14

The Benefactor walked into the office of Dr. Joaquín Balaguer at five o'clock, as he had every Monday through Friday for the past nine months, ever since August 3, 1960, when, in an attempt to avoid OAS sanctions, he had his brother Héctor (Blacky) Trujillo resign the Presidency of the Republic and replaced him with the affable, diligent poet and jurist, who rose to his feet and came forward to greet him:

"Good afternoon, Excellency."

After the luncheon for the Gittlemans, the Generalissimo rested for half an hour, changed his clothes—he was wearing a lightweight suit of white linen—and tended to routine matters with his four secretaries until just five minutes ago. He walked in scowling and came straight to the point, not hiding his anger:

"Did you authorize Agustín Cabral's daughter to leave the country a couple of weeks ago?"

The myopic eyes of the tiny Dr. Balaguer blinked behind thick glasses.

"Yes, I did, Excellency. Uranita Cabral, yes. The Dominican nuns gave her a scholarship to their academy in Michigan. The girl had to leave immediately to take some tests. The head of the school explained it to me, and Archbishop Ricardo Pittini took an interest in the matter. I thought this small gesture might build bridges to the hierarchy. I explained it all in a memorandum, Excellency."

The diminutive man spoke with his usual mild amiability and a slight smile on his round face, pronouncing the words with the perfection of a radio actor or a professor of phonetics. Trujillo scrutinized him, trying to uncover in his expression,

the shape of his mouth, his evasive eyes, the smallest sign, the slightest allusion. In spite of his infinite mistrust, he saw nothing; obviously, the puppet president was too astute a politician to allow his face to betray him.

"When did you send me that memorandum?"

"A couple of weeks ago, Excellency. Following the intervention of Archbishop Pittini. I told him that since the girl's trip was urgent, I would grant her permission unless you had any objection. When I received no answer from you, I went ahead. She already had an American visa."

The Benefactor sat down facing Balaguer's desk and indicated to him that he should do the same. He felt comfortable in this office on the second floor of the National Palace; it was spacious, airy, sober, with shelves full of books, shining floor and walls, and a desk that was always immaculate. You could not call the puppet president an elegant man (how could he be with a miniature rounded body that made him not merely short, but almost a midget?), but he dressed as correctly as he spoke, respected protocol, and was a tireless worker for whom holidays and schedules did not exist. The Chief noticed his alarm; Balaguer had realized that by granting permission to Egghead's daughter, he might have committed a serious error.

"I only saw your memorandum half an hour ago," he said reproachfully. "It might have been lost. But that would surprise me. My papers are always in very good order. None of my secretaries saw it until now. So one of Egghead's friends, afraid I would deny her permission, must have mislaid it."

Dr. Balaguer's expression changed to one of consternation. He leaned his body forward and partially opened that mouth from which there emerged soft arpeggios and delicate trills when he recited poetry, and high-flown, even impassioned sentences when he gave political speeches.

"I will carry out a thorough investigation to learn who took the memorandum to your office and to whom it was given. Undoubtedly I moved too quickly. I should have spoken to you personally. I beg you to forgive this mistake on my

part." His small, plump hands, nails trimmed short, opened and closed in contrition. "The truth is, I thought it a trivial matter. You had indicated, at the Council of Ministers, that Egghead's situation did not extend to his family."

He silenced him with a movement of his head.

"What's not trivial is that for a few weeks somebody hid that memorandum from me," he said curtly. "There is a traitor or an incompetent on the secretarial staff. I hope it's a traitor, incompetents do more damage."

He sighed, somewhat fatigued, and thought of Dr. Enrique Lithgow Ceara: had the man really intended to kill him, or had he simply made a mistake? Through two of the windows in the office he could see the ocean; big white-bellied clouds covered the sun, and in the ashen afternoon the surface of the water looked rough and agitated. Large waves pounded the irregular coastline. Though he had been born in San Cristóbal, far from the sea, the sight of foaming waves and the surface of the water disappearing into the horizon was his favorite view.

"The nuns gave her a scholarship because they know Cabral's in disgrace," he murmured in annoyance. "Because they think that now he'll work for the enemy."

"I assure you that is not the case, Excellency." The Generalissimo could see that Dr. Balaguer hesitated as he chose his words. "Mother María, Sister Mary, and the head of Santo Domingo Academy do not have a high opinion of Agustín. Apparently he did not get along with the girl, and she was suffering at home. They wanted to help her, not him. They assured me she is an exceptionally gifted student. I was hasty in signing the permission, and I am sorry. More than anything else, I did it to try to ease relations with the Church. This conflict seems dangerous to me, Excellency, but you already know my opinion."

He silenced him again with an almost imperceptible gesture. Had Egghead already betrayed him? Feeling himself marginalized, abandoned, with no responsibilities and no financial means,

drowning in uncertainty, had he been pushed into the ranks of the enemy? He hoped not; he was an old collaborator, he had rendered good services in the past and perhaps could render them in the future.

"Have you seen Egghead?"

