

Stefano Vignaroli

ESOTERIC CRIMES

Police Chief Caterina Ruggeri's First Investigation

WATER

FIRE



NOVEL

Stefano Vignaroli

Esoteric Crimes

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Vignaroli S.

Esoteric Crimes / S. Vignaroli — «Tektime S.r.l.s.»,

Sudden disappearances worry inhabitants of Trioria, a little town in the Ligurian inland. Caterina Ruggeri, police chief, will have to shed light on the mysterious crimes by going back up to four centuries before: the murder of a witch seems to be hiding the causes of an esoteric vendetta. After being for several years responsible for the Dogs' Unit of the State Police, Caterina Ruggeri, Law graduate, is appointed Police Chief and assigned to the Police District in Imperia. The newly appointed Police Chief, having just arrived at her new working place, will find herself involved in a thorny investigation, during which she'll have to face people linked to an esoteric sect, in a town, that is witches' place par excellence: Triora. Starting from the finding of a burnt woman's body, at the end of the operations of extinguishing a wood fire, Doctor Ruggeri, helped by her vice, Inspector Giampieri, an ex soldier expert in informations technology and sport cars' driver, will have to extend her investigation to occurrences that had happened in those places in far away times. Important protagonist of the adventure is Doctor Ruggeri's dog, Furia, her loyal Springer Spaniel, matchless trail searcher, that in more than in one occasion will be of precious help.

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First Investigation

Translator: Gabriela Gubenco

NOVEL

ESOTERIC CRIMES

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Preface

What does a series of mysterious disappearances in Trioria, Liguria, have in common with a witch's murder that happened more than four centuries before? Is it possible for two occurrences so chronologically distant to be related?

A real mystery on which police chief Caterina Ruggeri will have to shed light at all costs. She will have to retrace a gloomy trail that really seems to have esoteric roots.

That is how "Esoteric Crimes" presents itself, as a novel that tastes like blood and has the color of the starless nights. It is a thrilling noir able to leave the readers breathless and making them feel that sinister tingling that one can perceive only by reading a good thriller.

A straightforward book that's not distant from reality. But at the same time, with its esoterism, it seems so far from it, as if it wants to escape it, bringing and dragging the reader in a world of fantasy, imagination, and ... thrills!

Filippo Munaro

Prologue

Summer 1989

Border between Nepal and People's Republic of China

When the Sherpa reached the umpteenth suspension bridge, they explained, in broken English, to the two women that have hired them in Kathmandu that they would never go beyond that point. They were not allowed to challenge their deities; they were too afraid. None of them has ever ventured beyond that bridge. Those, who in the past have dared to do so, never returned. If the women wanted to continue, they would have to do that at their own risk and peril. They would leave them the bare essentials to carry in their backpacks, some food, some chocolate bars, a camping stove, and the light two-seater igloo tent. They would wait for them for three days, and no more. The day was clear and, the rarefied air of almost four thousand meters of altitude gave the sky an intense blue color. The tops of the highest mountains on Earth challenged, with their snowy peaks, that same blue sky. Aurora and Laris pulled out the warm Goretex windbreakers, which until then have protected them from the sudden blizzards, that they often have faced during the previous five days. Their purpose was certainly not to experience the thrill of an extreme vacation but to reach the Temple of Knowledge and Regeneration and to meet the Grand Patriarch. They would draw on the universal knowledge preserved in the temple and thus become members of the highest level of the sect. They already knew that from that point on, they would have to proceed alone, relying on their intuition and their powers. If they failed, if they went the wrong way, it would be impossible for them to save themselves. They would only find death in those mountains. Aurora paid the agreed-upon to the Sherpa chief, telling him that if he wanted, he could leave immediately. But the man with the Asian features, who held the reins of a lama, shook his head and repeated: «Three days.»

He warmed a strong tea for the two women and dismissed them, waving them goodbye. The old woman and her young friend hoisted their backpacks and ventured onto the bridge, suspended over an abyss of at least eight hundred meters high.

Chapter 1

Caterina Ruggeri

The voice of the plane's pilot in command who warned the passengers of the now imminent landing brought me back to reality. Ancona is just an hour flight from Genoa, but my mind has been engaged in a whirlwind of thoughts. The events of the past few days have brought my life to a turning point. I thought about my past and my future. Now I had an important position, I had been appointed police chief in Imperia, and I never thought that this appointment would come so soon. Of course, I've spent exciting years as head of the Dogs' Unit of the State Police at the Raffaello Sanzio airport in Ancona. I had had the opportunity to achieve what I have always liked from an early age: work with police dogs and train them, from drug-sniffing dogs to rescue from rubble dogs, from anti-riot dogs to the so-called molecular ones, that is those dogs that are suited for the research of trails and missing people. On the other hand, besides being engaged in a job that I liked very much, I also had the time to devote myself to studying and graduating in Law. I specialized in Criminology and hoped for the desired career advancement.

I would certainly never abandon my passion for dogs. That passion has been passed down to me by my veterinary cousin, Stefano, now fifty years old and medical director of the Aesis Veterinary Clinic. Stefano had always been my secret love since I was little. My second cousin, twelve years older than me, had always attracted me in a particular way. The memory of a Ferragosto twenty-five years ago would forever stay alive in my mind. At the time, I was little more than a child: I had attended the second year of middle school and was not yet thirteen years old. He had just graduated in Veterinary Medicine in Perugia.

I was on vacation with my family: father, mother, and my two twin brothers, Alfonso and Stella, in a beautiful location in the Sibillini Mountains, at 1,400 meters above sea level. My father, crazy about alternative holidays, would have never taken us on vacation in a hotel. So, we used the brand-new truck tent that he had just purchased.

My family and Stefano's were very close. My cousin joined us early in the morning, together with his two sisters and his mother, to spend Ferragosto with us. The day was already splendid, serene, clear, and cloudless. The crisp mountain air was perfect for a nice walk, so we decided to reach a refuge located at an hour and a half walk from the place where we were camping. From there, another half an hour of a tough climb made it possible to reach a peak called Pizzo Tre Vescovi. All the way, I had ignored my equal in age cousin, trying to stay as close as possible to Stefano and to talk with him. He had spoken about the university, his current and future plans, how and why he had recently broken up with his girlfriend, with whom he had shared over five years of life. Stefano and I were the most passionate about the mountains and the most hardened to physical fatigue. When we reached the refuge, the others had decided to rest and dedicate themselves to the picking of blueberries and raspberries whereas the two of us had extended the hike to the top. My father had agreed to meet us at the camp for lunch at one o'clock. With a slightly childish but targeted gesture, I took Stefano's hand in mine and started with him up the steep and tiring path. The show at the top had paid off the effort to get there. On such a clear day, you could glance at the Umbrian mountains to the west, the Adriatic Sea to the east, the Pesarese mountains to the north, and the massive shape of Monte Vettore to the south. The latter closed the horizon and prevented from getting a glimpse of Laga and Abruzzo's mountains.

I observed the view, but above all, I looked at Stefano's beautiful green eyes, who kept pointing out the names of the various mountains he could recognize. The more I watched and listened to him, the more attracted I felt to him, he who had a handsome face, adorned with a light beard, thick and dark hair, and two eyes that I liked incredibly. Being little more than a child, I didn't know what it

meant to fall in love, but, in those moments, I understood that I was feeling new sensations. Perhaps, for the first time, I had fallen victim to this strange feeling.

We went back down, still talking and joking, reaching the rest of the company, just in time for the lunch prepared by my mother. She cooked an excellent Amatriciana, accompanied by grilled sausages and, to finish, the raspberries collected by brothers and cousins during the excursion. At the end of the meal, I suggested Stefano lie down in the sun. I recovered a tartan blanket and moved a bit away from the others, just out of sight. I pulled off my shirt and jeans and stood in a pink bikini that was just enough to cover my still immature breasts. He, too, had gotten rid of his shirt. We lay down, side by side, enjoying the afternoon sun that warmed the skin. At one point, I turned to him and pressed my small breasts against his chest.

«Teach me how to kiss a boy!»

He looked at me quizzically, but I, not at all frightened, brought my face close to his, half closing my eyes. I felt his lips join mine, and for a moment, I felt myself swooning. I don't know how long it lasted; just a few moments, I think. When Stefano realized what he was doing, he stopped and, albeit delicately and perhaps reluctantly, he put some space between us.

«Caterina, it's not possible between the two of us. I shouldn't have let myself go. You are a pretty girl, and you will become a beautiful woman. You have two gorgeous blue eyes that stand out even more under your cascade of dark hair. You will have no difficulty in finding a nice guy suitable for you. I've known you since you were in swaddling clothes, and I assure you that I love you so much but like a sister! And then twelve years of difference are an abyss. You are little more than a child, and I am already a man almost ready to get married. Anyway, in September, I will leave for grad school in Little Animals' Diseases and will stay in Pisa for two years. I assure you that I will write to you and give you my address. My friendship and my affection for you will always be there, but let's consider today's episode as a game and let's not talk about it anymore. »

Blushing, I nodded, but that kiss would remain in my mind and heart as the most beautiful one I had ever received.

At that time, cell phones did not exist, so contacts could only be made by writing letters and postcards or via landlines. For some time, keeping in touch with Stefano had been sporadic, and only two years later, I did manage to spend a few days with him again.

I had finished the first year of High School and had been passed with excellent marks. Summer, however, promised to be boring and without any holiday plans since, in the family, the quarrels between my father and my mother were more and more intense. The two of them could no longer agree on anything. Besides, my father was experiencing increasingly frequent depressive breakdowns.

It was a hot July day when my mother called me, telling me that my cousin Stefano was asking about me on the phone. I had rushed to the device with my heart in my throat.

«Hi Caterina, I passed the exam of the second year of specialization, and I have a few days off before starting the two months internship at the University Clinic. Then, in October, I will have to present my thesis, so summer is looking to be quite busy! Why don't you join me here in Pisa, so we'll allow us to take a tourist tour of Tuscany? A nice holiday will do both of us some good, for you as a distraction from your family's situation, for me as a short break from the studying efforts!»

I asked for permission from my parents, who had not created any problems, took the train, and reached Pisa. Stefano was waiting for me in the station lobby. I mended him my bag and found myself aboard his car, a Citroen 2CV, with which we would tour Tuscany in the following days. We stayed overnight in hostels or were hosted by his friends from the university. We visited beautiful cities, Pisa itself, San Gimignano, Siena, Arezzo. We also went on the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines for a short excursion to the Arno's spring, always animated by our well-established passion for the mountains. Finally, we reached Florence, where his brother hosted us: he was enrolled in the faculty of Architecture and did everything but study. It was hot on the last evening after dinner, and I was tired. Walking along the Lungarno, we reached Ponte Vecchio. It was a splendid evening; the river

reflected the almost full moon in the sky, and everything was very romantic. Taking advantage of my tiredness, I leaned against Stefano, passing an arm around his neck. In response, he gently grasped my hand, which dangled from his shoulder, caressing it a little. Then he squeezed my hips with the other arm. We remained like that, in silence, close and embraced, looking at the Florentine landscape. I was expecting a kiss, but nothing happened. I wished for that moment to never end. I wanted to stay there forever. Instead, the following morning, I found myself at the station in Florence, ready to go back home. The short vacation was over, but I still thought about the embrace of the previous evening: I kept feeling the hand that touched mine. Was I in love? Maybe.

When I got home, I found my father and mother engaged in yet another quarrel, and this turned off all the poetry created in the previous days. How is it possible, I thought, for two people who had loved each other, who had shared their lives for over twenty years, to come to treat each other like this? At that moment, I realized that marriage was not for me.

I was almost 19 when, on a warm early autumn day, my father killed himself, shooting himself in the temple. How had he come into possession of a gun, I would never know. The fact is that his life has been marked by a tragedy, which occurred about twelve years earlier, a tragedy in which my little brother of about three years died.

