



## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The looting of the Baghdad Museum during the American conquest of the city in April 2003 has been compared to the destruction of the great pagan library of Alexandria by Christian zealots in 415 A.D.

Yet if it wasn't for the Baghdad tragedy, this extraordinary find may never have come to light. Its current owner acquired it in a Cairo bookshop, an emporium of antiques with obscure chains of ownership. His visit was in response to a tip from the bookseller, a few weeks after the pillaging of the Baghdad Museum, that a consignment of ancient manuscripts had just come in from Iraq.

The Baghdad offering was large, more than one hundred items. What immediately attracted the collector to a leather-bound codex, about twelve inches long and nine inches wide, obviously very old, was the face embossed on the cover. The collector opened the book. The obscure calligraphic style, probably North African, was written on well-preserved vellum. The collector could understand only enough of the title page to learn that the book had been translated from a Greek

original, that its author was someone called Epaphroditus and that its title was *The Nero Prediction*.

When the collector showed me the codex I made a call to the Baghdad Museum. The head librarian, an old friend, said he'd never heard of the codex. A great many manuscripts, some of them not yet catalogued, had either been stolen or gone up in flames. "We don't even know everything we had," he said. "So how can we know everything we lost?"

*The Nero Prediction* was evidently once widely known. There is a reference to it in the third century philosopher Porphyry's tract *Against the Christians*, a work that was condemned and burned in the fifth century and which survives only in fragments. One of these reads, "...as Epaphroditus, Nero's secretary, tells us in his famous book, it was not the emperor who ordered the burning of Rome but..." Here the text breaks off. Porphyry, like all intellectuals of his time, was fascinated by astrology. His system of astrological houses is still used today.

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# I

“They’re looking for you,” he whispered, falling into step with me like a shadow as I emerged from the gloom of the Library complex into the blinding light of the sweltering Alexandrian afternoon. His wizened, worried face looked intently into mine. “Soldiers. They started with all the high-ups, the free people, now they’re working their way down. They’re looking for sixteen-year-olds. Mark says they’ve done it before, Judea in King Herod’s time. They were looking for a two-year-old born in April because of his stars, murdered every one they found because one of them was destined to rule the world. They mustn’t find you either.”

Once a Museum mathematician and record-keeper, Phocion had bought his freedom a few years back with the money he made casting horoscopes. Now he had a stall in the market place where he read tourists’ stars. He was a friend of my mother’s, how close I didn’t know. Mathematics was his skill but astrology was his passion. “The universe is linked in all its parts, the smallest to the greatest,” he taught me. “Sympathy is the force that links us all together. Nothing happens alone. Nothing happens by chance. The Nile rises when Sirius rises. The Moon dances with the tides. The future of the planets is in harmony with the future of men. Because their future can be predicted, so can ours. Open your heart to the heavenly bodies, Epaphroditus, feel their sympathy for you. Give them yours. It’s the wisdom of the Stoics.”

I knew who Mark was, the one who knew about the search for two-year-olds in Judea. He was nicknamed the Lion because of his huge tawny beard and loud voice. He'd arrived in Alexandria three years ago with another Jew called Peter. I'd seen them together several times in the poorer quarters of the city, Peter talking in Aramaic and Mark translating into Greek. I'd stopped to listen once. Peter talked softly about something he called "the abomination of desolation" and Mark was translating for him in his booming voice. The "abomination" was some kind of catastrophe when the Sun and the Moon would be darkened and the stars fall from the sky. A dreadful apparition would come riding down on clouds of glory to purge the world with fire. It was the Messiah, the Christ. His eyes would burn like flames, a dreadful two-edged sword would dart from his mouth. His face would shine like the Sun and he would hold all seven planets, and therefore Fate itself, in his right hand.

Peter prophesied that this going to happen soon. "Verily I say unto you that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done." Some listeners nodded their heads approvingly, poor people and slaves mostly, converts I suppose. Others laughed. Peter fell silent as a police patrol approached, obviously aware that this was not the sort of news our Roman masters would welcome. I hurried on, concerned, because Phocion, eyes glued to Mark, was waiting for him to go on.

"What are they doing to them, I mean the sixteen-year-olds?" I asked Phocion as we walked across the Museum's crowded courtyard.

He gripped my arm. "Nothing, because they haven't found the right one. It's you they want."

"How do you know?"

He searched my face anxiously, looking for something, seeming to find it. "Because the Copy Master came to my stall less than an hour ago. He asked me to check my files. Said the Romans were looking for someone with a glorious horoscope who was born in July." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "I worked out it was yours."