"No, Excellency. I followed your instructions not to receive him or answer his calls. He wrote me several letters, which you have already seen. Through Aníbal, his brother-in-law, who is at the Tobacco Company, I know he is very distressed. 'On the verge of suicide,' he told me."

Had it been frivolous to put an efficient servant like Cabral to the test at this difficult time for the regime? Perhaps.

"We've wasted enough time on Agustín Cabral," he said. "The Church, the United States. Let's start there. What's going to happen with Bishop Reilly? How long is he going to stay with the nuns at Santo Domingo and play the martyr?"

"I have spoken at length with the archbishop and the nuncio in this regard. I insisted that Monsignor Reilly must leave Santo Domingo Academy, that his presence there is intolerable. I believe I have convinced them. They ask that the bishop's safety be guaranteed, that the campaign in *La Nación*, *El Caribe*, and the Dominican Voice come to an end. And that he be allowed to return to his diocese in San Juan de la Maguana."

"Don't they also want you to grant him the Presidency of the Republic?" the Benefactor asked. The mere mention of the name Reilly or Panal made his blood boil. What if the head of the SIM was right after all? Suppose they definitively lanced that focal point of infection? "Abbes García suggests I put Reilly and Panal on a plane back to their countries. Expel them as undesirables. What Fidel Castro is doing in Cuba with the Spanish priests and nuns."

The President did not say a word or make the smallest gesture. He waited, absolutely still.

"Or allow the people to punish that pair of traitors," he continued, after a pause. "They're longing to do it. I've seen

that on the tours I've made recently. In San Juan de la Maguana, in La Vega, they can barely control themselves."

Dr. Balaguer acknowledged that the people, if they could, would lynch them. They were resentful of these purple-clad priests and their ingratitude toward someone who had done more for the Catholic Church than all the governments of the Republic since 1844. But the Generalissimo was too wise and too much of a realist to follow the rash, impolitic advice of the head of the SIM, which, if carried out, would have the most unfortunate consequences for the nation. He spoke without haste, in a cadence that, combined with his pure elocution, was extremely soothing.

"You're the person in the regime who despises Abbes García most," he interrupted. "Why?"

Dr. Balaguer had his answer ready on his lips.

"The colonel is a technician in questions of security, and he provides a good service to the State," he replied. "But, in general, his political judgments are reckless. Because of the respect and admiration I feel for Your Excellency, I permit myself to entreat you to reject those ideas. The expulsion or, even worse, the death of Reilly and Panal would bring another military invasion. And the end of the Trujillo Era."

Because his tone was so gentle and cordial, and the music of his words so agreeable, it seemed as if the things Dr. Joaquín Balaguer said did not possess the firm opinions, the rigor, that the tiny man on occasion—this was one of those times—permitted himself with the Chief. Was he going too far? Had he succumbed, like Egghead, to the idiocy of believing himself safe, and did he also need a dose of reality? A curious character, Joaquín Balaguer. He had been at his side since 1930, when Trujillo sent two guards for him at the small Santo Domingo hotel where he was living, and took him to his house for a month so that he could help him in the election campaign; he had as an ephemeral ally Estrella Ureña, the leader from Cibao, and the young Balaguer was his ardent partisan. The invitation and a half hour's conversation were enough for

the twenty-four-year-old poet, professor, and lawyer, a native of the shabby little village of Navarrete, to be transformed into an unconditional Trujillista, a competent, discreet servant in all the diplomatic, administrative, and political posts he had conferred on him. In spite of their thirty years together, the truth was that this person, so unobtrusive that Trujillo once baptized him the Shadow, was still something of a mystery to him, though the Chief boasted of having a bloodhound's nose for men's characters. He did, however, harbor the certainty that Balaguer lacked ambitions. Unlike the other men in his intimate group, whose appetites he could read like an open book in their behavior, their initiatives, and their flattery, Joaquín Balaguer always gave the impression of aspiring only to what he wished to give him. In his diplomatic posts in Spain, France, Colombia, Honduras, and Mexico, or in the Ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs, or in the Presidency, he seemed completely fulfilled, even overwhelmed by missions far beyond his dreams and aptitudes, and which, for that very reason, he strove resolutely to carry out. But—it suddenly occurred to the Benefactor—because of his humility the tiny bard and legal scholar had always been at the top, yet, unlike the others, and thanks to his inconsequentiality, he had never endured periods of disgrace. Which was why he was puppet president. In 1957, when a Vice President had to be chosen from the list headed by his brother Blacky Trujillo, the Dominican Party followed his orders and selected Rafael Bonnelly, the ambassador to Spain. The Generalissimo decided suddenly to replace that aristocrat with the insignificant Balaguer, using a decisive argument: "He has no ambitions." But now this intellectual lacking in ambition, with his delicate manner and refined speech, held the highest office in the nation and allowed himself to rail against the head of the Intelligence Service. He would have to take him down a peg or two someday.

Balaguer remained motionless and mute, not daring to interrupt the Benefactor's reflections, hoping he would deign to speak to him. He did, finally, without returning to

the subject of the Church:

"I've always used formal address with you, haven't I? The only one of my collaborators I call *usted*. Haven't you noticed?"

