

The Oracle

Valerio Massimo Manfredi

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Ephira, north-western Greece, 16 November 1973, 8 p.m.

THE TIPS OF the fir trees trembled suddenly. The dry oak and plane leaves shuddered, but there was no wind and the distant sea was as cold and still as a slab of slate.

It seemed to the old scholar as if everything around him had suddenly been silenced – the chirping of the birds and the barking of the dogs and even the voice of the river, as if the water were lapping the banks and the stones on its bed without touching them. As if the earth had been shaken by a dim, deep tremor.

He ran his hand through his white hair, thin as silk. He touched his forehead and tried to find within himself the courage to face – after thirty years of obstinate, tireless research – the vision he had sought.

No one was there to share the moment with him. His workers, Yorgo the drunk and Stathis the grumbler, had already left after having put away their tools, their hands deep in their pockets and their collars turned up. Their footsteps on the gravelly road were the only sound to be heard.

Anguish gripped the old man. 'Ari!' he shouted. 'Ari, are you still there?'

The foreman rushed over: 'I'm right here, Professor. What is it?'

But it was just a moment's weakness: 'Ari, I've decided to stay a little longer. You go on to town. It's dinner time, you must be hungry.'

The foreman looked him over with a mixture of affection and protectiveness: 'Come with me, Professor. You need to eat something and to rest. It's getting cold, you'll catch your death out here.'

'No, I'll just be a little while, Ari. You go on ahead.'

The foreman walked off reluctantly, got into the service car and headed down the road to town. Professor Harvatis watched the car's lights slash the hillside. He then went into the little tool shed, resolutely took a shovel from its hook on the wall, lit a gas lamp and started towards the entrance to the building which housed the ancient Necromantion: the Oracle of the Dead.

At the end of the long central corridor were the steps that he had unearthed over the last week. He started down, going much deeper than the sacrifice chamber, and ended up in a room still cluttered by the dirt and stones that hadn't been cleared away. He looked around, sizing up the small space that surrounded him, and then took a few steps towards the western wall until he was in the centre of the room. His shovel scraped away the layer of dirt covering the floor until the tip of the tool hit a hard surface. The old man pushed aside the dirt, uncovering a stone slab. It was engraved with the figure of a serpent, the cold symbol of the other world.

He took the trowel from his jacket pocket and scraped all around the slab to loosen it. He stuck the tip of the trowel into a crack and prised up the slab by a few centimetres, then flipped it back. An odour of mould and moist earth invaded the small chamber.

A black hole was open before him, a cold, dark recess never before explored. By anyone. This was the *adyton*: the chamber of the secret oracle. The place in which only a very few initiates had ever been admitted, with one purpose. To call up the pale larvae of the dead.

He lowered his lamp and saw yet more stairs. He felt his life quivering within him like the flame of a candle just before it goes out.

By night

our ship ran onward towards the Ocean's bourne,
 the realm and region of the Men of Winter,
 hidden in mist and cloud. Never the flaming
 eye of Helios lights on those men
 at morning, when he climbs the sky of stars,
 nor in descending earthward out of heaven;
 ruinous night being rove over those wretches.

He recited Homer's verses under his breath like a prayer: they were the words of the *Nekya*, the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*, recounting Odysseus's journey to the realm of the shades.

The old man descended to the second underground chamber and raised his lamp to see the walls. His brow wrinkled and beaded up with sweat: the lamplight danced all around him guided by his trembling hand, revealing the scenes of an ancient, terrible rite – the sacrifice of a black ram, blood dripping from his gashed neck into a pit. He stared at the faded figures, eaten away by the damp. He stumbled closer and saw that there were names, people's names, cut into the wall. Some he recognized, great persons from the distant past, but many were incomprehensible, carved in letters unknown to him. He stepped back and the lamplight returned to the scene of the sacrifice. More words escaped his lips:

With my drawn blade

I spaded up the votive pit, and poured

libations round to it the unnumbered dead:

sweet milk and honey, then sweet wine, and last
 clear water; and I scattered barley down.

Then I addressed the blurred and breathless dead . . .

