

CARESSER LES NUAGES
DEPUIS LA NUIT DES TEMPS

*CARESSING CLOUDS
SINCE THE DAWN OF TIME*

Caresser les nuages

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CONTES

Caressing clouds

*Since the dawn
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STORIES

From time immemorial stories have conveyed wisdom and awakened our awareness. They speak directly to our heart and soul. Like a lantern, they light our way, adding more meaning to our daily existence. Through bountiful models, the heroes teach us how to go beyond trials and challenges to reap the benefits of the experience.

Every human being, and thus every group of human beings, is defined by the story they tell, in relation to themselves and in relation to others. These stories are not just a succession of events; they contain an emotional charge and even a measure of make-believe.

A company is part of an era and a place. It builds its identity and, within the limits of its capacity, contributes to shaping the history of its territory, its country, its people and humanity as a whole. What story does it want to tell and does the story go beyond its own volition? How does it wish to communicate about its past to

better influence its future? What construction are the men and women it comprises helping to build? What chapter of the story of human adventure are they writing together?

Stories teach us about our “jobs as human beings” and encourage us to “think differently”.

DESERT BELLS

In a faraway country, so remote it's not on any map, an arid, inhospitable land spread out from east to west. Winds swept through its dusty ravines and sandy dunes. In the distance, the sun slashed the horizon, beating down on the ochre earth. Sharp, angular stones cut the feet of the travellers and their animals.

That morning, along the rocky ridges, a tribe advanced, balancing delicately on the edge of the precipice. The multicoloured tunics and ornaments threaded their way in a mobile, shifting frieze between heaven and earth. A suffocating wind scorched the skin of the Water Seekers. Their journey dragged on because the waterholes, known by the elders and handed down among the Water Seekers, from father to son, could not be traced. They had been engulfed by the greedy earth and parched by

long months of drought. Even the animals, whose instinct was normally so sure, hesitated in confusion.

That morning, the men urged their mounts forward, while at the rear, the women hummed softly in the ears of their infants. The only sound was that of the tombak, beating out the rhythm of the convoy, with every step. The wind carried a pungent smell of dried blood mingled with sweat, heralding the arrival of the troop at the small village of Afazé, which clung to the rocks some miles below.

They had been walking for over a hundred days when they sighted the flat roofs of Afazé from the top of the dune. Their gourd skins had been empty for many hours. The day before, they had shared the last dates. The women's breasts were dry of milk. And every day they felt Death, that tireless traveller, breathing closer on their necks.

It took them another day of effort to reach the village. The entrances of the houses were covered by heavy woven hangings, which were occasionally lifted by a warm breath of wind. The sparse windows were narrow slits carved into the earthen walls. A few chipped bowls stood on a bench, awaiting the preparation of the next meal.

The men of the village came forward to greet the exhausted group. One of them, wearing a black turban, with a long embroidered tunic down to his calves, spoke.

“Strangers of the tribe of Water Seekers, welcome to Afazé. We see you are exhausted from your long march. We will gladly share our bread and olives with you tonight. Put up your tents in the shade of the palm trees that grow along our stream. Fill your water gourds there. Take your animals to drink. Refresh yourselves. We will wait for you at teatime in the centre of the village.”

And so it was. The Water Seekers quenched their thirst, the mothers bathed their children and the men watered their horses.

The shadow of night had begun to embrace the mountains when they all met again for the evening meal. The dishes passed from hand to hand. The musicians struck up their instruments. The singing of the women rose above the crackling wood fire, and then silence fell when everyone retired.

In one of the village houses lived a young woman of great beauty, who was called Sade and known for her unruly nature. Her long black hair was fastened with a golden comb, hidden under a scarf tied with a knot at her neck. Two bracelets adorned one of her ankles. On one a silver bell tinkled. And on the other hung a bell of clay. When Sade danced, the bells jingled gracefully against her amber skin.

That night, Asman could not sleep. After the long, exhausting march of the last months, his senses were aroused by the village festivities, the cool water of the stream and the starry sky.

But more than anything it was Sade's emerald green eyes that kindled his heart. Although they had only glanced at each other furtively, a shiver had run across his shoulders at the sight of the village girl. And he thought he had caught a blush on the beautiful girl's cheeks. So he decided to take advantage of the silvery light of the full moon spreading across the sand to enter the village in the hope of glimpsing her golden comb behind the curtain of her door.

