



The Denunciation of Demosthenes

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Ausonius took the center of the forum and cleared his throat into the cuff of his chiton. He was long acknowledged as Rome's greatest orator and cut an impressive figure, his tall and lean frame commanding all around him. Like all the great orators who had preceded him, he was in no hurry to begin. Waiting until only silence filled the chamber, ensuring its attention, he made his way across to the lowly figure seated between the rows of Senators. Grasping his chiton at the fibulae, he stood towering above the hapless alchemist, Demosthenes the Greek. Staring down with utter disdain, scorn written the length and breadth of his brow, he turned to face the crowded forum seated close to the edge of their seats. Pausing to take in the room, he began.

"Senators, citizens of Rome, I am here before you, your fellow Senator, one who I know has gained your trust, to address an issue that has come before us in what I can only say is an unexpected and inexplicable manner. Seated among you today, is a man unworthy of your attention, a foreigner, a Greek from the island of Sikinos in the Aegean, a place many learned men have said breeds only tyrants and despots. A place where deception and skullduggery are the accepted norm; where a stranger dare not walk among the filth of its un-cobbled paths for fear of his life, where the majesty of Rome is considered a foul and unwanted desire. Senators, I wish to make myself abundantly clear. Seated among you today is a man whose wickedness knows no bounds. Whose every word I will prove to be a lie."

Returning to the center of the forum, ensuring all eyes were upon him, Ausonius proceeded into his oratory.

"Fellow citizens, here is a man who would have us believe there is a pandemic plaguing us at this very moment, a pandemic stemming from the very pots in which we Romans cook our delicious food. I ask you, is such a thing even remotely believable? These pots that have for generations, along with the loving hands that have filled them, dispensed their plenty onto our Roman tables. I ask you to ponder such an outrageous opinion. It comes from the mind of the totally insane. We have heard of plagues being carried on the wind or on the backs of camels but never have we heard of a plague being levelled upon us from the bottom of a pot!"

He paused until the contemptuous chortling of the Senators subsided, then turned his attention back to the alchemist, who, in keeping with the demeanor of Socrates during his ordeal, remained breathlessly calm.

"So, Demosthenes, you who claim to turn lead into gold, would it be untoward of

me to ask how you have arrived at this erroneous conclusion? No, wait, I do not require an answer. I have already stretched the limits of this chamber's patience, not to mention questioning their wisdom. But one question I must ask, and I think it to be a fair one; to what ingredient in the witch's cauldrons you call our pots are you attributing this pandemic?"

"You have mentioned it already. It is derived from lead."

"You are telling me, and let me get this right, you are telling me in that tired-out calm way of yours that lead in our pots is the cause of a pandemic of sickness throughout Rome and other places in the empire?"

"Among other things, yes."

"And would you care to share what those other things might be?"

"It makes people insane and violent."

"Forgive me, Demosthenes, I know I have no right to question an alchemist, or should I say, scientist, of your stature, but are you saying that those same cooking pots the Empire has been using since its very beginnings are poisoning its people? Is that what you are telling me?"

"Yes. It is what I am telling you."

Ausonius abruptly turned to his fellow Senators.

"Senators, my friends and neighbors, what is there left for me to say? Am I to stand before you and submit myself to this nonsense? Far be it for me to question the wisdom of our scientific community, but even they can be mistaken, can they not? And here is the greatest error of judgement ever to attract my attention. This Greek, this Demosthenes, has dared to propose a theory that the minds of our people are being poisoned by an invisible ingredient secreted in our pots, which any reasonable person would deem to be untrue. He blames our love of the arena, a place we revere for the courage exhibited there, on that invisible ingredient. Is there a more noble place in all the Empire than the arena, the very core of what it is to be a Roman, which we now find is being challenged by hearsay painstakingly put forward by this vagabond who dwells in a cave? I put it to you, fellow Romans, that we must never succumb to such prattle. Our traditions must endure, especially in the face of flawed opposition. I thank you for your patience. Long live the Empire."

Amidst the tumult of the Senators exiting, Demosthenes remained seated until nudged by a centurion to rise. He addressed the empty chamber in a voice shaking with emotion.

"Citizens, I speak to your very souls. Perhaps my language has been too coarse for your understanding. For that, I beg forgiveness. But I refuse to seek forgiveness for confronting the pandemic facing the Empire, one that will ultimately destroy this civilization. I will take the path of Socrates; the only avenue left open and expected of me."

He was escorted to his home and, surrounded by believers, lay down. Without hesitation he swallowed the poisonous hemlock in the vial by his bedside, while Ausonius was inspecting a shipment of ore for his pot-making business.