The round little face blushed.

"I have, Excellency," he murmured, shamefaced. "I always ask myself if you avoid *tú* because you have less confidence in me than in my colleagues."

"I only realized it now," Trujillo added in surprise. "And you never call me Chief, like the others. All the years we've been together, and you're still something of a mystery to me. I never could discover any human weakness in you, Dr. Balaguer."

"I am full of them, Excellency," the President said with a smile. "But instead of paying me a compliment, you seem to be reproaching me."

The Generalissimo was not joking. He crossed and uncrossed his legs, not moving his piercing gaze away from Balaguer. He passed his hand over his brush mustache and parched lips, and scrutinized him steadily.

"There's something inhuman in you," he said, as if the object of his remarks were not present. "You don't have a man's natural appetites. As far as I know, you don't like women and you don't like boys. Your life is more chaste than the nuncio's, your neighbor on Avenida Máximo Gómez. Abbes García couldn't find any mistress or girlfriend, and no whores either. Which means that sex doesn't interest you. Or money. You hardly have any savings; except for the house where you live, you don't own property, or stocks, and you have no investments, at least not here. You haven't been involved in the intrigues, the deadly wars that bleed my collaborators dry, though they all plot against you. I had to force ministries and embassies on you, the Vice Presidency, even the Presidency. If I removed you now and sent you off to some damn little post in Montecristi or Azua, you'd go and be just as content. You don't drink, you don't smoke, you don't eat, you don't chase

women, money, or power. Is that the way you really are? Or is it a strategy with a hidden agenda?"

Dr. Balaguer's clean-shaven face flushed again. His soft voice did not falter when he declared:

"Ever since I first met Your Excellency, on that April morning in 1930, my only vice has been serving you. That was when I learned that by serving Trujillo I was serving my country. This has enriched my life more than a woman, or money, or power could have done. I will never find the words to thank Your Excellency for allowing me to work at your side."

Bah, the usual flattery, the kind any Trujillista who was less well-read might have said. For a moment, he had imagined that the diminutive, inoffensive man would open his heart, as in the confessional, and reveal his sins and fears, his animosities and dreams. He probably didn't have a secret life, or any existence other than the one everybody could see: he was a functionary, frugal, hardworking, tenacious, and unimaginative, who gave shape, in beautiful orations, proclamations, letters, agreements, speeches, and diplomatic negotiations, to the ideas of the Generalissimo; a poet who produced acrostics and odes to the beauty of Dominican women and the Dominican landscape that embellished poetic festivals, special anniversaries, Miss Dominican Republic pageants, and patriotic celebrations. A little man without his own light, like the moon, who was illuminated by Trujillo, the sun.

"I know you have been a good colleague," the Benefactor declared. "Yes, ever since that morning in 1930. I sent for you at the suggestion of Bienvenida, my wife at the time. A relative of yours, wasn't she?"

"My cousin, Excellency. That lunch decided my life. You invited me to accompany you on your election campaign. You did me the honor of asking me to introduce you at meetings in San Pedro de Macorís, the capital, and La Romana. It was my debut as a political speaker. At that moment, my destiny took another direction. My vocation had been literature, the classroom, the lecture hall. Thanks to you, politics came to the forefront."

A secretary knocked at the door, asking permission to enter. Balaguer consulted the Generalissimo with a glance, and gave his authorization. The secretary—well-cut suit, small mustache, hair smoothed with brillantine—brought in a memorandum signed by five hundred seventy-six prominent residents of San Juan de la Maguana, requesting "that the return to this prelature of Monsignor Reilly, the felonious bishop, be prevented." A commission led by the mayor and the local head of the Dominican Party wanted to deliver it personally to the President. Would he receive them? Again he consulted the Benefactor, who nodded.

"Ask them to be good enough to wait," Balaguer said. "I shall receive those gentlemen as soon as I finish my meeting with His Excellency."

Could Balaguer be as devout a Catholic as people said? Countless jokes circulated about his bachelorhood and the pious, intense manner he adopted at Masses, Te Deums, and processions; he had seen him come up to take communion with his hands together and his eyes lowered. When he built the house where he lived with his sisters, on Máximo Gómez, next to the nuncio's residence, Trujillo had the Walking Turd write a letter to "The Public Forum" that ridiculed their proximity and asked what kind of relationship existed between the diminutive lawyer and the envoy of His Holiness. Because of his reputation for piety and his excellent relations with the priests, he entrusted him with designing the regime's policy toward the Catholic Church. He did it very well; until Sunday, January 24, 1960, when the Pastoral Letter from those bastards was read in every parish, the Church had been a solid ally. The Concordat between the Dominican Republic and the Vatican, which Balaguer negotiated and Trujillo signed in Rome, in 1954, provided formidable support for his regime and his own presence in the Catholic world. The poet and legal scholar must have suffered because of this year-and-a-half-long confrontation between the government and the crows. Could he really be so devout? He always maintained that the regime had to get along with the

bishops, the priests, the Vatican, for pragmatic, political reasons, not religious ones: the approbation of the Catholic Church legitimized the actions of the regime to the Dominican people. What had happened to Perón must not happen to Trujillo: Perón's government began to crumble when the Church turned against him. Was he right? Would the hostility of those eunuchs in cassocks be the end of Trujillo? Before he let that happen, Panal and Reilly would be fattening the sharks at the bottom of the cliffs.