As he walked along the rocky path, his worn boot nudging away a snake making the most of the cool night air to migrate to its hiding place for the next day, he heard Sade's song. He decided to creep up to the small house she shared with her parents. He approached the house, hid behind a rock and waited. A faint glow lit the only room in the house. Sade's sweet melody bewitched the valiant Water Seeker. He had been sitting there for many minutes when he saw the beautiful girl on her doorstep. As she gazed at the sky she suddenly heard the sound of a stone rolling down the path.

"Who's there?" she asked, slightly worried.

"It's only me, Asman," answered the nomad.

"Come a little closer so I can see you," she ordered.

The young man approached. The oil lamp on the little bench by the door lit up his face. She smiled.

"You are very bold to come here at such a late hour," she teased. "May I know what brings you so close to my father's house?"

Stunned by the sound of her melodious voice and his surprise that she hadn't sent him away, in the turmoil of his thoughts, Asman could no longer find the words he had so carefully prepared.

"Well?" she asked again, mockingly.

The young man muttered a few inaudible words before picking up his courage to invite Sade to step out with him to look at the stars. His promise to tell her the story of his long march quickly convinced the village girl, who went back into her house to tell her parents she was stepping outside for a few minutes. She ignored their response and hurried to Asman, who was waiting a little further up the stony path. The pair walked along the path leading to a rocky outcrop, from which they looked out onto the vast sea of sand, its rounded dunes folding into the distance. Amazed by the joy everyone feels in the closeness of the other, they recounted their lives, and were not surprised by the softness of their embrace or the dizziness that followed.

The next morning, the Water Seekers' caravan dusted off and resumed its slow march to the north. It would take several weeks for the travellers to reach the site of their winter camp. Their heavy water gourds swung against the horses' flanks. Wicker baskets swayed on the

camels' backs, bursting with dried fruit. With luck the water and food supplies would last them until the next oasis.

Asman took his place among the men at the front of the convoy, holding a little silver bell in his fingers.

In the village of Afazé, life resumed its course. Every evening, Sade walked her little goat on the rocky outcrop, breathing in the desert scents to try to calm the pounding of her heart each time she remembered her passionate and tender lover.

When the young beauty realized that her belly was swelling, she went to her mother.

The calmness of the house was torn apart by the woman's cries. Arms stretched to the sky, she implored the Almighty to grant His forgiveness to the impure girl and save her family from scandal and disgrace. That evening, her father drove her from the house. But Sade stood straight and proud as she crossed the threshold. Her only baggage was a blanket, a bowl and a lamp. Her little goat followed her on the path leading away from her childhood home.

Just outside the village lived a woman who was so old that the wrinkles and deep furrows on her face and neck traced out the story of her long life. The banished girl knocked at the hermit's door and was received without surprise.

"I was expecting you," she whispered simply.

One moonless night, a baby girl emerged from Sade's belly. Her tiny, still wrinkled head

was covered with light, silver curls. The young mother twisted a curl around her index finger before falling asleep until morning. On waking, the news had filled the streets of Afazé. No one came to see her. Only the old woman remained at her bedside.

After a few months, Sade had to face the fact: the shadows of the night when the child was born nestled in her eyes. The little one would never see the sun, or even her mother's face. The young woman was engulfed in distress; it suffocated her chest. Her cries in the dunes echoed in the hollow ravines for many long moments.

Then all was silent.

The hermit's care, her herbal teas and ointments, could not relieve Sade's suffering – she who had once been so fearless. Yet at her side, her child grew happily, touching the slender stones and embroidery in her fingers, tasting the fruit and salt in her moist mouth, trailing her silver curls along her mother's arms. The few words that parted from Sade's lips were those whispered to the girl, telling her of love and describing her father. A wordless song barely lifted her chest, at nightfall wrapping her child in a protective, reassuring musical veil.

The old woman, who time seemed to be spare its passage, taught the lively, playful child the mysteries of the desert, the virtues of plants and the secret waves that flow through the living. And any villagers seeing the child from afar,

running with her kid goat, would never have guessed she was blind.

When the girl was seven years old, the old woman came to sit beside her and, taking her hand, said:

“Sweet child with your silver hair and silent gaze, it’s time for you to know your father. Your mother has cried so much that the well of her tears is as dry as the desert sand. Only the gentle hand of her beloved will give her the will to live.”

