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Lavinia

Written by Ursula Le Guin

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LAVINIA

Ursula Le Guin



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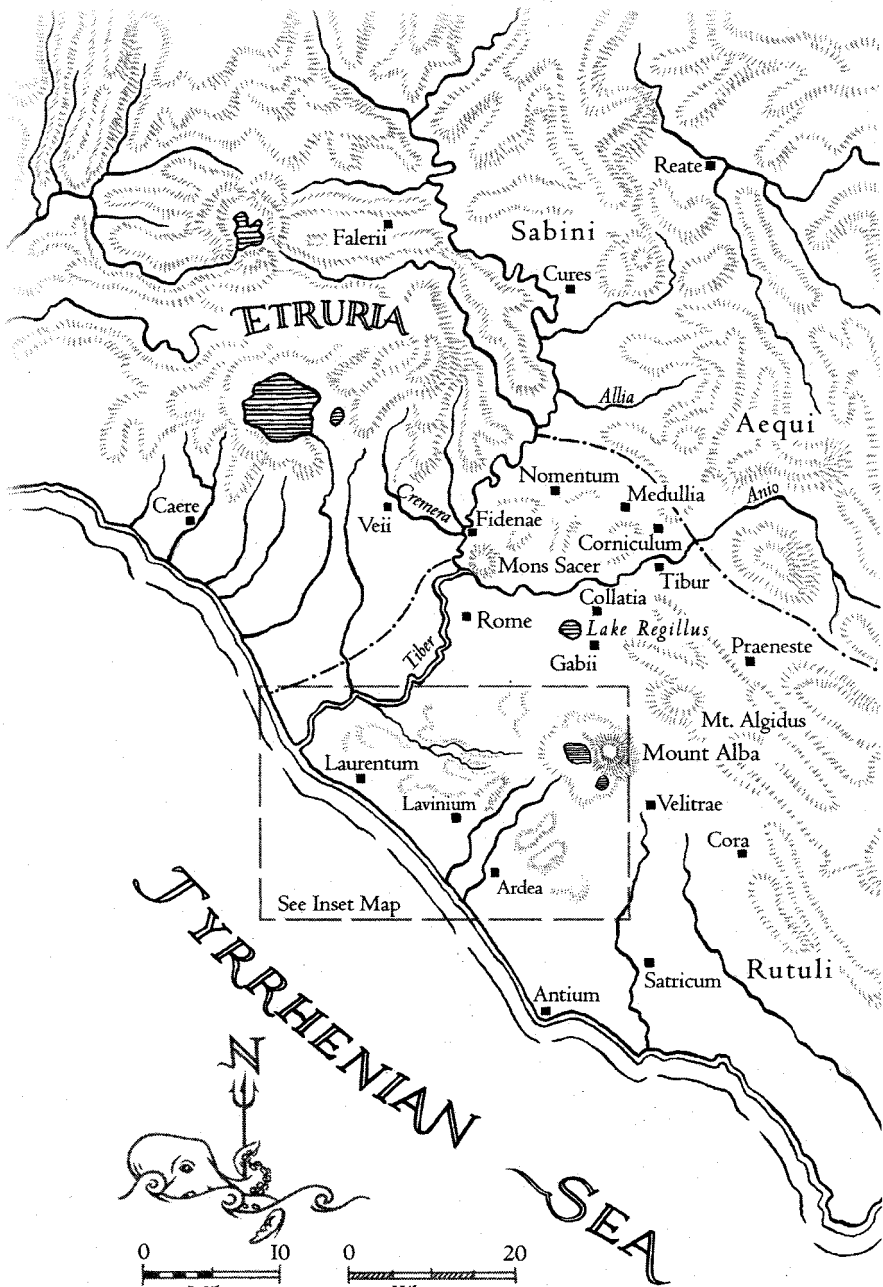
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ETRURIA