"I'm going to say something that will please you, Mr. President," he said abruptly. "I don't have time to read the bullshit intellectuals write. All those poems and novels. Matters of state are too demanding. Even though he's worked so many years with me, I've never read anything by Marrero Aristy. I didn't read *Over*, or the articles he wrote about me, or his *Dominican History*. And I haven't read the hundreds of books dedicated to me by poets, playwrights, and novelists. I haven't even read the stuff my wife writes. I don't have time for that, or for seeing movies, or listening to music, or going to the ballet or to cockfights. And I've never trusted artists. They're spineless and have no sense of honor, they tend to be traitors and are very servile. I haven't read your verses or essays either. I barely opened your book on Duarte, *The Christ of Liberty*, that you sent to me with such an affectionate dedication. But there's one exception. A speech you gave seven years ago. At the Fine Arts, when you were inducted into the Academy of the Language. Do you remember it?"

The little man had turned even brighter red. He radiated an exalted light of indescribable joy:

" 'God and Trujillo: A Realistic Interpretation,' " he murmured, lowering his lids.

"I've read it many times," said the high-pitched, mellifluous voice of the Benefactor. "I know whole paragraphs by heart, like poems."

Why this revelation to the puppet president? It was a weakness, and he never gave in to them. Balaguer could boast about

it, feel important. Things weren't going so well that he could afford to lose another collaborator in so short a time. It reassured him to recall that perhaps the greatest attribute of this puny little man was that not only did he know what was advisable but, even more important, he ignored what was inadvisable. He would not repeat this, in order not to earn the homicidal enmity of the other courtiers. Balaguer's speech had moved him deeply and often led him to wonder if it might not express a profound truth, one of those unfathomable divine decisions that mark the destiny of a people. That night, the Benefactor had paid little attention to the opening paragraphs of the address read by the new academician, dressed in a cutaway coat worn with little flair, from the stage of the Theater of Fine Arts. (He wore tails too, as did all the men in the audience; the ladies, glittering with jewels and diamonds, were in long dresses.) It seemed like a summary of Dominican history starting with the landing of Christopher Columbus on Hispaniola. But he began to be interested when, in the educated words and elegant prose of the speaker, a vision, a thesis, started to emerge. The Dominican Republic had survived more than four centuries—four hundred thirty-eight years—of countless adversities, including buccaneers, Haitian invasions, attempts at annexation, the massacre and flight of whites (only sixty thousand remained when it declared its emancipation from Haiti), because of Divine Providence. Until now, the task had been assumed directly by the Creator. But in 1930, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina had relieved God of this arduous mission.

" 'A bold, energetic will that supports, in the march of the Republic toward the fulfillment of its destiny, the protective benevolence of supernatural forces,' " Trujillo recited with half-closed eyes. " 'God and Trujillo: here, in synthesis, is the explanation, first, of the survival of the nation, and second, of the present-day flourishing of Dominican life.' "

He opened his eyes and gave a melancholy sigh. Balaguer, made even smaller by gratitude, listened in rapture.

"Do you still believe that God passed the baton to me? That He delegated to me the responsibility of saving this country?" he asked with an indefinable mixture of irony and interest.

"More than I did then, Excellency," replied the delicate, clear voice. "Trujillo could not have carried out his superhuman mission without transcendental help. You have been, for this nation, an instrument of the Supreme Being."

"Too bad those asshole bishops haven't heard the news," Trujillo said with a smile. "If your theory is true, I hope God makes them pay for their blindness."

Balaguer was not the first to associate divinity with his work. The Benefactor recalled that the law professor, attorney, and politician Don Jacinto B. Peynado (whom he had made puppet president in 1938, when the massacre of Haitians had resulted in international protests against his third reelection) had placed a large luminous sign on the door of his house: "God and Trujillo." And then identical signs began to be displayed on many homes in the capital city and in the interior. No, it hadn't been the words but the arguments justifying that association that had struck Trujillo as an overwhelming truth. It wasn't easy to feel the weight of a supernatural hand on his shoulders. Reissued every year by the Trujillonian Institute, Balaguer's speech was required reading in schools, and the central text in the Civics Handbook, used to educate high school and university students in the Trujillista Doctrine and composed by a trio of men he had selected: Balaguer, Egghead Cabral, and the Walking Turd.

"I've often thought about that theory of yours, Dr. Balaguer," he confessed. "Was it a divine decision? Why me? Why was I chosen?"

Dr. Balaguer wet his lips with the tip of his tongue before answering:

"The decisions of the Divinity are ineluctable," he said unctuously. "What must have been taken into account were your exceptional talent for leadership, your capacity for work, and, above all, your love for this country."

