



THE EAGLE AND THE LAMBDA

PEDRO SANTAMARÍA

Pàmies

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© 2018, ediciones Pàmies, S. L.

C/ Mesena, 18

28033 Madrid

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ISBN: 978-84-16970-65-0

BIC: FV

Cover: CalderónSTUDIO

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*To Federico Pacheco Gutiérrez,
for the gift that is friendship.*

INDEX

PART ONE: THE EAGLE'S SHADOW

I

II

III

IV

V

VI

VII

VIII

IX

X

XI

XII

XIII

XIV

XV

XVI

XVII

XVIII

XIX

XX

XXI

XXII

XXIII

XXIV

XXV

XXVI
XXVII
XXVIII
XXIX
XXX
XXXI
XXXII
XXXIII

PART TWO: THE BATTLE OF THE PLAINS OF BAGRADAS

XXXIV

XXXV

XXXVI

XXXVII

XXXVIII

PART THREE: FOUR FATES

XXXIX

XL

XLI

XLII

XLIII

XLIV

XLV

XLVI

XLVII

XLVIII

XLIX

L

LI

LII

LIII

LIV

LV

LVI

LVII

LVIII

LIX

LX

LXI

AUTHOR'S NOTE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

GLOSSARY

«Historia... testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustis».

(«History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illumines reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life and brings us tidings of antiquity»).

Cicero

«History is but a branch of literature».

Pío Baroja

«The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it».

Oscar Wilde

PART ONE

THE EAGLE'S SHADOW

I

As the slave girl parted the fabric covering the window, light filled the beautiful Carthaginian's chamber. The sun had only just begun its descent, heading towards the horizon and into the ocean depths. Specks of dust, disturbed by the sudden movement of the fabric, flew erratically in every direction only to settle an instant later in midair and start a feather-like and gentle fall. With a grimace on her face, Arishat turned over in bed to avoid the light. She was neither asleep nor awake, but found herself in that placid moment when the mind shakes off the numbness of sleep and the body begins to awaken. She moved her feet in a circle beneath the covers, gave a low and sedate groan, opened one eye slightly, stretched her limbs with the grace and delicacy of a dancer, covered her eyes with her hands, and smiled.

"It is time, mistress." the slave girl whispered.

"Thank you, Elissa."

Arishat yawned softly, as she covered her mouth with one hand. She paused briefly, pensively looking at the villa's ceiling while her eyes grew accustomed to the light. She then slowly sat up in bed, sliding her feet towards the floor. She felt cold on the soles of her feet, a pleasant and invigorating coolness. A soft tremor ran through her body. She wore a delicate tunic, light as air, white as a dissipating mist. Through it, a dark skinned and divinely shaped body could be appreciated.

"It is late, mistress. Remember, the shophet is expecting you tonight."

"Yes, I know."

Arishat rose to her feet, closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, filling her lungs with air. Her perfectly rounded breasts moved only slightly as she did so. The tunic caressed them as they rose like two twin volcanoes emerging from a fog. Her ribs marked her delicate skin. Her belly blurred beneath the cloth.

"Who was the fortunate one last night, mistress?"

"A young merchant from Massalia. It wasn't bad, though it seemed as if I had

been the one to pay him.” The courtesan laughed childishly.

The slave girl could not help but give a hint of a knowing smile while she made the bed. She enjoyed such stories. Arishat approached the window gracefully, as was her custom upon waking, and observed the sky over Carthage. Not a single cloud. In the distance, a woman hummed a monotonous and joyful melody. The racket of the city squares lay far from this well-off area of large and quiet houses, as if wealth attracted peace.

“Did you go to the market, Elissa?”

“Of course, mistress. At the break of dawn as you requested.”

“Did you get the perfume I asked for?”

“Yes, mistress, though it was quite expensive. It has been many days since ships from Alexandria arrived at port. The people are nervous.”

“The people are always nervous.”

“They say...” The slave-girl fell silent. Her mistress did not enjoy hearing the rumours going around, particularly if they were bad, and less so having just awoken. However, Arishat seemed interested.

“What do they say?”

“The price of wheat, which was already sky-high, has doubled within but a few days. People have begun to buy barley instead to make their bread. The price of lamb has increased fourfold, and there are no longer any wine supplies from Euboea. Fewer and fewer ships dock at the harbour with the passing of each day...”

“Oh, stop whining, Elissa! I grow weary of it. You sound like a weeper. It is not your money being spent, is it?” Arishat turned towards the slave girl. “You have not answered me, Elissa, what are the people saying?”

“The people are afraid, mistress. It is rumoured that the Romans plan to come ashore on our coasts. That, as a result, only a handful of foreign ships dock at our harbour, and that that is why everything has become so costly. People huddle in the squares and talk about it. Merchants use it as an excuse to demand more for their goods. Is it true, mistress? Is there really a Roman army headed towards the city?”