Sabini

Reate

Falerii

Cures

Allia

Aequi

Caere

Veii

Fidenae

Nomentum

Medullia

Anio

Corniculum

Mons Sacer

Tibur

Rome

Collatia

Lake Regillus

Gabii

Praeneste

Mt. Algidus

Mount Alba

Velitrae

Cora

See Inset Map

Laurentum

Lavinium

Ardea

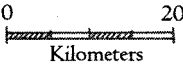
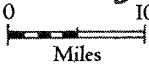
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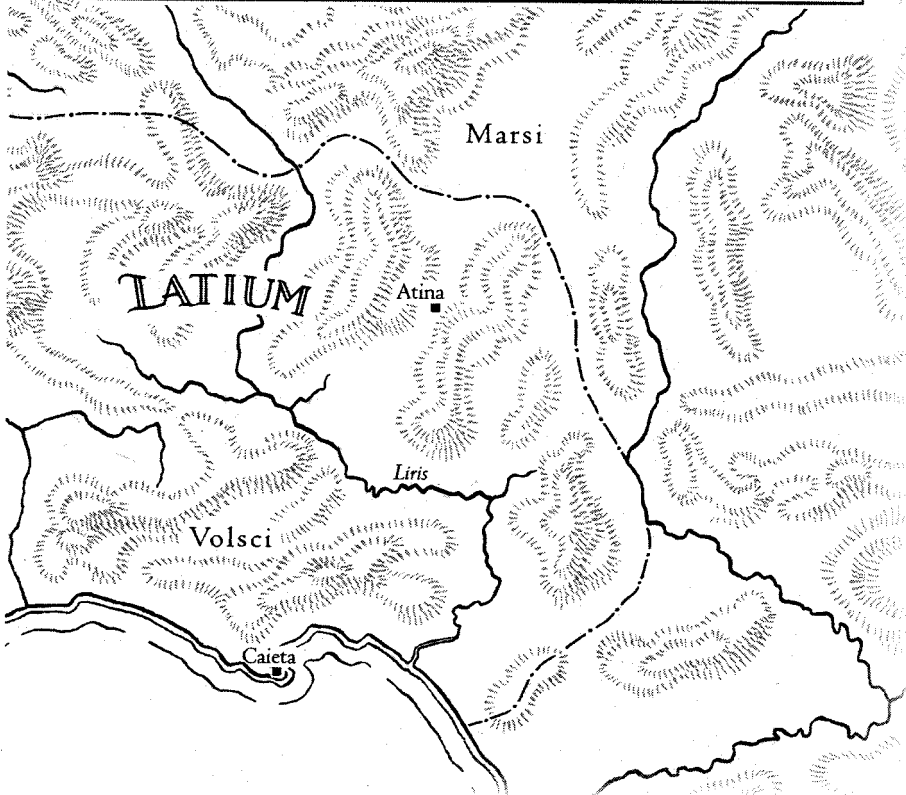
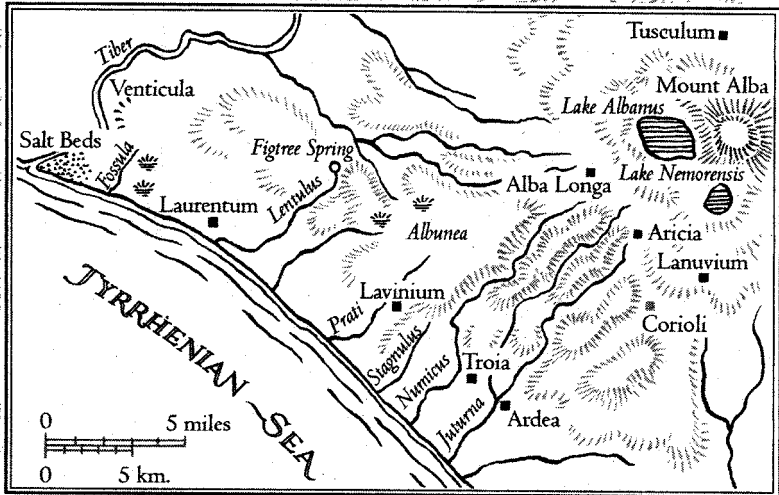
Rutuli

Antium

TYRRHENIAN

SEA





I went to the salt beds by the mouth of the river, in the May of my nineteenth year, to get salt for the sacred meal. Tita and Maruna came with me, and my father sent an old house slave and a boy with a donkey to carry the salt home. It's only a few miles up the coast, but we made an overnight picnic of it, loading the poor little donkey with food, taking all day to get there, setting up camp on a grassy dune above the beaches of the river and the sea. The five of us had supper round the fire, and told stories and sang songs while the sun set in the sea and the May dusk turned blue and bluer. Then we slept under the seawind.

