heart problems, as far as he knew. He read their names. Perhaps he too should have a good visit to the cardiologist, considering his arrhythmias.

After a while Francesco returned with an old cardboard folder in his hand. He placed it on the table and opened it. "Here, these are the clippings from the newspaper articles of the time about Valerio's death."

"It's not that much," commented Geremia after looking at them. "I mean, from what I understand you are not very convinced about the suicide hypothesis."

"Well, Valerio was found hanging from a rope. That is a fact. By a colleague of mine who died a couple of years ago. A tumor, poor guy. But we all saw Valerio, his body I mean. And it was certainly not a pretty sight, I can assure you."

"And you carefully collected and preserved all this material."

"What should I tell you, Mr. Solaris? All these years I have been trying to find out more. It seemed impossible to me that Valerio, a colleague of mine, had made such a choice because of the rumors about him. I felt the need to know more."

"And in all these years have you found any answers?"

The man poured more grappa into his cup after unsuccessfully offering it to Geremia. "I finally gave up on it."

"I see," Geremia said, asking, "Mr. Francis, can I take pictures of the articles with my cell phone?"

"Certainly, but if you want to..."

"Don't worry. A few photographs will be enough."

Then Geremia asked again, "Did Valerio, by any chance, confide anything to you? I didn't know... maybe that he was worried for some specific reason, that he felt he was being spied on by someone, that he sensed there was something strange going on inside the library?"

"No, at least from what I remember. Why do you ask?" Francis asked with a suspicious expression.

"Just to be certain," Geremia cut short. He didn't mention - only now it occurred to him - of the newfound notebook and preferred it to remain hidden as much as possible. "Who else was working with Valerio when he died?" he asked.

"Let me think for a moment," the librarian wrinkled his brow. "There weren't many of us at the time. And we needed the help of volunteers, young people doing community service. So, Giovanni. Yes, Giovanni Dariul. Then Caterina Pasc, who lives right on Cathedral Square. That woman had a brief affair with a bricklayer, many years ago, I don't remember whether Albanian or Romanian. Who didn't think twice about ditching her when he realized that she had become pregnant. With a child that Catherine raised on her own without ever marrying or accompanying again. I'm telling you this because no one ever expected such a thing, from someone like her, I mean."

"A bad story," Geremia commented, trying to picture that woman. "And then who else?"

"Daniel... Oh God, what was his name?... Moris... No, Mosar, that's it."

"Was there a library director?"

"Of course. Dr. Oliviero De Crignis. A big asshole, if you'll pardon the understatement."

Geremia could not hold back a chuckle. "What has he done to deserve your resentment?"

"Absolutely nothing. Since he was an absolute incompetent who nonetheless believed himself to be the All-Father."

"Such characters are all over the place, Francesco. Especially in the public administration."

"Ah, look. That doesn't tell me anything new. Fortunately, he was here only one year, two at most, and then someone had the good idea to transfer him before he did any more damage."

"And what happened to him?"

"They put him in charge of I don't know which office in Udine. A couple of years later I happened to notice his face among the obituaries in the *Messaggero Veneto*."

"And what did he die of?"

"From what I understand, he was hit by a car that did not even stop to help."

"Damn!" Geremia exclaimed.

"Surely, here in San Daniele, no one cried for him. That's for sure."

"And the colleagues you told me about," the guest also made to change the subject, "are they alive,?"

"Daniele passed away a few months before De Crignis. Another bad story of loneliness, one of those affecting retirees who no longer have anyone. The other two are still alive and well and both retired not long ago."

"Mr. Francesco, can you give me their contact information? I would like to talk to them."

"No problem," the landlord replied, taking an address book from a shelf and putting on his glasses. "I'll give you their phone numbers. Catherine Pasc, as I told you, lives nearby, near Cathedral Square, not far from the library. John Dariul, on the other hand, has moved to Gemona, his home town, but he comes to visit from time to time. And sometimes we go back to visit the Guarneriana together. It's hard to tear yourself away from that place once you've spent your life in there."

"So, you also know the current librarians?"

"Not very much, if I'm honest."

"But you know Andrea Ostermann. He gave me her contact information."

"A nice guy, that one," replied the other. "Very serious. Rare commodity these days. A little too much perhaps. He should look for a girl, let himself go at least a little."

"You're right," Geremia commented. "He looks like a seminarian. Doesn't he want to become a priest instead?"

"Well, who knows?" replied the landlord, spreading his arms.

"What about the others?"

"I know Andrea's two colleagues by name only. Rossana and Valentina. Both young and pretty. If I were in the shoes of what you call a 'seminarian'..."

"What about the current director?" Geremia pressed, pretending not to have understood the joke.

"I haven't framed him yet. He's only been here a short time and, from what they tell me, he's always holed up in his office. I don't even know his name."

"I plan to drop by the Guarneriana as soon as possible."

"It's an incredible place, Dr. Solaris. One of the most fascinating you can find in the whole region."

"I know, Mr. Francis. As I told you, I have been frequenting it for a long time." Geremia stood up. "I thank you for your time. It was very kind."

"You're welcome. I enjoyed having a chat. Be sure to give my regards to Rossana and Valentina. And, of course, Andrea."

"I certainly will," Geremia replied, shaking the man's seemingly trembling hand. Only then he noticed the man's reddened eyes. The fellow looked as if he had not slept a wink the previous night. Stepping out, he looked up at the sky, which had grown darker. Black clouds were gathering in the west and the wind was getting stronger. It was better to move and get back in. He hoped the weather would hold long enough. There was a time when he wouldn't have cared much about getting wet on his bicycle and, in fact, would have even found it amusing. But that boy who spent his afternoons in the Guarneriana Library was a different person. By now dead and buried under the rubble of a lifelong earthquake.

VI

Geremia sipped the orange juice, barely holding back an expression of disgust. That drink tasted sour, violent, worthy of a thick, reddish substance that burned his mucous membranes as it made its way to his stomach. But his brain needed a signal to let him know that he was still drinking something strong. He cast a glance towards the clock camping on the wall behind the bar counter. There was still half an hour to go before the limit he had set for himself, to that instant when the gates of restraint would finally open wide and repressed desires could run free and feed on verdant pastures. And that bottle of Cabernet he had already eyeballed could be a more than decent substitute for a good Chianti, unobtainable here. But that wine was also a way to plunge his mind back into the memory of his youthful drunkenness, when he still deluded himself that he was running the show.

In the meantime, however, he had much else to do and it was better if he did not waste time unnecessarily. He placed his cell phone on the table and began to read the first of the articles that Francesco, the now-retired former librarian, had allowed him to photograph.

Messaggero Veneto November 3, 1992

In San Daniele, it's all anyone talks about. The suicide of V. T., 48, librarian of the Guarneriana Library, has deeply shaken the entire community of the small Friulian town, which cannot explain why it happened. V. T. was well known and had been doing his work diligently for more than 20 years. The man was found by a colleague, yesterday morning, hanged inside the library. The reasons for the act are unknown, also because no suicide note was found, not even in the home of the deceased. But on the dynamics of the event, that is, that it was indeed a suicide, investigators have no doubt. The medical examiner found no signs of violence on the body and reportedly ruled out the need for an autopsy, after an initial reconnaissance. The deceased had been separated for some time and had no children. He lived alone in San Daniele and was reportedly a very private man who, according to colleagues, had never let on that he had any problems. He is described by all as a well-balanced person who did not drink and had never had financial or other problems. The affair would appear to be the result of one of the many dramas of loneliness that affect separated men and women. And in recent times, we have unfortunately seen several such epilogues. The director of the Guarneriana Library, Dr. Oliviero De Crignis, said he was shocked by the incident. He esteemed the deceased librarian and his great expertise in the library world and, like everyone else, could not explain why he would not confide in him or his colleagues before taking such an extreme step.

Geremia tried to mentally visualize the director's face after what Francesco had told him about him. He went on to read the second newspaper clipping, an article that appeared in the local edition of another paper, *Il Gazzettino*, which, however, added nothing new except that Valerio's father had also died by suicide when he was a boy. But the parent had opted, good hunter that he was, for a shot in the face. So, although the reporter did not write it directly, the article suggested that there was a predisposition in the family. In short, the fruit, as is always the case, had not fallen very far from the tree. Even if it was a diseased tree. He scrolled the image on his cell phone to the next clipping.

Messaggero Veneto November 5, 1992

The funeral of V. T., found hanged inside the Guarneriana Library, was held yesterday afternoon in the cathedral of San Daniele. There was a large crowd because the deceased was well known in the Friulian town and also appreciated for his volunteer work in the parish. After viewing the body, the coroner confirmed the suicide hypothesis. Investigators searched the house and questioned neighbors, colleagues and a few acquaintances in search of the reason that may have prompted the man to take his own life. But it appears that V. T. had no financial, health or sentimental problems to justify such an act. The mystery, therefore, remains unsolved.

Geremia put his cell phone back into his jacket pocket. None of the articles he had just read referred to allegations of child molestation or anything like that. Simple discretion, or had these rumors only begun to circulate later? It was hard to believe that any journalist had been particularly restrained in exploiting a topic that would draw morbid reader attention to the event. Although a few honest and respectful embezzlers might well have existed in that distant 1992. Why rule it out? Still, if the dead man, as in that case, was neither rich nor influential and with no relatives ready to file a lawsuit, the temptation to turn him into a monster, or at least make the reader suspicious that something serious, something unseemly, had happened would have been too strong a temptation. He had gotten the news of Valerio's death from the web, and by pure chance. Instead, he had learned the details from some acquaintances he had called by phone. His father, of course, had not taken the trouble to inform him, as if it was something that did not concern him, something not so relevant, after all.

The clock reminded him that it was only about ten minutes away, now, from the fateful moment. Geremia got up and bumped into a woman passing behind him and whose presence he had not noticed.

"Pardon me!" he said clumsily.

"It's nothing," replied the woman, managing to balance the cup she was holding and not spill its contents with a dexterity worthy of a circus juggler.

"I'm mortified... I should be more careful."

"A moment of inattention can happen to anyone," replied the woman, widening her lips in a smile. "Besides, nothing serious happened, don't worry."