“Well!” Exclaimed the Carthaginian amusedly. “Rumours are indeed running rampant after all.”

“Is it true, mistress?” Insisted the slave-girl as she left her duties unfinished, concern creeping into her voice.

“It has been mentioned by a Senator, but it is meant to be a secret, Elissa. I

would not however worry too much, the mob is easily agitated, more so when attempting to detail imminent calamities. You should know this by now. Someone must have talked to appear important, perhaps one of those merchants that wishes to justify raising the price of their goods. That is all they are, Elissa; rumours, nothing else.

“They say the Romans are bloodthirsty beasts.”

“I am hungry.” Arishat yawned and stretched delicately.

“They say they steal, murder, rape and burn everything to the ground.”

“As do all men, Elissa.” Arishat replied with a patronizing smile. “As do all men. But we need not concern ourselves with this.”

“How can you say such a thing, mistress?”

“You speak too much with the people at the market. It seems you are only happy when you are worried. We have been at war for the last ten years, Elissa, and our particular situation has only improved with the passing of time. Do you remember that hairy, Spanish mercenary?”

“How could I forget?”

“Well, he had more gold than hair.”

“What do you mean, mistress?”

“That war benefits us. War makes men long for mundane pleasures, and makes them more willing to spend their money to indulge themselves. They make the most of their lives and gold in case the Gods decide to cut their life short. In any event, whoever rules is irrelevant to us. A man is a man, wherever he may come from, and men need to distract themselves from their slow journey towards death. They need to feel immortal from time to time, and that is what I do for them. I do not care if they are a shophet of Carthage or a consul of Rome.” Arishat made a slight pause to change the subject. “Go make my breakfast; you can finish these chores later.”

“But what if they do come ashore...”

Arishat sighed in annoyance.

“First of all, Elissa, in order to reach us, the Romans would have to face our fleet, and let me remind you that no one has ever been able to defeat Carthage at sea. Even if they did manage to surpass that hurdle, they would still have to defeat us on land, and were they to do so they would then have to climb our walls.” The Carthaginian scowled and raised her voice ever so slightly. She was not angry; she merely wished to appear so. “Stop worrying about the Romans, worry more about the beating I will give you if you do not do as I say. Make

me something to eat.”

“Yes, mistress. My apologies, mistress.” The slave girl humbly retreated from the bedchamber.

The door closed with barely a sound. Arishat smiled and approached the great polished bronze mirror. She admired herself as she posed. She loved looking at herself in the mirror, affirming that her beauty remained intact despite the previous night’s excesses. It wasn’t only beauty however that her clients sought and found. A dog can be placated in but a few moments, and there were younger women who, for a bit of food, would offer their bodies to panting sailors in the port’s filthy streets; women whose charms would be swept away by the ocean breeze in a matter of months. She was different. In Carthage, having enjoyed Arishat’s delights was a symbol of status, wealth and influence. Carthage was home to even more beautiful courtesans, women with a greater talent for playing the lute, or who danced even more sensuously. The fact of the matter is that sometimes the price of a fragrance hinges more on the seller than on the fragrance itself.

It had been a pleasant evening. That Massilian, despite his youth, had turned out to be an experienced lover, unhurried, skilful and pleasurable. They had been alone and feasted on exquisite delicacies. He had spoken of love and recited poems from his native land and praised her beauty as would a man in love. It was remarkable how some clients, despite paying for her services, seemed to feel compelled to seduce her. She allowed this. She enjoyed the game, even though it was no more than that, just a game. In the end, everything boils down to business.

She slowly descended to the inner courtyard of her luxurious villa. A constant flow of water gave peace to the harmonious place. There, Elissa and her two other slave girls waited with all that was necessary for a delicious and well-deserved lunch. Arishat sat at the table. A child could be heard crying. The courtesan grimaced wearily.

“Apologies, mistress.” said Elissa.

“You should have taken the *silphium* when I told you to. This is no world to bring a child into. Your howling on the day you gave birth was quite enough.”

“Mistress...” the slave girl pleaded.

“Go on, go.”

“Thank you, mistress.”

A bit of freshly baked bread, some honey, a few dates and an egg, it was an excellent way in which to begin the day, though perhaps a bit late.

As she chewed, Arishat noticed a miniscule ivory flask shaped as an amphora and decorated with Egyptian motifs. It most likely contained the delicate perfume that Elissa had purchased that very morning. She extended her hand and brought it towards her. She uncapped the flask, brought the perfume to her nose, closed her eyes, and took pleasure in the smell of fresh roses. The shophet, a man of refined tastes, would appreciate the fragrance.