I woke at the first beginning of light. The others were sound asleep. The birds were just beginning their dawn chorus. I got up and went down to the mouth of the river. I dipped up a little water and let it fall back as offering before I drank, saying the river's name, Tiber, Father Tiber, and his old, secret names as well, Albu, Rumon. Then I drank, liking the half-salt taste of the water. The sky was light enough now that I could see the long, stiff waves at the bar where the current met the incoming tide.

Out beyond that on the dim sea I saw ships – a line of great, black ships, coming up from the south and wheeling and heading in to the river mouth. On each side of each ship a long rank of oars lifted and beat like the beat of wings in the twilight.

One after another the ships breasted the waves at the

bar, rising and plunging, one after another they came straight on. Their long, arched, triple beaks were bronze. I crouched by the waterside in the salty mud. The first ship entered the river and came past me, dark above me, moving steadily to the heavy soft beat of the oars on the water. The faces of the oarsmen were shadowed but a man stood up against the sky on the high stern of the ship, gazing ahead.

His face is stern yet unguarded; he is looking ahead into the darkness, praying. I know who he is.

By the time the last of the ships passed by me with that soft, laboured beat and rush of oars and vanished into the forest that grows thick on both banks, the birds were singing aloud everywhere and the sky was bright above the eastern hills. I climbed back up to our camp. No one was awake; the ships had passed them in their sleep. I said nothing to them of what I had seen. We went down to the salt pans and dug up enough of the muddy grey stuff to make salt for the year's use, loaded it in the donkey's baskets, and set off home. I did not let them linger, and they complained and dawdled a little, but we were home well before noon.

I went to the king and said, 'A great fleet of war-ships went up the river at dawn, father.' He looked at me; his face was sad. 'So soon,' was all he said.

I know who I was, I can tell you who I may have been, but I am, now, only in this line of words I write. I'm not sure of the nature of my existence, and wonder to find myself writing. I speak Latin, of course, but did I ever learn to write it? That seems unlikely. No doubt someone with my name, Lavinia, did exist, but she may have been so different from my own idea of myself, or my poet's idea of me, that it only confuses me to think about her. As far as I know, it was my poet who gave me any reality at all. Before he wrote, I was the mistiest of figures, scarcely more than a name in a genealogy. It was he who brought me to life, to myself, and so made me able to remember my life and myself, which I do, vividly, with all kinds of emotions, emotions I feel strongly as I write, perhaps because the events I remember only come to exist as I write them, or as he wrote them.

But he did not write them. He slighted my life, in his poem. He scanted me, because he came to know who I was only when he was dying. He's not to blame. It was too late for him to make amends, rethink, complete the half-lines, perfect the poem he thought imperfect. He grieved for that, I know; he grieved for me. Perhaps where he is now, down there across the dark rivers, somebody will tell him that Lavinia grieves for him.

I won't die. Of that I am all but certain. My life is too contingent to lead to anything so absolute as death. I have not enough real mortality. No doubt I will eventually fade away and be lost in oblivion, as I would have

done long ago if the poet hadn't summoned me into existence. Perhaps I will become a false dream clinging like a bat to the underside of the leaves of the tree at the gate of the underworld, or an owl flitting in the dark oaks of Albunea. But I won't have to tear myself from life and go down into the dark, as he did, poor man, first in his imagination, and then as his own ghost. We each have to endure our own afterlife, he said to me once, or that is one way to understand what he said. But that dim loitering about, down in the underworld, waiting to be forgotten or reborn – that isn't true being, not even half-true as my being is as I write and you read it, and nowhere near as true as in his words, the splendid, vivid words I've lived in for centuries.

And yet my part of them, the life he gave me in his poem, is so dull, except for the one moment when my hair catches fire – so colourless, except when my maiden cheeks blush like ivory stained with crimson dye – so conventional, I can't bear it any longer. If I must go on existing century after century, then once at least I must break out and speak. He didn't let me say a word. I have to take the word from him. He gave me a long life but a small one. I need room, I need air. My soul reaches out into the old forests of my Italy, up to the sunlit hills, up to the winds of the swan and the truth-speaking crow. My mother was mad, but I was not. My father was old, but I was young. Like Spartan Helen, I caused a war. She caused hers by letting men who wanted her take her. I caused mine because I wouldn't be given, wouldn't be taken, but chose my man and my fate. The man was famous, the fate obscure; not a bad balance.