Sensing what her adopted grandmother was about to say, the child was seized with apprehension. She tried to protest, pleading her inexperience and vulnerability.

“What your eyes cannot see, your hands can feel, your ears can hear, and your heart can love,” reassured the old woman. “And besides, who among us can claim to be endowed with all the faculties and graces? Tomorrow you will set out for the north, a few moons from here, where the Water Seekers have their winter camp,” she said, pretending to ignore the fear in the child’s tears.

With an immense effort, the little girl held back the sob in her throat. The old woman continued, “Here is a little bag. I’ve folded up a blanket, wrapped up some food and put in three matches,” she said, handing her the comforts. “And here is a stick. It will guide your steps and lead you to the water source where you can fill your gourd. Your kid goat will accompany you.”

Before the child could answer her, she gently ordered, “Go and rest now. Kiss your mother goodbye at dawn.”

The hermit placed a lingering kiss on her forehead. The girl ran her hands over the face of a thousand crevices, memorizing the patterns with her fingers.

Next morning she drank a glass of goat’s milk, tied up her hair with a scarf and went to her mother’s bedside. Her mother’s thin arms held her with infinite tenderness. Before letting her go, she untied the little clay bell from her ankle and fixed it to the knob of her stick.

And they parted.

The little girl’s body was seized with a dull anguish, churning her stomach, crushing her lungs, clogging her throat. She seemed to choke as the air struggled to enter. Her agile but frail body shuddered, invaded by a terrible shaking. Her wet hand, slipped on the wood of her staff.

It took many hours to calm the turmoil that shook her whole being. To give herself heart, she thought of the encouraging words of the old woman, the loving embrace of her mother and of her father who, although unknown, she knew so much about. She stroked her little goat, held her staff tighter and resolved to sing as she walked. She used the warm sun on her cheek to guide her, trusting her small companion to help her find her footsteps along the unfamiliar path. At noon, she made the first break in her journey.

As she was about to take a sip of water, she heard a faint chirping to her left. Anyone else would have taken it for the buzz of an insect. The girl though recognized the song of a young Scrub Robin.

“Little bird of the wilderness, I hear your whistle, but cannot see the colour of your sandy plumage. Come closer so we can get to know each other,” she entreated.

“Alas! I cannot move from the place where I fell,” replied the little bird. “My right wing is broken and I’m so exhausted, my legs will no longer carry me.”

The child listened carefully to the beating of the little heart in the bird’s chest. Seconds later, she gently picked it up. She took a small jar of medicinal cream out of the bag the hermit had prepared and rubbed it onto the injured wing. With one of the three matches, she made a splint, tying it with a lock of her hair. She poured a little water into her hand and held it out first to the bird and then to the kid. When all had quenched their thirst, the child stood up. She said goodbye to her new friend, urging it to take good care of itself.

“I’m on my way north to find my father’s camp,” she said. “No doubt we’ll meet when we return.”

“Little walker,” said her new friend, “may the dunes be as kind to you as you have been with me. Here’s a tiny whistle, to remember me by.”

And the two inseparable friends resumed their journey.

When the sun had disappeared below the horizon, the girl spread out her blanket and bit into a date. She handed another to her kid, who came to lie down next to her. The warmth of her companion reassured her while it reminded her how she missed her mother. She breathed in several times to calm her grief. Turning her face toward the stars, she felt a slight sadness flow over her sightless eyes. She decided not to light a fire that night but to keep her last two matches for a cool night. She was soon caught up in sleep.

Day was just breaking when the girl awoke. She felt for the goat with her hand. The place was cold. She called once, without success. Then again. Her heart began to pound. How could she go on without her constant companion? Dreadful images were crowding her mind when she finally heard the small animal bleating.

“Never stray from me again like that!” she cried vengefully, “Or I’ll have to tie you up.”

Surprised by a tone of voice he didn’t recognize, the kid explained,

“Be reassured, my faithful friend. I just went to stake out the path to take to bypass the steep ravine running down ahead of us. No need to threaten me with a rope and a knot,” it continued. “The bond that ties us is stronger than the tethers of desert horses.”

The girl apologized for her outburst and stroked the kid.

“Even if I’m haunted by the fear of losing you, I know you’re right. So walk freely beside me, just as it pleases you.”

Armed with their renewed pact of confidence, the two friends set out on the path ahead of them.

They walked for many days. Fear, thirst and fatigue were part of their journey, only loosening their grip during the few hours of night, when they fell asleep, exhausted, after a meal of fruit and bread.