I stopped, stunned, pulled away from the hand that urged me onward. "You know my birthday? You told me you didn't know when I was born!"

"I know the day, the hour, the very minute. It's on your certificate of ownership, in the Records Office. I've cast your horoscope."

“Why did you...” I was going to say “lie” but I couldn’t. I respected the man, loved him, even. “Why didn’t you tell me you knew my stars?”

“Sometimes knowledge must be forbidden or it becomes a curse.”

Because I was afraid I became petulant. “A curse? Am I cursed? Is that why the Romans are looking for me? If you knew I had an ill-omened horoscope why didn’t you change the date on the certificate a long time ago? Why? You have to tell me why!”

He tried to calm me with a gentle pat on my back. “Your horoscope foretells astonishing things. I thought it would be a testimonial, something to show a patron one day. But someone with greater skill than mine has looked deep into your stars. He must have found things there that interest the Romans, disturb them perhaps, predictions I didn’t see. I’ve just tried to remove it but it’s too late. Soldiers have sealed off the Records Office. They’re in there already, searching for it. They’ll find it and then they’ll find you. Epaphroditus, they are cruel, ruthless people. They have come to use you or to kill you. You must leave Egypt immediately.”

“Run away? I’ll be caught for sure! Crucified!”

He put his moneybag in my hand, heavier and fuller than I had ever seen it before. “Take this. Bribe your way onto the next ship that sails. Go now, my son. Take my love with you.”

But he was the one who left, giving my arm one final squeeze, hurrying away, head down, hiding his face from the world. I knew why, because his eyes, when he took his final look into mine, were flooding with tears.

There were hundreds of people milling through the courtyard bounded on all sides by the mighty colonnades of the Museum, tourists from all over the empire, come to gawk at the cultural center of the world. They disguised it cunningly, but I was convinced that several were stealing glances at me. My watchers. They never left me alone.

It was a kind of madness, I’d been told. It had afflicted me ever since I could remember. In the last three years it had been growing worse. Some watchers I glimpsed in the corner of my eye, fleeting apparitions that disappeared before I was absolutely certain they were there. Others made no attempt to hide themselves, avoiding my eyes as I approached, pretending they were waiting for someone or just whiling away time.

I was looking at Phocion’s retreating back, so straight for his

sixty-two years, my mind seething with indecision, hoping that Peter's prophecies had driven him out of his wits, knowing that they hadn't.

"Epaphroditus," said a deep voice right behind me. It belonged to my overseer, the Copy Master, an immensely fat man with jowls like dewlaps who walked the scriptorium floor with a whip in his hand ready to administer a wake-up call to anyone dozing over his papyrus. He frowned when he saw the fear in my face, the way my eyes darted about. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"No sir," I said, slipping the moneybag into my pocket before he saw it. "A headache, that's all."

He ground his teeth as if that was a statement that needed to be chewed before swallowed. "Good. I have another little assignment for you. Ovid, this time. One of his love poems. Sold already, a birthday present for a lady. The original's in the usual place. Take particular care, the client is a collector. He knows Ovid's writing as well as he knows his own."

I nodded, struggling to hold his gaze. "Yes sir," I said, "this afternoon."

The Copy Master looked away in the direction that Phocion had gone, plucking at his double chin with the ringed fingers of his plump right hand. "I saw you talking with Phocion. He seems upset too. He was caught trying to sneak into the Records Office a few minutes ago, any idea why?"

"No sir. Perhaps to see a friend. He used to work there."

The Copy Master raised his eyebrows in mock surprise, because of course he knew that. He and Phocion had worked together for years. "Yes, he did, didn't he? Tell me, Epaphroditus, when were you born?"

"I don't know, Master."

"But you are sixteen, aren't you?"

"I think so Master, more or less."

His quick, greedy eyes narrowed. "Interesting. You've heard about this search for sixteen-year-olds? They're offering a huge reward. A thousand tetradrachmas. Have they questioned you yet?"

"No, Copy Master."

For a few moments he seemed deep in thought, working his jaw like a ruminating ox. Finally he said, "If you are questioned be very careful to say nothing of the little... assignments you do for me. If you're foolish

enough to let anything slip I'll brand you a liar and you might be unlucky enough to lose your right hand. It's the penalty for forgery, did I ever tell you that?"