All the same, sometimes I believe I must be long dead, and am telling this story in some part of the underworld that we didn't know about – a deceiving place where we

think we're alive, where we think we're growing old and remembering what happened when we were young, when the bees swarmed and my hair caught fire, when the Trojans came. After all, how can it be that we can all talk to one another? I remember the foreigners from the other side of the world, sailing up the Tiber into a country they knew nothing of: their envoy came to my father's house, explained that he was a Trojan, and made polite speeches in fluent Latin. Now how could that be? Do we all know all the languages? That can be true only of the dead, whose land lies under all the other lands. How is it that you understand me, who lived twenty-five or thirty centuries ago? Do you know Latin?

But then I think no, it has nothing to do with being dead, it's not death that allows us to understand one another, but poetry.

If you'd met me when I was a girl at home you might well have thought that my poet's faint portrait of me, sketched as if with a brass pin on a wax tablet, was quite sufficient: a girl, a king's daughter, a marriageable virgin, chaste, silent, obedient, ready to a man's will as a field in spring is ready for the plough.

I've never ploughed, but I've watched our farmers at it all my life: the white ox trudging forward in the yoke, the man gripping the long wood handles that buck and rear as he tries to force the ploughshare through the soil that looks so meek and ready and is so tough, so shut. He strains with all his weight and muscle to make a scratch deep enough to hold the barley seed. He labours till he's gasping and shaking with exhaustion and wants only to lie down in the furrow and sleep on his hard mother's breast among the stones. I never had to plough, but I had a hard mother too. Earth will take the ploughman in her

arms at last and let him sleep deeper than the barley seed, but my mother had no embrace for me.

I was silent and meek because if I spoke up, if I showed my will, she might remember that I was not my brothers, and I'd suffer for it. I was six when they died, little Latinus and baby Laurens. They'd been my dears, my dolls. I played with them and adored them. My mother Amata watched over us smiling as the spindle dropped and rose in her fingers. She didn't leave us with our nurse Vestina and the other women as a queen might do, but stayed with us all day long, for love. Often she sang to us as we played. Sometimes she stopped spinning and leapt up, took my hands and Latinus' hands and danced with us, and we all laughed together. 'My warriors,' she called the boys, and I thought she was calling me a warrior too, because she was so happy when she called them warriors, and her happiness was ours.

We fell ill: first the baby, then Latinus with his round face and big ears and clear eyes, then I. I remember the strange dreams of fever. My grandfather the woodpecker flew to me and pecked my head and I cried out with the pain. In a month or so I got better, got well again; but the boys' fever would fall and then return, fall and return. They grew thin, they wasted away. They would seem to be on the mend, Laurens would nurse eagerly at my mother's breast, Latinus would creep out of bed to play with me. Then the fever would come back and seize them. One afternoon Latinus went into convulsions, the fever was a dog that shakes a rat to death, he was shaken to death, the crown prince, the hope of Latium, my playmate, my dear. That night the thin little baby brother slept easily, his fever was down; next morning early he

died in my arms with a gasp and a shiver, like a kitten. And my mother went mad with grief.

My father would never understand that she was mad.

He grieved bitterly for his sons. He was a man of warm feeling, and the boys had been, as a man sees it, his posterity. He wept for them, aloud at first, then for a long time in silence, for years. But he had the relief of his duties as king, and he had the rites to perform, the consolation of returning ritual, the reassurance of the ancient family spirits of his house. And I was solace to him, too, for I performed the rites with him, as a king's daughter does; and also he loved me dearly, his first-born, late-born child. For he was much older than my mother.

She was eighteen when they married, he was forty. She was a princess of the Rutuli of Ardea, he was king of all Latium. She was beautiful, passionate and young; he, a man in his prime, handsome and strong, a victorious warrior who loved peace. It was a match that might have turned out very well.