He walked to the centre of the chamber, knelt down and began to dig with his bare hands. The earth was cold and his fingers numb. He stopped to warm his stiffened hands under his armpits; his breath was fogging up his eyeglass lenses and he had to take them off to dry them. He began digging again, and his fingers found a surface as smooth and cold as a piece of ice; he

pulled them back as if he had been bitten by a snake nesting in the mud. His eyes jerked to the wall in front of him; he had the sensation that it was moving. He took a deep breath. He was tired, he hadn't eaten all day: an illusion, certainly.

He plunged his hands back into the mud and felt that same surface again. Smooth, perfectly smooth. His fingers ran over it, all around it, clearing off the mud as best he could. He brought the lamp close. Under the brown earth, the cold, pale glitter of gold.

He dug with fresh energy, and the rim of a vase soon appeared. A Greek crater, incredibly beautiful and minutely crafted, was buried in the dirt at the exact centre of the room.

His hands moved quickly and expertly and, under the feverish digging of his long, lean fingers, the fabulous vase seemed to emerge from the earth as if animated by an invisible energy. It was very, very ancient, entirely decorated with parallel bands. A large medallion at the centre was engraved with a scene in relief.

The old man felt tears come to his eyes and emotion overwhelm him: was this the treasure he'd been searching for his whole life? Was this the very core of the world? The hub of the eternal wheel, the centre of the known and the unknown, the repository of light and darkness, gold and blood?

He put down the lamp and stretched his trembling hands towards the large glittering vase. He closed his hands around it and lifted it up to his face, and his eyes filled with even greater stupor: the medallion at the centre depicted a man on foot armed with a sword, with something raised to his shoulder: a long handle . . . or an oar. Facing him was another man, dressed as a wayfarer, who lifted his hand as if to question him. Between them, an altar, and next to it three animals: a bull, a ram and a boar.

Great God in heaven! The prophecy of Tiresias engraved in gold before his eyes, the prophecy which announced Odysseus's last voyage . . . The voyage that no one had ever described, the story that had never been told. A journey over dry land, an odyssey through mud and dust towards a forgotten land, at a

great distance from the sea. To a place where people had never heard of salt, or of ships, where no one would recognize an oar, and could mistake it for a winnow, a fan used for separating the chaff from the grain.

He turned the great vase over in his hands and saw other scenes; they leapt to life, animated by the lamplight dancing on their surface. Odysseus's last adventure, cruel and bloody, in fulfilment of a fate he could not escape . . . forced to travel so far from the sea, only to return to the sea . . . to die.

Periklis Harvatis held the vase against his chest and raised his eyes to the northern wall of the *adyton*.

It was open.

Dumbfounded, he found himself facing a narrow opening, an impossible, absurd gap in the inert stone. It must have always been there, he reasoned, perhaps he just hadn't noticed it in the wavering light of the lamp. But deep inside, he realized with merciless certainty that he had somehow forced open that dim, threatening aperture. He took a few steps forward, still holding the vase, and picked up a little stone. He threw it into the opening. The stone was swallowed up without making a sound, neither when he hurled it nor after.

Was the abyss without end?

He moved forward to put an end to these dark imaginings. 'No!' he roared out, with everything he had in him. But his voice did not sound at all. It imploded within him, obliterating every scrap of strength. He felt his legs collapsing as he was invaded by intense cold, overwhelmed by crushing pressure. That hole was stronger than anyone and anything, it would suck up and devour any living energy.

But how could he turn back now? What meaning would his life have? Hadn't he been pursuing, for years and years, the proof for his theories, so often ridiculed? He was still in the real world, after all. He would go forward. He held out the lamp with one hand and gripped his treasure to his chest with the other.

He stepped forward, willing himself to believe that his hand would meet the wall, but he was wrong. His thin fingers

stretched into nothingness, the lamplight shrank into a tiny point. That point revealed all that he had vaguely sensed for years and years. And this flash of understanding drained the very life from his veins.

He shrank back, horrified and weeping, and fumbled for the opening to the tunnel that had brought him to the threshold of the abyss. He dragged himself towards the stairs. The vase had become intolerably heavy but he couldn't let go. He would rather die clutching it to his chest, go out in glory, have the last laugh.