Geremia looked at her. How old would she have been? About forty, maybe a few more. She had a slim figure, a little thinner than she should have been, with a hollowed-out face and a thin dress that looked a size too big. Maybe even two, from what little he could tell. The clothes were understated but tastefully juxtaposed. Teacher-like, he would have said. A tuft of light brown hair, barely wavy, fell over a pair of discreet glasses. Hair fresh out of a hairdresser's hands, he ventured.

She broke the awkward silence that had lasted longer than necessary between the two of them. "Do you know Andrea, by any chance?"

"Andrea?" Geremia stammered, bewildered by the question.

"Yes, Andrea Ostermann, a librarian in San Daniele. I saw you two together at the table in the café outside yesterday morning."

Of course, Geremia reflected, in such places people have a spirit of observation and memory definitely out of the ordinary. "We met because we shared an acquaintance," he merely replied to the indiscreet lady. "Anyway, my name is Geremia. Geremia Solaris."

"And I am Speranza. Speranza Sgnaf. Nice to meet you. Solari... a last name from around here."

"If you'd like to sit down..." he said, pointing at the table.

The woman squared him suspiciously, steaming cup in hand.

"Forgive me," he corrected himself. "Surely, you must be here with someone else. Perhaps, I should have been more discrete."

The woman hesitated for a moment. "No, no, I'm alone," she replied, observing the empty chairs. "Besides, why not? One place is as good as another, after all."

Geremia waited until she had taken a seat before sitting down again in turn.

"Aren't you going to take anything?" the lady asked.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "I was just going to order something." Then, turning to the man behind the counter, "One orange juice, please!" Turning in the woman's direction, he continued, "So, you also know Andrea..."

"Of course," she said with a smile. "I'm his cousin."

"A happy coincidence!"

"This is a town of a few thousand people, don't forget that. It's easy to find yourself being related to someone."

"Yeah. And the world is always smaller than you might think," he commented. "Tell me, what kind of person is your cousin? I hardly know him, to be honest."

"Andrea?" replied the woman, passing a hand to rearrange the rebellious forelock. "Well, the classic geek, I must say. Very reserved and perpetually bent over books. Even at home. Printed paper has always been his only passion."

"Which I also share, for that matter," Geremia interjected.

"Which certainly does you credit, Mr. Solaris. Don't get me wrong."

"That's an arguable point..."

"Forgive me," she said; she certainly not grasped the meaning of that statement. "You have a surname from around here, as I told you, but I don't recall ever noticing you before."

"Indeed. I've lived in Florence for several years now."

"Florence? How wonderful! And what do you do?"

"Editorial consultant," he replied. It was a definition that meant nothing after all. Better than revealing her the truth, which was that the man in front of her was just a desperate man, one who had unresolved problems with the alcohol that would eventually drag him to the grave. Someone

ruined by books and who, at fifty, was still living, so to speak, on precarious and poorly paid jobs. And someone who had returned to his hometown only because an unexpected sum he had received had enabled him to pay for the trip.

"What about you?" he asked so as not to risk delving further into a slippery subject.

"Who, me?" asked the woman without being able to hide a motion of surprise. "There's not that much to say," she added, just to say something.

"I am not sure that's true but, Speranza, can we call each other by our first names please? Maybe that would be better. This way I feel damn uncomfortable."

"No problem," she replied without flinching. "I teach in the local middle school. Literary subjects. But I asked for a leave for family reasons. That's all."

"That's all? But yours is a role of great responsibility. I mean it!"

"Maybe so, although this job is not easy. Today's teenagers are wonderful little animals but too, how should I put it?, distracted."

"That's true. But teenagers are still teenagers and are also capable of great enthusiasms. It is the people around them who often determine their future, for better or worse."

Geremia recounted his experience and what Valerio had represented to him.

"You were lucky to find such a person on your path," the woman commented. "You must have talked to Andrea about that, too, I imagine."

"Yes," replied the other. "That's the reason I met him. But the man committed suicide, perhaps because of the unfair accusations against him. Words can really kill sometimes. And destroy what little good this world still manages to give birth to."

"I'm sorry. I really am," replied Speranza. "I had heard about it. However, I was too young at the time, and these are events that happened in San Daniele, several kilometers from here."

They talked for quite a while about this and that. The woman showed a considerable culture. But in her gaze - this was Geremia's impression - a shadow shone through, an indefinable presence, perhaps unhappiness, perhaps a history of grief, a trauma not completely overcome. Even her smiles were always measured, sometimes almost imperceptible. Besides, the woman - he observed - was too thin. Not that she did not take care of her appearance and clothing, but she certainly should have eaten more. Even to finish the contents of her cup had taken forever, with her small, insubstantial sips.

At one point, Speranza looked at the watch she wore on her wrist, "Oh my, it's late!" she exclaimed, rising to her feet.

"Do you have to go?" Geremia asked.

"Yes, and in a hurry. I have a meeting in a few minutes and I completely forgot. Excuse me!"

Geremia also stood up, "I really enjoyed this talk. It's not easy to find someone with whom you share the same interests."

The woman smiled, "It was pleasant for me as well. I must confess that I don't associate with many people these days."

The she walked out. Leaving the man standing by the coffee table cursing inwardly for not asking for a phone number and not even proposing to share another coffee in the future. But there was something that had held him back. He could not exactly say what it was, but he had the impression that this woman, until a moment before sitting across from him and with whom he had conversed so amiably, was an unhappy or troubled person. He had read it in her eyes. At least that was how she had looked to him. Then again, you can't ask such things to someone who, until a moment before, was completely unknown to you. And whom you probably would never see again.

Geremia sat back down and pushed away from himself the cup of juice he had failed to finish. He nodded to the man who was reading the sports paper with his arms resting on the counter. Perhaps it was time to open that bottle. And to drain it discreetly, in perfect solitude. If solitude could ever be called such. Which, at that moment, he was beginning to doubt.

VII

The church bell tower that towered next door had just chimed ten o'clock in the morning when Geremia made his entrance into the large room completely lined with wooden shelves of the Guarneriana Library. The bicycle he had borrowed from the lady who ran the bed-and-breakfast he was staying in, though already visibly used, had performed its duty with great dignity, even though on the climb up San Daniele he had been forced to dismount and push it by hand. Apart from this setback, it had almost seemed to him as if he had gone back in time, back to when, still a teenager, he would gladly make a dozen miles in open country to come all the way up here where he knew he would find all the books he needed and, above all, the expertise and friendship of a librarian like Valerio. These walls covered with volumes were his refuge, his toyland made of old bound and yellowed papers well worth the effort of a long ride.

And now he was there again, decades and decades later, still smelling the typical smell you can find in old libraries, immersed in the dimness recalling the aisles of some Romanesque church lost who knows where. With the wooden columns that divided the space into bays made of shelves filled with books. It was a strange feeling to step on that floor without Valerio's reassuring presence and without hearing his voice. He looked around, brushing his fingertips over the dark surfaces of the solid wood tables stained with the patina of a time that would never return. The portrait of Monsignor Giusto Fontanini, stared at him sternly and suspiciously from above the door, just like then. But at that moment in the great hall there was a silence he didn't like at all. No, that was not the Guarneriana he liked to remember. It seemed to him, if anything, to be in another dimension. In a place that did not belong to him and that, he could have sworn, had never been his.

Geremia observed the walls bulging with codes, the wooden gallery suspended on elaborate shelves, the large chandelier hanging from the white ceiling. Where on earth had he hung himself? - was one of his first thoughts. He would have bet that a character like Valerio would have chosen that very room to end his existence. If he could have chosen the setting for his last show, of course. But there were shadows on that death, filed too hastily as suicide. Something did not add up, at least to him. Perhaps he was too suspicious by nature, but of suicides that, in fact, were not suicides at all, he had seen far too many in recent times. Certainly, San Daniele, a sleepy town of a few thousand inhabitants in Friuli, could hardly aspire to compete with the more emblazoned Florence with all its evil and perfidy well hidden in the meanders of Renaissance palaces. However, he could not forget that men were always the same, wherever they were. And they were creatures capable of expressing the worst of themselves, at all times and at all latitudes. Evil, for its part, would certainly not be picky, having to choose between one location and another as a place to sink its claws in.

Geremia adjusted his jacket lapel as best he could and walked through the door at the back. To a rather pretty librarian - he had to admit - he asked if he could speak to Andrea Ostermann. The woman, after a moment's hesitation and a host of questions that he judged impertinent, went to call him.

"Dr. Solaris," the seminarian said as soon as he was inside, "there you are!"

"I promised, didn't I?"

"I'm very pleased. I mean it," the librarian replied, asking him to take a seat in the large room.

"Where...?" Geremia asked immediately.

"Unfortunately, I can't tell you exactly," replied the other. "At that time I was still a child. Or little more. The only one who might still know all the details of the affair is Francesco, his former colleague whom you should have already met, I suppose."

How does he know I have already met him?, Geremia pondered. Probably they had been in touch, and he gave the impression of someone who did not like to waste time. Yes, that had to be the most obvious explanation. "Of course," he merely replied. "In fact, thank you for providing the contact. It was a very useful chat, I must say."

"My pleasure," the seminarian replied. Then, lowering his voice as if he was afraid someone would hear him, he added, "The notebook and typescript... did you read them?"

"Yes," Geremia replied, speaking softly to match his interlocutor. "But I must say that beyond what Valerio tells about his fears, I have not found any other useful indications. May I ask you a question, Mr. Ostermann?"

"Please."

"That notebook, where did you find it?"

"Behind a shelf I moved to retrieve some cards I had dropped. Not more than a week ago. A genuine accident, considering that after this I found you, as I told you. I am not particularly religious, but someone could see a sign of Providence in all these coincidences."

"A shelf that, in all these years, no one had cared to move."

"I don't know what to tell you, but it must be so."

So much for maintenance and cleanliness, Geremia thought without saying. "According to what Valerio wrote, it would all revolve around the manuscript that that religious man, Bartolomeo da San Salvatore, supposedly wrote before he was executed."

"So it would seem. And do you really believe Valerio hid it right in here?"