Their steps had marked out ephemeral footprints in the sand for two moons when they reached the bank of a wadi. Muddy, viscous water ran through the middle, with a heavy stench. The girl picked up the foul smell and pinching her nostrils asked her companion, “How can the air be filled with such a stench? Can you see what it is?”

“It’s a muddy stream that’s giving off this smell,” said the kid. “Ugh!”

Just then a huge monster, with skin like the bark of an old tree, and covered in filth, raised its head out of the water and made a grunting sound that chilled the bones of the walkers, standing there in full sunlight.

“Who dares disturb my nap?” he yelled menacingly.

“We come from the village of Afazé, two moons south of here,” explained the young girl, trying to hide the tremor in her voice.

“Who gave you the right to come so close to me?” interrupted the green monster.

“We’re on our way to the winter camp of the Water Seekers,” explained the girl.

“You seem very young and frail to be travelling alone in the desert,” the monster said doubtfully. “Are you an abandoned child?”

“Abandoned?” exclaimed the little girl.

To the surprise of both the kid and the river monster, she burst out laughing. She laughed so hard she had to sit down to avoid falling over. Never had the monster heard such laughter. As for the kid, it hesitated between jumping for joy and shaking the girl to bring her back to her senses.

When she had laughed to her fill, she said, “I’m on my way to find my father.”

“That doesn’t explain the burst of laughter,” said the monster, confused and upset by the thought that she was laughing at his expense.

“You’re right, oh inhabitant of the wadi. It’s just ... How could I ever feel abandoned when I’m so loved by my mother and the old hermit ... and by my kid,” she said, noticing her friend’s crestfallen look. “And this love, you see, makes me strong despite my young age.”

“Strong?” sneered the monster. “Do you even know what it means to be strong?”

He swished his powerful tail on the muddy surface of the water, spraying the banks with a viscous, sickening liquid that miraculously spared the two walkers.

“Be wary of me,” retorted the little girl, swaggering.

“Very well,” said the monster. “Get on my back. I will take you across the river, so you can continue your journey.”

“Alright,” said the little girl, a bit quicker than she intended. Her companion was stunned. He tried whispering to her how scary the monster was, but she wouldn’t listen.

“Have you had a good look at me?” asked the monster mockingly.

“No need to see you, oh inhabitant of the river, to know who you are. Open your mouth so I can prop it open with a match; I wouldn’t like one of your many teeth to hurt us by mistake.”

She picked her way down to the riverbank and put one of her two tiny matches upright in the huge open mouth, gaping before her. And then she climbed straight up onto the monster’s back, holding her kid under her trembling arm. A few minutes later, the monster deposited them safely to the other shore.

With a simple flick of his tongue, he snapped the match that disappeared in the mud.

“Explain this mystery, little one. Of all the travellers, you’re the only one not to have taken the bridge over the wadi a few metres further on ... and to have defied me!”

“The match protected us,” she argued. “And above all, I felt that beneath your thick mud skin and scales, your heart was good.”

“Good? That’s the first time anyone’s spoken to me like that!” exclaimed the giant reptile. “But I confess that, hearing your words I feel

quite touched,” he said in a whisper, hoping no one could hear.

“We must continue our journey,” interrupted the kid, less confident than his young companion.

“Take some of the mud covering my back,” invited the monster. “If one day you’re in trouble, set fire to it. Its powerful smell will find its way to my nostrils and I’ll come straight to your side.”

The child agreed, rolling the mud into a small ball that she carefully wrapped and placed at the bottom of her bag. And the two walkers resumed their journey after saying goodbye.

They continued on their way for many long days. The further north they went, the more the temperature fell. And one morning, they were surprised to find their blanket covered with a thin layer of snow. Neither of them had ever felt the searing sensation of cold or the lightness of snowflakes. But their joy soon gave way to consternation. Winter soon crept into their bones, freezing their muscles, bending their heads to the ground and making them shiver uncontrollably.

One night they had just stopped to camp, when the girl muttered through purplish lips, “My faithful friend, my strength is abandoning me, just as the last breath leaves the dying. My feet are frozen and damaged by the snow and they refuse to go on.” She swallowed and continued, painfully. “I have failed in the mission entrusted

to me by the old woman. This is where I must stop," she sobbed.