He had, more than once, to make sure I kept my mouth shut. More than once, also, I had told myself not to take the meager coppers he gave me for making facsimiles of famous originals which he secretly sold to booksellers for a small fortune. Letters mostly, written in Latin and Greek, by people like Julius Caesar, Cicero and Cleopatra. Library treasures. Copies so exact that once he'd distressed the papyrus they were almost indistinguishable from the originals. But it was not as if I had any choice in the matter. I was a slave and he was my overseer, a man who had the right to insist on absolute obedience.

"You did, sir."

He smiled, exposing his yellow, well-used teeth. "And do wipe off that ghastly expression! You look as guilty as sin. Well, I'd better get back to work. The Romans are ransacking the Records Office. They've asked me to give them a hand."

The Copy Master waddled off but my fear stayed with me, I could feel it weighing on my cheeks like a lead mask. I was sure I couldn't lie to the Romans. If they asked me about the "assignments" the Copy Master gave me, I would have to tell them the truth. I examined my right hand, trained by the Copy Master himself. It was so slender and clever, I wasn't going to lose it. I decided to take Phocion's advice. Escape.

Trying not to hurry, I made for the north exit of the complex, heading for the harbor, a short walk away, where hundreds of ships were docked, loading and unloading produce going as far as India. I was hurrying down a narrow alley toward the fish emporium when a small man with a huge tawny beard blocked my way: Mark the Lion, who had stayed on in Alexandria after Peter had gone elsewhere to preach the end of the world. The way Mark stood, legs spread, arms folded, it looked as if he'd been waiting for me all day.

"Epaphroditus," he said. "Where are you going?"

I felt a flash of terror. How did he know my name? Phocion must have told him. I scrambled for a lie as I brushed past him. "The fish market. We're running out of ink. They sent me to buy octopus. Excuse me, I'm late."

"Don't be afraid, boy," he called after me. "You've been chosen."

I hurried through the busy market, the fish reeking already because it was well past noon, heading for the docks. My thoughts whirled about as madly as feeding bats. Why did Mark say I was chosen? Chosen for what? Phocion had cast my horoscope. Had Phocion showed mine to Mark? Had Mark shown Christ's horoscope to Phocion? Were the Romans somehow connecting the two?

"Hey you!" It was a familiar voice. I turned. It was the Museum's chef buying mullet, no doubt for the director's table. "What are you doing here?"

Pan took possession of me. I found myself sprinting toward the docks, Phocion's money jingling loudly in my pocket.

"Stop! Runaway!" called the chef.

Someone in front of me, white-haired, wide-eyed, tried to block my way. I dodged around him. Another man, much younger, tripped me as I tried to flee past him. I hit the pavement hard. Someone was on top of me with a knee rammed into my spine.

"What's going on here?" asked a voice that had the ring of authority.

"A runaway," said the man pinning me down.

"He's a Museum slave," said the chef, indignant and out of breath. "Trying to sneak on board a ship, probably."

"Thank you. We'll take it from here." The harbor policeman grabbed me by my hair, pulled me to my feet. "What's your name?"

I told him, my voice shaking.

"Why did you run?"

"I panicked."

"Why?"

"Because the harbor is off-limits for me."

The soldier moved his hard face close to mine. I could smell cloves on his breath. "But the Castellum isn't."

They pushed me in a cell already crammed with the sweepings of the city. Perhaps ten feet wide and twenty long, it held over a hundred miserable people. All the spaces against the walls were already taken. A woman cradled a crying infant in her arms. I wondered what she'd done. I sat on the slippery stone floor near a slender young girl with a painted face and large, frightened eyes. A young man with a ring through his

nose, also heavily made up, wrapped his arm protectively around her bony shoulders. They looked like prostitutes. When darkness seeped in through the high barred window they began to make love with increasing abandon. No one complained. The sobs of pleasure were a welcome distraction from the horror of the place. After what seemed like hours they exhausted their passion. But the infant didn't stop crying and I didn't sleep.

A man who'd been beating his head against the wall since first light screamed when they came for him at sunrise. The warders laughed as they used their whips to drive him out the door. I was sure he was going to be crucified. A man I'd known had been crucified, a slave who'd run away from the Library. They made all of us watch. It took him four hours to die. For some reason what horrified me most was the swarm of wasps that fed on his oozing lash wounds. Although it was suffocatingly hot in the foul cell, a wind, cold as the winter sea, blew through my bones. Christ, the other one with wonderful stars. The Romans had crucified him.

Shortly afterward they came for me. Numb with terror, dead already, I went quietly. They tied my hands behind my back and led me upstairs. Four men waited for me. One of them was barrel-chested with powerful, hairy forearms. His round skullcap told me he was a Roman freedman.

"This the one you want?" asked a jailer.