"This is what he wrote in that notebook. You read it too, didn't you? Why doubt it?"

"I am certainly not going to doubt what was revealed by a man about to die. Believe me, all these days I have been looking for that codex everywhere. Although I have not revealed the issue of the notebook to anyone else before you, I have turned this library inside out. But despite my efforts, I found no trace of that codex. And a volume, however small it may be, certainly cannot vanish into thin air."

"In short, Mr. Ostermann, are you telling me that, according to you, that manuscript is no longer in here?"

"It may be that someone has found it and taken it away during all these years. I wouldn't feel like ruling it out."

"And who would that have been, what do you think?"

"How should I know?"

Geremia turned dark in the face: "In that notebook, Valerio gives us a precise date, the year 1698, the month of October."

"Listen," the seminarian said, "I have found no trace of this phantom monk or friar either."

"I understand. But a man who feels he's going to die is certainly not going to start writing fictional novels."

"You're probably right," said the other, spreading his arms, "but it's such an apparently absurd business... Surely, that manuscript is not in here. Otherwise I would have dug it up, I can guarantee you. How do you plan to go about it, Dr. Solaris?"

"You told me that you searched for news of this character, Bartolomeo da San Salvatore, that's what Valerio calls him, but found nothing."

"That's right, indeed. It seems that a guy with this name never existed."

"So you haven't even found the records of the trial concerning him."

"Nothing at all. Not even in the Archives of the Seminary in Udine, which we contacted. Or in Venice."

"You're right, it's really strange," Geremia said, visibly puzzled. "Do you have any texts in the library about the Inquisition trials of that period, by any chance?"

"Certainly. But they can be found..." The librarian paused. "It's been many years since you frequented these halls, Dr. Solaris, perhaps you don't know that several things have changed in recent times."

"Namely?"

"Well, for example, the modern section has been moved to another building on the opposite side of the square."

"Actually, I didn't know that," Geremia commented. "Does that mean that access to this section is regulated?"

"It is," the other confirmed.

Geremia seethed as many thoughts suddenly overlapped in his mind. Those rooms and the treasures they held would become the preserve of scholars who would be admitted there, perhaps, only with a permit and after a diligent official had sniffed at length at the applicant's resume. And that fortune he had had, of a boy who could venture into this sea of paper, lose himself in a fascinating sea made of parchment, fall in love with those yellowed pages to which he would devote his life, would never be repeated. He felt a knot forming in his throat. Along with the realization that there would be no one else to pick up Valerio's legacy.

"Don't worry," the librarian said with an oily tone. "Be my guest at a table. If you want, I'll bring you some texts I know on the subject, collecting the records of the Inquisition trials in these parts. Just give me the time to get them."

"Yes, thank you." The seminarian was about to leave but Geremia quickly blocked him, "By the way..."

"Tell me."

"Mr. Ostermann, yesterday I met your cousin by chance. A thin woman with light brown hair... in her forties or maybe a few years older."

"Ah, you are definitely talking about Speranza."

"Yes, that's her."

The librarian shook his head. "Too bad. Too bad indeed."

Geremia stared at him bewildered. "Why do you say that?"

The other hesitated, realizing only then that perhaps he had said something wrong. "Has she reported anything to you about her state of health?"

"No. All I know is that she is a middle school literary teacher and that she has taken a leave of absence. For family reasons, she told me."

"Exactly. To cure herself of a bad illness."

"What? From a bad illness?"

"Unfortunately, let's say so."

"And... what is it?"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Solaris, I was probably wrong in mentioning it to you. But I cannot reveal anything more. Except that the world is profoundly unfair at times. And Speranza has been through some very hard years that have left their mark on her. Nothing deadly, mind you, but something equally devastating. Something she certainly did not deserve." That said, he passed haled for the wooden door and disappeared, leaving Geremia alone with his darkest thoughts.

Twenty minutes or so later, Geremia was sitting at a table, in front of a stack of volumes and filling his notebook with notes. As always, books were the only remedy to remove, at least for a while, the pains and anxieties of a life that, without their presence, would have been much more miserable and mundane. Gutenberg would have deserved the Nobel Prize in medicine. Although, in the end, everything, even all the volumes of this world and what they contained, were nothing but pure illusion, hope destined to end up in a cold grave along with us. And even the printed pages turned out to be nothing more than an extreme deception, a wonderful placebo capable of soothing our pain of living. Perhaps to distract us for a moment from our most genuine and deepest afflictions and fears. But nothing more.

From time to time, sinister creaks seemed to come from the 18th-century balcony. Geremia looked around. Was this what Valerio was hearing while he was here alone at night, chasing his ghosts? Looking for confirmations to his fears? Surely the place was as eerie as he had ever sensed it before. There was something sinister emanating from those walls, as if a thousand evil creatures were watching him at that very moment. Lurking, unseen on those shelves.

Geremia stretched his arms and legs and turned his head, sensing a worrying creaking coming from his neck. The years were beginning to take their toll on his spine. With the first hints, perhaps of arthrosis. A physical decay that he could do little to counteract except by regular exercise and by stuffing himself with minerals and vitamins. Or by putting all his eggs in the basket on the tannin in red wines that florid scientists guaranteed would fight aging.

He cast a glance at his notes. Yes, one in particular of the texts the librarian had brought him had proved very useful. It was a fairly recent study on the Aquileian Inquisition, which, in addition to compiling lists, as completely as possible, of available documents, was also rich in statistical data. And he had not needed to look for much else for his purposes, at least to get a rough idea. In short, it had been an unexpected stroke of luck. Not least because the material of the Holy Office of Aquileia and Concordia, this was the correct name of the institution, kept in the Historical Archives

of the Archdiocese of Udine, constituted one of the very few funds still sufficiently intact preserved to date on the activity of the ecclesiastical court. And it had been made available to scholars and catalogued as early as the years 1976 to 1978. Quite a different matter from the Vatican archives, just to take one example, still jealously guarded with unjustified confidentiality. What is more, the study also included material concerning trials held in Friuli and dispersed elsewhere.

Geremia read his notes again.

Udine was a major seat of the Inquisition from 1556 until 1806. The office of inquisitor was always held by the Friars Minor Conventual. Like Florence and Tuscany and despite the poor, humble Francesco, who must still be turning in his grave over this umpteenth betrayal. A presence, that of the Franciscans as inquisitors, dating as far back as 1254. Only a very few years after the death of the meek and nonviolent founder. The one who fought his battle by example alone. Even in the face of Saladin and the Muslims, just as others were slaughtering each other in the crusades.

The world has always been turning the same way, Geremia pondered, even if it is the completely wrong way. But this consideration was best kept to himself. Now it was convenient to focus on the essentials.

In the following centuries, before the establishment of the Holy Office in 1542, accounts are sporadic and incomplete. Certainly, one constant element was the direct intervention of civil authorities and other ecclesiastical entities in the repression of heresies. Even after the start of the Roman Inquisition and the struggle against the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Several times it was the civil authorities themselves who proceeded against heretics. Or the initiative came directly from the Holy Office in Venice.

In the first half of the seventeenth century a vicar from outside the city habitually resided in San Daniele. The activity of repressing heresy was regulated by the norms of canon law, which provided for two types of proceedings, namely the formal trial and the summary procedure. The formal trial contemplated direct investigations by judges aimed at the confession of the accused. It was initiated ex officio following a complaint, news reports or public fame. Interrogations were then carried out and, if the evidence was deemed sufficient, arrests were made. Torture was a tool used to push the accused to tell the truth. It must be said that nothing scandalous was seen in this way of proceeding at the time.

The summary procedure normally began following a spontaneous presentation by the accused, collected the confession of his errors and the denunciation of accomplices, involved neither interrogation nor torture, and ended with the eventual private abjuration, absolution from excommunication, and the assignment of penance. Mostly acts of worship and prayers. This kind of procedure became preponderant in the late seventeenth century, at least in the area of the Inquisition of Aquileia and Concordia.

Geremia took his eyes off the page. He found himself investigating an alleged trial that took place in 1698 and of which all records were lost, almost certainly. Could it be that the cleric, according to his own account, had had the misfortune of being one of the very few to go on trial? And on top of

that to be sentenced to death? This was something unthinkable, especially considering that the dossier of the trial, which must have been of some significance, was lost. An almost unholy coincidence. But, assuming that this Bartolomeo da San Salvatore was not telling lies and that the document was authentic, one could not rule out that someone helped to silence something that could have been embarrassing if it had fallen into the wrong hands. The cleric had not been shrewd enough or, perhaps, had confided in the wrong person. Was he perhaps flying too far in his imagination? He continued reading.

Looking at the trial files collected to date, the number of inquisitorial proceedings in the period 1557-1800 would total 4,069. A figure that is, of course, inaccurate. Just under a thousand cases concern the years 1650-1700. In general, there were few death sentences carried out in Friuli. Only three, and all concentrated in the sixteenth century. In addition to these documented cases, we know that one person found guilty managed to escape, while another execution was carried out on the corpse of a condemned man who had died in prison. Eight other death sentences were imposed on contumacious people, and two additional defendants were extradited to be tortured in Rome. Most of the charges involved adherence to Reformation ideas, but several other death sentences involved charges of magic, witchcraft, and maleficence. The sentences, from what emerges, were carried out by strangulation, "without effusion of blood," in prison, as discreetly as possible. Or in the flames.

It should be noted, however, that the last burning in Friuli dates back to 1599. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, at least as far as is known, no accused were executed, but several deaths occurred in prison. The last one documented was in 1703. There were, however, several cases of witches burned directly by the temporal power (one in Udine in 1643 or 1644; two in Cormons in 1647). Others were killed at the hands of fellow citizens and without trial (two in 1663 in Andreis). In general, the files related to accusations of use of magic cover about a third of the activity of the Inquisition tribunal of Aquileia and Concordia and almost all are concentrated in the seventeenth century.