At these words, the little animal panicked. Giving up ... or worse, dying so far from home and after such a journey! What injustice! Fear restored his strength. Ideas buzzed around his head like a fly trapped in a bottle. Suddenly he remembered the Scrub Robin and the monster. He knew he was too weak to be of any help to the exhausted child. But he still had enough energy to try a last resort. He put his muzzle in the bag to find the mud ball, as the little girl lay on the ground shivering, wrapped in the blanket that was no longer keeping her warm. At the bottom of the bag, he spotted the whistle offered by Scrub Robin and blew with the little strength he had left. While preparing to strike the last match, he hesitated. What if the reptile had lied? They would lose their last chance to make a small fire and warm themselves enough for the blood to recirculate in their numb bodies and for the extra energy to get them a little closer to the Water Seekers' camp ... He hesitated again for a few minutes.

The pale face of his friend finally convinced him. He set fire to the mud. It gave off a foul odour. He lay beside the child and waited for a long time.

Suddenly he felt the ground vibrate. Standing before them was the huge reptile. Without even waiting for instructions, the giant put them on its back. In contact with the hot mud, the girl

awoke. Soon she thought she could hear the song of the bird.

The kid answered, "Little bird, you who see the world from above, can you find the way to the Water Seekers' camp? And you, powerful giant, can you take us there?"

The bird immediately showed them the way and the monster set off. They rounded the frozen dune ahead of them. A few metres below lay the camp. The two travellers had almost reached their goal without even realizing it!

The little band went down to the tents surrounded by the oil lamps that would burn until the women extinguished them at dawn.

Already up, the men approached the strange band of travellers. The child dismounted. Her staff supported her steps. And from where they stood, the Water Seekers couldn't tell whether the staff or the child was the strongest.

As the child approached, she straightened up and said, "Men of the Water Seekers' tribe. My companion and I have walked through the desert for many moons. There is among you a man who I am seeking."

Seeing her sightless eyes, one of them asked, doubtfully, "And how will you recognize him, child whose eyes are hostages of the night?"

Before the girl could answer, her staff suddenly came to life, vibrating intensely. The little clay bell on the top of the staff tinkled. And in the crowd a tiny instrument was heard that seemed to answer in concert. At the neck of

one of the men, a silver bell tinkled. The man stepped forward, visibly moved at the sight of the clay bell, whose memory instantly returned.

“Where did you get this bell?” he asked

“From my mother’s ankle bracelet,” the child replied, in turn overcome by an intense emotion, as sudden as it was unexpected.

“What is your mother’s name,” asked the man, his voice trembling.

“Sade. And you are Asman, aren’t you?”

“How do you know my name?” asked the startled Water Seeker, glimpsing the revelation of a truth that his heart had already guessed.

“Because Asman is the name of my father,” said the girl, no longer holding back her tears.

The crowd applauded as he lifted up the sobbing girl in his strong arms. At his feet, the kid jumped for joy.

Perched on the back of the Water Seeker’s mount, the return journey was much quicker.

They had been away for less than a hundred days when they again spied the flat roofs of Afazé from the top of the dune. They followed the path to the hermit’s house. The sound of hooves brought the two women out. Sade, who had hardly walked at all in recent years, ran to meet her two loves. She covered her child with kisses, thanking the Almighty for His infinite benevolence.

When Asman took Sade’s hands in his, a bright light lit up the sky. Its brightness bathed the face of the child, back safely in the arms of

the old woman. She opened her eyes and for the first time her parents’ faces were imprinted on her blind retina. In love, they gazed at her in wonder.

And then the darkness returned.

Her piercing cry shook the rocks. The girl had to breathe in deeply not to give way to the immense despair gripping her heart.

Then the old lady tenderly sat the girl on her lap, rocked her and said with infinite gentleness:

“It is when the dunes are violently whipped by swirling sand that the desert knows the power of its vitality. Victory over one storm does not protect it against the onslaught of the next.”

She stood her on her little legs that had travelled so far, and, one hand on the child’s heart and the other on her stomach, said:

“Child of the desert and of love, you have survived the dangers and fears that your journey has placed before you, braved the unknown and ultimately you have never given up. You have fully become who you are. You are courage. Your name is Daleera.”¹

1. Free feminization of *daleer*, “brave and courageous” in Farsi.

HIDDEN TREASURE

There once was an old king who lived alone in his castle at the edge of a deep and dense forest, said by the troubadours to be populated by elves, fairies and monstrous beasts. His queen, who had died after a long, gruelling illness a few years before, had given him two sons, born exactly three years apart, who he had raised alone for almost ten years.