On Sundays, my father liked to cook, preparing embers in the fireplace, where he cooked everything, meat skewers, sausages, grilled vegetables, skewered chickens, and other delicacies. On the day of the accident, as usual, he had lit the fire and prepared everything he needed on the table. Alfonso, as a joke, had taken a grill and started running around the room. Trying to prevent an accident, my father chased him, but my brother stumbled and fell to the ground. The grate flew in the air and fell on the back of his nape. The metal point had found the space between two cervical vertebrae, slipping into the spinal cord and causing the immediate death of the child. Dad had never made peace with himself for this episode. Together with my mother, they had decided to have another child to compensate for their loss. So, after some time, the twins were born. Naming one of the two children Alfonso, again, has not been a brilliant idea at all. Every time my parents spoke his name, they remembered that tragedy all over again. Over time, my parents quarreled more and more often. Every time, my mother pinned the fault for the death of the child on her husband, who had gone into depression, to fight which he had started attending psychotherapy sessions. At one point, his therapist had stuffed him with psychiatric drugs, which, instead of making him feel better, led him to the psychic meltdown and, eventually, to suicide.

I had heard a loud noise coming from the study, and I rushed into my father's room with a bad feeling. I found him slumped on the desk, with a laconic note beside him, where he had written just the following: «Forgive me.»

I hadn't been able to shed a tear. My mother didn't seem too sorry for the loss: indeed, perhaps it has been a liberation for her. I felt the need to speak with someone other than my mother, with someone who understood me, and the only one who could do that was Stefano. I joined him in his Veterinary Clinic, on the outskirts of Jesi, and only in his arms, I did manage to unleash all my tears.

«I've suffered too much in the last years. I've seen too much evil around me. I would like to remedy this by engaging myself in a job that is useful to someone and, at the same time, that could be a personal satisfaction. Give me some advice, please!»

He smiled at me, trying to wipe away my tears.

«You have recently graduated with honors, you have a good knowledge of psychology and sociology, plus you love animals and dogs in particular. If you may be interested, a client of mine, a superintendent of the State Police, illustrated me a few days ago a project for the construction of a dogs' unit. It will depend on the Ancona Police Headquarters. Waiting for the funds and equipment to arrive, he was assigned a German Shepherd, to use as a drug-sniffing dog at the port. Why don't you try the police force career? I can see you doing that! Then, once you enter, you will have the

opportunity to assert your qualities as a skilled dog expert. I am here and will always help you when you will need it!»

At the time, I judged the idea a bit bizarre. But then, considering that I didn't think of myself as a marriage kind of woman, given my parents' bad experience, a few days later, I presented myself to the Police Headquarters in Ancona. I filled in the application for admission to the course for student agents.

After the course, the career hadn't been as easy as I had thought. Some time passed before I was called into force. In the meantime, I had enrolled in the Faculty of Law in Macerata, dedicating myself mainly to criminology.

I hadn't even been able to sit an exam when finally, the employment letter arrived. I was to be a chosen agent stationed at the Police Headquarters of Ancona. At first, it seemed that nobody cared about my qualities as a criminologist, and about my knowledge on how to work with dogs. I spent long days behind the wheel and around the city, stopping cars at checkpoints or arresting drunks, drug addicts, and prostitutes. It was certainly not the job I had expected and, after the shift was over, I was so exhausted that it was unthinkable to go back to the books to study.

But I didn't let my guard down, and I always looked for an opportunity to demonstrate my true abilities to my superiors. After a couple of years of service, the advancement to the rank of superintendent was automatic. Thus the possibility for me to follow my fellow inspectors in some investigation had opened up.

The idea of a dogs' unit dependent on the Ancona Police Headquarters had been monopolized by a colleague, by superintendent Carli, posted at the port. He did nothing but make some tourists pass by his German Shepherd, to occasionally pull out from, of the moment, unfortunate person, a few grams of drug from his underwear. But the real drug, the one, we knew very well, was passing through the port of Ancona in kilos he never intercepted it.

Finally, one day my great opportunity knocked on my door. Together with Inspector Ennio Santinelli, a smart guy, but who lacked that edge necessary to stand out from the others, I was investigating the trafficking of stolen dogs. We believed they were being exported abroad after being cleaned up of their tattoo, that is if they had one. According to my colleague, they were mostly hunting dogs, marketed in Greece, Albania, and Turkey. In my opinion, there was more to it because they were often half-breed dogs, and of all ages, there were even old dogs. I asked Stefano, and he too, as a veterinarian, said that it didn't add up much.

«If one wants to speculate with international dog trafficking, the dogs are to be hunting dogs of high genealogy and young or trained to fight. There's something wrong here,» he told me on the phone.

One morning in March fax from Greece arrived at the station. An animal welfare association reported that in Patras, a lorry, that officially transported horses, had been embarked on a ferry with Ancona as its destination. But, among the horses, there were at least a hundred dogs transported in inhuman conditions. Superintendent Carli was not on duty that day. Inspector Santinelli, partly because of the bitter cold of the morning, and partly because he did not want to invade his colleague's camp, was reluctant to head towards the port.

«I don't think this interests us much,» said Santinelli. «You go, Caterina, have a look and, if you find it necessary, get the Public Veterinary Service to intervene.»

When I arrived at the pier where the ferry from Greece was docked, I immediately noticed a hustle and bustle of animalists, who demanded the immediate appropriation of the animals. On the other hand, the captain of the ferry claimed that on board, as per international conventions, the Italian authorities could not intervene, and he had received a message from the Greek shipowner not to land the lorry, which would return to Patras. All this convinced me more and more that there was some shady traffic in there. I asked for the lorry documents, the travel plan, and the animals' accompanying documents. Trucks, engine, and trailers came from Turkey and were headed to Hanover. From the

transport documents, it appeared that the vehicle had to transport only horses intended for slaughter. Trying to express me in English with the Greek driver, I managed to get information that some dogs were being transported among the horses. He showed me some health certificates, attesting to rabies vaccination and other treatments, but which, being written in Greek, were very difficult to understand. The driver claimed to have about forty dogs on board, while animal rights activists claimed there were at least a hundred. I would have liked to unload the truck to check it calmly, but the ship's captain continued to object. I needed a ploy. I grabbed my cell phone and, even if the mobile phone rates were still very high in those days, I called Stefano, who gave me the tip.

«If the animals have been traveling for more than 24 hours, for their well-being, and according to the international laws, they must be watered, fed, and allowed to rest. So, you need to insist and make the captain disembark the lorry. You will see that he cannot refuse. If he doesn't follow the rules, he'll risk losing his well-paid job.»

The captain threatened to later officially protest but had landed the truck. Inside, in fact, there were just a few horses and many dogs. I immediately called Inspector Santinelli and the magistrate on duty, because I intended to seize the entire load. I managed to do that, overcoming the reluctance of my colleague and the magistrate, who were truly distraught, because then an adequate place should have been found to house all those animals.

When I managed to check the dogs, there were one hundred and two at the final count. I was struck by the fact that they were all medium-sized dogs, all half-breed, and all with prominent muscled backs.

Why not? I thought to myself. They may have found a way to smuggle something into the subcutis of these poor animals! But how can I explain it to my superiors?

And here, Stefano intervened, once again, with his precious help. I arranged for the horses to be placed in the stable of a friend of his, and for the dogs to be sent to a modern and recently built shelter. Stefano looked after it from the sanitary point of view. The shelter was provided with a fully equipped infirmary, where Stefano performed first aid interventions on injured dogs. The equipment included an ultrasound, used to diagnose the pregnancies of the hosted mares.

We had to act quickly because internationally renowned lawyers were already on the move to obtain the release of the animals. This increased my suspicions and hypothesis of illegal trafficking. Colleague Carli was making rain down holy hell because we had invaded the land under his jurisdiction. He invoked important connections in the upper echelons, even up to the Ministry of the Interior, and demanded that the case be traced back to him.

As soon as we sheared the dog's fur, we realized that the animal had a linear scar on both sides, alongside the lumbar spine.

«Let's try to run some ultrasound scans on the backs of these dogs,» Stefano suggested to me, fondly caressing one of those nice little animals.

«These are perfect scars. They do not appear to be surgical cuts, because the cross marks of the stitches are not evident. But a surgeon who can work well, performing a particular subcutaneous suture, can get aesthetic scars like these. I, myself, could not do better.»

He then placed the ultrasound probe on the involved part.

«There is an abnormal density of the subcutaneous tissue. I'd say to take some of these dogs to the surgery room. Let's see what is hidden under the scars.»

He anesthetized a dog, surgically prepared the identified anatomical area, and cut right above the scar. He extracted a blood-stained, well-sealed transparent envelope, with a white powder within. It was certainly neither flour nor sugar.

«Drug,» I said. «Most probable cocaine or heroin, coming from Afghanistan and headed to Germany through Turkey, Greece, Italy, and Austria. They invented a nice trick but, I think that someone I know suggested it. Drug-sniffing dogs only smell other fellow dogs, and the drug was not discovered in customs. The surgery is performed at the origin; then they wait for the wounds

to heal and the fur of the animals to grow back. And then, upon arrival, these animals are perhaps slaughtered, even killed, just to pull out their precious contents.»

I informed the magistrate of the discovery, who ordered the animals to be operated in safe conditions, to remove the drug, and then to treat them properly. Later they could be put out for adoption by good-hearted people. Stefano, in his clinic, worked day and night to operate all the dogs. He allowed himself only a few hours of rest and knowing that he would not see a penny at the end of the work. But to ensure my success, he would do this and more. In the end, we had two hundred and four bags, each containing half a kilo of drugs, which the scientific laboratory confirmed to be pure heroin. They were worth one hundred and thirty billion of the then old Lire (about sixty million Euros). We also discovered that Superintendent Carli was entangled in this story up to his neck. So, he was arrested for aiding and abetting. At that point, the investigation passed to Interpol, which would try to identify the network of drug traffickers, starting from all the elements we have made available.

A few days later, the commissioner summoned me to his office for the usual congratulations.

«Congratulations, Ruggeri! Thanks to your intuition, we did a great job, and they complimented us at the Ministry. I have already signed the proposal for your advancement to Chief Inspector. Besides, we also found out that Carli was doing everything to cover up the proposals and funds that came from the Ministry for the dogs' unit project. Now with Carli is gone, I will suggest for the responsibility for the project to go directly under your supervision. You will be able to use the funds as you see fit, decide how to build the structure, and above all, choose the dogs and the men. I would suggest leaving the port to the Finance Police, which already controls the customs. We will have our own space at the Raffaello Sanzio Airport, which will be enhanced starting from 2000. What do you think about that?»

«Thank you, Doctor, but I don't think I deserve this,» I replied, looking down. «I just did my duty.»

The words of that distant conversation still rang in my mind, when the croaking voice of the speaker startled me.

«Thank you for choosing the company Nuova Alitalia. We would like to warn the passengers that in ten minutes, we will land at Cristoforo Colombo Airport in Genoa. It is 9.30 on the first of July 2009, the temperature on the ground is around 28 degrees, stable and clear weather is expected with rising temperatures and winds from the South-East. We wish you a nice stay. Thank you, and we hope to see you again on these airlines.»

Of course, it had taken another two years to set up the Dog Detachment at the Raffaello Sanzio airport. On the land that had belonged to the Air Force, the settlement has been built exactly as I had it in mind: twelve boxes closed on three sides a large training field. The fourth side was occupied by the service structure, obtained from an old Air Force building. On the ground floor, there was an equipped infirmary for dogs, supplied with a radiological device, an ultrasound machine, a medicine cabinet, as well as a surgical room for emergency operations. A couple of rooms were reserved for administrative procedures, while, on the upper floor, I had my accommodation, a bedroom, a bathroom, and a small kitchen. For several years the place would become my home and my roof, as well as my working place, also because I was getting surer day by day that I would never tie myself to a man to a man.

