



LA SANTA MARÍA

The Ship That Became Land

The Trajectory · Book Three — Oriented Growth

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Part I: Rome — Chapter 1

The Proposal

Alberto Ferri left early, as he always did when he needed to think before arriving at the office. He passed through Piazza San Marco, where the Fontana della Pigna was still throwing the water of the Acqua Marcia with the same tired jet as ever, and slowed for an instant in front of a plaque gone opaque on the wall beside it, which few people stopped to read anymore: an old United Nations office, closed for more than twenty years, of which only the worn brass of the name remained.

He crossed Piazza Venezia, climbed toward the Capitol, and came down the other side into the Forum, as he did once every so many weeks, without any true reason except to remind himself, by walking, that certain things stay still even when they stop being visible. He stopped, as always, in front of the few fragments of marble that the archaeologists continued to call the Miliarium Aureum, though they were not

entirely certain that was truly what they were. Augustus had had it erected twenty years before Christ, near the Temple of Saturn: a column probably clad in gilt bronze, a little more than three meters tall, the symbolic point from which Rome represented the measure of its own roads, even though the real distances, in practice, were calculated from the gates of the city, each gate for its own road. Today no one could say with certainty even where the monument had exactly stood. The point that everything else had learned to cite as origin had become, with the centuries, the most uncertain point of all.

Turning back toward the office, he cut through Piazza di Pietra, where the eleven columns of the Temple of Hadrian still held up, after centuries, the flank of a palazzo that had once been the papal customs house and then the seat of the stock exchange: stones that had changed trades three times without ever ceasing to stand. Alberto slowed his step, as he did every time he passed that way, not to admire the façade, but because of the question that always came back to him unchanged: how many times could one truly change what one did, while remaining recognizable as what one had been.

The office was a few steps away, on via della Pigna, behind an anonymous doorway that bore no nameplates. Alberto had chosen it twenty years earlier for precisely that: so as never to have to explain to anyone why an Albanian family business had its Roman seat in a palazzo that said nothing about itself to those passing in the street.

He climbed the three floors on foot, as he always did. Francesca was already waiting at the office door, with an expression Alberto recognized at once. It was not worry. It was the way his daughter looked at something she could not yet classify.

"It arrived last night," she said, handing him a thin folder. "An American fund. Meridian Capital."

Alberto set down his bag, took off his jacket with exaggerated calm, and only then picked up the pages. It was not the first offer the company had received in twenty years. But the way the letter was written was different from all the others.

"How much are they asking for?" he asked, without raising his eyes from the page.

"They're not asking. They're proposing," Francesca answered. "Forty percent. With a seat on the board and a right of veto over any transaction above two million."

"And in exchange?" "Capital to double production in Tirana. And access to their reporting standards. The real ones, not our homemade semiannual statements."

Alberto sat down. The light came in from the window that gave onto the inner courtyard, and for a moment he remained looking outside instead of at the page.

"You know where I've come from this morning?" he said, more to himself than to Francesca. "From the Forum. I stopped in front of those four stones they still call the Miliarium Aureum, even though no one knows for certain anymore whether that is what they are."

He remained for an instant with his gaze fixed on a spot of the desk he was not really looking at. "The point from which Rome measured every road of the empire, and today not even the archaeologists can say exactly where it stood."

Francesca did not answer right away. Over the years she had learned to recognize when her father was really talking about a Roman monument and when he was talking about something else. "You're not talking about the stones," she said.

"No."

They remained in silence for a few seconds. Then Alberto went back to the page, this time reading it attentively, line by line. Having reached the end, he set it down on the table with a dry gesture.

"Who else knows?"

"No one. It came to my direct email, not the office one. I believe they did it on purpose."

"Why?"

"Because they know who decides, in this family. And I'm not sure they meant you."

Alberto looked at her. There was no reproach in that sentence, only a lucid observation, the kind of observation Francesca had always known how to make, ever since she was a little girl, when she noticed things that escaped adults.

"Call the Board," Alberto said at last. "Everyone. Those in Tirana too, those in Geneva too. No decision

today, none next week. But everyone must see this page with their own eyes, not have it told to them."

"And Mom?"

For the first time since he had come in, Alberto hesitated. "Your mother does not sit on the Board. You know that."

"I know. But this is not like the other times."

"It is exactly like the other times," Alberto said, getting up and going back to the window. "The figure changes. What does not change is who decides, and who stays out of the room by choice, not by exclusion."

Alberto looked out, at the anonymous stretch of street where no tourist would ever have stopped to photograph anything, and thought that this was exactly how a true point of reference worked: no one looks for it anymore, once everyone has learned to measure themselves from it without knowing it, and the place itself can vanish, or remain uncertain, without the measure suffering for it.

"Meridian," he said softly, almost tasting the word.

Francesca waited for him to continue, but her father had already gone back to staring at the void beyond the window. She did not press: she knew well that fixed gaze beyond the window, the way her father left a room while remaining seated inside it, and it was always the sign of a decision already made, not yet ready to be said out loud. In the afternoon, while Francesca prepared the invitation to the Board with the same bureaucratic care with which she drafted every official

communication of the family (date, time in three time zones, a single subject line: “Meridian Capital proposal, to be read before discussing it”), Alberto stayed in the office longer than usual, without any precise task to perform, simply so as not to return too early to an apartment that, that evening, would have seemed emptier than usual.