That of death in prison, Geremia pondered, could have been a possibility. No one would have paid much attention to a prisoner who kicked the bucket before being led to the gallows or even before being sentenced by the court. Better still if the proceedings were just beginning and the death could be attributed to natural causes. This would probably have been the best way to avoid excessive publicity. If a prisoner was unable to withstand the harsh life of imprisonment, whose responsibility could it possibly be? Proceedings brought against clergymen, then, were certainly nothing new, and no one would have been all that surprised by this. Everyone was well aware that priests and friars very willingly engaged in magical practices, sometimes pushing the limits of what could be labeled "white," if that definition made sense. It was also a way to earn some money. The figure of Bartolomeo da San Salvatore remained in the shadows, however, and no trace remained of his trial.

The court of the Inquisition in the seventeenth century shows some attention to the local reality of San Daniele also because of the presence of a sizeable Jewish community. In this regard, there are numerous proceedings we have records of. In 1599 the Jew Iuseppo Iuzzato was inquisitioned for asking a peasant to cure a sick cow by magical operations. In 1655 one Giovanni Nicolò Valentini,

of San Daniele, was accused of using the divinatory skills of James, a Jewish convert, to find treasure in his house.

But the most famous proceeding, probably the most substantial one instigated by the Inquisition in the whole of Friuli, was the one brought against the Sandanielese mystic and stigmatist Marta Fiascaris whose reputation of holiness, attested by priests and Capuchin friars, had begun to worry ecclesiastical authorities as early as the 1630s. It had to wait until 1649 for there to be an intervention by the Holy Office, which proceeded to interrogate and arrest Fiascaris. A proceeding that ended only in 1656 with the visionary forced to recant shortly before her death. Otherwise, in the following years, there are no traces of trials brought against religious nor death sentences.

Between 1683 and 1686 ten trials were instructed against parents who had taken the little bodies of their prematurely deceased babies to the sanctuary of Trava, in Carnia, in the belief that there had been someone up there capable of bringing them back to life for only a few moments. Only for the time strictly necessary to baptise them and to be able to bury them in consecrated ground, certain that they would then be able to see Heaven. As always, even then there were those who profited from the desperation of simple souls. Even with the rite of "double death." That's what it was called.

But had Valerio unearthed any information other than that contained in the pages he had hidden? And where? We cannot know how far he had gone with his research.

"Did you find anything?" the seminarian asked. Geremia jolted, because he was completely focused on his notes and did not hear him arriving.

"Not much, Mr. Ostermann. At least for now," he replied. "But we have to insist." And then, seeing that the librarian was not responding, he added, "I can't take it anymore for today. My eyes are burning and my head is pounding. I need to clear my head."

"Indeed it is late, Dr. Solaris," commented the other. "However, you can come back anytime. I'll leave these books aside for you, and you can come and consult them whenever you want, if you need them. For any need just ask for me. And other texts, even if they were not here with us, we can get them here quickly. If you want, you can call me at any time. You have my number."

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your willingness," Geremia said. "Since the key to the whole thing should be right in here, I'll have to come back."

The other looked at him with an indefinable expression. "Well, goodbye then."

"Goodbye," Geremia said, taking the folder in his hand and putting away his laptop, notebook and pen. Then he looked up in the direction of the man in front of him. "In all sincerity, what do you think of the procession of dead souls that allegedly moves inside these rooms at night?"

"I've never seen it, of course," the librarian replied, flaunting a smile that the other found idiotic. "And no one has ever mentioned it to me, even jokingly. I hope you won't..."

"Yet Valerio speaks of it as real facts," Geremia interrupted him. "I think, Mr. Ostermann, that I will really need you in the coming days."

"Those processions never existed, I can assure you. Do you think I wouldn't have noticed, working in here? We're talking about ghosts, you don't really believe in these things?"

"You may be right. But I never heard Valerio tell a single lie. Besides, he was a very rational being."

"Men change, Dr. Solaris."

"No. Not Valerio. He would never make up such a story. And I am certain that the allegations of harassment made against him were completely unfounded. If not created in bad faith. By someone who had an interest in harming him, God knows for what purposes."

"It may be."

"No. It is a certainty, Mr. Ostermann. One of those things for which I would unhesitatingly put my hand on the fire."

That said, Geremia turned and walked in the direction of the door. He felt exhausted, with a thousand thoughts chasing each other in his head. But he was sure of one thing. He would take up the message Valerio had sent him so many years before. Not least because if the man had done so, it was because he was perfectly aware that he, his former pupil, would be able to interpret it. That was also why he could not back down. He could not let down the only friend he had had in his adolescence. The only one who had really believed in him.

VIII

Geremia pushed away from himself what should have been a pizza, at least according to what was trumpeted on the menu, and which he had left halfway through, surrendering. He downed a generous sip of a passable wine, at least one decent thing. There were several people in the room at that moment, but their dense talking was so indistinct that it was rather background noise not bothering him much. For a moment his thoughts went to Speranza and her illness. That "sin!" uttered by the librarian sounded like the evocation of something sinister, the indication of a reality now advanced. And that "family leave of absence" also found its own meaning. Chemotherapy, perhaps? Although he didn't seem to notice its effects on her body. And that thinness. No, it had to be something quite different, from what Andrea Ostermann didn't tell. Not as serious, perhaps, but equally devastating, if his suspicions were right.

He opened the folder and pulled out the notebook. He felt sorry for the woman, sincerely. A being of great culture and considerable ability, such had been his first impression. Just like his wife Sara. But the latter had been dead for many years now. Run over by a car while chasing after a drunken man, namely the great Geremia Solaris. One who did not deserve her, who had never deserved her. He closed his eyes for a moment until he caught a glimpse of her face emerging from the half-light. Sharp as always, so were those hands reaching out to embrace him. And the lips that parted to... Geremia shook his head as his gaze wandered back to the sad and mundane reality around him. He caught sight of the hand of a desperate being reaching out to seize the glass snoring in front of him and bring it to his mouth. To then feel the warmth of the soft, discreet liquid flooding his throat. The only possible warmth in a world made of ice.

However, he had something to do. And all his regrets, his despair, his pleas for forgiveness would not change the past one iota. He opened the notebook. The wine, in spite of everything, made his reasoning more fluid and, indeed, his thoughts at that moment were more lucid than ever. Extracting himself from his surroundings, he glanced at his notes. That name, first of all, Bartolomeo da San Salvatore. Hard to imagine that Valerio had made it up out of thin air, as well as the date. Easier to assume he had copied them from a text he had before his eyes at the time, as he himself clearly stated, moreover. Why was there no trace of the name anywhere in the Inquisition archives, for the most part studied and published? Of course, it could not be ruled out that for some reason the folders containing the files of that trial had been lost or had ended up somewhere far away, perhaps just waiting for a scholar to publish them. There was nothing strange about that, after all. There were a lot of gaps in the documents. And he had confirmed this in the course of his library research.

According to Valerio, Bartolomeo was perfectly aware that he was going to die. Yet, from what he had read, no death sentences were imposed in Friuli in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Not by the Inquisition, at least. Evidently, burning at the stake, or even strangulation in prison, were regarded as something outdated at that time. Even by the diligent judges of the Holy Office. Although deaths in prison, it should be noted, during trials were far from uncommon. Had the same thing happened to the cleric, who had died or had been murdered before the sentence?

Valerio claimed that Bartolomeo da San Salvatore, a Franciscan, had been imprisoned as a result of false accusations pressed against him by very powerful people. Impossible to know more at the time. But the next day he would go back to the Guarneriana to continue his research. Yet that clergyman's name and that date, October 30, 1698, were elements to which the late librarian had clearly wanted to draw his attention. And they were too precise not to constitute an element to be considered. Just as it was essential to find those damned pages mentioned by Valerio. *Eight sheets written on both sides and dated 1698*, as he had written. God only knew where they had ended up,

whether in that library, still well hidden, or whether someone had stolen them. Or if the devil had taken them back. Given that, after all, that book could very well have been the Devil's stuff. For if it was certain that Valerio claimed that Bartolomeo had been imprisoned as a result of false accusations fabricated against him to silence him because of something he had discovered, it remained to be understood by whom and exactly for what reason. Had it really been the Inquisition? And, if not, who else? Could it not be, then, that those charges were, on the contrary, well-founded and that the cleric was only trying to defend himself by telling his version of events? Those centuries, from what the documents recounted, were full of figures of priests and friars who willingly devoted themselves to performing demonic rites, attending orgies, and fleecing the rich and the noble for unmentionable and, all too frequently, bloody purposes. Why exclude it? Poor Valerio, after all, was certainly a brilliant humanist, but he had never had occasion, as he had, to immerse himself in the meanders of human evil and wickedness. At least until that moment.

Yes. Tomorrow, at the opening, he would show up again at the door of the Guarneriana library with his rickety bicycle. The truth was that at the moment he really didn't know what else to do. After all, Valerio had died there, and that cursed manuscript was perhaps still hidden in there. Why rule out that it just hadn't been found yet? If there was a chance, he had to pursue it to the end. And who knows, the ghost of his suicidal master might even have been able to help him in some way.

Geremia pulled Valerio's written notebook out of the folder to take another look at it, when Sara's picture fell to the ground. He bent down to pick it up and sensed that his head was beginning to spin. He got up again and placed the now faded image gently on the table. Suddenly he felt full of sadness. And immensely alone. Alone and useless, an empty sack thrown into a corner.

As if being forced to delve into the murky events of a friend's death and having to deal with his guilt over Sara's was not enough, meeting Speranza and her tragic reality of illness had dealt him the final blow. Could it be that death and suffering enjoyed chasing him and constantly reminding him of their closeness? Reminding him that he, unlike Sara and Valerio, was well alive, despite the destructive doggedness towards his liver?

Geremia stuffed his things into the satchel and gobbled down the last glass of wine. Not bad, indeed. He would get another bottle and take it discreetly to his hotel room. One bottle only and three cigarettes. And if that wasn't enough, there was another one dozing on the bottom of a drawer. He would drink, away from prying eyes. Until the Great Deceiver had taken full possession of his mortal body. What his awakening would be like the next day, the next morning's guilt, the regrets he would have plenty of time to think about.