He didn't blame her for the boys' deaths. He didn't blame me for not having died. He took his loss and set what was left of his heart's hope on me. He went on, greyer and grimmer every year, but never unkind, and never weak, except in this: he let my mother do as she would, looked away when she acted wilfully, was silent when she spoke wildly.

Her awful grief met no human answer. She was left with a husband who couldn't hear or speak to her, a six-year-old weeping daughter, and a lot of miserable, frightened women who were afraid, as servants and slaves must be afraid, that they might be punished for the children's death.

For him she had only contempt; for me, rage.

I can remember each separate time I touched my mother's hand or body, or she touched mine, since my brothers died. She never slept again in the bed where she and my father conceived us.

After many days when she never came out of her room, she reappeared, seeming little changed, still splendid, with her shining black hair, her cream-white face, her proud bearing. Her manner in company had always been somewhat distant, rather lofty; she played the queen among commoners, and I used to marvel at how different she was with the men who thronged the king's house than she was with us children, when she sat spinning and singing and laughed and danced with us. With the house people her manner had been imperious, wilful, hot-tempered, but they loved her, for there was no meanness in her. Now she was mostly cold to them, cold to us, calm. But when I spoke, or my father spoke, often I saw the crimp of loathing in her face, the desolate, scornful fury, before she looked away.

She wore the boys' bullas round her neck, the little amulet bags with a tiny clay phallus in them that boys wear for good luck and protection. She kept the bullas in their gold capsules hidden under her clothes. She never took them off.

The anger that she hid in company broke out often in the women's side of the house as fierce irritation with me. The pet name many people called me, 'little queen', particularly annoyed her, and they soon stopped saying it. She did not often speak to me, but if I annoyed her she would turn on me suddenly and tell me in a hard, flat voice that I was a fool, ugly, stupidly timid. 'You're afraid of me. I hate cowards,' she would say. Sometimes my presence drove her into actual frenzy. She would strike me or shake me till my head snapped back and

forth. Once the fury drove her to tear at my face with her nails. Vestina pulled me away from her, got her to her room and quieted her, and hurried back to wash the long, bleeding rips down my cheeks. I was too stunned to cry, but Vestina wept over me as she put salve on the wounds. 'They won't scar,' she said tearfully, 'I'm sure they won't scar.'

My mother's voice came calmly from where she was lying down in her bedroom: 'That's good.'

Vestina told me to tell people that the cat had scratched me. When my father saw my face and demanded to know what had happened, I said, 'Silvia's old cat scratched me. I was holding her too tight and a hound came by and she was frightened. It wasn't her fault.' I came to half believe the story, as children will, and decorated it with details and circumstances, such as that I was quite alone when it happened, in the oak grove just outside Tyrhus' farmstead, and ran all the way home. I repeated that Silvia was not to blame, nor was the cat. I didn't want to get either of them in trouble. Kings are quick to punish, it relieves their anxiety. Silvia was my dearest friend and playmate, and the old farm cat had a litter of suckling kittens that would die without her. So it had to be my fault alone that my face was scratched. And Vestina was right: her comfrey salve was good; the long red furrows scabbed, healed, and left no scar but one faint silvery track down my left cheekbone under the eye. A day comes when Aeneas traces the scar with his finger and asks me what it is. 'A cat scratched me,' I say. 'I was holding her, and a dog frightened her.'

I know that there will be far greater kings of far greater kingdoms than Latinus of Latium, my father. Upriver at Seven Hills there used to be two little fortified places

with dirt walls, Janiculum and Saturnia; then some Greek settlers came, rebuilt on the hillside, and called their fort and town Pallanteum. My poet tried to describe to me that place as he knew it when he was alive, or will know it when he lives, I should say, for although he was dying when he came to me, and has been dead a long time now, he hasn't yet been born. He is among those who wait on the far side of the forgetful river. He hasn't forgotten me yet, but he will, when at last he comes to be born, swimming across that milky water. When he first imagines me he won't know that he is yet to meet me in the forest of Albunea. Anyhow, he told me that in time to come, where that village is now, the Seven Hills and the valleys among the hills and all the riverbanks will be covered for miles with an unimaginable city. There will be temples of marble splendid with gold on the hilltops, wide arched gates, innumerable figures carved of marble and bronze; more people will pass through the forum of that city in a single day, he said, than I will see in all the towns and farmsteads, on all the roads, in all the festivals and battlefields of Latium, in all my life. The king of that city will be the great ruler of the world, so great that he will despise the name of king and be known only as the one made great with holy power, the august. All the peoples of all the lands will bow to him and bring tribute. I believe this, knowing that my poet always speaks the truth, if not always the whole truth. Not even a poet can speak the whole truth.