Why was he wasting time on this bullshit? He had urgent matters to attend to. And yet, it was very strange, he felt a need to prolong this vague, reflective, personal conversation. Why with Balaguer? Within the circle of his collaborators, he had shared the fewest intimate moments with him. He never invited him to the private suppers in San Cristóbal, at Mahogany House, where the liquor flowed and excesses were sometimes committed. Perhaps because, in that entire horde of intellectuals and writers, he was the only one who had not yet disappointed him. And because he was famous for his intelligence (although, according to Abbes García, a dirty aura surrounded the President).

"I've always had a low opinion of intellectuals and writers," he repeated. "On the scale of merit, the military occupy first place. They do their duty, they don't get involved in intrigues, they don't waste time. Then the campesinos. In the bateys and huts, on the sugar plantations, that's where the healthy, hard-working, honorable people of this country are. Then the bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, businessmen. Writers and intellectuals come last. Even below the priests. You're an exception, Dr. Balaguer. But the rest of them! A pack of dogs. They received the most favors and have done the most harm to the regime that fed and clothed them and showered them with honors. Those Spanish refugees, for example, like José Almoina or Jesús de Galíndez. We gave them asylum and work. And from groveling and begging for handouts they moved to writing slander and lies. And Osorio Lizarazo, that Colombian cripple you brought here? He came to write my biography, praised me to the skies, lived like a king, then went back to Colombia with his pockets full and became an anti-Trujillista."

Another of Balaguer's virtues was knowing when not to speak, when to become a sphinx before whom the Generalissimo could permit himself to vent his feelings. Trujillo fell silent. He listened, trying to hear the sound of the metallic surface, with its parallel foaming lines, that he glimpsed through the windows. But he could not hear the murmur of the ocean,

it was drowned out by the noise of car engines.

"Do you think Ramón Marrero Aristy betrayed us?" he asked abruptly, turning toward the quiet presence, the other participant in the conversation. "Do you think he gave information to that gringo from *The New York Times* so he could attack us?"

Dr. Balaguer never failed to be surprised by Trujillo's sudden compromising and dangerous questions, which trapped other men. He had a solution for these occasions:

"He swore he did not, Excellency. With tears in his eyes, sitting right where you are sitting, he swore to me on his mother and all the saints that he was not Tad Szulc's informant."

Trujillo reacted with an irritated gesture:

"Was Marrero going to come here and confess he had sold out? I'm asking your opinion. Did he betray us or not?"

Balaguer also knew when he could not avoid taking the leap: another of his virtues that the Benefactor recognized.

"With sorrow in my heart, because of the intellectual and personal esteem I felt for Ramón, I believe he did, that he was the one who talked to Tad Szulc," he said in a very low, almost inaudible voice. "The evidence was overwhelming, Excellency."

He had reached the same conclusion. During thirty years in government—and before that, when he was a constabulary guard, and even earlier, as an overseer on a sugar plantation—he had become accustomed to not wasting time looking back and regretting or celebrating decisions he had already made, but what happened with Ramón Marrero Aristy, that "ignorant genius," as Max Henríquez Ureña had called him, that writer and historian for whom he had developed real affection, showering him with honors, money, and posts—columnist and editor of *La Nación* and Minister of Labor—and whose *History of the Dominican Republic*, in three volumes, he had paid for out of his own pocket, sometimes came to mind and left him with the taste of ashes in his mouth.

If there was anyone for whom he would have put his hands to the fire, it was the author of the most widely read Domini-

can novel at home and abroad—*Over*, about the La Romana sugar plantation—which had even been translated into English. An unshakable Trujillista; as editor of *La Nación* he proved it, defending Trujillo and the regime with clear ideas and bold prose. An excellent Minister of Labor, who got along wonderfully with unionists and employers. Which is why, when the journalist Tad Szulc of *The New York Times* announced that he was coming to the Dominican Republic to write a series of articles about the country, he entrusted Marrero Aristy with the task of accompanying him. He traveled everywhere with Szulc and arranged the interviews he asked for, including one with Trujillo. When Tad Szulc returned to the United States, Marrero Aristy escorted him as far as Miami. The Generalissimo never expected the articles in *The New York Times* to be an apology for his regime. But he also did not expect that they would expose the corruption of the "Trujillista satrapy," or that Tad Szulc would lay out with so much precision the facts, dates, names, and figures regarding properties owned by the Trujillo family and the businesses that had been awarded to relatives, friends, and collaborators. Only Marrero Aristy could have given him the information. He was sure his Minister of Labor would not set foot in Ciudad Trujillo again. He was surprised when he sent a letter from Miami to the paper in New York, refuting Tad Szulc, and even more surprised when he had the audacity to return to the Dominican Republic. He came to the National Palace. He cried and said he was innocent; the Yankee had eluded his watchful eye and talked in secret to their adversaries. It was one of the few times that Trujillo lost control of his nerves. Disgusted by his sniveling, he slapped him so hard that Marrero Aristy lost his footing, finally stopped talking, and stepped back, horrified. The Benefactor cursed him, calling him a traitor, and when the head of the military adjutants killed him, he ordered Johnny Abbes to resolve the problem of the corpse. On July 17, 1959, the Minister of Labor and his chauffeur drove over a precipice in the Cordillera Central on their way to Constanza. He was given an

official funeral, and at the cemetery Senator Henry Chirinos emphasized the political accomplishments of the deceased and Dr. Balaguer delivered a literary eulogy.