IX

A half hour of bicycling and a couple of painkillers had accomplished the miracle. And now he found himself comfortably seated at the same table as the previous day, in that same library, continuing his research. Without interruption, at least until he was approached by the one who introduced himself as the director of the Guarneriana and who evidently had nothing else to do. The typical official, according to Geremia's first impression. One for whom an institution like a library was worth any other public position, as long as it came with an adequate salary. And the tie worn almost ostentatiously, despite the fact that it clashed with the rest of his attire, said a lot about the kind of person in front of him. Not that all library directors were like that, mind you...

"So, you were a friend of Valerio's," the man said flatly, once the pleasantries were over. Civil servant-like, in fact, maybe with some aspirations in politics, which never hurts, especially if you have the right endorsements. No, Geremia did not like the man.

"He was a very good person," Geremia cut short, hoping the other would leave.

"I've been here less than a couple of years," the man replied calmly. "When that terrible thing happened, I was working in the offices of the province, in Udine. But the few times I touched the subject, I only heard flattering comments about him. Apart from the natural uneasiness about how he died. These are things that stick. I don't know if I explain myself."

"You explain yourself very well. What about the accusations that were made against him?"

"Oh, those?" the director asked without getting too upset. "I was informed of them, but I couldn't find a single person who claimed to really believe them."

"Yet it was pedophilia," Geremia pressed, abruptly closing the book in front of him. "Something very serious and infamous. And because of which Valerio probably took his own life. Rumors certainly unfounded and artfully crafted, if I may say so. To your knowledge, has any investigation been done to determine who was the author?"

"Well, no. I don't think so... In fact, to tell you the truth, I can't tell you," replied the other with a hint of embarrassment. "These are facts from many years ago, thirty years. I don't even remember who was in charge of the Guarneriana at that time." Then, almost to change the subject, he asked, "So you are familiar with this library?"

"It's been so long, you're right.... But, I would say so."

"I have been its director, as I told you, for less than a couple of years, but I must confess that this place never ceases to amaze me."

"I can't argue with that," Geremia replied. "It is a place that exudes an incredible charm. A place like you don't find many in Friuli and around the peninsula."

"It is a library that preserves a priceless book heritage. Some codices cannot even be appraised so much is their value. And they are kept in a vault, of course."

"To which you will have the keys, I imagine."

The director merely smiled. "For the most part, those volumes are the legacy of Guarnerio, this incredible collector who lived six centuries ago."

"A singular character of great culture. And who, despite being a powerful man, having even become the vicar of the Patriarch of Aquileia, chose to renounce all his offices and prerogatives in order to be able to offer a worthy and honest accommodation to his daughter by recognizing her as legitimate."

"Indeed, not many would have behaved in this way. It must be said."

"Giving up power and career, as well as a comfortable life, to follow one's heart and responsibilities? No, I don't think so. Neither then, nor especially nowadays."

"You don't seem to have a high regard for your fellow human beings," the director made.

"Not at all," Geremia replied. "But Guarnerio acted by listening to his own conscience. And he was an orphan who had climbed, young and brilliant as he was, all the rungs of the hierarchy after living in Rome at the pope's chancery until he came within a whisker of the prestigious patriarchal seat. A man of power, in short, and extremely motivated. It could not have been easy at all."

"However, if nothing else, despite the following financial difficulties, he held on tightly to his very rich collection of precious codices. Finally donating it to the community of San Daniele where she resided. They are such unique volumes, even scholars from abroad come here to consult them."

"They are codices often made by the greatest illuminators or copyists of the time, such as the *Jerusalem Bible* penned by Battista da Cingoli," Geremia said. "Or Dante's *Inferno* made in Florence with illustrations by Bartolomeo di Fruosino, one of the most talented artists in that great workshop that was Santa Maria degli Angeli. While what is known as the *Byzantine Bible* could even come from the *scriptorium* of the Holy Sepulcher. And one could go on at length with codices of inestimable value, since it is impossible to value them."

"Of course," the director commented. "Unique pieces of great beauty, such as the breviary known as *Guarneriana Codex 4*, or *Guarneriana 42* with the *Sentences* of Pietro Lombardo. Or the so-called *Breviary of Vienne*, the *Guarneriana 102*, Brunetto Latini's *Tresor*, the *Messale Parmense*, the *Book of Hours* known as *Guarneriana 198*, the codex containing Petrarch's *Canzoniere* and *Trionfi*. Or the *Arcanum of the Sea*..."

"The latter produced in Florence, by a strange coincidence," Geremia interrupted him. "However, you didn't mention the *Tabula Salomonis*," he observed.

"Yes," the other commented, looking at the floor. "That shouldn't even be in here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that in the library wanted by an ecclesiastic a cursed text like the *Tabula Salomonis* is completely out of place. What on earth was Guarnerio doing with it?"

"A cleric who even held the position of vicar of the patriarch, to boot. But he was a great lover of books and texts he even copied and transcribed himself. And probably esoteric and magic books, as possessed by all the most educated and wealthiest men of the time. Assuming, of course, that those papers were really brought here by him."

"That may be."

"I am convinced that Guarnerio came into possession of the *Tabula Salomonis* when he was in Florence on the occasion of the 1439 Council, which saw the arrival in the city of many people from

the East. And perhaps in his collection he also possessed other such books of which we have since lost trace. Or of which he himself preferred to get rid."

"That seems a bit far-fetched," the director commented.

"Perhaps. But I see no reason to keep those pages condemned by the Church even though they are included in bizarre company in that miscellany known as *Guarneriana Codex 137*, from paper 7 recto to 9 verso if I remember correctly. Although in that context it is called *Tabula Fungonis*."

"I see you have a remarkable knowledge of the volumes kept in here, Dr. Solaris. I'm impressed."

"Don't forget that I had a great teacher. The best, no doubt."

"Of course it's strange," the director made as he looked around. "We are inside a temple of culture, wanted by one cleric and expanded by another, and we are talking about an object that was employed to summon the devil."

"You say? I am convinced that demons have never left this place."

"What?" the other said without understanding.

"Don't worry," replied Geremia. "Even Valerio's suicide should never have taken place in here."

"You are right, Dr. Solaris. However, I see you are very well versed in certain subjects, if you allow me. Don't tell me you also know how to use it, the *Tabula Salomonis*. Of course, mine is just a joke. But I think you should talk about this with a person I have known for years, an expert on certain subjects and who has taught at the University. He lives in Udine, downtown. If you want, I'll give you his address and phone number."

"Why not?"

"Fine," the other said, writing the address on a piece of paper and handing it to Geremia. "I'll take care of notifying him. Meeting you has been a pleasure, Dr. Solaris," he added, extending his hand.

"Goodbye and thank you," Geremia replied, sitting down again as soon as the director had stepped away. Talking to certain people was always a waste of time. Although, at least, he showed that he was sufficiently familiar with the library he presided over. Nevertheless, he had immediately felt a kind of revulsion toward that person, a dislike at first sight, he would have said. Or perhaps was it just the resurgence of the animosity toward any power, that he had cultivated since boyhood and that still affected him?

He searched the web for information about the name marked by the director. Yes - he reflected - a chat with that guy, perhaps, would be a good idea. On the other hand, not knowing which way to proceed, any attempt might do. What did he have to lose, after all? And he had not been back to Udine for a long time. To the city he had lived in as a high school student. Which had shared his hopes, those of a teenager who still did not understand what mechanisms governed the madness of this world. More than thirty years had passed since then, and he knew he would find a different world than the one he had left behind. Whether better or worse, he could not say. But, for sure, an alien world, with which he had little, now, to share.

X

Why type a text already handwritten in a notebook, living in fear you could be killed at any moment? There was no point in wasting time, and not a little, on such an activity. Besides, if that typescript was addressed to someone, probably him, how come Valerio had put it back inside the notebook along with those two photos? By logic, one of the two was one too many.

He had checked it very carefully. The text was exactly the same as the one written in pen. Of course, if you excluded those extra white spaces probably due to a defect in the typewriter that had never been found, as far as he understood. It was a manual model, probably an old Olivetti, while those in use in the library at the time were all electric by then. This was strange to say the least, it had to be admitted. Where had it ended up? Valerio had taken time to type a text, probably at home, but he was in such a hurry to finish that he could not afford to go back over the skipped characters.

Geremia had tried hard to understand if there was a hidden code, any logic, behind those apparent jumps. What on earth did you want to communicate to me, Valerio? - he asked himself, as if that old friend of his was still there listening to him. And why couldn't he understand, he, who had known the librarian quite well? And where had he hidden the damn typewriter?

Perhaps it was best if he finished his orange juice and walked out of the diner to take a walk until it was time for dinner, as soon as the fateful hour of freedom struck. And some fresh air, surely, would have been a good thing, for sure. Maybe even for his synapses, not properly lubricated since the previous night.

"May I sit down?" a voice said, coming from a woman with a steaming cup in her hand.

"Speranza?" he exclaimed almost jerking. "That's a surprise! Of course, have a seat!"

"I didn't mean to disturb you," she quickly added, setting herself down. "You may be busy..."

"No," he replied, folding up the paper he was still holding and putting it back in the notebook. "I was just finishing going over some notes."

"Are you researching anything in particular?"

"Let's say I am. With the help of your cousin."

"He's a good person, despite his quirks. What is it about, if you don't mind me asking?"

Geremia hesitated. He did not know whether it was appropriate to make her aware of the affair regarding Valerio's death. Besides, he hardly knew the woman. Then he gave in to her insistence and told her part of the truth, omitting the role her cousin, Andrea Ostermann, had played in implicating him. It might have been an acceptable compromise, after all. On the other hand, it was pleasant to spend time discussing with such an educated woman, as he realised once again. And it was not just because of her teaching job. Speranza demonstrated an uncommon open-mindedness and curiosity. Certainly more than the average teacher he had met. And also, she knew how to listen.

"I feel sorry for Valerio," the woman said after a while. "He must have been a great person. And if really... If those accusations were not true, as you so confidently claim. That's terrible. But what do you plan to do, after so long? We are talking about 30 years ago, if I understand correctly. Even in the worst cold cases you don't go back that far, at least I don't think so. Many witnesses are gone, and the physical traces will be gone as well by now. The murder scene, the Guarneriana, is a fairly busy place and will have had some changes in this period as well. I admire you for your perseverance, Geremia, I mean it. But what do you really think you will find?"