But in my girlhood his great city was a rough little town built up against the slope of a rocky hill full of caves and overgrown with thick scrub. I went there once with my father, a day's sail up the river on the west wind. The king there, Evander, an ally of ours, was an exile from Greece, and in some trouble here too – he had

killed a guest. He'd had sufficient reason for it, but that sort of thing doesn't get forgotten by our country folk. He was grateful for my father's favour and did his best to entertain us, but he lived far more poorly than our wealthy farmers. Pallanteum was a dark stockade, huddled under trees between the wide yellow river and the forested hills. They gave us a feast, of course, beef and venison, but served it very strangely: we had to lie down on benches at small tables, instead of sitting all together at one long table. That was the Greek fashion. And they didn't keep the sacred salt and meal on the table. That worried me all through the meal.

Evander's son Pallas, who was about my age, eleven or twelve then, a nice boy, told me a story about a huge beast-man that used to live up there in one of the caves and came out in twilight to steal cattle and tear people to pieces. He was seldom seen, but left great footprints. A Greek hero called Eracles came by and killed the beast-man. What was he called? I asked, and Pallas said Cacus. I knew that that meant the fire lord, the chief man of a tribal settlement, who kept Vesta alight for the people of the neighbourhood, with the help of his daughters, as my father did. But I didn't want to contradict the Greeks' story of the beast-man, which was more exciting than mine.

Pallas asked me if I'd like to see a she-wolf's den, and I said yes, and he took me to a cave called the Lupercal, quite near the village. It was sacred to Pan, he said, which seemed to be what the Greeks called our Grandfather Picus. Anyhow, the settlers let the wolf and her cubs alone, wisely, and she let them alone too. She never even hurt their dogs, though wolves hate dogs. There were plenty of deer for her in those hills. Now and then in spring she'd take a lamb. They counted that as

sacrifice, and when she didn't take a lamb, they'd sacrifice a dog to her. Her mate had disappeared this past winter.

It was not the wisest thing perhaps for two children to stand at the mouth of her den, for she had cubs, and she was there. The cave smelled very strong. It was black dark inside, and silent. But as I grew used to the dark I saw the two small, unmoving fires of her eyes. She stood there between us and her children.

Pallas and I backed away slowly, our gaze always on her eyes. I did not want to go, though I knew I should. I turned at last and followed Pallas, but slowly, looking back often to see if the she-wolf would come out of her house and stand there dark and stiff-legged, the loving mother, the fierce queen.

On that visit to the Seven Hills I saw that my father was a much greater king than Evander was. Later I came to know that he was more powerful than any of the kings of the West in his day, even though he might be nothing in comparison with the great august one to come. He had established his kingdom firmly by warfare and defence of his borders long before I was born. While I was a child growing up, there were no wars to speak of. It was a long time of peace. Of course there were feuds and battles among the farmers and along the boundaries. We're a rough people, born of oak, as they say, here in the western land; tempers run high, weapons are always at hand. Now and then my father had to intervene, put down a rustic quarrel that got too hot or spread too widely. He had no standing army. Mars lives in the ploughlands and the borders of the ploughlands. If there was trouble, Latinus called his farmers from their fields, and they came with their fathers' old bronze swords and leather shields, ready to fight to the death for him. When they'd

put down the trouble they went back to their fields, and he to his high house.

The high house, the Regia, was the great shrine of the city, a sacred place, for our storeroom gods and ancestors were the Penates and Lares of the city and the people. Latins came there from all over Latium to worship and sacrifice as well as to feast with the king. You saw the high house from a long way off in the countryside, standing among tall trees above the walls and towers and roofs.