He backed up again and stumbled; the wall dissolved in the halo cast by the lamp. As he made his way in its feeble light, he felt his heartbeat weakening, becoming slower and slower. He finally found the bottom step and pulled himself, gasping, to the upper chamber. With immense effort, he pushed the slab back over the opening and covered it with dirt. He picked up the vase and hobbled to the tool shed.

He couldn't stand the sight of it an instant longer. He covered it convulsively with a blanket from the cot. Struggling, he found a sheet of paper and a pen and began to write. He put the letter into an envelope, wrote an address and sealed it. He knew he was dying.

ARI SLOWLY SIPPED his Turkish coffee and smoked a cigarette, tipping the ashes into the remains of his meal still in the dish in front of him. He glanced at the road with each drag. The last diners had gone, and the tavern owner was busy cleaning up. Every now and then he'd walk over to the window and say, 'Looks like rain tonight.' He turned the chairs over on to the tables and wiped the floor with a wet rag. The telephone rang, and he set down the broom and picked up the receiver. He paled and gasped with the phone still in his hand, glancing over at Ari, who was smoking. He stuttered: 'Ari, come quickly . . . O my Lord, O most Holy Virgin . . . get over here, it's for you.'

Ari jumped to his feet and picked up the phone: a death

wheeze on the other end, pleading interrupted by sobs, the voice – nearly unrecognizable – of Professor Harvatis. He flicked away the cigarette butt burning his fingers and ran to the car. He raced back up towards the excavation tool shed, where he could still see a light on. Wheels skidding as he entered the courtyard, he jumped out, leaving the engine running. He grabbed an axe from the trunk of the car and approached the half-open door, poised to defend himself. He kicked it open and found the professor: curled up in a corner of the room, near the telephone table, with the receiver still swinging next to his head.

His face was deathly pale and carved by deep wrinkles, his body was shaking uncontrollably. His legs were stretched out on the floor as if paralysed and his hands clutched a shapeless bundle to his chest. His eyes, veiled with tears, flickered back and forth, as if his mind, invaded by panic, could no longer control their movements.

Ari dropped the axe and knelt down next to him: 'My God, what has happened? Who did this to you?' He reached out towards the bundle. 'Here, let go, give it to me . . . I'm taking you to the hospital in Preveza.'

But Harvatis clutched the bundle even tighter. 'No. No.'

'But you've been hurt, dear Mother in heaven, come on, in the name of God . . .'

Harvatis half closed his eyes: 'Ari, listen, do as I say . . . you have to do as I say, understand? Take me to Athens, right away, now.'

'To Athens? Not over my dead body . . . you should see yourself! Here, let me help you.'

The old professor's stare turned suddenly hard, sharp, his voice peremptory: 'Ari, you must absolutely do as I say. There's a letter on the table. You must take me to Athens, to the address that's on the envelope. Ari, I've got no one left to me. No family and no friends. What I found under there is killing me. And maybe many others will die this very night, understand? There's someone I have to see; I must tell him what I've discovered. To ask him for help . . . if it's possible . . . if we're still in time.'

Ari looked at him, completely disconcerted: 'Good God, Professor, what on earth are you saying? ...'

'Ari, don't betray me. For whatever in life is dearest to you, Ari, do as I say ... do as I say.' The foreman lowered his head, nodding. 'If I should ... die before we get there, you deliver the letter.'

Ari nodded again. 'Give me that bundle at least, let me put it in the car.' He shook his head. 'What is it, anyway?'

'Take it to the storeroom in the basement of the National Museum. The key's in my jacket pocket.'

'Whatever you say, Professor, don't worry, I'll do what you want me to do. Here, let me help you.' He picked the old man up like a child and eased him on to the back seat of the car. He took a last look before closing the door: the old man would never make it to Athens. He had seen death in the face. A goner if he'd ever seen one.

He went back to the tool shed, hung up the phone, picked up the letter and took a quick look around. Everything was perfectly in place - there was no hint that anyone had broken in; a familiar smell of onion and olive oil permeated the air. Had the old guy just suddenly gone crazy? And where had he found that thing he wouldn't let go of? He would have liked to check out the excavation area, but the professor was dying out there in the back seat of his car. He closed the door behind him and went back outside.