I personally chose the dogs at the canine center of the Finance Police, in Castiglione del Lago, and at that of the State Police in Nettuno, near Rome, where I had followed the training course. I wanted perfectly trained dogs to cover all possible specialties. I had brought two German Shepherds to Falconara Marittima, to use as drug-sniffing dogs, and two other dogs of the same breed, flanked by a Rottweiler, as anti-riot dogs, and for public order interventions. As molecular and rubble dogs, that is dogs destined for civil protection interventions, I opted for a pair of Labrador Retrievers and a Samoyed. I then selected two Weimaraners to work with explosives, while another German Shepherd, a large male, had been chosen for attack and self-defense. A box left empty for other specialties would later be occupied by my Springer Spaniel, Furia. A dog completely denied for hunting, but with an

exceptional sense of smell, and capable of following a trail and finding missing people starting from a simple object that belonged to those who had to be found. But Furia would arrive several years after the beginning of the detachment activity.

The men had been chosen among the most valid in force in the State Police of the Marche's various provinces. Each man was linked with a dog, as his handler. The men had to be not only experts in the same specialty as the animal but that they had to have the patience to train and take care of their dogs as if the latter were a child or part of them. I had some doubts about offering Inspector Santinelli to be my deputy. Usually, there is some difficulty in accepting to be subordinate to a person of which one was superior but he had accepted willingly, either for his passion for dogs or perhaps for a passion for me too, that I would never share back.

At the beginning of the summer of 1997, we were finally ready to begin. The inauguration of the detachment took place in the presence of important authorities, among whom there were the Prefect, the Mayors of Ancona and Falconara Marittima, and officials from the Ministry of the Interior. At the end of our demonstration of the work with the dogs, in simulated drug and explosives research and actions aimed at blocking criminals, the day ended with a performance by the Frecce Tricolori. To my great regret, the only sad note of the day was that I learned that that was the last public event that commissioner Ianniello would attend, as he was close to retirement.

In short, even at 26 years of age, I had a position of responsibility and great satisfaction. Stefano's support, both as the doctor of our dogs and as a friend, has never failed. All the dogs chosen worked very well. Only concerning the Rottweiler, I did regret the choice.

«To keep the crowd in check,» Stefano had warned me, «you need dogs that make a scene, they need to inspire fear in those in front of them, whether they are the fans at the stadium or the demonstrators in a square. But dogs must never hurt people. The Rottweiler is a traitor. He looks like a good-natured, he's there good and seated looking at you, he doesn't seem to even care about you. But once you get within his range, without even warning you with a snarl, he is capable of tearing you alive. The strength of his jaw is superior to that of any other breed. Measured with the dynamometer, the force of its bite reaches 230 kg, against German Sheperd's 80 kg and Neapolitan Mastiff's 120 kg. He is basically a war machine. Never trust him!»

To my regret, after Thor, that was his name, had made himself responsible for a bad training joke against his conductor, it had been necessary to reform him. Usually, a dog is reformed at the end of his career, when he is too old to perform his duties and, in most cases, the handler, who by the time has developed a particular relationship with the dog, adopts it and keeps it close, considering that the animal has just a few years of life. If this does not happen, the reformed dog must be euthanized, because it is unthinkable for dogs trained like this to end up in the hands of untrusted people. I was aware that the end of Thor would be a lethal injection, and I could not give myself peace, but I looked at his handler, with his arm still bandaged, and I could not take responsibility for something like this happening again. Thor was soon replaced by another German Shepherd, this time chosen by me at a local farm. I raised him since he was a puppy, and I trained him up until the moment of assigning him to a conductor.

Aside from Thor's unpleasant episode, the days went by fast. Every day the team was engaged in training for at least two or three hours, then there were the services, the drug control at the airport customs, the services during fairs and markets looking for possible pickpockets or drug dealers. Sometimes we were also called to distant places, for civil protection interventions, after earthquakes or other natural disasters, to recover any survivors from under the rubble, or to search for missing people in the mountains, not just after mudslides or avalanches, but just because maybe they got lost during an excursion. The fame of my team, over time, went beyond the Marche borders, and we were often called for services far away from our base. The team lacked a dog that could sniff a trail, follow one, and in short, help the policeman in an investigation, as well as in an action. It would arrive later, and it would have been my Furia, a Springer Spaniel, puppy of a dog of Inspector Santinelli.

The flow of my thoughts was, at that point, definitively interrupted by the braking of the plane on the runway and the consequent opening of the hold doors. A whole new chapter of my life was about to begin.

Chapter 2

I was trying to orient me in the arrivals lounge at the airport in order to understand where the conveyer belt on which my luggage would arrive was when a madman in perfect State Police summer uniform approached decisively. He was about one meter and ninety high, with a stubble haircut, blue eyes, and perfectly trimmed beard. His biceps were hardly contained by the uniform shirt's half sleeve. He was about to make me the military salute but then rethought that and held out his hand instead.

«Doctor Ruggeri, I presume! I'm inspector Mauro Giampieri and from this moment I'll be at your disposal. I have compulsory orders from the police commissioner, we need to get going right away to reach a crime scene. It is a crime that happened last night in Triora, a small village in Imperia's inland. I already instructed an agent to collect your luggage and to take it to the police district. Follow me, we have no time to waste.»

I was a bit confused, and I followed him without any objection, even though I would have preferred to start everything in a different way, by taking a taxi to Imperia and settling in my new job after having at least refreshed myself in a hotel. When I saw the white and blue State Police car we were approaching in the parking lot reserved for the police, I could not help feeling a thrill: a brand new Gallardo Lamborghini. I knew about the existence of that marvelous car, that could reach 320 km per hour, equipped with an on-board computer with various functionalities, connected through a satellite system to the computer archives of the Criminalpol and Interpol, only because I've read something in the magazines.

«I thought this gem was reserved for the highway. Patrol,» I said, trying to break the ice with the Inspector, who kept his firm pace. As we closed to the car the hazard lights flashed, beeping.

«This car is different from the one at the disposal of the traffic police, what changes is not the model, but the equipment and performance. I'll be able to explain some things along the way, take a seat!»

In the car, he inserted a card into a designated slot on the dashboard and entered a code on a numeric keypad. He was about to press the button to start the engine but stopped himself and started tinkering with a package.

«Your right forearm, Doctor! I'm going to insert you a microchip, containing some information about you, such as biodata, blood type, medication history, but it will also function as a satellite locator if needed. It will take a split second, and you won't feel any pain. These are the orders, unfortunately. I've got one inserted too.»

His pseudo-military discipline was starting to get on my nerves and I was about to object.

«I'm not a dog that risks getting lost!»

With swift movements, he opened a sterilized bag containing a swab soaked in disinfectant, and then, from another one, he extracted an injector with a huge needle. Despite my protests, he grabbed my arm and carried out the procedure.

«Keep the pad pressed for a few moments and fasten your seat belt. We're heading off.»

The speeding glued my back to the car seat. In just a few seconds the Lamborghini reached a speed well above the limit. He swiftly passed the toll gate and started driving at about 200 km per hour.

«You, Inspector, look a lot more like a soldier than a policeman. I do not know your CV, but I think I will study it with great attention. Anyway, since we have to work together and I've always hated formalities, I'd suggest getting on first name terms. I am Caterina.»

He answered, warming up a little.

«Mauro. I confess to you, Doctor...Caterina that in fact, until a few months ago, I was in the army. I followed the Italian contingent on missions abroad on various occasions and until last Christmas, I was stationed in Afghanistan. I was in Nassirya in 2003, during the massacre of the

Italian soldiers, and I got out of that without a single wound. I have also been to Iraq and Bosnia and Herzegovina. I am still very used to military discipline. Anyway, I'm an expert in explosives, fights against terrorism and organized guerrilla warfare, driving in extreme conditions... I believe that the police commissioner put us in pair to solve a really rough case, which I will later explain to you. Meanwhile, I'm going to show you the features of this car, which for now has no comparison in Italy. As you can see, here in the center on the dashboard we have a twelve-inch display, which looks like a GPS navigator, but which has many other features. It is an actual PC, which in addition to having internet access via a satellite connection, allows us to consult the police databases, not only the Italian ones but those all over the world. That is a small scanner, connected to the system, in which we can insert fingerprints, taken with pieces of scotch tape, and start a search in the databases to which we are connected. To the touch screen functionality, which is very interesting for working on the main menu, we can add the functions of a standard keyboard, which we can extract from that drawer below. Open the glove compartment, you will find there a gun, which has already been assigned to you, and a PDA. Both you and I have an identical PDA, with which we can interface with the car's on-board computer. The PDA, like the microchip that we have inserted, allows the central unit, and one of us from the car, to find our exact location with the GPS. »

«Geez, judging from everything you're telling me, the investigation they've assigned us seems to be very risky. Not even the mythical 007 agent has had all this technology at his disposal!»

«And in fact, you are not wrong. Strange events have happened in Triora for several years: people disappear in mysterious circumstances, without apparently leaving any trace. So far, the police have investigated but without getting on with anything. On the main suspect, a certain Aurora Della Rosa, whom the people of the country define as a sorceress, or rather, a witch, they have never managed to gather sufficient evidence, and therefore the investigations are still groping in the dark. A fire broke out in the woods near Triora tonight, which threatened Aurora's home. At the end of the extinguishing operations, the firefighters found the burnt corpse of a woman. I believe that the coroner and the forensic scientist are already on the scene. This time no Carabinieri nor RIS, the investigation is ours. Precisely for your studies on esotericism and on sects, Imperia's police commissioner has requested your presence, and this crime, who knows based on what randomness, was consumed just at the same time as your arrival. Now we have work to get done, and not a little!»

In fact, after a few years of intense work with the dog units, the team had become so trained and efficient that I had been able to give myself some personal space and even start attending again the Faculty of Law in Macerata. I knew that with my degree I could aspire to an important career advancement, but this was not what motivated me to study. It was my innate passion for criminology, which was second only to that for dogs. I was particularly interested in the crimes committed by the followers of the so-called esoteric sects. Starting from the episode of the Beasts of Satan, which occurred a few years earlier, in which the fools, to cover the murder of a girl and mislead the investigations, had staged black masses and satanic rites, I had begun to study the true esoteric sects. I tried to dig deep, to get an idea of what their origins were, but they were lost in the mists of time, to understand what was hidden behind their rites and what crimes their adepts had stained in the past, recent and remote. In Italy, Liguria was one of the places where it was known that some adepts still gathered and practiced their rituals in secret, which sometimes included sacrifices of animals or people. The Inquisition had fought sects until the late 17th century, condemning proselytes to death on charges of heresy or witchcraft. All this fascinated me in particular, so, with my thesis entitled "Esoteric sects and crimes perpetrated by their followers," I graduated in July 2008 with the best results.

So, precisely by virtue of these studies of mine, now, not even a year after graduation, I had been called to hold the post of police chief in the police district of Imperia, exactly in that area where there was still an intense activity linked to the sects.

Through the window, I saw several highway toll gates, one after the other. In a few minutes, we were already past the Savona exit and continued at high speed towards Imperia.

«Why do the investigators see the shadow of the sects in all this?» I asked, emerging from my thoughts. «All in all, if we consider the Beasts of Satan, famous in these places, we can well understand that they are all frames and there is nothing related to esoterism.»

«In this case, however, there are well-founded elements that lead to thinking about a sect, even if the whole plot, which started several years ago, remains quite dark. Corpses have never been found, up until today, and, based on this new element, we can start to think that even the previously disappeared people were killed, but the crimes were covered, in due time, flawlessly. Maybe something unexpected happened tonight and the killer, or the killers, failed to hide the body, as in the previous cases. Perhaps they tried to set the victim's body on fire, but a sudden change of wind, which is not uncommon in these parts, has triggered a fire that was no longer controllable. We think it was Aurora herself who called for help because her home was threatened by the fire.»