The walls of Laurentum were high and strong, because it wasn't built on a hilltop like most cities, but on the rich plains that sloped down towards the lagoons and the sea. Farmed fields and pastures lay all round it outside the ditch and earthwork, and in front of the city gate was a broad open ground where athletes played and men trained their horses. But entering the gate of Laurentum you came out of sun and wind into deep, fragrant shade. The city was a great grove, a forest. Every house stood among oak trees, fig trees, elms, slender poplars and spreading laurels. The streets were shady, leafy, narrow. The broadest of the streets led up to the king's house, great and stately, towering with a hundred columns of cedar wood.

On a shelf on each wall of the entryway was a row of images, carved by an Etruscan exile years ago as an offering to the king. They were spirits, ancestors – two-faced Janus, Saturn, Italus, Sabinus, Grandfather Picus who was turned into the red-capped woodpecker but whose statue sat in stiff carved toga holding the sacred staff and shield – a double row of grim figures in cracked and blackened cedar. They were not large, but they were the only images in human form in Laurentum, except the little clay Penates, and they filled me with fear. Often I

shut my eyes as I ran between those long dark faces with blank staring eyes, under axes and crested helmets and javelins and the bars of city gates and the prows of ships, war trophies, nailed up along the walls.

The corridor of the images opened out into the atrium, a low, large, dark room with a roof open in the centre to the sky. To the left were the council and banquet halls, which as a child I seldom entered, and beyond them the royal apartments; straight ahead was the altar of Vesta, with the domed brick storerooms behind it. I turned right and ran past the kitchens out into the great central courtyard, where a fountain played under the laurel tree my father planted when he was young, and sweet daphne and shrubs of thyme and oregano and tarragon grew in big pots, and women worked and chatted and spun and wove and rinsed out jugs and bowls in the fountain pool. I ran across among them, under the colonnade of cedar pillars, into the women's part of the house, the best part, home.

If I was careful not to bring myself to my mother's attention I had nothing to fear. Sometimes, as I grew towards womanhood, she spoke to me kindly enough. And there were a lot of women there who loved me, and women who flattered me, and old Vestina to spoil me, and other girls to be a girl with, and babies to play with. And – women's side or men's side – it was my father's house, and I was my father's daughter.

My best friend, though, was not a girl of the Regia at all but the youngest child of the cattleman Tyrrhus, who was in charge of my family's herds as well as his own. His family farm was a quarter-mile from the city gates, a huge place with many outbuildings, the stone-and-timber farmhouse bulking up among them like an old grey gander in a flock of geese. Cattle-pens and paddocks

and pastures stretched away back from the kitchen gardens among the low, oak-crowned hills. The farm was a place of endless industry, people working everywhere all day; but unless the forge was lit and the anvil clanging, or a drove of cattle was penned in close by for castration or for market, it was deeply quiet. Distant mooing from the valleys and the murmur of mourning doves and wood doves in the oak groves near the house made a continuous softness of sound into which other noises sank away and were lost. I loved that farm.

Silvia came to keep me company sometimes at the Regia, but we both preferred to be at her place. In summer I ran out there almost every day. Tita, a slave a couple of years older than I, came with me as the guardian my status of virgin princess required, but as soon as we got there Tita joined her friends among the farm women, and Silvia and I ran off to climb trees or dam the creek or play with the kittens or catch polliwogs and roam the woods and hills, as free as the sparrows.

My mother would have kept me home. 'What kind of company is it she chooses to keep? Cowherds!' But my father, born a king, ignored her snobbery. 'Let the child run about and get strong. They're good people,' he said. Indeed, Tyrrhus was a trusty, competent man, ruling his pastures as firmly as my father ruled his realm. He had an explosive temper but was just with his people; he kept every feast day generously, with observance and sacrifice to the local spirits and sacred places. He had fought beside my father in the old wars long ago, and still had a bit of the warrior about him. But he was soft as warm butter when it came to his daughter. Her mother had died soon after her birth, and she had no sisters. She grew up the darling of her father and brothers and all the house people. She was in many ways more a princess

than I. She didn't have to spend hours a day spinning or weaving, and had no ceremonial duties. The old cooks ran the kitchen for her, the old slaves kept the household for her, the girls swept the hearth and fed the fire for her; she had all the time in the world to run free on the hills and play with her pet animals.