'Let's go, Professor. We're going to Athens. Try to rest ... lie down ... sleep, if you can.' He put the car into gear. The old man didn't answer, but Ari could hear his laboured, faltering breathing. And feel his desire to keep an impossible appointment, in Athens.

The car sped down the deserted streets of the town, and the tavern owner, from behind the dirty windows of his place, saw it shoot by in a cloud of dust down the road to Missolungi. The next day he'd have a strange story to tell his first customer.

Athens, 16 November, 8.30 p.m.

'Claudio, it's late. I'm out of here . . . What about you? We could get something to drink at the Plaka before we call it a night. There are these girls we met . . .'

'No thanks, Michel, I'm not leaving yet. I have to finish up on these files. I've got to get this work out of the way.'

'You don't know what you're missing. Norman and I picked up a couple of Dutch dolls on a tour. We're going to take them for a drink at Nikos's and then maybe go to Norman's place in Kifissia.'

'Not bad. So how do I fit in anyway – the odd man out?'

'Okay, okay, you're too much in love to think about having a little fun. What's up for tomorrow?'

'Oh right, Michel – I've heard that tomorrow there's something going on at the Polytechnic, something big. There's going to be a huge protest demonstration against the government and the police. The students' committee is talking about a lock-in. They say that the situation in the university has become impossible. Police infiltration, spies . . . people disappearing and you never find out what happens to them.'

'Who told you, Heleni?'

'Yeah, it was her. But it's stuff that everyone knows. Why?'

'Nothing. So what are you going to do, go to the Polytechnic yourself?'

'No. Why should I? We don't have anything to do with it. It's their thing. But I'm going to hang out here at the Institute tonight anyway. You know Heleni; she won't let them start anything without her . . .'

'Okay. Well, see you here tomorrow, then. 'Night, Claudio.'

'Goodnight, Michel. Say hi to Norman.'

His friend left and he could soon hear the sound of his Deux-Chevaux as it coughed its way into motion.

Claudio Setti returned to the epigraphy files he had been working on. He stood up and walked over to the shelves to

check a volume; as he was pulling it out a smaller booklet fell to his feet. He bent down to pick it up and gave it a look. The heading on the title page was:

PERIKLIS HARVATIS

Hypothesis on the necromantic rite in the *Odyssey*, Book XI

He started to read the first pages with growing interest, forgetting the files he was working on for his thesis, while a strange uneasiness crept up on him, a sense of confusion and solitude.

The phone rang. He stared at it at length before putting down the book and picking up the receiver.

'Claudio?'

'Heleni, honey, is that you?'

'*Agapimou*, you're still studying! Have you had dinner?'

'I thought I'd grab a sandwich and keep working.'

'I need to see you. I'm going back to the University tonight.'

'Heleni, please . . . don't go.'

'Can't you meet me here? I'm not far, at the *Tò Vounò* tavern. Please?'

'All right. I'll come. Have them fix me something to eat.'

He gathered up his notes to put them into his backpack. As he was about to close it, his gaze fell on the little book he'd left on the table. Too bad he couldn't finish it. He put it back on the shelf, switched off the lights and left, throwing his military-style jacket with the fake fur lining over his shoulders.

The streets were nearly deserted. He passed alongside the agora, where the ancient marble gleamed unnaturally white in the moonlight, and slipped down one of the roads in the intricate maze of the Plaka district. Every now and then, between the rooftops and terraces, the Parthenon loomed on his right, like a vessel of the gods shipwrecked on a cliff between the sky and the houses of men. He reached the old Wind Tower square where the tavern was.

He could see Heleni's black hair through the misty window. She was sitting alone with her elbows on the table and seemed

to be watching the thin thread of smoke rising from her cigarette as it sat in the ashtray.

He walked in behind her and put his hand on her hair. Without turning, she took his hand and kissed it. 'I really wanted you to come.'

'You know I want to see you. It's just that I have to get this work done. I want to get my degree. I'm serious about that.'

'I know you're serious. They have *dolmades* tonight. I've told them to heat some up. Is that okay?'

'Sure, *dolmades* are fine.'