«What is her alibi? Do we know what she said?»

«She said she came home very late, because she has been to dinner in a restaurant downstream, and that, when she approached her home, she spotted the reddish light of the fire. She called 115 on her cell phone while she was still a couple of miles away.»

«Well, we'll do the necessary checks. But tell me about the people who disappeared previously.»

«It would take a lot to tell everything in detail. I'll try to keep things brief, then we will have the opportunity to go through all the material that has been sent to us by the police headquarters and the court. There is a nice file to study, and it's already on your desk. The first person whose traces were lost is the one who lived in the same house as Aurora and who went by the same name. In 1989 this sixty-year-old lady, known as a fortune teller, herbalist, healer, seer, and sorceress, decided to go to the mountains of Nepal to reach a temple where she could regenerate her spirit, body, and soul. She reached Kathmandu with her follower, a young Romanian woman, a certain Laris Dracu. The two women hired Sherpas, who accompanied them up to a certain extent. When they insisted on going to an unexplored area, barred to the Sherpas for their religious beliefs, the latter left them alone, saying that they would wait for them for three days, after which they would hold them for missing. Nothing was ever known about the two, but a few months later a twenty-year-old who claimed to be Aurora's granddaughter showed up in Triora. Appealing to the homonymy, she claimed the right to take possession of her grandmother's house. This young Aurora also seemed to have supernatural powers, but far more powerful than those of the alleged ancestor. The few locals, who had known Aurora in her youth, could not do anything else but notice the extraordinary resemblance of the young woman to the elderly one that disappeared, so much that many were convinced that the witch had found, on her trip to Nepal, an elixir for youth and has managed to rejuvenate her appearance until she became a girl again. But apart from that, strange episodes began to occur in the woods around Triora. It was said in the village that, on full moon nights, the witches had started practicing their Sabbaths, organized by the young Aurora. Aside from the Sabbaths, Aurora had many visits to her home. In addition to the postulants who requested herbal remedies for the treatment of sicknesses, or elixirs of various types to resolve love troubles, occasionally special people came, hosted by her as followers of an esoteric sect, whose name I do not remember now. These subjects, essentially women, reached the place in order to draw knowledge in the ancient library, which had always been jealously kept in Aurora's home by her ancestors, and gradually enriched by them over the centuries. One of these young women, Mariella Carletti, called La Rossa, in 1997 left from a small town in Abruzzo, where she was already known as a healer and seer, leaving said that she would reach Triora in order to pass the arduous tests that would allow her to become an adept of the seventh level, one of the highest, and that she would return with powers that no one could ever imagine. She never went back. In Triora, this beautiful girl, tall, with flowing fiery red hair, light blue eyes, a pale complexion full of freckles, did not go unnoticed. At dusk on June 21, the day of the summer solstice, she headed for

the woods where the Sabbaths were said to take place, after which she disappeared. An interesting detail is that there was a beginning of a fire that night, but very limited. Apparently, a long-disused truck had caught fire, but the fact could not be connected in any way to the girl's disappearance. The burnt carcass of the truck is still there, it was never removed. The case, in its time, was dismissed as the work of thugs. In 2000, three journalists, two men, and a woman, from a well-known national monthly magazine which has its headquarters and editorial office in Genoa, wanted to carry out their own little investigation into the girl's disappearance, which had taken place three years earlier. With the excuse of a reportage on witches and witchcraft in Triora, they placed themselves with a small tent right in the woods where the witches gathered, near the Fonte della Noce, with the hope of glimpsing some satanic ritual or something. For a few days, they collected information on the trial put in place against the witches of Triora towards the end of the 16th century. They also tried to get an exclusive interview from Aurora, who however did not grant it. On the night between the 20 and 21 August, the three journalists disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Inside the tent, found empty the following morning, some notebooks with the collected material were found. These notebooks were returned to the magazine which, to honor the three, published an eight-page article about the witches of Triora. The last sentence written in the notebook of one of the three journalists was in large capital letters and it was also underlined: "MY GOD!" Something or someone had definitely scared him to death. Nothing was ever heard again about the missing journalists.»

In the meantime, we had passed Imperia, left the highway at the Arma di Taggia toll gate, and took a provincial road that went up a beautiful valley floor, running parallel to the course of a river. It was the first time I was seeing places that would later become familiar. We were traveling through the Argentina Valley, crossed by the river of the same name, a narrow valley with few human settlements. The green of the luxuriant woods stood out against the intense blue of the clear sky on the warm day of early July and, within me, the old passion for the mountain was awakening. I was already dreaming of walking on the paths that went into those woods. We went up past a small town, Molini di Triora, to reach Triora, a village with medieval features, perched on the top of a summit. After passing the center, the road descended and, after a while, we stopped in an open space, where a couple of police cars, a jeep of the firefighters, and a truck of the forestry body equipped to put out the forest fires were parked.

«Well,» I said, «what you told me is very interesting and actually one can really glimpse the paw of the sects, besides that of something really thorny! It is now a question of how much esotericism has to do with all this and what is the responsibility of the followers in the disappearance of the people you mentioned and in the murder of this night if it was a murder and not a simple accident. »

«Caterina, please, caution is never too much here. Aside from witches, during this investigation, we may find ourselves faced with unscrupulous criminals. Take the gun and let's memorize each other's PDA's number, so we can call each other if necessary. Let's go!»

I grabbed the PDA but left the pistol in the glove compartment of the car, as I thought I wouldn't need it at the time.

Chapter 3

Aurora Della Rosa

Larìs was not afraid of crossing the suspension bridge. She looked for Aurora's blue-green eyes, which transmitted her all the strength and energy she needed. She had known her for a short time, but she trusted her and her esoteric powers.

Larìs Dracu was from Transylvania, a region in Romania, that was still ruled by a communist dictator in the late 1980s. By the age of eighteen, she had already gained the fame of an anti-communist witch and, in order not to fall into the hands of General Ceausescu's secret police, she had headed to Italy with considerable difficulty. She had gone to a village in Liguria, where she knew an adept of her own sect lived, who would help her and guide her in continuing her journey towards the highest level, the one beyond the seventh, that of universal knowledge. When she arrived at Aurora's house, on the day of the spring equinox, at midday, she noticed that her hostess was waiting for her in the doorway with the door open. She was not surprised, as she knew the sorceress's seer powers. She felt herself being watched with complacency. Larìs was a beautiful girl, with shiny black hair, pulled back and gathered in a short pigtail, dark eyes, almost black, delicate facial features. The sinuous lines of her body allowed to imagine, under tight clothes, a rare to be seen perfection of breasts, buttocks, and legs. The sorceress appeared to her as a sixty-year-old in excellent shape, with blond hair slightly streaked with white, her eyes changed their color from blue to green, depending on the brightness of the environment. Her body still had the strength of a forty-year-old and her skin was smooth, tight, and not furrowed by obvious wrinkles. Her gaze was magnetic and, when her eyes met Aurora's, Larìs felt a strong sexual impulse towards the sorceress. Aurora spoke a few words in a language incomprehensible to ordinary mortals. She had not expressed herself in the Occitan language, typical of that border area between Italy and France, but the young woman had been able to understand it, having learned it as a child, when her mother had started her to magical and esoteric practices. The Semants was the ancient language of the adepts, whose origin was lost in the mists of time, an idiom already known at the time of the Egypt of the Pharaohs by magicians and shamans, but which had even more ancient origins. Larìs was invited by Aurora to enter the house and was led into a squared room. One of the walls of the living room was occupied entirely by a mirror, so it seemed that the room was much larger than it actually was, while on the other three walls there were shelves, where there were many books and manuscripts and some porcelain vases, like the ones used in the past in pharmacies and herbalist shops.

Larìs's attention was caught above all by the floor, very shiny marble of different colors, yellow, blue, emerald green. With colored tiles, as if it were a mosaic, the design of one of the main esoteric symbols had been created, a pentacle, a five-pointed star, inscribed in a circle, which in its turn was inscribed in the squared perimeter of the room.



The symbol of the spirit, a sort of asterisk, drawn on the central pentagonal tile, delimited by the lines from which the five-pointed star originated, indicated the exact center of the room. In each of the other sectors in which the floor was divided by the lines and arcs of the circle, some figures could be recognized, each linked to the esoteric symbolism: the crescent moon and the waning moon, the full moon, the conjunction of the sun with the moon in the partial eclipse and total eclipse, and others. Laris was both fascinated and embarrassed.

«In the house where I lived, in Transylvania, there was a room identical to this one,» she, turning towards Aurora, said in the same language in which the sorceress had spoken earlier. «The central tile indicates the exact point where something important had happened in the past, something infinitely beautiful or extremely ugly. My foster mother, Cornelia, said that, in correspondence with my home, many centuries ago, a prince who came down from the Carpathian Mountains, on a full moon night, had loved a beautiful girl and from their mating was born the girl who would have originated our offspring. But apart from this legend, I am also aware of the fact that, by lowering the central tile, a mechanism is triggered that highlights a secret room hidden behind the mirror. Cornelia pulled from her neck a gold chain in which a ring was inserted, where a pentacle-shaped stone was set, which fit perfectly into a lock, hidden behind a shelf. Then she lowered the pentagonal tile so that the mirror moved and left access to the secret room. There were preserved books, manuscripts, parchments, even very ancient ones, that her ancestors had handed down to her and which was the knowledge to which she granted access to those who aspired to become followers of the seventh level.»

«From the way you speak, and from what I perceive with my powers, I know that you have already been able to view those documents and possess, like me, the powers and the wisdom of the seventh level, therefore it is useless for me to open for you the secret room. Together, however, we could be able to face the path that will take us to the highest level, that of Universal Knowledge.»

While she was speaking, Aurora had taken some tobacco from a precious porcelain container and placed it on two papers, she skilfully rolled them into two cigarettes. She offered one to Laris, then lit a match, bringing it first to the young woman's cigarette, then to hers.

Aspiring a large puff of smoke, Laris understood that hallucinogen and exciting substances had been added to tobacco, but she was already used to smoking that type of mixture. If she had not been, she would have fallen prey to the will of the sorceress, as in a hypnosis caused by both drugs

and Aurora's hidden powers. The drug instead stimulated a sexual desire in her, she moved closer to Aurora and let herself be kissed and caressed. Having put out their cigarettes, the two undressed and lay together on the bare floor, until Laris reached orgasm.

«Now that we have united our bodies, we will unite our minds and our souls,» Aurora said to the girl, that was still panting with pleasure. «Today is a special, unique day, and we must use our powers together to evoke the spirit of Artemisia, my ancestor burned at the stake just four centuries ago.»

Laris followed the speech curiously while observing that the light entering through the window was decreasing and already the full moon was evident in the still blue late afternoon sky.

«On March 21, 1589, exactly four hundred years ago, Artemisia was tied to the pole, stuck in the ground right there, where you now see the pentagonal tile marked with the symbol of the spirit. Today is the spring equinox, the full moon in a few hours will be obscured by the shadow of the earth in a total eclipse. It is a very rare astral conjunction to occur. It's an ideal night for a Sabbath, but that's not what interests us. You have come here in these hours because I alone would not have had the strength to do what we are about to do.»