II

Repugnant. Nauseating. It was said that lookouts could smell a ship before they saw it. The gang of *proletarii* clinging to their oars could not have smelled worse even if they had spent their entire lives submerged in the *Cloaca Maxima*. They did not stop rowing even though it was a consul who entered the quinquereme's foul smelling hold. Stopping the entire fleet for an absurd ritual was out of the question.

Marcus Atilius Regulus, second term consul of the Roman Republic, walked slowly across the hold. The boards creaked under his feet as he looked upon those who, dressed in loincloths, sank their oars into the water rhythmically, in unison, propelling the galley towards Africa. He felt contempt and disgust, as well as admiration and pride for those men. They fulfilled their duty from their cramped benches to the cadence of an officer's monotonous whistling. The men drew their oars towards them as they made contact with the water, to later lift them, move them forward, and then sink them again into the ocean. To go down to the bowels of a galley from the upper deck was akin to descending into hell. The oarsmen lived in the dark, with but a few timid glimmers of light creeping through the oar ports, as if with each stroke light threatened to burst into the hold, only to be engulfed once again by the dark.

On deck however, and in comparison, the air appeared clean and pure. Up there, both the world and the Roman fleet stretched as far as the eye could see. Hundreds of sails decorated the horizon and advanced slowly, propelled by the winds and by the arms of more than one hundred thousand men. Down below however, in that underworld, almost at water level and surrounded by the cream of the suburbs of Rome, the universe became reduced to a few wooden benches smelling of resin and tar, and to an annoying whistle travelling the length of the hold. The officer looked to his right and to his left, setting the

tempo of the oar strokes.

As soon as they had set sail from Syracuse, and the fleet had adopted the complex wedge formation conceived by the consul to counter any Carthaginian attack, Regulus launched a search that had become personal. He watched the faces grimacing in effort, examining each one for a few moments. They all seemed the same in the dark, but he never forgot a face, and he was certain that the man he sought was among his quinquereme's oarsmen.

Three hundred citizens propelled that wooden hell, arranged on three different levels. Regulus had already searched each of the faces from the upper levels, and had but fifty left to examine. He would, without a doubt, find him; the thug would not remain unpunished. It was an opportunity for the consul to demonstrate that nothing escaped his notice. He would make an example of this man.

The consul felt a trickle of warm and sporadic rain on his neck while he seemed to dissect an oarsman with his gaze. The liquid flowed down his neck and back, soaking his purple tunic. It took him a heartbeat to realize what was happening. He suddenly and instinctively moved aside, but it was too late to avoid the unpleasant and warm shower that had now stopped falling. Regulus cursed the oarsman from the level above and thought he saw a mocking smile. In any other situation, urinating on a consul of Rome would have meant certain death for any man, but not here, for once an oarsman has taken his place, he is not to stop rowing, no matter the circumstances, until either the galley has reached port, he has been relieved or has died. It was not only sweat that soaked the limbs of those *proletarii*.

Since the beginning of the year, Regulus had been the father of that great family. A family made up of one hundred and forty thousand oarsmen, sailors and legionaries. He would be generous with the sons that served him well, and severe with those that did not.

The galleys were new, but the wood had already made the foul smell of stale sweat, urine, vomit and faeces its own. After ten years of war and several misfortunes at sea, the gods had smiled upon the city of Rome. The new Roman fleet had been built based on the model of a Carthaginian galley run aground on the coasts of Italy. Only when the Roman engineers had studied the design of this galley did they understand the defeats they had suffered. It was a magnificent vessel, light and robust, which summarized the power of Carthage; a former ally of Rome, and now its mortal enemy. Thus far, the

Carthaginians had maintained an undisputable hegemony over the seas, the product of a centuries-old seafaring tradition.

The war in Sicily had gone on long enough. The doomed island was a conglomerate of small Greek city-states, mostly walled, which shared a complex system of treaties, alliances and conflicts, and did not hesitate to surrender to one side or another in succession. Sieges were long and arduous, as both those conducting the siege and those being besieged, felt the sting of hunger; the defenders due to not being able to reach their fields, and the besiegers because feeding large armies in barren lands was an impossible task for their commanders. The latter were also tormented by other evils: the rain, the mud, the heat, the tedium, and the rats.

There were many deserters. At least the besieged had the warmth of their homes and could not go very far. Attacks were far too risky and bloody; too costly in terms of casualties. Occasionally, a walled town would be taken, more often than not as a result of betrayal from those within than due to a valiant assault. Damn Greeks: oligarchs, democrats, tyrants and demagogues, a myriad of decadent people, merchants and charlatans. Damn treasonous and turncoat rats.