"I've never thought about it, to be honest. I just know that I have to give it a try. I owe Valerio a lot and I know he would never back down to help me if I asked him to."

She smiled. "Then you are right to insist. I rarely leave the house these days, but if you need help, anything, don't be shy about it. I'm available."

"I thank you, Speranza. But you maybe..." Geremia immediately regretted uttering those last words whose meaning, however, had not escaped the other.

"Did Andrea tell you something about me?" the woman asked, pointing her eyes at him.

"Maybe I shouldn't have," he replied impishly, "but don't take it out on him, I was the one who..."

"Never mind," the woman interrupted him with an eloquent hand gesture. "I'm well aware that I don't look very healthy."

"No, believe me. I didn't mean..."

"Never mind, Geremia. As you may have quickly realized, I asked for a leave in order to better fight a very serious form of depression. Some very bad things have happened in my life. And I have also done some stupid things."

"I'm so sorry, Speranza," he replied. "I know you will make it through this difficult time." Then, before she could retort, he asked, "But don't you have anyone to help you?"

"Help me? My parents are dead and my only sister lives abroad. And my husband, thank God, is out of the way. Excuse my frankness, but you men are big assholes when you want to be. Besides, forgive me, I'd rather not talk about it."

Geremia had noticed that Speranza's language had lapsed and the tone of her voice was colored with resentment and anger. Evidently those events still burned beyond her words of independence. "I'm sorry, I really am. Although I don't know the details, I know I don't deserve to know them," he tried.

But before he could continue, she asked him, with the hint of a smile as if to erase the last words, "How about you? How are you doing?"

He gritted his teeth. But, albeit after some hesitation, he had no problem telling her his whole story with Sara and why he felt guilty about his wife's death. Opening up to that woman came naturally to him. The other had to notice the knot that had formed in his throat as he recalled those events and his wet eyes.

"It's clear that we haven't had great luck from a sentimental point of view," the woman commented after he had finished his tale.

"Apparently not, Speranza."

"Don't worry about me, Geremia. There are things we cannot do anything about. And others on which we can act. Or, at least, try to. Regardless of what we may think, our life is unique. We must do what we can to not throw it away. Although often it is not easy, I know that too well."

You don't know at all the abyss of evil that dominates this world - he thought. But at least one thing was true. Perhaps those moments spent with Speranza had been the best in a long time. Despite the sad affair she was going through. His was of no importance in comparison.

Like a trite Cinderella-style fairy tale, Speranza glanced at the clock, "Oh my, how late it is!"

"Do you really have to go?"

"I absolutely must take my medication. I have schedules I have to keep."

Geremia had the impulse to ask if he could accompany her, but he froze. Perhaps that was not the case. It was a small town, after all. And evil tongues were always at work. Maybe Speranza wouldn't have cared. But she was a middle school teacher, known to everyone. And perhaps she herself would not have appreciated this overconfidence.

"I understand," he merely said.

"Mandi" the woman greeted him as she stood up and waved him away.

"Mandi" he replied. "Wait a minute" he immediately added, blocking her.

"What is it?"

Geremia pulled out a business card from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. "Here, if you need anything, call me. Don't be shy about it."

"Thank you," the woman replied, writing her phone number on a piece of paper in turn. Then she quickly headed for the door. He noticed her smiling as she left.

He returned to his seat staring at the empty, abandoned cup in front of him. And then at the unopened notebook resting on the table. In its cruelty, he reflected, fate amuses itself by tying distant and seemingly irreconcilable threads together. If a fate worthy of the name eventually exists. Speranza was fighting her daily battle against an adverse fate. He wished he had possessed a small part of her courage instead of drifting along, day after day, dragged along by the unpredictability of the currents. Without ever making a choice. Without deciding, ultimately, which direction to take. And Valerio, who had instead directed his life, now came to claim his commitment to something he could not deny him. Geremia shrugged. At least he would have a job to do instead of getting drunk, and in this, his master was helping him once again. A help he didn't deserve much, perhaps. Even if, ultimately, he remained a desperately lonely being. Exactly like Speranza, at least from what he understood.

He reopened the notebook again and pulled out the typed paper to give it yet another look. After that, he put it away again. He definitely needed to have a walk but he swore he would discover the secret of those lines. The next day he had that appointment in Udine. When was the last time he had been in the city? He had checked. There was a bus leaving at a quarter past seven, and although he wasn't completely sure, the trip might have given him something. He knew from experience how sometimes the cues, the happiest inspirations come from where one least expects them. Sometimes it had worked. And his brain, when left free to roam about on its own, had proved to have some surprises in store for him.

XI

On the wall in front of him hung a series of college degrees and certificates, even in English. And of photographs portraying the landlord alongside people he didn't know but who, as far as he could see, must have been important. All hung above an expanse of books and junk of all kinds piled just about everywhere, in a chaos that must have looked like what God had around himself at the moment of the Creation, from which he drew what he could, as is known.

The figure sitting behind the desk was imposing and, moreover, quite well fleshed out. A human monument wearing a pair of round spectacles with thick lenses. A snow-white beard, like a nineteenth-century character, descended to cover a shirt that peeped out from under a dull-colored, V-necked sweater. One of those usually purchased by an apprehensive wife with no particular imagination. Geremia guessed the man must have been in his seventies, more or less. In fact, even a little more.

"In short," the man said, resting his elbows on the large table that participated in the primordial chaos that reigned in the room, "you know Walter Cesclans."

"Walter Cesclans?"

"The director of the Guarneriana, of course," the other replied, looking at his interlocutor indecipherably and raising his eyebrows.

"Ah, forgive me. I had misunderstood," Geremia lied, taken aback. He actually had no idea of the name of the man he had spoken to the day before. He had not even bothered to ask him, for all he cared.

"Never mind," the other commented, just to say something. Then he added, "Dr. Solaris, forgive me, but I didn't quite understand why you asked to see me."

"Walter Cesclans, as a matter of fact, gave me your name because of some research I am doing. He told me you are a genuine expert on the subject."

"The director's esteem gives me great pleasure. Just think that he was a student of mine when I was teaching Religious History at the university. He was smart, although now he has been reduced to basically being a bureaucrat."

Geremia smiled. "Well, that your students hold you in high esteem is a credit to you."

"Let's just say I have to appreciate," the other commented, reciprocating with a scowl, "especially those who judge me favorably despite having taken my classes. Because, I confess, I had a reputation for being a strict lecturer. And also a bit of a jerk, if you'll allow me the expression."

"I just can't imagine you being as fierce as you paint yourself, professor."

"Don't trust appearances, Dr. Solaris," the man said with a chuckle. "But, tell me, what can I do for you?"

Geremia repeated the little story he had prepared. "I'm taking up some old studies I had done before I left. They were about the persistence of ancient cults in these areas. I am referring in particular to those related to deities connected to water and fire. Like Belenos, to whom not only the main temple of Aquileia was dedicated, but even the whole city."

"Which says a lot about how deep-rooted his cult was," the professor intervened. "So much so that the new masters, the Romans, failed to impose the name of Apollo as would have been more natural."

"That's right," continued the other. "The thing that has always made an impression on me is that his cult, pagan as it was, continued even under Christianity, transformed into that of John the Baptist, for example, which the diocese of Aquileia, with its claim to independence from Rome, would take as reference. And then under the guise of St. Christopher, who can still be seen represented on many church facades in the area."

"You are absolutely right, Dr. Solaris. The Patriarchate of Aquileia has always maintained that its origins were completely distinct from those of Rome having been founded directly by the evangelist Mark. Or by the Egyptian church, a hypothesis that, would not be so far-fetched according to recent studies. In any case, as you have surely learned in your research, water worship has remained well alive to this day. Just look at how many churches in these parts were built near the springs and perhaps named after the Baptist, the baptizer. Do not forget that that of baptism is a rite of passage in which water plays a fundamental role. Just as Christopher, whose name means "bearer of Christ," is always depicted crossing a stream of water. Finally, baptism is a moment in which one dies only to be resurrected. Exactly like Jesus and, if you will allow me, Belenos as well."

"And like Osiris," Geremia added. "Or Adonis, Mithras, Baal..."

"Exactly," commented the professor. "But the figure of Belenos possesses a peculiarity."

"Which one?"

"It is a deity with a very close relationship with the Friulian territory and certain Celtic peoples who inhabited it. Which is not found elsewhere, at least to such an extent, except in a specific area of what is now southern France."

"This is really curious," Geremia replied. "Although, now that you mention it, everyone knows that the Friulian language has obvious points of contact with the language beyond the Alps. Certainly greater affinities than with Italian. Which can only be explained by relationships between peoples going back to the antiquity. And you are telling me this had already happened at the level of religious beliefs. Moreover, even in Christian times. Interesting indeed."

"The basic misunderstanding, Dr. Solaris, is to believe that Friuli, nowadays placed on the fringes, so to speak, of the West and of that legal absurdity that is the Italian state of Savoyan origins, has always been a peripheral area. But this is not the case. Remember that for many centuries, this was an important and politically and culturally independent land. And that is how it was perceived even from the outside. Just to give an example in a different sphere, in the 16th century, the time of a great musician like Giorgio Mainerio, in a large part of Europe people danced "alla furlana." And before that, Wolfram von Eschenbach wrote part of his Parzival at the court of the Patriarch of Aquileia, one of the most important men in the Empire, around whom flourished a remarkable literature that the school, still intimately fascist in its programs, pardon my frankness, is careful not to mention. As well as the fact that one of the first parliaments in the world, complete with representatives of local communities, was that of the Patria del Friuli with its headquarters in Udine Castle. But on this, too, the school is silent, even here. Friulians, despite their language and culture, have never been entitled to a history, Dr. Solaris. Reading school texts, it seems that in these lands, people for centuries have done nothing but wait for the Italic liberator. Everything else has simply been erased."

"I can only agree with you," commented Geremia.

"Would you like another example? The 16th century, let's continue on this, was a century of social uprisings but also of trials against witches and the sort of shamans who were the so-called *benandanti*. Trials that continued in the following centuries as well. But if these had not been the subject of a study that has resonated with historians and anthropologists internationally, almost no one would be talking about them."