She took very sharp scissors and carefully cut her blond pubic hair until the genital area was completely smooth-skinned. She collected them in a golden chalice and did the same thing with Laris's pubic hair, much darker than her own. Then she took some herbs from some containers, including some of the mixture they had smoked earlier, and mixed everything, adding some oil, after which she carefully placed the glass over the central tile. She prepared two more cigarettes, which they would smoke, still naked, until they reached a certain degree of oblivion, almost to the trance. Meanwhile, it got dark and the large circle of the moon shone in the sky, it was slowly being obscured by the shadow of the Earth, in that rare magical moment of alignment of the three celestial bodies. By the time the moon was completely darkened and its position was evident only as a reddish halo, the two naked women sitting on the floor joined their hands and feet to form a circle around and above the chalice. Aurora uttered a magic formula: «Has Sagadà, Artemisia.»

The window swung open, a bolt of lightning entered the hall and set fire to the contents of the glass. A greyish smoke rose, with the bad smell of burnt flesh, reminiscent of the smell of the witch burned at the stake four centuries earlier. The smoke modeled itself and took the form of a woman who, circling and dancing, reached Aurora and merged with her body. Now Aurora was Artemisia and Artemisia was Aurora. Laris was helplessly witnessing this phenomenon. When the last thread of smoke disappeared, absorbed by Aurora's body, and the contents of the chalice had completely disappeared, the two women fell into a deep sleep and had a vision of what had happened four centuries before. Aurora lived the scene first-hand, in the role of Artemisia, while Laris lived it as a spectator, mixed with the crowd who witnessed the witch's torture.

Artemisia was tied to the pole, bundles of pruning of the olive trees had been placed under her feet, and then larger logs of pine and fir resinous wood. Everything had also been sprinkled with lamp oil. Her four companions, Viola, Emanuela, Alessandra, and Teres, were tied to other four poles, which had been arranged in a semicircle behind her, and faced toward the spectators. The latter was also called "tomboy", as she had been surprised several times while lying with other women, she had even been accused of being a hermaphrodite, a person in which male and female sexual organs lived together. She was a woman with a clitoris so developed that it simulated a small penis, capable of also achieving an erection. These last four women would not be burned, even if some bundles had been placed at their feet. They had confessed their faults and had indicated Artemisia as their "spiritual guide", therefore they had been tied to the stakes, both as a warning to the local population, and to witness closely the torture of their inspirer. Why was the execution going to take place, since the Doge of Genoa had vetoed the Inquisitors of the Church, assuring women that he would not allow, in those modern times, a sentence to such an atrocious death? The Doge was proud of the fact that one of his fellow citizens had discovered, not even a century earlier, a new land, America, putting an end to that dark period that had been the Middle Ages. He would therefore never have allowed

the Church, through the Inquisition, to burn these women alive, even if they had been found guilty of witchcraft, heresy, mingling with the devil, crimes against God, the Church, and men. Everything had started a year and a half earlier, in the autumn of 1587, when the Podestà, Stefano Carrega, and the local parliament, had indicated the witches who lived in Ca Botina as the main perpetrators of the serious famine, which had for some time fallen all over the area, and they had asked the Bishop of Albenga to institute a trial of the alleged witches so that their wrongdoing could be ended with exemplary punishment, the condemnation to the stake. Two inquisitors had arrived in the village, two Dominican friars dressed in black, one was the Vicar of the Bishop, and the other the Vicar of the Inquisitor of Genoa. The “crows”, as the locals called them, arrested the five witches living in Ca Botina, who, under torture, accused many other women of the country, not only of peasant origins but also belonging to the noblest families. At one point the inquisitors had come to arrest about two hundred alleged witches and the Council of Elders, also considering that two women had already died, one from the torture inflicted, another falling from a window following an attempted escape, decided to turn to the Doge of Genoa, to put an end to the process and ensure that only the real witches, those of Ca Botina, the group linked to Artemisia, were sentenced, thirteen women in all and a 13-year-old girl. The Genoese government, therefore, not entirely convinced of the regularity of the trial in Triora, decided to look better into it. A few months passed in which, while the Doge of Genoa and the Bishop of Albenga did not find an agreement on the competence to proceed, the women remained in prison at the mercy of jailers who did not spare them humiliations and even sexually abused them. In the following month of May, the Chief Inquisitor arrived in Triora to visit the women in prison and ascertain the situation. After subjecting them again to the torture of the fire, he confirmed the accusations for the thirteen women and let the girl free. The women were tried on charges of crime against God, trade with the devil, murder of women and children. The trial ended in August, with the death sentence for Artemisia and the other four women closest to her: Emanuela Giauni, known as Emanuela la Capricciosa, Viola and Alessandra Stella, and Teresa Borelli, known as Teresa the Tomboy, for her habit of wearing short hair, dressing male clothes and lying with other women. When it seemed that the execution of the sentence of the five women, by hanging and incinerating the remains, was now imminent, the Inquisitor of Genoa intervened, asking that his office be respected, until then ousted from the process. It was for him, in fact, as representative of the Inquisition of Rome, to judge the crimes of the witches. So, the five condemned were transported to Imperia and from there, onboard a ship, to Genoa, where they were locked up in government prisons, as the Inquisition did not have enough room and kept company to other alleged witches from other towns of the area. Everything seemed to be going well, as the Doge had promised he would make sure, now that they were under his protection, to save their lives. He would keep them in prison for a period, then, when the population had forgotten all about them, he would have let them free, with the agreement not to return to their village of origin. But the evil, under the mortal remains of the Podestà and the head of the Council of Elders of Triora, put his hand in there. It was not difficult, for the henchmen hired by the two illustrious characters, to bribe the jailers with a few silver coins, to replace the five witches with as many corpses of poor women, who died of illness or the hardships due to the famine that still raged in the mountains of the upper Argentina Valley, and bring the five witches back to Triora for an exemplary public execution.

Tied to the pole, Artemisia retraced with her mind the main stages of her life, starting from her initiation, when, little more than thirteen, she found herself at the center of the magic circle, created by her mom, her grandmother, and other followers of the sect, near the Fonte della Noce, a fountain located under a large walnut tree. Even then she had perceived the strong presence of the Evil, a negative force outside the circle, who wanted his victims to assimilate his powers and become unparalleled in his evil power. The teachings transmitted by her mother and grandmother, the acquisition of the powers of clairvoyance, and the use of touch and sight to perceive and heal the evils of body and soul, had always been used by her for good. She had learned the healing powers of herbs,

becoming skilled in producing potions that lowered the fever and removed the pains, which helped women giving birth during labor. She had learned to use, in the right doses, poisonous mushroom spores, to be applied on infected wounds to make the purulent secretions regress. She had learned to make talismans, to recite the ritual magic formulas, to perform invisibility spells, to form protective magic circles. But she had never used her powers for evil purposes, ever. Yet, in the end, she had been held up as a witch and, together with her four most trusted companions, Emanuela, Viola, Alessandra, and Teresa, she had been imprisoned and tortured with the rope, with the fire, and with the water. At the beginning of the summer of 1588 the Podestà, Stefano Carrega had arrived in her cell, he was the one who had started the witch hunt and, at that moment, Artemisia had understood that it was he who represented the evil, the great threat that loomed over her and her friends. Already weakened by torture, she was stripped naked and her hands and feet were tied to two wooden poles arranged to form a cross of Sant'Andrea so that she had arms and legs spread wide. The jailers shaved the hair of the genital area, then left her alone with the Podestà who approached her raising his tunic and showing a large member already erected. There was no possibility for Artemisia, tied as she was, to escape sexual violence, but she was aware of having to be strong in that situation, of not giving in to pleasure, otherwise, with the sexual act, the man would have then subtracted all her powers and knowledge, taking them on himself. She came out victorious. As she felt the hot ejaculate penetrate her bowels, she arranged her mind to be as far away from there as possible, to wander the woods dear to her, and her body not to feel even a shudder, not even a gasp. The Podestà, having failed to achieve his goals, became furious.

«Worse for you, witch! You and your companions will die at the stake, and the power of the flames will transfer your powers to me.»

The fact of having won that battle had given her a glimmer of hope and when, despite the sentence of the inquisitors, she and her four companions were transferred to Genoa, she thought that the danger had gone away. Of course, after the sexual intercourse with the Podestà, the monthly cycle had not come to her. It was evident that she was carrying a child, or rather, as she could perceive, a daughter. She refused to admit that she was the daughter of the evil one. She would however have started her to magical and esoteric practices, just as it had been done with her by her mother and grandmother, in fact, she felt in her heart that that daughter would have really strong supernatural powers, able to counter any evil power and carry on her lineage well. But, after a few months, the evil one had returned to work, he had allied himself with the Council of Elders and had sent hooded men to Genoa to bring her and her four companions back to Triora, where they would have been executed. In March Artemisia was almost at the end of her pregnancy. When he arrived in Triora, the head of the Council of Elders, Giulio Scribani, wanted to make sure of her condition personally, since he could not allow an innocent creature to be burned at the stake with the witch. Artemisia used all her powers to penetrate the elderly man's mind, in which she inculcated the concept that she would sacrifice herself at the stake, provided that her sacrifice served to save her daughter and her companions. The Podestà had the five bonfires set up and already foretold the spectacle of that evening, in which, for a rare astral conjunction, on that day of the spring equinox, day of full moon, a total eclipse of the moon would have occurred. But Giulio imposed his will.

«I don't want to witness a barbaric massacre. I sent a midwife to Artemisia, she knows how to get her an early birth. The new-born will be entrusted to a nurse. Only Artemisia, the most powerful of the witches, will be burned. The others, tied to their poles, will assist at her execution, then they will be marked in such a way that whoever meets them will recognize them as witches and will be able to avoid them. Each of them already has a strange tattoo on the right leg, on the inside of the calf. Three tomes are depicted, representing the books they consulted and studied to become adepts of their sect. We will complete the tattoo with flames that surround the books and the same tattoo will be done to every firstborn female in the lineage of these witches!»

The Podestà threw flashes of hatred towards the elderly man, but he could not contradict him. At least he could take part of Artemisia's powers. But she, tied to the pole, waiting for the flames to be stuck to her pile, remained concentrated and formed a protective barrier around her friends, who were in telepathic contact with her. The semi-circular position of the other gallows behind hers favored protection. So when someone shouted «Don't spare them, burn them all!» and a man, with a lit torch in his hand, managed to climb over the guards' barrier and bring the flame close to Teresa's stake, two armigers took him by the arm and sent him back into the audience with a well-placed kick in the ass. The man rolled to the ground and stopped right at Laris's feet, who stared at him disapprovingly.

A few moments later, the executioner took a torch from a brazier, first lifted it to show all the flames, then brought it near the pile of wood at the foot of Artemisia, that started burning.

Artemisia, before the flames began to envelop her own body, turned her gaze to the moon, which at that moment was obscured by the phenomenon of the eclipse and perceivable only as a reddish sphere surrounded by a halo, and let go of her spirit. She had to prevent her powers and her wisdom from moving to Carrega, directing them instead, with the telepathic help of her companions, to whom her sacrifice had saved their lives, towards the little girl who born just a few hours earlier and who would be named Aurora, the first light of morning. In short, the flames took over Artemisia's body and enveloped it, the woman turned into a human torch, the hair burned, the clothes were incinerated, leaving the flesh uncovered, which first became red, then black. The silhouette of Artemisia, which was still twisting, was now only perceivable in the middle of the wall of fire, which burned to rumble. Eventually, Artemisia, with a last prolonged cry of pain, expired, while the flames continued to do their cruel work. In the end, only a pile of ashes would remain on the ground.

When Aurora and Laris returned to the reality they were still naked, stretched out on the cold marble floor, their bodies beaded with sweat from the tension of the experience they had just lived. Aurora still stunned, grabbed a silk kimono, put it on, and offered one similar to the girl, who was shivering and was glad to wear it. Then Aurora went into the kitchen to prepare a relaxing herbal tea, she returned after a few minutes with two steaming cups, which spread a mint aroma in the lounge.

«Why did we have this vision? What does it mean?» Laris asked, starting to recover.