Born on the same day and fed on the milk of the same wet nurse, the two children, despite being very different, maintained an unfailing complicity. The first was as dark and powerful as the second was blonde and slim. While one delighted in archery and sword fighting, his younger brother found peace and fulfilment in the contemplation of flowers and streams or reading richly illuminated tomes.

Winter was laying out its first white sails when this story begins.

On the day of their birthday, the king summoned his heirs to the great Council Chamber. Vast and silent, flanked by a large fireplace in which a huge log was always burning, the room inspired deference to anyone who entered it. No traveller or courtier, counsellor or valet dared tread its cold stone floor without having been expressly invited by the royal host. Each of them entered with respect and full awareness of the honour that was granted. Even the servants who cleaned the room passed their rags and brushes gently across the room's woodwork and precious marbles so as not to alter its magnificence. Only the two young princes in their deerskin boots entered the room laughing, gently shaking the windows with their bright, cheerful voices.

That day, happy to celebrate their birthdays with their father, they impatiently and enthusiastically opened the heavy wooden door guarded by two soldiers, each holding a straight and menacing halberd mounted with the colours of the kingdom. In a few strides, they were at the foot of the throne on which their father sat, watching them with grave kindness.

"My children, this first day of the Month of Flakes is also one that celebrates Donatien's entry into adulthood. As for you, Bertillac, you leave your childhood behind you today. The time has come for you to learn about life beyond the borders of the kingdom."

Donatien, delighted with the promise of travel and adventure opening up before him, already wielded his blade to confront the imaginary opponents he intended to go out and slay. Bertillac merely cast a sceptical glance at his father, and closed his eyes for a moment, his fingers squeezing the leather binding of the small collection of poems that never left him.

The king continued. "Your quest will not be aimless," he announced, suddenly whetting the curiosity of his two sons. "Before she died, your mother told me of a treasure of inestimable value that she had carefully entrusted to a worthy and faithful guardian. This treasure, a token of your love and loyalty, will be offered, in time, to your future wives and life-long companions. I swore to your mother to make accomplished men of you, and fair and loyal future sovereigns. This will be your quest. The journey is dedicated to your duty to the memory of our queen."

The two boys exchanged a look of interest and surprise, never having heard about their mother's treasure.

"You will leave tomorrow at dawn, at the hour when the forest comes alive. Donatien, you will take the road to the west. Bertillac, you will take the path to the east. Your destination, kept secret from everyone, including myself, is somewhere midway between the two cardinal points. I commend to each of you a ring. Take the time to discover the precious

stone and understand the symbols inscribed around the ring. They will be your guides.

“You have the rest of the day to prepare your belongings. Later, you must go and choose your mounts in the stables. May heaven protect you both.”

And the king, just as he would have done with his counsel, adjourned the session. So the two boys took leave of their father and found themselves in the small adjoining room decorated in blue and gold, to share their first impressions.

The announcement of Donatien’s departure hardly surprised the two young men, being part of the purest secular tradition of their house and the surrounding royal houses. But both were amazed that Bertillac would also have to leave on a journey. His youth, his lack of experience in handling weapons, his attachment to the castle keep in which their mother had once set up her laboratory, the garden of medicinal plants to which he devoted much of his time ... all argued in favour of him staying at the castle for a few more years. The news about the existence of a treasure to give to their betrothed also kept them guessing.

They spent the afternoon putting together the few belongings they considered essential for their exploration. Donatien packed a large fur blanket stamped with the family crest, a pewter cup, and a heavy leather purse of gold and silver crowns. A dagger with an ivory handle, his sword and his bow completed his pile.

Bertillac, for his part, filled a bag with a felt blanket, an iron mug, some vials containing tinctures, some small pots of ointment and a small hemp bag in which he had deposited ten different seeds. And of course, the poetry book he always carried with him. Finally, he carefully rolled up the silk scarf that had belonged to his mother.

It was almost five o’clock when Bertillac joined his elder brother in the stables. The damp heat of the stable, with its straw-covered floor and patches of smoking dung, contrasted with the cold dry air of the courtyard and the snow-covered meadows. Donatien was busy talking in a loud, masterful voice to the groom who had been attached to the castle since his early childhood. He gave the groom final instructions about the reins, the saddle and the stirrups he had chosen for the black Arabian stallion his father had given him for Christmas, almost a year before.