The girl nodded and a waiter brought two plates and a pan with the stuffed grape leaves.

'It's about tomorrow.'

'Heleni, what do you mean, it's about tomorrow? What's that supposed to mean?'

'We're going to make a proclamation on the University radio asking for a general strike. This government will have to drop their mask and show who they really are. Students at the universities of Salonika and Patras are going to rise up with us. We'll make such a racket that they'll hear us all over Europe!'

'Oh, Christ. Now she wants a revolution. "Darling, there's a revolution tomorrow." What time? Have you decided what time it's going to be?'

'Stop that. You're Italian, you're going to finish your thesis and go back home. You'll find a job. It's hell here. Those pigs are strangling this country. They're selling it piece by piece, they're prostituting it. You know how many of my friends have suddenly dropped out of circulation because they took part in a protest or because they signed up for a political party—'

'Heleni, love, it'll never work, there's no hope. It's like South America here; the US don't want to run any risks, so they back the military and squash the left. There's no way out. It's useless, believe me.'

'Probably. Anyway, it's been decided. At least we can say we tried.'

'I suppose that the revolution can't do without you.'

'Claudio, what's wrong with you? Where have all your fine speeches about freedom and democracy gone? The inheritance of the ancient Greeks, Socrates and Pericles and all that other shit? You sound like you're on the state payroll, for God's sake!' She was excited. Claudio looked at her for a moment without speaking: God, she was as beautiful as Helen of Troy, scornful and proud. Small, slender hands and eyes as deep and black as the night sky, her T-shirt draped on her breasts like a sculpture by Phidias. He'd rather take her prisoner than let her be exposed to any danger.

'Heleni, what would I do if something happened to you? You know . . . you know I feel the same way you do . . . but I can't stand the thought of you risking your life in there. You've been occupying the University for three days now; the prime minister won't be able to keep the military out of it for much longer, even if he wanted to. They're going to strike hard, and fast, and the people won't be backing you up. They're too afraid, they have jobs and families to worry about, a long past and not much of a future . . .'

The girl smiled: 'Come on. There's nothing they can do to us. It's not like they're animals; they're not going to tear us to pieces! I told you, it's going to be a peaceful demonstration. No one will be carrying weapons.'

A street musician entered just then and started to play his bouzouki. Some of the regulars joined in to sing '*Aspra, kóchina, kitrina . . .*', a melody that Claudio and Heleni had sung many times with their friends and which seemed very touching to them just then. Heleni's eyes glistened: 'How often we've sung this one! It's still lovely, isn't it?'

'Heleni, listen, come away with me. We'll leave everything behind and go to Italy. We'll get married, find work, anything will do . . .'

The girl shook her head and her hair shaded her eyes, tossed lightly on her cheeks and neck. 'I've got a more exciting idea. Let's go to my house. Maria's at the movies with her boyfriend, they won't be back till after midnight. Let's make love, Claudio,

and then you'll take me to the University. I can't miss tomorrow. It will be a great day, all the young people of this country rising up together. And I know our people are behind us; I haven't lost hope.'

They walked out on to the street and Heleni raised her eyes to the starry sky: 'It's going to be a beautiful day tomorrow.'

SHE STRIPPED IN front of him without hesitation and with none of the innate modesty she'd always shown. She let him look at her and desire her, proud of her beauty and her courage, sitting on the edge of the bed, illuminated by the soft light of the table lamp. Claudio knelt, nude and trembling, at her feet. He kissed her knees and lay his head on her lap as he caressed her hips. He leaned her back on to the bed and wrapped his arms around her, covered her with his broad chest and wide shoulders as if he wanted to make her part of his own body. But he felt the darkness of the night weighing on his back, crushing as a boulder, cold as a knife.

And he heard a distant sound like thunder, and the pealing of a bell.

His heart felt as though it would burst, and Heleni's heart beat against his, between her superb breasts, beautiful Heleni, amazing and gentle, more precious to him than life and as warm as the sun. No one could dissolve their embrace, no one could hurt her. She would always be his, no matter what happened.

They dressed sitting on opposite sides of the bed and then embraced again as if they could not bear to leave one another.