«I think I understand that the evil, who has remained dormant for four centuries, is gaining strength and wants to sacrifice victims to increase his strength and power. We have to be careful because those victims could be me, you or our other sisters, descendants of those who escaped death in the flames four hundred years ago.»

«How can we prepare to face it? Do we have enough strength to do it?»

«My dear Laris, you and I will have to face a long and perilous journey to the temple where the Grand Patriarch lives, who will offer us access to universal knowledge, of which he is the custodian. We will be given the necessary strength and wisdom.»

Step by step, holding on to the side ropes, they had reached about halfway across the bridge which oscillated with each movement, when a gust of stronger wind made Laris's heart freeze, who again sought Aurora's eyes to feel reassured. Cautiously, the two pulled from the backpacks on their shoulders their windbreakers and put them on and continued until they reached the grassy clearing beyond the bridge. From there at least five paths began, which headed in different directions. Which could be the right one to follow? Aurora saw two branches crossed with loose earth around, looked for a long branch and, being careful not to step on the loose earth, destroyed the cross then, with the same branch, drew a circle on the ground, reciting words that Laris recognized like those of a counterspell. Someone had put in place a spell, to put them in difficulty on the way forward. But Aurora had a lot of experience. Once the circle was completed and the words turned towards the sky, it was evident that only one path began from the clearing, which was the one to follow. After crossing the tongue of a glacier, the path turned downhill, until the highland meadows gave way to

a forest, denser and denser as you descended. At each crossroads, at each fork of the path, the two, instinctively, always knew which direction to follow.

The forest offered fruit and berry eats and now and then a source of fresh water was found so, even if the supplies were beginning to be scarce, there was no way to suffer hunger or thirst. Even the temperatures had become more pleasant and there was no longer any need to wear windbreakers. On the fifth day of the walk, coming out of the dense forest, they found themselves in a pleasant valley, at the bottom of which they saw their destination.

The temple was an ancient construction that had remained intact over the centuries and millennia, built as it was on solid rock in a place not accessible to ordinary mortals. What aroused the two women was the hydroelectric power plant that could be seen on the back of the temple. A waterfall, with the force of a jump of a few hundred meters, powered the turbines that supplied electricity to the ancient building. Next to the turbines, a series of solar panels provided hot water and also helped to generate electricity. A forerunner photovoltaic system, not yet in operation, completed the control unit, which made that oasis completely autonomous from an energy point of view.

At the entrance of the temple, they were greeted by two statuesque-looking men.

«Welcome to the temple of Knowledge and Regeneration. The Grand Patriarch is waiting for you and will receive you as soon as possible. In the meantime we will be your guides, we will take you to your accommodations and we will make your visit to this enchanting place pleasant. Whatever you need, ask and we will try to accommodate you. I am Ero and my partner is Dusai.»

The two men, dressed only in short colored tunics, were tall and powerful, the evident muscles seemed sculpted, recalling ancient Greek statues. Ero had blond, curly, rather long hair, fair complexion, albeit slightly tanned, and blue eyes the color of the sky, Dusai had black and short hair, dark eyes, and complexion the color of ebony. While Dusai was taking care of Aurora, Ero bowed to Laris and took her baggage. The four crossed a squared courtyard, entered the building, and walked along decorated corridors. The frescoes alternated hunting scenes with war scenes and mating between animals. Finally, they arrived in a cloister, in the center of which there was a swimming pool. Under the arcades opened the doors of the guest rooms. Here the decorations represented couplings between men and women, in all possible and imaginable positions taken from the most unthinkable manuals of Kamasutra. The two women were invited by their ciceroni to enter each room, where they were helped to undress and relax with a long and accurate toning massage. After a couple of hours, the two women and the two men found themselves together inside the pool to enjoy the pleasures of a good bath in the warm water of the tub, and the sex offered spontaneously and sensually by Ero and Dusai. Exhausted by the days of walking, but regenerated in the spirit, Aurora and Laris were refreshed. The laid table offered roasted mutton with side dishes of tasty vegetables and an incredible variety of succulent fruits. At the end of the banquet, they retired to their rooms to sink into a well-deserved restful sleep.

Early the next morning, the ciceroni brought each of the two women a fragrant cup of tea, accompanied by sweets made with sultanas and must, telling them to prepare to be received by the Grand Patriarch. Their companions from the previous day accompanied them to the foot of a staircase, which led to the upper floors. From that moment they would have been accompanied by a much older and much less attractive guide, as Ero and Dusai were not allowed to go up to the Patriarch. Hiamalè, the new guide was called, was a person who was at least eighty years old, but was said to be much older. A long grey beard adorned his face and the long silvery hair was gathered behind the nape in a long braid. He greeted the women in the ancient language and invited them to come up. Despite his age, the elderly faced the staircase with agility, branch after branch, until he reached the fifth level. Aurora and Laris realized they were on a kind of tower that overlooked the temple and that, from the windows, you could admire the building in all its magnificence. Elder Hiamalè knelt before a wooden door, decorated with beautiful inlays, and invited the two women to

do the same. As if someone had sensed their presence, even if not announced, the door swung open and the two women found themselves in front of the Grand Patriarch.

«There is no need for you to bow down to me,» he said, dismissing the old man and inviting the two women to enter his room. «You are welcome here. I have been waiting for you for a long time, the perception of your arrival was strong inside me. I present myself to you, faithful followers, who aspire to universal knowledge. Since I am in this place I call myself Roboamo, although this is not my real name, in honor of the son of King Solomon who was so-called. Tradition has it that this temple was built by the wise King in these inaccessible places, among these which are the highest mountains on Earth, to act as a treasure chest and as a protection for the oldest and most exact book of magic, written by his fist, “The key of Solomon”. Legends tell that this book was found, after a few centuries from the death of the famous King, inside his tomb, preserved in an ivory container together with a ring bearing his seal. Many tried to translate the one written first into Latin, then into French, but no one succeeded fully in the intent, as that was only a fake and King Solomon had made sure to make it incomprehensible. The original “Key of Solomon” is instead preserved in the Sancta Sanctorum of this temple and only a few wise people, over the millennia, have been able to access it. Maybe you, Aurora, will be able to become part of those chosen few, but we are not ahead of the times. You are here to access the knowledge preserved in this place just as, before you, people wishing to consult important texts have arrived, which have been collected here since time immemorial. Priests of any type of religion have arrived, but also important men of science, thanks to whom this building has been equipped with modern comforts. You have seen the power plant yourself. It is not easy to get raw materials for the construction of these plants here. The last scientist who visited us was an Italian, whose idea was to transform the energy of the sun’s rays, but also that inherent in the light itself, into electricity, by means of microcells, which he called photovoltaic cells, in honor of his countryman Alessandro Volta. But while I see positive auras within you, a dark aura tending to black hovered around him, indicating wickedness and perfidy of soul.»

«What did he call himself,» Aurora asked, curious and intimidated. «Did he have access to knowledge, even if you doubted him?»

«My dear Aurora, you have an aura of an intense blue, like the clear sky, and therefore you have a pure heart, but you are very sensitive to external influences because you trust everyone. And that’s why you are accompanied by Larìs, who has a red aura like fire and who reveals her impulsive, determined character, ready to sacrifice even her own life to help those close to her. I can’t reveal that person’s name. Anyone who arrives here has access to the texts and manuscripts that are kept there. Then it is up to him to decide how to use the acquired knowledge, whether for better or for worse. You see, every religion tends to identify ‘good’ with God and ‘evil’ with another opposing divinity. Whether God is called Javhè, Vishnu, Odin, or Allah and the devil Satan, Lucifer, Seth or Sehuè is indifferent. Good and evil are within each of us and the eternal struggle between them is consumed in our soul. In some, good prevails, in others evil.»

«Grand Patriarch, tell us the path to access Universal Knowledge,» Aurora went on, «and we will be grateful and honor you for the rest of our mortal life.»

«You see, there are two ways to reach the goal, a faster one and a slower one. Larìs, who is young, will follow this second way, will have plenty of time to consult the texts, assimilate what is contained in them, and learn to use, with the help of the Masters, her Third Eye, that of wisdom, the one with which she will be able to perceive the aura of the people around her and penetrate their thoughts, coming into contact with their mind. It is a long path that I, myself, have undertaken at the time, and which requires constancy, concentration, and application. For you, Aurora, who is instead keen to assimilate everything quickly and return to your homeland to fight against evil forces, I have a shorter way in-store.»

Clapping his hands, he called Hiamalè, who led Larìs out of the room, while from another door two young maids entered with a steaming herbal tea for the elderly patriarch. Roboamo drank

carefully then, from a tray which was brought to him by one of the two maidservants, took a case and took out a syringe. «Papaverine. Inoculated into the cavernous body of the penis, it allows a lasting erection for a satisfying sexual intercourse, even for an elderly person like me. I will pass on all my knowledge and science to you by carnal conjunction, after which you will have access to the Sancta Sanctorum.»

The maids helped Aurora to undress and lie down on the cushions arranged for this purpose on the floor, then they took care of the old man, freed him of his clothes, gave him the injection, massaged him well, and when they understood that he was ready to consume the intercourse with the new arrival, they withdrew to a corner of the room. The sex with the old man gave Aurora immense pleasure. She closed her eyes and abandoned herself to the thrusts of Roboamo. At the apex of her excitement, reaching an orgasm, she realized that with the flow of semen a heat was penetrating her that pervaded her from tiptoe to the last hair. She was assimilating in one fell swoop all the knowledge that the elderly had accumulated in decades of permanence in that inaccessible place. At one point, Aurora realized that Roboamo was motionless above her. He still had an erect penis, as a result of papaverine, but he was no longer breathing, he had expired. With a delicate movement, she moved aside the body of Roboamo and with no small difficulty disengaged herself from him. While the handmaids took care of the deceased, Aurora got dressed and was assailed by fear: how to reach the Sancta Sanctorum without the guidance of Roboamo? But then, concentrating, she understood that, in addition to knowledge, she had assimilated everything that was kept in his memory, and therefore she already knew the way forward to reach the goal. But there was more, the sex just consumed had transformed her, she had smoother skin, firmer breasts, slimmer legs, less thin hair, in short, she felt rejuvenated. She looked for a mirror, which returned the image of a twenty-year-old, the image of herself but with forty years younger. She touched her face with her hands as if to make sure that what she saw was real and not a vision. The wrinkles were gone, her green eyes shone, there was no shadow of opacity in the lens, the hair had returned to their natural light brown color. But it was not time to dwell on futile elements. She was to reach “Solomon’s Key”.

Trying to follow the memories impressed on Roboamo’s mind, she went down the stairs to the ground floor. In a room with decorated walls, she looked for a golden statue depicting a cat. At the neck of the latter, she noticed a medallion in the shape of a pentacle. She turned it and saw a passage open in the back wall, the only one on without windows. She entered a long, half-dark corridor, occasionally illuminated by the dim light of ancient oil lamps. At the end of the corridor, a spiral staircase went down to the basement, to another richly decorated hall. She went straight to a massive golden door, enriched with pure gold bas-reliefs, depicting episodes from the life of King Solomon. There was no lock to open this door, nor any other device. To access the Sancta Sanctorum a voice command is needed, different depending on the days of the week and the hours of the day. Aurora, calculating that at that moment she should have invoked the moon, uttered in a loud voice: «Levanah!»

The massive golden door began to slide inside the double-headed wall, leaving free access to the most secret of the temple rooms. In the center of the room, above a column of about one meter and twenty meters high, an ivory casket held the book and the ring with the seal of Solomon, the most powerful talisman of all time. Not without emotion, she opened the chest. The book was in its place, but not the ring. Those who had come before her had managed to steal him, ensuring a power that was not indifferent and difficult to fight, if used for evil purposes. But now the sorceress had no time to think, she had all night to be able to assimilate what Solomon had written many centuries before, which she had not received from the memory of Rehoboam, since he, even if he had access to the Sancta Sanctorum, never had had the courage to face the sacred text. When she was sure that she had learned all the formulas and the invocations by heart, she put the Key in the box and went out, going backward on the way made to get there. When she went out into the hall, she noticed that the first light of dawn was beginning to enter the windows. She rotated the medallion on the cat statue, returning it to its initial position, and the passage from which it had just come out closed again.