He smiled when he saw his brother and called him over to the saddlery. Bertillac smiled back, lingering by the box where his filly was feeding. The young horse looked up, snorted heavily and plunged her muzzle back into the manger full of oats. The adolescent ran his hand over its chestnut rump, feeling the animal’s powerful flexor and extensor muscles. As he was about to leave the box, he saw blood on the horse’s left foreleg. He called the groom over. Instantly at the horse’s side, the latter put his finger near the

wound, which was much deeper than it had at first seemed to Bertillac.

The animal was badly injured, and limping. It would take several days for the wound to heal. Bertillac had to face the facts: his mount could not accompany him the next day.

Donatien then ran up and tried to reassure his brother. "Isn't there a miraculous cream among your ointments that can treat your filly's leg overnight?"

Bertillac smiled shyly. "None of them works better than nature. At most, they supplement and facilitate its work. The healing will take as long as it needs. No one can escape that. That's just the way it is."

"How can you so easily accept the idea of leaving without your filly? Isn't there another mount you could ride?"

The embarrassed groom nodded toward a little brindled donkey with a thick tousled mane, chewing on a bunch of dried herbs.

"Is this your idea of a joke? You can't be serious, you rascal!" scolded Donatien roughly.

"Forgive my brother's outburst," said the younger boy to the groom. "The donkey will be perfect," announced Bertillac, already stroking the rough fur of his new companion.

Night had not yet given way to day when the two princes found themselves in the company of the king, at the foot of the Great Gate. Under their feet, the snow crunched, disturbing the calm of the icy, starry night. Donatien's stallion,

like his fiery rider, pranced with impatience. After embracing his brother and bidding farewell to his father, the older boy spurred his horse and galloped off towards the west. Bertillac fastened his bag to his saddle and mounted the donkey. He had just enough time to say goodbye, as the donkey had already started trotting eastward.

"Brave and robust companion, you'll have to listen to me if we are going to get on together and return to the castle before the harvest," the boy gently scolded.

The only answer he got was a braying as the donkey quickened its pace without waiting to be spurred by its rider.

"It seems as though I'll have to get used to the rather unruly nature of this donkey," Bertillac said to himself, beginning to miss his filly. "Well so be it! Since this is the mount I chose, I must accept it for what it is."

And he adjusted his position to the awkward gait of the little animal.

After a few hours, Donatien had travelled many miles. He decided to stop at an inn to eat and to water his stallion. He had not been sitting there for ten minutes when a gypsy came up to him, "Young rider, I see you are richly dressed. Could it be that you are the heir of our good king?"

Taken aback by her clairvoyance, Donatien nodded.

"Do you know that I can see into the soul of precious stones? I know all their secrets. Are

you not carrying a jewel that I can read to your greatest advantage?"

Although suspicious at first, the young man quickly gave way to his curiosity and handed over his ring. The fortune-teller inspected the gem, her eyes shining.

"You are promised a great future, young prince. But you must find the only treasure that can make you a king."

All ears, Donatien invited the woman to continue her revelations.

"On your way westward lies a sacred place which houses the treasure, guarded by a terrible snake, that is cunning and aggressive. Will you be able to undermine its vigilance? A single key will give you access. Can you open the door to the treasure?"

"Gypsy woman, can you direct me you to this place?"

She unrolled a map and threw a few small bones onto it. She took the time to divine the answer and showed Donatien the place he had to make for. The young prince thanked her, asked the innkeeper to feed the seer at its expense, finished his meal quickly and was soon on his way, impatient to do battle with the fearsome guardian.

It had been dark for several hours when Bertillac reached the first stage post on his path. He asked for a place in the stable for his donkey and went into the inn. The hearth spread a reddish glow and pleasant warmth, whose comfort he enjoyed after a day in the wind and cold. He

had not been sitting there for ten minutes when a gypsy approached him:

"Young rider, I see you dressed modestly with a bag full of medications. Could it be that you are the healer of our good king?"

Amused by the young woman's mistake, nevertheless tinged with wisdom, the young incognito prince congratulated her, "You have great insight. So you must know that all I have on me is enough to pay for my meal and a bed."

"If you agreed to treat this nasty wound that will not heal on my right hand, I could read the precious stone you wear close to your heart."