He set about tidying a bookcase he had not touched in months, and between one volume and another he found an old guide to Rome, bought years before for a foreign guest who had never wanted it back. He opened it by chance to a page devoted to the basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli, on the other side of the city, and lingered on a detail he had read and forgotten more than once: on the floor of the basilica there still ran, since 1702, a meridian line nearly forty-five meters long, willed by an astronomer, Francesco Bianchini, to verify the calendar by way of a small opening in the dome from which the light of the sun, each day at true noon, fell a little farther along or a little farther back along the brass set into the marble. It no longer served anyone, by now, for calculating the seasons: it still existed only because someone, three centuries before, had decided that it was worth tracing forever, in a public building, the exact point where the sun touches the earth one day after the next, always the same as itself and always slightly different.

He closed the book again, thinking that Rome had two meridians, not one: the one of marble and brass in a basilica that almost no one visited for that reason, and the one that was simply immaterial, the Miliarium

Aureum, of which all that remained, by now, was a documented uncertainty, and both of which, in all likelihood, Meridian Capital ignored.

Francesca sent him the invitation to the Board shortly after six, copying Mapi, Pietro, and Luz, with Edoardo added at the last moment at Alberto's explicit request; he had learned over the years never to convene a family council without someone capable of saying, if necessary, the thing that no one else at the table would have dared to say first. Mapi replied within a few minutes, with a message as brief as her reputation: "I will be there. Bring the numbers, not the feelings." Pietro did not reply at all, which surprised no one: it was his usual way of confirming, answering only when something truly required a word from him.

Francesca, for her part, stayed in the office an hour after her father had left, not to finish anything urgent, but to read the Meridian proposal a third time, this time looking not for the clauses but for the tone: the way certain paragraphs seemed written to be accepted without ever really being read. She marked in the margin, with a pencil she used only for that, three sentences that seemed written on purpose to slip away, and promised herself that she would bring them to the Board not as objections, but as questions.

Alberto left the office a little before eight, with via della Pigna already in shadow and the windows of the upper floors lighting up one after another as if someone, somewhere in the palazzo, were still working on something that could not wait until the next day. He walked home unhurried, rehearsing in his mind not the

clauses but the question that had clung to him more than all the others: whether a fund that called itself after a point of measurement really knew what it means to be measured by someone else, or whether it had simply chosen a beautiful name.

The call came at nine in the evening, when Tirana had already been dark for an hour and in Rome the sky still held a strip of low light above the roofs of the neighborhood. "So," Ina said, without saying hello, as she always did when she already knew what the call would be about. "Francesca wrote me two lines. She says it's serious."

"It's serious."

"How serious?"

Alberto poured himself a finger of wine he did not really feel like drinking, more to give himself a gesture for his free hand than for the wine itself, and laid out the terms with the same economy with which he had listened to them in the office: the stake, the seat on the board, the right of veto above two million, the capital to double production in Tirana, and the implicit request, never written yet present all the same in every line of the document, to adopt reporting standards that at the company, today, did not yet exist in that form.

Ina listened to him to the end without interrupting, which in twenty years of marriage Alberto had learned to recognize as the most reliable sign that she was already thinking about something precise.

"And what have you decided?" she asked finally.

“Nothing, not yet. I’ve asked for a full Board. Tirana and Geneva, by video link.”

“When?”

“As soon as Francesca and Mapi find a date that works for everyone.”

There was a brief silence, not an awkward one. Alberto had stopped filling it with other words years ago: he knew that Ina, on the other end of the line, used it to put her thoughts in order, not to hesitate.

“You didn’t ask me whether I want to be there,” she said at last.

“No.”

“Good,” she said, and in the word there was neither relief nor reproach, only the confirmation of something that between them had not needed to be discussed for years. “Because the answer would have been the same as always.”

Alberto smiled to himself, in the empty kitchen of the Roman apartment, thinking of how many times in the past others, outside the family, had taken for granted that Ina’s absence from the table of decisions was a form of exclusion, perhaps even of subordination, without ever considering that it might be the exact opposite: the choice of one who prefers to remain at the point from which everything else sets out, rather than at the one where everything else is decided.

“How are the girls?” Ina asked, changing register with the ease of someone who had already closed the

subject inside herself.

"I don't know yet. I haven't spoken with them today, only with Francesca, and only about work."

"Talk to them tomorrow. Not about work."

"I will."

"And Alberto," she added before hanging up, in a tone he recognized at once, the one she used only for the things she truly cared about and did not want to make solemn by saying them with emphasis. "Whatever you decide in Geneva, home stays here. That is not in question, in any version of the contract."

"I know."

"I know you know. I'm telling you all the same, every so often, because certain things have to be said out loud at least once a year, even when they are already clear to both of us."

They ended the call a few minutes later, with the brevity of people who esteem each other enough not to have to fill every phone call up to the last available second, and Alberto remained seated at the kitchen table, his glass still almost full, watching through the window the inner courtyard of the palazzo, where someone on the floor below had left the shutters ajar and a yellow light came out at intervals, moved by a curtain the wind barely stirred.

He thought of Meridian, of the name chosen by people who had probably never heard of the Miliarium Aureum, and he wondered whether it was chance, or

whether someone in that fund knew more than the dry language of the proposal let on.

He decided that knowing it did not matter. The zero point, he thought, has no need for those who cross it to know its origin. It only has to stay still long enough that everyone else, without arranging it among themselves, begins to measure from there.

He finished the wine, turned off the kitchen light, and went to bed with the phone already set for the alarm of a day that, he knew, would not be like any of the ones before it.

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