It was time to go home to Liguria, and this time the trip would have been short. She would use teleportation, which was one of the new spells she had just learned. But first, she had to take her leave from Laris. She returned to the cloister, where the guest rooms were located, she met Ero and Dusai already up and conversing on the edge of the swimming pool. They both missed an appreciation of Aurora's new appearance.

«Damn! If she had been that way the other day!» commented Dusai.

The sorceress avoided replying and knocked on Laris's door, which was still immersed in the world of dreams. Sleepily, Laris opened the door and looked questioningly at the young woman. When she realized that she was her travel companion, she rubbed her eyes thinking she was still dreaming.

«Yes, it's me.» Aurora laughed. «I'm leaving, but we'll stay in telepathic communication. When I need you, you will know, and you will be able to reach me as soon as possible.»

Then she brought her lips close to Laris's and kissed her.

«See you soon.»

Aurora came out of the temple and reached an isolated clearing, where she sat on the ground, taking care not to cross her legs, concentrated on the place where she was to go and pronounced the magic formula. As if captured by a vortex, by a kind of a whirlwind, her body vanished to reappear in Triora, inside her home.

«I am home!»

Chapter 4

We headed to the crime scene, which had already been delimited by the red and white plastic strips with the words “State Police.” The place was blackened by the fire and wet due to the water used to put it out, but what struck most was the nauseating smell that we were forced to breathe. The smell of burnt human flesh, which still hovered in the air, was truly unbearable. When I first saw the body, I could barely hold back vomiting. At first glance it looked like a mannequin, bent over itself, leaning against a metal gate that closed a kind of cave, the human form blackened by the flames. There was no trace of the hair and, in some areas, bones could be glimpsed amid some shredded skin. The shape of the breasts allowed one to see that it was the body of a woman. At the level of the wrists and ankles, there was something that looked like melted plastic strings, meaning that something must have been used to tie the victim to the gate. The coroner was carrying out the first tests on the body, while the men of the forensic police were waiting patiently for him to finish to start their work. Telling Mauro to wait for me, I approached them passing the barrier of plastic strips. Sensing my presence, the doctor raised her head and pulled off the latex gloves, shaking her head. The person who was holding out her hand to me was a petite woman in her thirties, with short dark hair, dark eyes, and a small golden nose piercing.

«Doctor Ruggeri, I suppose! Nice to meet you, I’m doctor Ilaria Banzi, coroner.»

«What can you tell me about this poor woman?»

«Very creepy, in my career, even if it is short, I have never seen anything like this. I can’t say now if she was alive or dead when she was set on fire but, since it seems clear that she was tied hands and feet to that gate with duct tape, I really think she was burnt alive. The autopsy will tell us this detail. At the moment I can say that we are in the presence of a female subject, around thirty-five years old, forty at most, judging by the teeth, but I cannot be precise about this either, as the fire has altered everything. As soon as the forensic police will make its evaluations, I will arrange the transfer of the body to the morgue and in the shortest possible time, I will send you the necropsy report. The magistrate will also be here shortly. I wish you luck, it won’t be a simple investigation!»

I took my leave and went to the men in uniform.

«Do you know anything about the victim’s identity?» I asked.

«She certainly had no papers on her!» was the sarcastic reply of a superintendent, whom I glared at. «I understand, it wasn’t a happy joke. What we do know is that the victim was tied with large adhesive tape, the one used for packages so to speak, to the metal railing and a fire was set. That sort of cave is an old woodshed. Inside, there were dry wood and other flammable material. Since there is a lot of talk about witches in this area, we thought someone wanted to simulate the execution of a witch at the stake. Maybe a sadistic game between two lovers, why not? She, consenting, gets tied up, he lights a fire to give more verve to the game, but then the situation gets out of hand, the wind rises, the fire breaks out, and for the woman, so tied up, there is no escape. We got this idea.»

«Very imaginative, I would say, and poorly supported by evidence. Do you like playing these types of games with your partner?»

Perhaps struck in his intimacy, he blushed, cleared his throat, and looked for a way out.

«The magistrate is coming. Now he will formulate the right hypotheses. Forgive me, mine was just guesswork.»

The magistrate was a man in his fifties, gray hair, almost as tall as Mauro, thin. He looked like a bird of prey, with a hooked nose, narrow lips, and reading glasses raised on his forehead. He approached Mauro, who shook his hand and introduced me.

«Doctor Leone, this is Doctor Ruggeri. My colleague has just arrived from Ancona and has found herself in full swing of the action.»

«Yes, I see! Well, I think there is little for me to do right now. Keep me updated on the investigation and try to close this case as soon as possible. We are not used to such heinous crimes in this area and I don't want troubles with the journalists.»

I tried to speak, asking him if he wanted to interrogate with us the owner of the neighboring house, the famous Aurora, but he took his leave with a soft handshake and a “Good job!”

Who knows why I have always hated people who do not shake hands, but I tried to put on a gritted smile and replied, «Thanks.»

When he had gone away, I turned to Mauro.

«If now the police commissioner of Imperia would arrive and would be just as nice, I would risk losing the work I just got. You understand me, don't you? Well, while the forensic does its job here, let's get to know this witch.»

Mauro smiled and followed me gladly. All in all, I was starting to like him, and I would soon find out that, behind that air from Rambo, all muscles, he hid a strong intelligence and was a good observer, all elements that made him a good policeman and a valid collaborator.

A path crossed the vegetation, went out the dirt road from which we had come, and led to an isolated building. It was a sort of farmhouse, ancient-looking, but in excellent condition.

The owner's car, a metallic gray Porsche Carrera, made a fine show in the front. We were greeted by a beautiful forty-year-old blonde, with eyes of a blue-green color, rare to be seen. She was taller than me, with a fair, smooth complexion, and without any wrinkles. She wore a dark kimono with strange designs, among which I recognized some esoteric symbols, closed on the front only by a belt. At each step, a long pink thigh peeked out of the dress. The décolleté gave good visibility to the prosperous breast and did not leave much room for imagination. I saw Mauro's gaze settle with interest on the subject, perhaps with the hope that sooner or later the dull dressing gown would fall to the ground, revealing to his eye all the graces of its owner.

«Please, take a seat, I am Aurora Della Rosa, and I live in this humble home. I'm sorry, I still have to recover from the fright! I was afraid that everything could get on fire here tonight. Inside this house I have many books and manuscripts, very old ones, some even unique in the world, and in addition to my safety, I feared a lot of losing everything in the flames.»

We sat in a square room, where I noticed shelves full of books and scrolls. An entire wall was occupied by a mirror and the floor was in polished marble of various colors which, like a mosaic, represented a pentacle. I could not believe my eyes. I found summarized all that I had studied on esotericism and sects.

«Della Rosa,» I said, repeating her surname. «De La Rose was the name of a French house of famous Templars, the guardian knights of the temple and the Holy Grail.»

«It is said that they existed since before the advent of Christianity. The Templars were the custodians of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, the temple of whose ruins only the Wailing Wall remains, sacred to the Jews. Then they identified them as the custodians of the Holy Sepulcher. In the Middle Ages, in France, they were declared heretics, perhaps because it was thought that they kept the Holy Grail hidden and did not allow even the Pope to access to its hiding place, or perhaps because they were aware of important secrets that the Church did not want to be made public. They were tortured, many burned alive, but were never completely annihilated. Yes, you are right, my family is originally from France, from the Avignon area. The De La Rose, who had possessions in those places, fought against the British in the Hundred Years War, suffering many losses. At the end of the fourteenth century, some members of the family settled in this border area between Italy and France, a quiet place in the middle of the mountains. But then it seems that the Inquisition, even here, did not give respite to an ancestor of mine, who in the late sixteenth century was tried on charges of witchcraft.»

As she spoke, she pulled a silver cigarette case out of her kimono pocket, inside which were placed cigarettes that looked like they were rolled by hand. She chose one, brought it to her mouth, and held out the cigarette case towards us.

«Thanks, but I don't smoke,» I said. «And I would be grateful if you refrained from doing so. Smoking bothers me.»

Without even considering what I had said, she lit her cigarette, directing the first dense cloud of smoke towards me, almost as a challenge. I don't know how I did manage to hold back my anger, but I did.

«No more chatting, Aurora Della Rosa! Where were you last night when the fire broke out?»

She inhaled again and responded by emitting smoke along with the words.

«Last night I went to dinner in a restaurant downstream, "Da Luigi". I didn't feel like cooking, so I went out. I was on my way back when I saw the flash of the fire and called the police myself.»

«We will verify what you are saying. And, tell me, I guess you receive your customers here at home. They told me that you are a sorceress. People from everywhere and of all backgrounds come here, to ask for advice, buy potions, and so on. Judging by your car, it is a job that pays off. I don't want to express my opinion on your work, I just want to ask you if you have received a particular client, a woman, recently, who could be the victim whose body we found.»

«My God,» Aurora exclaimed, surprised. «There was a victim? Who could have been in the woods at that hour of the night?»

«We hoped that you would tell us that! Come on, make an effort, I don't think it's that difficult.»

Thoughtfully, she inhaled other smoke.

«Whatever you think of my job, Doctor...?»

«Ruggeri, Caterina Ruggeri.»

She blew another cloud of smoke in my direction.

«You see, the work that we sorcerers do is very respectable. I pay my taxes and I also joined the union of sorcerers, and I don't sell smoke, like the one of this cigarette. People come because they trust me, and I also have to respect a code of ethics and protect my clients' right to privacy.»

«Would you like to invoke professional secrecy, by chance?»

Carelessly, she turned off the cigarette butt in an ashtray and went on.

«I am not here to sell amulets or to deceive my customers about their possible future. I have good knowledge of herbal medicine and I know the issues that can be treated with medicinal herbs and those that must be dealt with in a conventional way. Many come here to ask for good advice and I bestow them, based on my science and experience. Nobody has ever complained about being deceived, I always say what my interlocutor expects, and everyone leaves happy and with an enriched heart.»

«Yes, but depleted in the wallet. Come on, I know your category well, you are able to make people believe that your deceptions are great remedies. I could agree on natural medicine, but on the rest...»

«Doctor Ruggeri, don't be biased! We are all led to believe that what we see, and hear, and touch is the truth, that there is nothing but what is perceivable by our five senses, but sometimes it is not so. Inside this room, you can create optical and acoustic effects that make what is not seem true, and what is true seem false. Try to touch me, put a hand on my shoulder, and lean on me!»

I went over and tried to touch her, but my hand felt empty space where I saw her image.

«It's a game of mirrors,» I said. «Some kind of a magician's trick!»

«And now go to the center of the pentacle, on the central tile, and talk. You will hear your voice ring in your ears as if it came from a powerful stereo system.»

«Of course, it's the effect of the room acoustics! It was the same in Roman amphitheatres. A matter of architecture! You're going astray, trying to distract me from my goals. They told me that among your visitors, there is a particular category: the followers of a sect who recognize a saint in

you. They come here to have access to your library and complete the process of achieving various levels of knowledge of the esoteric arts. Have you recently received any such visits?»

«The sect you speak of is the “Enomolas id ivres,” and it is not a satanic sect. Its adepts, through the various levels, assume knowledge unknown to ordinary mortals. For centuries, those who arrive here, or in three or four other places around the world similar to this one, aspire to achieve one of the highest levels of knowledge, the seventh. The path to reach it is very hard. For generations, my family has been the keeper of texts which can only be accessed by those who have completed the previous levels. Those who want to go further, to reach Universal Knowledge, must face the pilgrimage to the Temple of Knowledge and Regeneration, which is located in a remote valley between Nepal and Tibet. It is very difficult to reach the Temple.»