"In spite of his betrayal, I was sorry when he died," said Trujillo, with sincerity. "He was young, barely forty-six, he still had a lot to offer."

"The decisions of the Divinity are ineluctable," the President repeated, without a shred of irony.

"We've gotten off the subject," Trujillo responded. "Do you see any possibility of settling things with the Church?"

"Not immediately, Excellency. The dispute has become poisonous. To be perfectly frank, I fear it will go from bad to worse if you do not order Colonel Abbes to have *La Nación* and Caribbean Radio moderate their attacks on the bishops. Only today I received a formal complaint from the nuncio and Archbishop Pittini regarding yesterday's assault on Monsignor Panal. Did you read it?"

He had the clipping on his desk and he read it to the Benefactor, in a respectful manner. Caribbean Radio's editorial, reproduced in *La Nación*, asserted that Monsignor Panal, the Bishop of La Vega, "formerly known as Leopoldo de Ubrique," was a fugitive from Spain and listed in the files of Interpol. It accused him of filling "the bishop's residence in La Vega with women before he turned his fevered brain to terrorism," and now, "since he fears a legitimate popular reprisal, he hides behind pathologically religious women with whom, it seems, he enjoys unrestrained sexual relations."

The Generalissimo laughed heartily. The things Abbes García thought up! The last time that Spaniard, who was as old as Methuselah, had a hard-on must have been twenty or thirty years ago; accusing him of fucking pious hags in La Vega was very optimistic; what he probably did was feel up the altar boys, like all those lecherous, faggot priests.

"The colonel sometimes exaggerates," he remarked with a smile.

"I have also received another formal complaint from the

nuncio and the curia," Balaguer continued, very seriously. "Regarding the campaign launched on May 17 in the press and on the radio against the friars of San Carlos Borromeo, Excellency."

He picked up a blue folder that held newspaper articles with glaring headlines. "Terrorist Franciscan-Capuchin monks" were making and storing homemade bombs in their church. Neighbors had discovered this after the accidental explosion of one of the devices. *La Nación* and *El Caribe* were demanding that the forces of law and order turn their attention to this den of terrorists.

Trujillo passed a bored glance over the clippings.

"Those priests don't have the balls to make bombs. The most they do is attack with sermons."

"I know the abbot, Excellency. Brother Alonso de Palmira is a saintly man, devoted to his apostolic mission and respectful of the government. Absolutely incapable of a subversive act."

He paused briefly, and in the same cordial tone of voice he would have used in after-dinner conversation, laid out an argument that the Generalissimo had often heard Agustín Cabral make. In order to rebuild bridges to the hierarchy, the Vatican, and the priests—the immense majority of whom still supported the regime out of fear of atheistic Communism—it was indispensable that this daily campaign of accusations and diatribes end, or at least become more moderate, for it allowed their enemies to portray the regime as anti-Catholic. Dr. Balaguer, with his unfailing courtesy, showed the Generalissimo a protest from the U.S. State Department concerning the persecution of the sisters at Santo Domingo Academy. The President had replied by explaining that the police guard was there to protect the nuns against hostile acts. But, in fact, it really was harassment. For example, every night Colonel Abbes García's men played popular Trujillista merengues over loudspeakers directed at the school, depriving the sisters of sleep. They had done the same thing earlier, at the residence of Monsignor Reilly in San Juan de la Maguana, and were still doing it in La Vega, to Monsignor Panal. A reconciliation with the Church was still possible. But this campaign

was moving the crisis toward a complete rupture.

"Talk to the Rosicrucian and convince him," Trujillo said with a shrug. "He's the priest-hater; he's sure it's too late to placate the Church and that the priests want to see me exiled, arrested, or dead."

"I assure you that is not the case, Excellency."

The Benefactor paid no attention to him. He said nothing as he scrutinized the puppet president with penetrating eyes that disconcerted and frightened. The little lawyer normally resisted the visual inquisition longer than others, but now, after a few minutes of being stripped bare by an audacious gaze, he began to betray some discomfort: his eyes opened and closed unceasingly behind his thick spectacles.

"Do you believe in God?" Trujillo asked with a certain uneasiness: he bored into him with his cold eyes, demanding a frank answer. "In a life after death? In heaven for the good people and hell for the bad? Do you believe in that?"

It seemed to him that the diminutive figure of Joaquín Balaguer grew even smaller, crushed by his questions. And that behind him, his own photograph—in formal dress and wearing a feathered tricorn, the presidential sash crossing his chest next to the decoration he prized most, the great Spanish cross of Carlos III—grew to gigantic size inside its gold frame. The puppet president's tiny hands caressed one another, as he said, like a person confessing a secret:

"At times I doubt, Excellency. But years ago I reached this conclusion: there is no alternative. It is necessary to believe. It is not possible to be an atheist. Not in a world like ours. Not if one has a vocation for public service and engages in politics."