"Very clear, professor. So what?" Geremia said, to invite his interlocutor not to digress.

"I mean, we must not stop at the appearance of a sleepy land and a people who for too long have known no better than to identify with the master of the day. The currents of thought, the religious tensions, have been running through this region just like the others. Indeed, certainly more so and affecting it in greater depth. Friuli has always been an important crossroads, placed in the heart of Europe. Since the dawn of time."

"Even in the case of heresies?" Geremia asked.

The professor looked him in the eye. "Terms like 'heresy' do not mean much. *Háiresis*, in everyday language, simply meant 'choice.' And who can really say that his is the right choice? Or at least the best possible one? Just as one speaks of "orthodoxy," or *ortos doxa*, "correct opinion." Correct with respect to whom? You see, Dr. Solaris, what for us is established, was once considered heresy by many, indeed by the majority. But, as is well known, history is never written by losers. And in this area, over the centuries, a terrible conflict was fought. Until power decided to adopt the belief until then considered subversive, if not criminal. A matter of simple political expediency, of course. But it was by no means a peaceful and brief transition. Instead, it was a terrible war, a war that has lasted in practice, in various forms, since time immemorial and is being fought even in our own day. Some things, you see, cannot be completely erased, and some parts of the old beliefs always manages to survive, even if it is sometimes forced to adapt to the new situation."

Geremia looked at the professor with suspicion. The years and studies must have left their mark.

"What exactly are you referring to, professor? Forgive me, but I'm afraid I can't follow you."

The other looked around before answering. "Mind you, I am a scholar who, although now retired, can boast of having a long academic career at my back. But I know I am speaking to a man who is capable of understanding what I mean."

"Perhaps," Geremia said, increasingly bewildered.

"Dr. Solaris, we have become addicted to a conception of the universe that envisions the presence of a single god from whom everything is derived. A god who is fundamentally good and dispenser of mercy. We take it for granted, almost natural. But this does not explain the presence of evil in our reality. Moreover, it prevents us from entering into the difficult question about the nature of this evil. As you know, all Christian exegetes have used every possible argument in order to succeed in justifying the presence, in this world willed by a god who is only goodness, of a destructive reality that someone, at some point, wanted to identify with the Evil One, Satan, the Adversary and so on and so forth. In short, with someone who is still a subordinate and separate entity. It was a way to take away God's responsibility. But the construction does not hold, it leaks on all sides, and after thousands of years, theologians have still not come to a satisfactory accommodation of the issue. If God is unique and is the creator of all things, from whom can evil come, if not from him?"

"And what is the alternative?"

The professor smiled, not hiding a certain smugness. "Don't forget that many of what we label as 'heresies' are actually much older than Christianity. Hard to imagine that they are a simple reaction to the latter, don't you think?"

"Some things never change," Geremia commented. "And man is still the same, he was before Christ, and afterwards he certainly hasn't changed, except for the worse."

"You don't think much of your fellow human beings Dr. Solaris."

"Should I?"

The other spread his arms wide. "What to say? I can only agree with you, unfortunately. However, returning to our discourse, long before our era men asked themselves the same questions, and in order to solve the problem of the objective wickedness that dominated the world in which they lived, they found no better way than to make their god assimilate good and evil in himself. This corresponds to a, shall we say, rather primitive stage of religions."

"Or," Geremia intervened, "they had to admit the presence of a second entity who was the master of the dark aspect of the universe."

"Precisely so," the professor replied. "But this evolution took place in stages. As any biblical scholar well knows, Yahweh, at his appearance, was a cruel and bloody god. Not to mention the human sacrifices certainly offered to him. To him and most likely also to his companion, his Asherah. I am not asserting anything, mind you, that has not emerged from the most recent philological studies and archaeological excavations in recent decades."

"When I sharpen my flashing sword and my hand grasps it in judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, while my sword devours flesh: the blood of the slain and the captives, the heads of the enemy leaders."

"Deuteronomy, chapter 32, verses 41 and 42. Congratulations on your memory, Dr. Solaris."

"Also on yours, professor. But those are lines I like to repeat and therefore I know them very well. It seems almost impossible that this is the same fatherly and loving God preached by Jesus."

"And in fact even the early Christians were definitely embarrassed about this. One step at a time, the people of Israel had to invent the figure of Satan to take the responsibility for evil away from God. But some ancient trace of this ambivalence has survived in the biblical text." The scholar took a Bible from the shelf behind him and began to leaf through it. After that he stopped on a verse underlined in pencil: "Isaiah chapter 45, verse 7. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things. In short, it is Yahweh himself who proudly tells us. And in the Old Testament there are dozens and dozens of passages betraying this ambivalence, let's call it that, of God. Which many times lapses into the most genuine sadism, into complacency about the suffering he inflicts. At other points the word Satan, in the biblical text, is in fact replaced with the expression the wrath of the Lord. You cannot be much clearer!"

"In this he does not differ much from many other deities who assimilate good and evil in themselves, the latter perhaps symbolized by a peculiar trait, something animal-like. I think of the goat-horned Dionysus, of Mithra with his bull. But there are lots of examples."

"It is the depiction peculiar to primitive cultures where a rather crude religious experience still prevails. What theologians will call dualism will be a far more mature and conscious experience."

Geremia stared in wonder at his interlocutor. "What?" he exclaimed without understanding.

"As I said, the Jews separated Yahweh from its evil component and called it Satan. Not only that. The Bible we know is actually a tampered and late text in which an attempt was made to conceal in various ways the authentic nature of a god who, in fact, was clearly Phoenician in nature. In the same way, an attempt has been made to draw a veil over the reality of the rites that took place in the temple in Jerusalem, and elsewhere, and that involved, among other things, human sacrifices. Probably of children, as many passages betray. But this is a subject that would take us too far."

"You undoubtedly refer to the so-called *molk* sacrifice."

"Which the Israelites learned from the Phoenicians, along with sacred prostitution, the cult of the king who dies and rises again, and other such little things. Your learning on the subject surprises me, Dr. Solaris."

"I have dealt with it, professor. But, forgive me, I fail to see where you are going with this."

"I mean to say that dualism, which the Jews found mature enough and which prompted them to create the figure of Satan, Šātān, the *adversary*, the *enemy*, is not the legacy of ancient civilizations now dead and buried."

"But professor, Satan, the *diabolos* of the Septuagint translation, is an inferior being, a creature who rebels against God and whose powers are limited. The Christians dualism is very flawed and unbalanced. Leaving aside the never-solved problems that this approach brings with it and the fact that we do not understand why God allows evil to rule without deigning to intervene. If you are referring to Zarathustra and his religion, we are even in 1200 B.C., more or less."

"Well before the writing of the Bible, you are right, which dates back only a few centuries before Christ. Certainly after the return from the Babylonian exile. Zarathustra's revelation states that evil is not an aspect of the good god, but a totally separate principle. Herein lies its striking novelty. If it is his own doing, of course."

"Ormazd and Ahriman..."

"Yes," commented the scholar, "Ahriman, the Destroyer. The personification of wickedness and death. The father of our demons."

Geremia was beginning to no longer understand what the professor was getting at with his crackpot reasoning. If there was a goal at all. He could not help but consider worthy of attention what an academic of undoubted renown like the one in front of him was telling him. But the years do not always play in favor of logic in the exposition of ideas. And the head sometimes merrily goes off on its own. In any case, he was beginning to have enough.

But before he could open his mouth, the elderly lecturer resumed, "That of Zarathustra, whoever he was, was a shattering revelation influencing all subsequent cultures, even the most openly polytheistic ones. A river that over the centuries has flowed through much of mankind's religious thought: Manichaeans, Mithra and Dionysus worshipers, Gnostics, followers of Marcion, Paulicians, Bogomils, Cathars albeit in a thousand different shades. And many others."

"Movements that are either dead and buried or survive with few adherents."

The professor looked Geremia in the eye. "Are you really convinced, Dr. Solaris? I have studied the subject in depth and, believe me, I am convinced that while the official religions at the moment are not enjoying great health, the groups that have always referred to the darker side of the universe are as vital as ever."

"More vital than ever? And who would they be?"

"I don't want you to misinterpret my words, Dr. Solaris, but I have devoted a good part of my existence to the study of certain phenomena that are little known because they take place in the shadows, basically."

"Namely?"

"We are dealing with cults that come from the mists of time and have never had any interruption. It is Christianity, if anything, that turns out to be something incidental but that does not change the substance of the matter."

"But professor, our planet is largely Christian! You certainly don't want to deny that."

"Dr. Solaris, do not make the mistake of underestimating the extent of this underworld."

"I do not underestimate it at all."

"If I say Sabbaths, black masses and stuff like that, what do you say?"

"That they are phenomena that belong to the pathology of a segment of people and should rather be dealt with by crime reports and psychiatry."

"Perfect, Dr. Solaris. As you well know, these phenomena include very pronounced sexual components, but not only that. I could see that these rituals have remarkable similarities with those once dedicated to Baal, for example, where women undressed before phallic images and priests entered their shrines naked. Leaving aside, of course, the child sacrifices that might be reminiscent of the *molk* sacrifice..."

"Professor," Geremia interrupted him impatiently, "we started from Belenos and came to Baal and the black masses. I can understand that the name of the deity can only have one origin, but I must confess that I have lost the thread of your argument. What are you getting at?"

The other stared into his eyes, "I understand your skepticism, Dr. Solaris. If I were you, I would act the same way. But I just want to make you understand that what is presented to us as an orgy done by devil worshippers, a trivial and unimaginative parody of the Christian mass and so on, does not correspond to reality at all. And it comes from much, much further away."

"Are you claiming that Satanism does not exist? And neither does everything related to it? That we have so far misrepresented everything? I'm sorry to contradict you, professor, but I've dealt with people like this before, people often connected to Masonic and esoteric circles and stuff like that. Look, I come from Florence, a city where these realities have even held the reins of political and economic power for centuries. Political institutions and banks included."