«I suppose you have already faced this pilgrimage, but that’s not what I want to know. I will repeat the question, have you received a visit from one of these followers in the last few days?»

«I have already told the policemen and carabinieri who interrogated me. The last visit of this type dates back to 1997, when a sorceress from a small town in Abruzzo, Sant’Egidio alla Val Vibrata came. She called herself Mariella La Rossa. She told me that before facing the tests that I would have subjected her to, she wanted to visit the magical places in the woods and around Triora, the Fontana di Campomavùe and Fontana della Noce, Via Dietro La Chiesa, and Lagu Degnu. It was the day of the summer solstice, one of the typical dates on which sorceresses and sorcerers meet, also in these places, for the Sabbath ritual. Mariella left at sunset and never returned.»

«And you certainly didn’t participate in the Sabbath and don’t even imagine what happened to Mariella! Come on, we know very well that these so-called Sabbaths are the occasion to perform satanic rites, sometimes sexual violence, other times sacrifices of animals or people. With your brainwashing you convince some people, the weakest from a psychological point of view, to be purified, to be reborn to a new life, and so on, as long as they undergo the violence that you propose during the rites. Not to mention all those cheated for profit. Cases, in which someone has lost all their belongings to follow a Guru, are not uncommon.»

«I already told you that ours is not a satanic sect. Those who join our organization do so by their free choice and by their desire to reach high levels of knowledge. I repeat that I am not a smoke vendor, and everything I say or preach has always come true. Show me your left hand and look me in the eye, Dr. Ruggeri. Could you be one of us, without knowing? I see that you suffered as a girl, I see mourning in the family, and that has marked you, I see a complicated love life, but that has recently been resolved in a positive way. You have powers above the norm, not indifferent perceptions, and a very strong aura, red as fire, nothing escapes your attention in those who are in front of you, not even a detail. And now go, Dr. Caterina Ruggeri, I have known everything there is to know.»

Without even realizing it, I found myself outside Aurora’s house, in the courtyard, followed by Mauro who, with an ironic smile, commented on what he had witnessed.

“That woman has hypnotic powers. She made you do whatever she wanted. She basically threw us out in her own way and, like all the others who preceded us, we are leaving too, with the tail between our legs.»

«Yes, but the witch is right, nothing escapes me, not even a detail. We will come back with another strategy. I just need to have a way to think and come prepared here. Let’s go back and check if the forensic has finished its work and then let’s have a look around. What were the names of those places the wicked mentioned about Mariella La Rossa?»

«Fontana di Campomavùe, Fontana della Noce, Via Dietro la Chiesa and Lagu Degnu.»

«Damn, you have a good memory! One doesn’t even need tape recorders or notebooks with you!»

«Yes, however, remember that the PDA can be useful for recording conversations. It is a very sensitive model and even by keeping it in the pocket you could record.»

«Yes, thank you for telling me. For sure it will also be useful for taking pictures!»

The men in white overalls and latex gloves were finishing their work on the crime scene. While one was taking photos, another collected soil around the victim by inserting the samples into plastic bags, and another scattered Luminol to search for any hidden traces of blood.

«Did you find something interesting?» I asked.

«It seems that the fire was started using flammable liquid, not gasoline, but something else that we will try to identify in the laboratory. We also found traces of wax, perhaps deriving from a torch of pressed paper and wax used in processions, in torchlight processions, so to speak.» One of the three replied.

«Did you find the torch?»

«No, doctor. But we are also removing charred debris, maybe we can find something useful. As soon as the lab work is finished, we will send you a detailed report. For now, we are done here. The Mortuary Police has arrived, and we can have the body transferred to the morgue.»

Returning to the square where our car was parked, a wooden sign indicating the Fonte della Noce attracted my attention.

«Let's get over there and have a look around.» I turned to Mauro and, without even waiting for his reply, I took the path that led to an area of dense wood. We moved forward for a short distance and reached a clearing dominated by a large walnut tree, near which, from a fountain, an inviting gush of water flowed. Given the heat and fatigue of the day, both Mauro and I drank a few sips of the freshest water, then we started looking around to see something special, some signs, some clues. At first glance, there seemed to be nothing interesting. While I regretted not having my trusted Furia with me, an unparalleled tracker, my eye fell right next to the big tree, where I noticed some loose earth.

«There was a drawing on the ground, made with a pointed object, a knife, or a pointed stick. Usually, members of sects perform rituals in certain places, drawing symbols, pentacles, or other things, which are then deleted. It seems that the drawing has been canceled in a rush, given that it is still partly visible. There are also some writings. Maybe the ceremony was interrupted or disturbed, and the followers had to vanish, otherwise, they would have taken much more care in erasing the traces.»

«Do you think it could have been a Black Mass, perhaps with sacrifice, who knows, of an animal, a virgin, or one of the followers?»

«For now, I don't think anything, I just observe and stock away what I see and hear. There are many elements, but I still don't know which can be useful and which are not. The path heads over there. Shall we move on?»

After a few steps, the vegetation became so intricate that the path seemed to end. I was about to go back when I caught sight of a rusty figure about thirty meters away.

«It must be the carcass of the woodcutter's vehicle that burned years ago. Nobody bothered to remove it, because the owner had been dead for years. Given the vegetation, I would say that we will never be able to reach it,» was Mauro's comment.

«Yeah, we'll have to bring suitable equipment to thin out the vegetation to have a look at it,» I replied. «Let's go back to the car now!»

We started at a moderate pace down the path that led back to the bottom of the valley, along the enchanting Argentina Valley. After passing the built-up area of Molini di Triora, the road kept going down. An advertising sign indicated that a few hundred meters away we would find the "Da Luigi" restaurant.

«Shall we check the witch's alibi?» I suggested Mauro.

«Yes, gladly,» was his reply. «And since it is late in the afternoon and we have not put anything under our teeth yet, I would suggest using the restaurant also for its specific function.»

The restaurant was deserted at that hour. We sat down at one of the tables and waited for someone to appear. The owner of the restaurant, a man in his forties, overweight, face sprightly and sweaty, was quick to show up.

«Can I help you, gentlemen? Unfortunately, we have very little in the kitchen at this hour.»

«Police,» said Mauro. «Would you be so nice as to answer some questions?»

«I guess you're referring to last night's crime. The place is quite far from here. How can I help?»

«You know Aurora Della Rosa, don't you?» I asked.

«Of course, she is a loyal customer, every so often she comes here, and I take the opportunity to ask for some advice. I suffer from sciatica and she has herbal remedies that are much better than conventional medicine.»

«Was she here last night?»

«Yes, she arrived around half-past nine and left at midnight. She was strange, rather more taciturn than usual. She ordered food, but I don't think she touched any. I also had to scold her because, sitting at the table, she lit a cigarette and was smoking in the dining room. There were not many patrons present, and nobody would have complained, but it is prohibited by law, you know, I had to intervene!»

«Was she alone?»

«Yes, alone.»

«And does she usually come alone or accompanied by someone?»

«It depends. Sometimes yes, she comes alone, but often she is in the company of a brunette friend of hers, a beautiful woman with a foreign accent. It seems that the two are a couple. Here in the area, they are said to be lesbians.»

He pronounced these words approaching us and lowering his voice.

«Homosexuals,» I corrected him.

«Yes, that's right! Today, in the big cities, no one notices it anymore, but in our areas, we are not very used to certain behaviors.»

«Well, my dear Luigi, that's enough! I would say that Inspector Giampieri and I would like to eat something. What would you recommend us?»

«Well, as I said before, there isn't much choice at this hour. I can recommend a nice dish of Ligurian trofie with Genoese pesto with green beans and potatoes, a unique dish that will certainly leave you satisfied.»

«Bring us two large portions.»

It was almost evening when we reached Imperia and parked in front of the Police District.

«Here we are,» said Mauro. «You have reached your new workplace. It is not in the center of the city, while the Questura is right in the center, in Piazza del Duomo. I believe that tomorrow morning, before starting any activity, we should go there. The police commissioner is one who cares a lot about formalisms and therefore, sooner or later, you will have to introduce yourself to him!»

Mauro led me through a maze of corridors and offices until I reached the one that would become my office.

«Of course, but before going to the Questura, I would like to get to know the staff on duty here. Do you think it's possible to meet the men early in the morning?»

«I'll make sure they're all here, with justifiable exceptions, at eight. For now, I think you'll want to rest. At the end of the corridor, there is a room with a bed and the bathroom is in the corridor. You will find your luggage there and, whatever you need, know that I will spend the night in the gatehouse.»

«Well, until I'll find a better accommodation, I will adapt, then we will see. Now I'm too tired to look for another sleeping arrangement. And then, anyway, I'm used to living in the same place where I work!»

I peeked at my desk, where a box was already dominating, containing all the records of the investigation into the people missing in Triora. I certainly didn't want to put my hands on it at the moment, because I was afraid that anything caught in there could change the ideas I had gathered during the day. Better to keep a cold head and not get influenced by the work of others! My eye

landed on a copy of a monthly magazine. I grabbed it, leafed through it, and focused on the article about the mysteries of Triora, published on the occasion of the disappearance of the three journalists, who were part of the editorial staff of the magazine: Stefano Carrega, Giovanna Borelli, and Dario Vuoli. A section taken from the notes from Vuoli's notebook was found in a box, retrieved inside the abandoned tent of the three.

What's the point of looking for witches? Above all, who are they, and how does one recognize witches today? There is no longer an Inquisition to indicate them. Maybe they still exist, maybe they just look different. In 1587 it was easier to recognize them: "You will see them putting images of wax and aromatic substances under the altarpiece. They receive the Communion of the Lord not above, but under the tongue, because so they can easily take the body of Christ out of the mouth and use it in their hateful practices. Furthermore, what distinguishes a witch from a sinner, or a bad woman, is the ability to fly in the night"...

Yeah, maybe towards the end of the sixteenth century, ordinary people still could not recognize the tricks and illusions of those charlatans and so thought of them as magic or witchcraft. But in the 21st century, come on! These three journalists had gone looking for witches in their village, and maybe they had found them! And had they been kidnapped by them? Come on now! This was all a frame, but what was the purpose? Hide a crime, want to make one's tracks disappear, or for what other reason? And what did the sect have to do with it, what the hell was its name? Enomolas id ivres. What could that mean?

With my mind crowded with these questions, I went to wash and retired to the room Mauro indicated to me. The days were long and although it was almost nine in the evening, there was still light outside. I lay down on the bed without even pulling the covers down. I was dozing off when I heard a knock on the door. It was Mauro, who carried a paper cup with a steaming drink.

«It is not the best, it is tea from the vending machine, but I thought it could be pleasant before bedtime. Do you fancy something to eat?»

«No thank you, I still have to digest the trofie.»

«Well, however, I have news for you. Your dog, Furia, will be here by tomorrow afternoon at the latest. I had the box cleaned up in the courtyard, where your predecessor kept his German Shepherd. I think, for the moment, it can be a good accommodation.»

«Thanks for everything, Mauro! But now let me rest. I am very tired and tomorrow we will have to face another really intense day! Good night.»

I looked for a light nightgown in the suitcase, undressed, and went to bed. I fell asleep and dreamed of witches flying on the back of their brooms, who gathered to invoke Satan, who participated in Sabbaths under large walnut trees. And then inquisitors who captured them, tortured them, tried them, and burned them at the stake. But the fire could not consume their bodies and they laughed and joked, despite the burning clothes and hair. And, in the end, the witches went away from the place of torture, dribbling children in swaddling clothes.

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