"You have the reputation of being very overly pious," Trujillo insisted, moving in his chair. "I've even heard that you never married, and don't have a girlfriend, and don't drink, and don't do business, because you made secret vows. That you're a lay priest."

The bantam executive shook his head: none of that was true. He had not made and never would make any vow; unlike

some of his classmates at the Normal School, who tormented themselves wondering if they had been chosen by God to serve Him as shepherds of the Catholic flock, he always knew that his vocation was not the priesthood but intellectual labor and political action. Religion gave him spiritual order, an ethical system with which to confront life. At times he doubted transcendence, he doubted God, but never the irreplaceable function of Catholicism as an instrument for the social restraint of the human animal's irrational passions and appetites. And, in the Dominican Republic, as a constituent force for nationhood, equal to the Spanish language. Without the Catholic faith, the country would fall into chaos and barbarism. As for belief, he followed the recommendation of St. Ignatius Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises: to behave as if one believed, miming the rites and precepts: Masses, prayers, confessions, communions. This systematic repetition of religious form gradually created the content, filling the void—at a certain point—with the presence of God.

Balaguer stopped speaking and lowered his eyes, as if ashamed of having revealed to the Generalissimo the rocky places in his soul, his personal accommodations with the Supreme Being.

"If I'd had any doubts, if I had waited for some sign from heaven before acting, I never would have raised this corpse," said Trujillo. "I had to trust in myself, nobody else, when it was a question of making life and death decisions. At times I may have been wrong, of course."

The Benefactor could tell by Balaguer's expression that he was asking himself who or what he was talking about. He did not tell him that he had in mind the face of Dr. Enrique Lithgow Ceara. He was the first urologist he consulted—recommended by Egghead Cabral as an eminent physician—when he realized he was having difficulty urinating. In the early 1950s, Dr. Marión, after operating on him for a periurethral ailment, assured him he would have no more problems. But the same difficulties soon flared up again. After many years and an

unpleasant rectal examination, Dr. Lithgow Ceara, putting on the face of a whore or an unctuous sacristan, and spewing incomprehensible jargon to demoralize him ("urethral perineal sclerosis," "urethrographies," "acinous prostatitis"), formulated the diagnosis that would cost him dearly:

"You should place your trust in God, Excellency. Your prostate is cancerous."

His sixth sense told him he was exaggerating or lying. He was convinced of it when the urologist demanded immediate surgery. Too many risks if the prostate was not removed, it could metastasize, the scalpel and chemotherapy would prolong his life for a few years. He was exaggerating or lying because he was a quack or an enemy who was attempting to hasten the death of the Father of the New Nation, and he knew it absolutely when he brought in a famous physician from Barcelona. Dr. Antonio Puigvert denied he had cancer; the enlargement of that damned gland, brought on by age, could be treated with drugs and did not threaten the life of the Generalissimo. A prostatectomy was unnecessary. Trujillo gave the order that same morning and a military adjutant, Lieutenant José Oliva, made certain that the insolent Dr. Lithgow Ceara, with all his venom and bad science, disappeared off the Santo Domingo docks. By the way! The puppet president had not yet signed the promotion of Peña Rivera to captain. He descended from divine existence to the pedestrian matter of rewarding the services of one of the most able thugs recruited by Abbes García.

"I almost forgot," he said, making a gesture of annoyance with his head. "You haven't signed the resolution promoting Lieutenant Peña Rivera to captain for outstanding merit. I sent the file to you a week ago, along with my approval."

The round little face of President Balaguer soured and his mouth tightened; his tiny hands twitched. But he regained his self-control and again assumed his usual tranquil posture.

"I did not sign it because I thought it a good idea to discuss this promotion with you, Excellency."

"There's nothing to discuss." The Generalissimo cut him

off harshly. "You received your instructions. Weren't they clear?"

"Of course they were, Excellency. I beg you to hear me out. If my reasons do not convince you, I will sign Lieutenant Peña Rivera's promotion immediately. I have it here, ready for my signature. Because it is a delicate matter, I thought it preferable to discuss it with you personally."

He knew all too well the reasons that Balaguer was going to present to him, and he began to be annoyed. Did this nonentity think he was so old and tired he could disobey an order? He hid his anger and listened, without interrupting. Balaguer performed rhetorical miracles with soft-pedaling words and extremely refined tonalities to make the things he said seem less rash. With all the respect in the world he would take the liberty of advising His Excellency to reconsider his decision to promote, especially for outstanding merit, a man like Lieutenant Victor Alicinio Peña Rivera. He had so negative a record, one so stained with reprehensible actions—perhaps unjustly—that his promotion would be exploited by their enemies, above all in the United States, and represented as compensation for the deaths of Minerva, Patria, and María Teresa Mirabal. Although the courts had established that the sisters and their driver died in an automobile accident, overseas it was depicted as a political murder carried out by Lieutenant Peña Rivera, the head of the SIM in Santiago at the time of the tragedy. The President took the liberty of reminding him of the uproar caused by their adversaries when, by order of His Excellency, on the seventh day of February of the current year, he authorized, by means of a presidential decree, the ceding to Lieutenant Peña Rivera of the house and four-hectare farm which had been expropriated by the State from Patria Mirabal and her husband because of subversive activities. And the outcry had not ended. The committees established in the United States were still protesting, calling the gift of Patria Mirabal's land and house to Lieutenant Peña Rivera payment for a crime. Dr. Joaquín Balaguer urged His Excellency not to give a new