Silvia had a wonderful way with creatures. In the evening, the little owls would come to her quavering call, *hu-u-u*, *hi-i-i*, and alight a moment on her outstretched hand. She tamed a fox cub; when it grew to a vixen she let it go free, but it brought its cubs round yearly for us to see, letting them gambol in the twilight on the grass under the oaks. She reared a fawn her brothers took on a hunt, the hounds having pulled down its mother. Silvia was ten or eleven when they brought the little thing in. She nursed it tenderly, and it grew into a magnificent stag as tame as any dog. He trotted off to the woods every morning, but was always back at supper time; they let him come into the dining room and eat from their trenchers. Silvia adored her Cervulus. She washed him and combed him and decked his splendid antlers with vines in autumn and flower wreaths in spring. Male deer can be dangerous, but the stag was docile and mild, far too trusting for his own good. Silvia fastened a broad white linen band round his neck as a sign, and all the hunters of the forests of Latium knew Silvia's Cervulus. Even the hounds knew him and seldom started him, having been scolded and beaten for doing so.

It was a wonderful thing to be out on the hills and see a great stag come walking calmly from the forest, balancing his crown of horns. He would kneel and put his nose in Silvia's hand and, folding his tall delicate legs under him, sit there between us while she stroked his neck. He

smelled sweet and strong and gamey. His eyes were large, dark, and quiet; so were Silvia's eyes. That is what it was like in the age of Saturn, my poet said, the golden time of the first days when there was no fear in the world. Silvia seemed a daughter of that age. To sit with her on the sunlit slopes or run with her on the forest trails she knew so well was the delight of my life. There was no one in all that country of our girlhood who wished us any harm. Our pagans, the folk of the ploughlands, greeted us from their fields or the doorstep of their round huts. The surly bee-keeper saved a comb of honey for us, the dairy women had a sip of cream for us, the cowboys showed off for us, riding bull calves or vaulting an old cow's horns, and the old shepherd Ino showed us how to make piping flutes of oat-straw.

Sometimes in summer as the long day drew toward evening and we knew we should be starting home to the farm, we'd both lie face down on the hillside and push our faces right into the harsh dry grass and the hard clodded dirt, breathing in the infinitely complex smell, hay-sweet and soil-bitter, of the warm summer earth, our earth. Then we were both Saturn's children. We leapt up and ran down the hill, ran home – race you to the cattle ford!

When I was fifteen years old, King Turnus came on a visit of state to my father. He was my cousin, my mother's nephew; his father Daunus, ailing, had given him the crown of Rutulia the year before, and we'd heard of the splendours of the ceremonies of his coronation at Ardea, the nearest city south of Latium. The Rutulians had been close allies of ours since Latinus married Daunus' sister Amata, but young Turnus showed signs of wanting to go his own way. When the Etruscans of Caere drove out their tyrant Mezentius, a savage man

who held nothing sacred, Turnus took him in. Now all Etruria was angry with Turnus for receiving and sheltering the tyrant, who had abused his power so cruelly that even the Lares and the Penates of his household had forsaken him. That ill feeling was a matter of concern to us, since Caere was just across the river. The Etruscan cities were powerful and it behoved us to keep on good terms with them if we could.

My father discussed these matters with me as we walked to the sacred forest of Albunea. It lay east of Laurentum, under the hills, a day's walk. We had gone there together several times; I served as his acolyte in the rites there as he praised and propitiated our ancestors and the powers of the woods and springs. In those solitary walks he talked to me as to his heir. Though I couldn't inherit his crown, he saw no reason why I should remain ignorant of matters of policy and government. After all, I'd almost certainly be queen of some kingdom. Perhaps, indeed, of Rutulia.

He didn't talk about that possibility, but the women did. Vestina was certain of it the moment she heard of King Turnus' visit: 'He's coming for our Lavinia! He's coming courting!'

My mother looked sharply at Vestina across the big basket of raw wool we were all pulling. Pulling wool, drawing apart the blobs and hunks of a washed fleece to separate the fibres so they can be carded, was always my favourite housework; it's easy and perfectly mindless, and the clean fleece smells sweet, and your hands get soft from the oil in the wool, and the blobs and hunks end up as a huge, pale, airy, hairy, lovely cloud towering out of the basket.

'Now that's enough of that,' my mother said. 'Only peasants talk about marriage for a girl her age.'