'Now take me,' said the girl. She had already prepared a bag with some clothes and a little food. Claudio helped her on with her jacket.

THE ENORMOUS VEHICLE surged forward, tracks biting into the asphalt, spewing out a dense cloud of black smoke from its exhaust pipes. It headed off roaring and clattering down the dark streets. From the wide gate of the barracks other tanks followed the first, turrets bristling with machine guns. They were dark

and gleaming and they reflected the street lights. Behind the tanks were trucks loaded with soldiers in fighting order. They hunched silently on the benches, their helmets down over their eyes and guns on their laps. The officers wore taut expressions as they mutely inspected their soldiers' uniforms and equipment, eyes on their watches. Orders crackled over the radio, to be answered in monosyllables. They were setting out for a mission without glory.

They passed Eleusis and Piraeus and headed towards the city in two groups: one would arrive from the south, from Odòs Pirèos and Omonia Square, the other from the north, turning down Leofòros Patission at full speed and passing in front of the National Museum. A gust of wind blew the pages of a newspaper over the white stairs, between the tall Doric columns.

The last tank hauled up sideways at the Leofòros Alexandras intersection to block off traffic. The tank commander opened the turret and stretched out to take stock of the situation. His radio headset hung around his neck and his hands were stuck in his belt. Suddenly a car sped around the corner, headlights high and blinding. He pulled out his handgun in a split second and took aim. The car stopped just a few steps from the tank and a man got out, unshaven and haggard. He looked around, bewildered.

'Stop! Go no further!' shouted the officer. 'The centre of the city is blocked off. Turn back immediately.'

The man held his ground. 'Please,' he shouted back, 'let us pass. I have a very sick man in the car, I have to take him to the hospital.'

'Not this way. Take him to Abelokipi or Kifissia.'

'But what's happening? What are you doing here?'

'I told you to get out of here. Don't make me repeat it,' the officer shouted irritably.

The man went back to his car and opened the back door: 'Professor . . . Professor, we can't get by. Soldiers are blocking off the whole area. Professor Harvatis, can you hear me? Answer me, please.'

Periklis Harvatis was lying on the back seat, his face half hidden by the collar of his jacket. He seemed to be in a deep sleep. Ari took his hand: it was icy cold.

'Professor, we can't go any further. It's all been useless. Oh my God . . . I'll take you to the hospital.'

He got back into the car and set off towards Kifissia at full speed. He pulled up in front of the hospital there and ran over to the night-duty attendant's station. 'Hurry, hurry! For the love of God, there's a man in my car who is sick, very sick. Hurry, please, he may be dying.'

Two nurses followed him with a stretcher and they loaded the apparently lifeless professor on to it.

'It was no use coming to Athens,' Ari muttered disconsolately. 'Why did I listen to you?' But the old man could no longer hear him.

Ari went back to the car, took the letter out of his pocket and read the address: it was inside the area blocked off by the military, but he suddenly knew he couldn't hold on to it another minute. His watch said 2 a.m.; he was worn out with exhaustion and devastated by the futility of their journey through the night. But he had to see this through to the end.

He turned down Acharnôn Street in an attempt to proceed parallel to Patisсион Street where the tank garrison was. He had to get as close as possible without getting noticed. He parked in a little square and continued on foot, hiding in a doorway or behind the corner of a house when he saw a search patrol approaching. He couldn't understand what was happening. He finally got to the address written on the letter: 17 Dionysiou Street. It was an old building with chipped plaster and green blinds, but there didn't seem to be a living soul there. The shutter was completely lowered and padlocked at the bottom. The name of a print shop was displayed on the sign above. He felt like he was dreaming.

'Are you looking for someone?' A deep, hoarse voice behind him made him jump. He spun around and found a man of about fifty in a grey coat with a felt hat worn low over his eyes. He

tried to make out the man's features, but the halo of a street light behind him made that impossible.

'I'm . . . looking for a man named Stávros Kouras. I have to give him a letter. I thought he lived here, but all I can see is this closed shutter . . . it seems to be a print shop. Maybe you know . . .'

The man watched him silently, hands deep in his pockets. Ari felt his blood run cold.