"Epaphroditus?" asked the freedman.

"Yes sir," I said. "I wasn't running away. I was running back to the Museum."

There was a sly light in the freedman's small green eyes. He seemed to find me amusing. "Although headed in the wrong direction."

The jailer handed the freedman Phocion's money bag. "He had this on him. Exactly a hundred silver tetradrachmas in there. Count them yourself. Must have stolen them."

"Thank you," said the freedman, weighing the bag and giving me a sideways smile as if we were somehow in collaboration.

"Want me to leash him?" asked one of his attendants who had the battered face and broken fists of a pugilist.

"No, he doesn't look like a fool. Untie his hands. But watch him anyway."

The streets were already bustling with early risers. My escort was alert, eerily silent.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked the freedman. He ignored me. A few minutes later we passed out of the city through the Canopic Gate.

The freedman broke his silence. He told the pugilist, “Run ahead. Tell the master we have him.” The man took off at a brisk trot. The Sun was already high in the east when we reached a horse farm near the hippodrome.

The pugilist, his face still running with sweat, waited at the door of a modest villa. “He wants to see you first,” he said to the freedman, “Then bring him straight in.”

Gaius Ofonius Tigellinus was standing at the window of his study, hands clasped behind his back, watching the early Sun burnish the hippodrome perhaps a quarter of a mile away. The walls of the room were decorated with paintings of horses, some of them so lifelike you could hear them snort.

I had the distinct impression that he took a deep, quiet breath as he turned. His shoulders were broad, his waist tapered, his clean-shaven face elegantly chiseled, his velvet blue eyes large and compelling. There was an iron ring on his finger that told me he was a Roman citizen. He examined me from head to foot as if I were a statue he was appraising. I certainly stood as still as one, my eyes riveted to his, like a cornered mouse stares in fascination at the cobra that has trapped him in a corner.

“He’s not quite what I expected,” he said in a calm pleasant voice.

The freedman flashed his strange smile. “He’s had an uncomfortable night.”

“Lovely,” the citizen said. “It’s lovely, isn’t it?”

“Dominus?” I squeaked because I was unsure whether he was calling me lovely, because that is what Epaphroditus means in Greek, or just calling me by my name.

“They tell me you tried to run away. Why did you do it?” he asked, very cordially.

I couldn’t lie to this man, no more than the paralyzed mouse can flee from the snake. “I was told I was going to be killed.”

“Who told you that?”

“An astrologer, dominus.”

“Really! What was his name?”

I swallowed hard but it wouldn't stay down. “Phocion.”

“Phocion.” Tigellinus seemed to relish the word as if it were a particularly savory oyster. “Why did Phocion think you were going to be killed?”

“Because the Romans were looking for someone with my birthday, sir.”

“You told him your birth date?”

“No sir, I don't know when I was born. But Phocion said he knew the very hour.”

“How well did you know him?”

“Since I was a child, sir. He was a friend of my mother's when she was alive. She died at my birth.”

“Amazing! He knew you all those years and he didn't tell you your own birthday. Why?”

“He said ... he said something about forbidden knowledge.”

Tigellinus sat on an Egyptian chair that was carved with gilded hieroglyphics. His voice remained calm, faintly bored even, but it had an undercurrent that frightened me. “What else did he tell you about your horoscope?”

“Sir, he said it foretold astonishing things.”

The Roman raised both eyebrows, glanced at his freedman who stood behind me. “Astonishing things, fancy that! A sixteen-year-old pen-pushing slave is destined for astonishing things!” He took Phocion's well-worn money bag out of his pocket, I recognized it instantly from the large X that had been embossed on it, bounced it in his hand so it jingled. There seemed to be shards of ice in his dark blue eyes when he looked back at me.

“A hundred silver tetradrachmas. A lot of money. Where did you get it?”

“Phocion, sir. He gave it to me so I could buy passage on a ship.”

The Roman looked up at the ceiling painted with joyful scenes of the Egyptian afterlife, papyrus marshes teeming with wildfowl, fat cows, years of plenty without end. “Would you have any idea why Phocion hanged himself from the rafters of his room?”

Grief gripped me by the throat. If it were not for the dispassionate

way Tigellinus was looking at me, as if he were waiting for me to break down, I think I would have. “No sir, I don’t,” I managed to get out.

“Are you sure you didn’t get this from the Copy Master?”

“No sir, Phocion gave it to me.”

“We questioned the Copy Master, you know. Eventually he told us that he was giving you money for forging famous documents that he then sold as originals. Forgery, you should lose your hand for that.”