"Dr. Solaris, I am in no way denying the actual existence of what you are claiming. I am only telling you that the reality is quite different from what we believe. I have studied the trials of the Inquisition extensively. Moreover, right here in Udine, we have one of the most important archival collections on the subject. Nothing strange, considering that the valleys of these mountains and the whole territory, all the way down to the plains, witnessed a great number of witch trials. And also trials against sorcerers, so much so that they have been cited by leading international scholars of religion and anthropology."

"Are you referring to the proceedings involving the so-called 'benandanti'?"

"Of course. Precisely to these Friulian shamans of a few centuries ago, but not only."

"Many trials brought against alleged witches have been published and often those accusations are just the result of fabrications due to popular hysteria."

"On this I cannot disagree. But I was talking about the first trials, and I have become convinced of one thing."

"Namely?"

The elderly scholar seemed to hesitate. "That the depositions of the defendants brought before the Inquisition tribunal on charges of witchcraft or Satanism were quite reliable."

"What?" Geremia exclaimed, amazed by the statement. "Are you kidding?"

"Think about it for a moment, Dr. Solaris. We take for granted, as if it were a given, that those whom we regard as innocent victims of ignorance were inclined to confess, terrified as they were and subjected to torture, to any statement suggested by their torturers. Who tended to match the depositions with what they had learned from the manuals of inquisitorial procedure. In short, to make them fit into the patterns they had been trained on by the hierarchy and their culture."

"And did they not, perhaps?"

"I studied countless of those minutes, as I told you. And not only of the trials held in this area. At least in the Catholic area, the defendants were guaranteed much more than is commonly believed. Ultimately, a judge was forced to follow certain procedures to guarantee the accused. It was definitely more convenient for an ordinary citizen to appear before the Inquisition than before a civil court. This is an indisputable fact. The fact is that most of the proceedings were resolved with nothing or with quite mild punishments, all things considered."

"You're not going to deny the reality of the fires?"

"Of course not. And they will remain an indelible stain within the history of the Church. But, as you well know, the number of death sentences as a result of accusations of witchcraft should be greatly scaled down from what is routinely fabularized. And the vast majority of death sentences were imposed, let us not forget, in Protestant circles. Those who identify Church, Inquisition and witch burnings are making a very serious mistake from a historical point of view."

"What about Torquemada, to say nothing of characters like him? Surely that will not make him a man of holy life or a Good Samaritan?"

The professor chuckled. "God forbid! But the Spanish Inquisition constituted a chapter apart, so much so that it was often at odds with the Roman curia itself. It was above all a formidable instrument of social and territorial control in the hands of the Iberian monarchy. But here we enter the realm of the political use of the tribunal by the ecclesiastical power and hierarchy. Which also happened in many other local realities on Italian soil and in territories belonging to Venice, such as Friuli. These relations between powers were sometimes conflictual, sometimes conniving, if not more so. And it cannot be ruled out that certain pyres were set on the advice, let us say, of certain potentates, whether openly or not. This was already happening in earlier centuries, even in the Florence where you live, Dr. Solaris, where judges and the municipality would agree many times to divide the property seized from the accused."

"This was certainly happening in the 14th century, professor. And it was the practice. But, in your opinion, could it have happened even in a much later period? In 1698 for example? After all, from

the mid-sixteenth century onwards we are now talking about the Roman Inquisition, a much more centralized and efficient repressive structure and, in theory, much more autonomous than local power and with structures of its own. And also for this reason freer from certain ties and conditioning."

"The Tribunal remained formally active even until the early nineteenth century. And even in the previous century it had a lot of work to do."

Geremia remained silent, thinking about those last words. Could it be that...

The phone rang. The elderly lecturer apologized and answered it. A few monosyllables. "Dr. Solaris, you must forgive me, but I almost forgot that I have to take my wife to a medical examination. Even spouses get old, unfortunately."

Without getting up from his chair, the professor turned to open a flap behind him. He drew a spiral-bound package of photocopies from it and handed it to his guest. "Here, if you want to elaborate on what we just discussed. I have more copies and you are welcome to keep this one. It is a text that I never managed to publish but I am convinced that since you have a degree in History of Religions, you will be able to understand its contents better than these idiotic publishers."

"Thank you," Geremia said, increasingly confused.

"But now I really have to leave," the professor concluded, "or my wife will kill me. She would be quite capable of it, I guarantee you."

XII

The interview with the professor had lasted three quarters of an hour. Geremia found it as odd as he could have imagined. Why had Walter Cesclans so strongly advised him to talk to the professor? Having been one of his lecturers, he must have known him well. Although, if he was honest, there was a certain idea, sparked by the scholar's words, that kept buzzing in his head.

Thus reasoning, Geremia had arrived at the door of the nearby Udine Civic Library. There was a part of his research he should not be doing at the Guarneriana in San Daniele. Maybe he was too careful, but the events of life had made him suspicious. And he acted accordingly, now almost mechanically. What is more, often getting it right.

After the grueling paperwork for the admission, he was finally sitting at a table with a few packs of newspapers in front of him. And he needed to verify something. On the web he had only been able to find the obituary of the former director of the Guarneriana at the time of Valerio's death, the hated and never regretted Dr. Oliviero De Crignis. The usual nobody, from what he understood, put in charge of an institution for no apparent reason. The Internet said basically nothing more. But at that time, the 1990s, the Web was not yet a shared, omnivorous reality as it has become today. And the social media had yet to take full possession of our minds and time.

In any case, he found a date, November 23, 1994, which allowed him to restrict his searches. And it was not difficult, in fact, to find ample space devoted to the event in the local pages of the *Messaggero Veneto* at the time, due mainly to the circumstances of the death. Not least because it is not every day that journalists get the cakewalk of news of an unfortunate bystander being killed by a hit-and-run car. Summing up the facts, it had been dark for a while and our dear De Crignis was tending to what was probably, from what he had heard about him, the busiest task of his day. That is, taking the dog out to do his business. The former director lived in a fairly suburban area of Udine and, at that hour, there was virtually no one around. So much so that it had been one of his neighbors, after his wife had been alarmed because he didn't return, who had found the lifeless body jolted onto the lawn, lower than the roadway and practically invisible to those passing further above.

No doubt he had been run over by a car with the driver not even stopping to help. Although the collision must have been so violent that De Crignis had surely died instantly. The Carabinieri had not detected any braking marks. As a result, whoever was driving the car, which was proceeding at high speed, must not have noticed it, except, realizing what had happened, to rush off. After collecting some fragments that surely belonged to the hit-and-run car, the officers had tried to identify it. They had made the rounds of body shops in a wide area to see if anyone had approached one of them for repairs. They had looked for witnesses, checked the cameras of a few nearby banks. But there had been nothing they could do.

Geremia checked the newspapers of the following days. The hit-and-run driver was never identified, and within a couple of weeks the affair was forgotten. He discovered that none of the articles mentioned the dog's fate, which seemed decidedly unfair to him. But that death reminded him too closely of certain others that had occurred in Florence. The style was the same, after all. And that was exactly how Sara had been taken from him. Although there was no possibility of comparison between the sunny immensity of that woman and the slimy nullity of any De Crignis.

He scribbled through the newspapers for a while longer but with nothing else significant emerging, except for the black-and-white photograph of the former director of the Guarneriana. He studied the image for a long time, it was grainy, as all the images of the newspapers of that time. The figure

reminded him strikingly of another obnoxious being he had dealt with a couple of years earlier. A fellow - what the heck was his name? Ah, yes, Chiostroni. He couldn't remember the name. A total idiot with a guaranteed salary who wanted to confiscate God only knew what from him for not paying a municipal tax and who had been unwilling to accept any installment proposal. An idiot incapable of reasoning and reading anything other than a regulation compiled by other idiots. If a shred of justice still existed in this filthy world, he should have been screaming in pain at that moment from a slow and devastating disease. But surely, instead, he was somewhere enjoying his seat-warmer's salary like so many others thriving under the banner of the city lapped by the waters of the blameless Arno. Yet it was amazing, he pondered, how much these bureaucrat parasites resembled each other. Nothing new under the sun. *Nihil sub sole novum.*

He set the pack of newspapers he had just scrolled through to one side and picked up another from a different editor. It was not difficult to track down the very extensive article about the incident. In that case, the author of the piece had managed to stuff it with even more platitudes and obvious expressions. But one of the last paragraphs literally made Geremia jerk on his chair.

With the death of the former director, it almost seems to continue the kind of curse that has been raging against the Guarneriana Library in San Daniele del Friuli in recent years. The death of Dr. De Crignis, at the hands of a hit-and-run driver, follows by a little more than two years the suicide of an employee just inside the library premises. While about two months ago another former librarian, Daniele Mosar, was found dead in his home following an overdose.

The article added nothing more. Geremia scrabbled like a fury through the newspaper pages from a couple of months earlier until he found the article he was interested in in the local news.

San Daniele: Retired librarian dies of overdose.

The corpse of Daniele Mosar, in a now advanced state of decomposition, was found in his home on the far outskirts of the town by the brother of the deceased, who had the door broken in, concerned because for several weeks his relative had not been answering the phone and had given no sign of life, while his car was reported to be regularly parked in the driveway.

When firefighters entered, accompanied by Carabinieri, they could only verify Mosar's death. A syringe was found next to the corpse, and a fair amount of cocaine was found in the apartment, well hidden. The final word will of course be up to the autopsy examination, but as of now there seems to be little doubt as to how the events unfolded.

Daniele Mosar had recently retired and had always been appreciated for his work in the library, at the Guarneriana. His former colleagues say they are shocked by this fact. No one had ever suspected that the deceased was using drugs. In any case, the manner of death would seem to indicate that he was not a habitual user of such substances, a circumstance that proved fatal to him. In short, it would seem that we are facing yet another drama due to loneliness.

Geremia closed the paper again. What on earth had ever happened in the Guarneriana some 30 years ago? He cast a glance toward the clock. His time was running out and he had to hurry if he wanted to get back to Buja in time for...

In spite of everything he managed to smile and for a moment forgot the irritated and satisfied faces of a De Crignis or a Chiostroni. He picked up his bundle of newspapers and walked briskly towards the delivery desk.