'Stávros Kouras doesn't exist, sir.' He took his right hand from his pocket and stretched it out. 'If you like, you can give me that letter.'

Ari backed up and banged against the shutter, shaking his head, then started to run as fast as he could, without once looking back. He reached his car and jumped in, switching on the ignition, but the car wouldn't start. He turned around to look at the street he'd come from but it was empty. He tried the key again and flooded the engine. The smell of gasoline was strong; he'd have to let it evaporate. He waited a couple of minutes and tried again. On his third try the engine finally sputtered to life. He took a look at the rear-view mirror as he was backing up to turn into the street: just at that moment, far off down the road, the stranger he had spoken to turned the corner. He was walking slowly, his hands in his pockets.

CLAUDIO HUGGED HELENI again, then stepped back and looked her in the eye: 'There's nothing I can say to change your mind, is there? I have no influence over you at all.'

Heleni smiled and her eyes seemed to light up the night: 'Silly, you're the only one I care about.'

'And the revolution.'

'We've already discussed this whole thing and I've demonstrated that your objections don't hold water. Go home, honey, and go to sleep. Don't worry about me. If everything goes well, I'll come out again tomorrow night and we'll have an ouzo together at Nikos's.'

Claudio scowled: 'And what if things don't go well?'

'I'll find you, don't worry. You'll never be able to get away from me, for the rest of your days . . . you know that a Greek girl from a good family only gives herself to the man of her life.'

'I've made a decision. I'm coming in with you.'

'Claudio, stop that! Tomorrow you've got to turn in your paper. And this isn't your place anyway – you're not enrolled in this university, and you're not even Greek. Really, you should go now. I promise you that nothing will happen. I'll be careful. I won't do anything foolish. We'll have security people posted at the gates. I'll be inside with the committee working on our proclamation for the press.'

'Swear to me that you'll take care of yourself and that tomorrow night you'll be at Nikos's.'

'Promise. I swear.' She gave him a last kiss.

'And listen, I'll be at the Institute, right near the phone. Call me once in a while, if you can.'

'If they don't cut us off.'

'Right.'

'*Ghiá sou, krisémou.*'

'Ciao, my love.'

Heleni ran towards the University gates. Two boys and a girl were on guard duty near a little bivouac. They opened the gates to let her in. Heleni turned to wave and the fire lit up her excited face. She looked as if she were going to a party.

Claudio pulled up the collar of his jacket to ward off the cold wind blowing light and sharp from the north, and walked straight down Patisson Street. The sky was clear and full of stars and it was already Saturday morning. Heleni was right: what could happen on such a beautiful night, just a day before Sunday?

He didn't feel like sleeping, and thought he'd walk over to Omonia Square where there was always a café open. Find a freshly printed newspaper and drink a good cup of Turkish coffee. Maybe he'd even find an Italian newspaper, like *La Stampa* – they'd been covering the student uprising on the front page, while *Il Corriere* hadn't even made mention of it yet.

He took a new pack of Rigas from his pocket and stopped

behind a street lamp to light a cigarette. When he raised his eyes, the quiet night air was suddenly rent by a roar, and a monstrous tank erupted rumbling from a side street, blinding him with its headlights. It made a complete turn, digging at the asphalt with its heavy tracks, and headed off roaring towards the University, followed by two trucks. Another tank was advancing fast from the other direction; a minute later it stopped in front of the Polytechnic, revolving the gun on its turret towards the colonnade of the atrium.

Claudio fell against the lamp-post, beating his fist against the icy metal, again and again until it hurt. Heleni was their prisoner.

He started running until his heart was close to bursting, racing down the maze of streets at the foot of Mount Licavittòs. He stopped, gasping for breath, and then started running again, aimlessly, until he found himself in the huge deserted space of Sintágmatos Square. The Greek parliament: two *evzones* guards marched back and forth before the tomb of the unknown soldier. The gold and black of their jackets shone in the night and their white skirts fluttered in the wind. From this distance they seemed like puppets, like the toys crowding the tourist stalls in the Plaka. Behind them, the great marble warrior slept, naked, the sleep of death, and the words of a great man from the past engraved on the stone above him seemed blasphemous on that wretched night.