pretext to his enemies for repeating the charge that he protected murderers and torturers. Although His Excellency undoubtedly recalled it, he would take the liberty of pointing out that Colonel Abbes García's favorite lieutenant was associated, in the exiles' slanderous campaigns, not only with the death of the Mirabal sisters but with Marrero Aristy's accident, and certain alleged disappearances. Under these circumstances, it seemed imprudent to reward the lieutenant in so public a manner. Why not do it discreetly, with financial compensation or a diplomatic post in a distant country?

When he stopped speaking, he kneaded his hands together. He blinked uneasily, sensing that his careful argumentation had failed, fearing a reprimand. Trujillo restrained the anger boiling up inside him.

"You, President Balaguer, have the good fortune to be concerned only with the best part of politics," he said icily. "Laws, reforms, diplomatic negotiations, social transformations. That's what you've done for thirty-one years. You've been involved in the pleasant, enjoyable aspects of governing. I envy you! I would like to have been only a statesman, a reformer. But governing has a dirty side, and without it what you do would be impossible. What about order? Stability? Security? I've tried to keep you away from unpleasant things. But don't tell me you don't know how peace is achieved. With how much sacrifice and how much blood. Be grateful that I've allowed you to see the other side and devote yourself to the good, while I, Abbes, Lieutenant Peña Rivera, and others kept the country in order so you could write your poems and your speeches. I'm sure that with your acute intelligence, you understand me perfectly."

Joaquín Balaguer nodded. He was pale.

"Let's not talk any more about unpleasant things," the Generalissimo concluded. "Sign the promotion for Lieutenant Peña Rivera, have it appear tomorrow in *The Official Gazette*, and send him congratulations written in your own hand."

"I will, Excellency."

Trujillo passed his hand across his face because he thought

he was going to yawn. A false alarm. Tonight, breathing in the fragrance of trees and plants through the open windows of Mahogany House, and seeing the myriad of stars in a coal-black sky, he would caress the body of a naked, affectionate, slightly intimidated girl with all the elegance of Petronius the Arbiter, and he would feel the excitement growing between his legs while he sucked the warm juices of her sex. He would have a big, solid erection, the kind he had in the old days. He would make the girl moan and give her pleasure and he would feel pleasure too, and he would erase the bad memory of that stupid, skinny little bitch.

"I looked over the list of prisoners the government is going to release," he said, in a more neutral tone. "Except for that professor from Montecristi, Humberto Meléndez, there's no objection. Go ahead. Have the families come to the National Palace on Thursday afternoon. They'll meet the freed prisoners there."

"I'll begin the process immediately, Excellency."

The Generalissimo rose to his feet and indicated to the puppet president, who was about to do the same, that he should remain seated. He wasn't leaving yet. He wanted to stretch his legs. He took a few steps away from the desk.

"Will this new release of prisoners placate the Yankees?" he said. "I doubt it. Henry Dearborn will go on encouraging conspiracies. There's another one in the works, according to Abbes. Even Juan Tomás Díaz is involved."

The silence he heard behind him—he heard it, like a heavy, clammy presence—took him by surprise. He whirled around to look at the puppet President: there he was, absolutely still, observing him with his beatific expression. He did not feel reassured. Those intuitions of his had never lied. Could it be that this microscopic creature, this pygmy, knew something?

"Have you heard anything about this new conspiracy?"

He saw him shake his head vigorously.

"I would have reported it right away to Colonel Abbes García, Excellency. As I have always done whenever I hear

rumors of anything subversive."

He took two or three more steps, in front of the desk, not saying a word. No, if there was one man in the regime incapable of being involved in a plot, it was the circumspect President. He knew that without Trujillo he would not exist, that the Benefactor was the sap that gave him life, that without him he would vanish forever from politics.

He walked to one of the large windows. For a long while he observed the sea in silence. The clouds had covered the sun and the grayness of the sky and air was streaked with silver; the dark blue water reflected it in places. A small boat moved across the bay, heading for the mouth of the Ozama River; a fishing boat, it must have finished for the day and was returning to dock. It left a foaming wake, and though he could not see them at this distance, he imagined the gulls endlessly shrieking and beating their wings. He looked forward with anticipation to the hour-and-a-half walk he would take, after visiting his mother, along Máximo Gómez and the Avenida, smelling the salt air, soothed by the waves. Don't forget to ream out the head of the Armed Forces for that broken pipe at the entrance to the air base. Let Pupo Román stick his nose in that stinking puddle, then see if the Generalissimo ever finds anything so disgusting again at the front gate of a military installation.

He left the office of President Joaquín Balaguer without saying goodbye.