“The Copy Master forced me to do it, dominus. He used his whip. He only gave me a few coppers.”

Tigellinus tapped his fingers on his thigh as if he were keeping track of the seconds. “The Copy Master knew Phocion.”

It wasn’t a question but I answered it anyway. “Yes sir. Phocion used to work in the Records Office.”

Tigellinus’s tapping on his knee stopped abruptly. For a moment I thought my time had run out. “Come. Let me show you something,” he said evenly, rising to his feet and walking to a wall hung with a large painting of a chariot race in Rome’s Circus Maximus—I recognized it from cheap sketches they sold to tourists in the marketplace. For a long moment he gazed at the picture with its electrum-coated obelisk that Augustus had taken from Heliopolis and set up in the middle of the central divider. He spoke without turning around.

“There it is, the microcosm of the universe. See, the course is oval because the universe is an egg. The track is the earth and the moat between the track and the seats is the sea. The Circus is the circular year, its twelve doors are the twelve months and the twelve signs of the Zodiac. Each race consists of seven laps just as the astrological week has seven days and the universe has seven planets. Twenty-four races are held each day to correspond to the twenty-four hours it takes the Sun to circle the earth. Did you know that, Epaphroditus?”

“No sir,” I said, as astonished as I was relieved by this sudden digression. “Although it all makes sense to me now.”

“It’s why being banished from Rome is like being banished from the world itself.” He faced me and again I felt the numbing power of his velvet eyes. “You do know who I am, don’t you?”

“Yes, yes of course,” I said because I had heard of Gaius Ofonius Tigellinus, things said both loudly and in whispers. He was famous for his chariot teams and was making a fortune in the hippodrome. He

wasn't in Alexandria by choice; the emperor Claudius had banished him from Rome when he discovered that he was having an affair with his niece, Agrippina, Caligula's sister.

"Did you know that I was close to Caligula?" Tigellinus went on, reading my thoughts. "Fortunately for me, as it turned out, it wasn't a political relationship at all. Our mutual passion was horses; I supervised his personal stables. You must have heard the joke that he was going to make his favorite horse a Consul? It was a horse I trained for him. That's how I got to know his sister Agrippina, when we were both quite young. A remarkable woman, Agrippina, born to be empress some day. Would have been emperor by now if she'd been a man. I performed little services for her, when she needed them, nothing more. Unfortunately friends of someone I had to ... take care of for her, convinced Claudius otherwise. That's why I remain confined to the eastern provinces, breeding horses for the Circus Maximus but not allowed to watch them race there."

Tigellinus's head tilted in a listening posture as if he could somehow hear the distant roar of that mighty Roman crowd, a quarter of a million voices, through the shriek of the Egyptian cicadas. "The day before yesterday I received a letter from her, from Agrippina. She said she'd had a dream that I would find someone with the birth time she was interested in here in Alexandria. Certain matters are coming to a head in Rome. Agrippina needs help immediately. She needs it from you, she needs it from me also. I need eyes and ears in the imperial palace. Your eyes, your ears. As long as I have them I will say nothing about what you and the Copy Master were up to and all the interesting possibilities that raises. You will be treated like a visiting prince in Rome. Betray me ..." His tone became almost loving. "But I don't think you will betray me, will you?"

I was gaping with astonishment, giddy, my life had been turned on its head so quickly. I stumbled over my words. "No sir ... never ... I will never—"

Tigellinus gestured briskly to the freedman who'd been standing just inside the door. "You leave immediately. Euodus will travel with you. He will keep in touch with you daily. Obey him without question because his instructions will have come from me."

Although I knew that this man had just sunk a hook into me, I blurted out my thanks.

Tigellinus smiled for the first time, showing his perfect white teeth. It was a warm smile, reassuring, winning. "Here," he said, handing me a wooden box made of lacquered wood. The lid was decorated with a dreadful lion-headed man with four wings and a serpent wrapped around its naked torso. Its hands were crossed over its chest. Both held large keys. It stood on a globe that was crossed with an X like the one on Phocion's moneybag. "This is for you. A parting gift. Do you recognize the figure?"

We have several lion-headed gods and goddesses in Egypt but I didn't recognize this one. "No sir."

"His Egyptian name is Kar-Knum, which the Greeks translated as Kronos. He's lord of the four winds. See the keys in his hands? Those are the keys to the future because Kronos, of course, is also Lord of Time. Well, what are you waiting for? Open it!"

I opened the box. Inside was a hand, neatly severed at the wrist. Its fat fingers were covered with rings.