Regulus had focused his electoral campaign on convincing the Senate and the people of Rome that Sicily was a deathtrap. He argued that the only way to win that endless war was to take it to the heart of the enemy, and deal them a mortal blow. He offered himself as the best candidate for the task given his experience. If he were to be elected consul again, he claimed, he would subdue Carthage as he had subdued the Salentians during his first term: taking an army to the enemy's very gates.

The legions of Rome had to disembark in Africa and bring death and destruction with them. This was the only way, he argued, to bring the conflict to a close. His solid arguments and the vehemence with which he presented them won him the position of consul.

At the end of his electoral speech, making use of his powerful voice and energetically lifting his arm, he said to the city's irate mob: "What I propose, people of Rome, is to go to their homes and drag them from them! Give me the tools, and I shall finish the job!" That roar of hatred, that feeling of commitment still resonated in his eardrums, making the hair on his forearms stand on end. Regulus knew how to speak to the people in their own language.

Like every good Roman, it was not only the glory of Rome which interested

the consul, but his own and that of his family. He would do everything in his power to ensure that his accomplishments remained in the memory of all; seared into history, remembered in times to come.

He had a year ahead of him as consul, over three hundred quinqueremes under his command, with four entire legions on board. Additionally, two thousand horses, provisions for the expedition, and a vast amount of weapons crossed the seas in transports that were towed by galleys. The fleet sailed on slowly, heavily loaded with all that was necessary for the task. The effort made by Rome and its allies was vast. Entire forests had been cut down to create the Republic's new fleet.

It was the largest expedition ever launched. Regulus however had two problems. One, which he hoped to avoid, was the Carthaginian fleet; the other, inevitable, was Lucius Manlius Vulsus Longus, his co-consul. A stupid man, an obstinate Patrician, a bloodsucker, who instead of being sent to Sicily as was intended, had managed to convince the Senate that such an ambitious campaign as this required both magistrates. Why was Longus a bloodsucker? Because he was stupid, but not a complete fool. If the operation proposed by Regulus led to victory over Carthage, the honours and spoils would be for them both. If it failed however, then Longus would no doubt find a way to avoid any responsibility for it in the eyes of the Senate. Regulus would have had conceived the misbegotten plan after all. History would be the judge. In the end, that which is reckless differs from the audacious in one aspect alone, the result.

Longus, as any Patrician, seemed not to have assimilated the *Lex Licinia Sextia* that had been in place for over one hundred years. According to the law, of the two consuls elected every year, one was to be a Patrician, the other a Plebeian. Prior to the enactment of said law, only Patricians could be made consuls, and many still considered the edict as temporary; a river that has overflowed and sooner or later must return to its normal course. In their opinion, only the most distinguished families of Rome should guide the fate of the city. Guardedly, many Patricians attempted to hinder the actions of their Plebeian counterparts.

"Sir" whispered the submissive and alarmed voice of a legionary behind Regulus.

Despite the stench of the hold, the soldier did not cover his nose or mouth out of respect for the magistrate. Regulus turned slowly after having carefully

observed another of the faces that rowed, which bore a horrible wart on its nose as if it were a trophy.

“Speak, solider.”

“The tribune requires your presence in the command tower. A group of ships has been sighted to the West.”

“How many?”

“Several, sir.”

With a gesture of indifference, Marcus Atilius Regulus, second term consul of the Republic, suspended his personal search in order to return to the upper deck.

III

Aulus Porcius Bibulus had not been able to avoid smiling as he dragged the oar towards himself. The night in Syracuse, prior to setting sail, had been a good one. And though he would have preferred to sleep until late the next day, tempting fate was not advisable. His mouth was still dry from all the wine he had drunk during the two hours he had been away from his post. He still felt the tickling sensation from that Syracusan harlot's lips between his legs. For one measly coin she had fulfilled his desires in a filthy city corner. But, above all, he could still hear the tinkling of coins those two sixes had won him in that dirty tavern. Two sixes. He could not believe his luck. Could things get any better?

"Hey Bibulus" said the man at the oar to his right. "Did you win last night?"

"I was on watch yesterday" said Bibulus deadpan.

"Come now, your face tells that you had your fill of wine. How much did you win?"

"As I told you, I was on watch."

"You're a damn liar." His friend replied amused.

"Silence!" roared a soldierly voice.

"Consul of Rome in the hold! Do not stop rowing!"

A consul of Rome indeed, what an honour, Bibulus thought to himself.

It was simply a matter of being silent for a bit. Any senator would be hard pressed to remain on the lower level of a quinquereme for more than a brief spell. The sheer smell drove them away. This would also give Verrucosus, the man to his right, time to forget about their conversation. At that speed, between oar strokes, one could speak calmly. Another unwritten convention held that one had to show effort on one's face when a magistrate visited the nasty place.