The wound was deep. Bertillac cleaned it and applied a healing antiseptic cream containing lavender. After treating the wound, he handed his ring to his bold patient.

"You are promised a great future, young man. But you must find the only treasure that can make you a man. It is on your way to a sacred place which houses the treasure guarded by a terrible snake, that is cunning and aggressive. Will you be able to undermine its vigilance? A single key will give you access. Can you open the door to the treasure?"

"Gypsy woman, can you direct me to this place? How shall I know this place?"

"Your steps will lead you there."

Bertillac, exhausted after a long day on the donkey's back and eager to revel in some poetry, took leave of the seer and went to his modest room.

The sun was just beginning her daily round when the young prince took to the road, perched on his rough-haired friend.

His winter journey had reached its seventh week when he saw a huge oak tree in the middle of the forest and in the hollow of the tree was a stone cave. By what supernatural power could a tree grow on the rock, completely embracing it and incorporating it in its own trunk? Eager to find out more, he dismounted and went up to this curiosity of nature. As he slid his hand over the surface of the thick, frosty bark, he thought he heard a cry. He put his ear to the entrance of the cave. Without a doubt, someone was calling for help from inside. He turned to his little brindled companion and told him he was going in to help the person. The frightened donkey brayed loudly and vehemently, pulling at his master's coat with his teeth to try and dissuade him from going in. The young prince told his friend to wait for him, flung his bag over his shoulder, and entered the cave.

From the first step, he was surrounded by dense darkness. He groped his way forward, feeling along the icy walls with his numb fingers, and trying to follow the direction of the cries he'd heard a few minutes before. He seemed to hear a faint echo from the depths of the cave. Deciding to press on despite the fear that gripped him, he entered a wet, slimy passage that was so narrow he had to crawl along it. He had hardly gone a hundred metres when

his legs were violently gripped and his body yanked upward.

To protect himself, he immediately covered his head with his arms. But to his amazement, his head didn't hit the roof of the passage. A fireplace opened out and he found himself dozens of metres in the air, dangling by his feet. A huge torch burned, set into the rock, and with horror he saw the huge, gaping jaws of an enormous snake dangling him from the tip of its long body, covered in sharp scales. Its forked tongue flicked at him. Miraculously, he managed to avoid it by twisting sideways.

Then he saw him, a bit further away, on a small ledge formed by the rock.

Thin and shrivelled, Donatien trembled against the wall to stop his body from teetering off the edge. Bertillac's eyes had barely made out the sight in the darkness, when he was thrust onto a stone ledge facing that of his brother.

"It seems that the brotherhood is now complete," hissed the snake, more menacing than ever. "I cannot thank you enough for coming to meet me. Spring is not far off. Devouring you will give me all the energy I need to shed my ancient skin."

It flicked his tongue across the walls to either side, narrowly missing both terrorized brothers, before coiling itself up and plunging into a deep sleep.

After a few moments, Bertillac ventured to whisper, "Donatien, is it you I saw?"

“Alas, yes, my dear brother. I have been a prisoner for over a month to this abominable monster.”

“How could this beast reduce you to such captivity, you the valiant fighter?” asked the younger boy.

Donatien recounted his story. “I was riding fast towards the point I had been shown on the map by a gypsy I met on the first day of my quest, when, after a week, I reached this secret place. I dismounted and walked up to the entrance of the cave when a huge eagle suddenly flew toward me. I had just enough time to avoid its claws. My stallion galloped away with my weapons and luggage. Exhausted, with the dagger as my only remaining possession, I decided to spend the night in the hollow of the tree. When I awoke, I was lying on the rocky ledge where you see me now, my feet hanging over the edge. And the snake was flicking its black forked tongue in my face.”

His voice faltered, indicating his anxiety as much as his exhaustion.

“The snake never came close enough for me to stab at it with the dagger hidden in my boot. And since then I’ve been surviving on the rare insects and lizards that venture this far and the water that runs down the rock. You see, my brother, when you lack food and water, that is all you think about.”

Sympathizing with his brother’s suffering, Bertillac asked, “Have you told this terrifying

beast about our quest? Does it know you are the son of she who once gave it custody of her treasures?”

“Of course!” said Donatien. “I talked about it as soon as I woke up. The traitor claims to know nothing about the story and says the treasure it is hiding in plain sight is its own and will remain so until its final moult.”

“If it is lying, the animal is breaking its commitment to our mother,” the younger prince reflected. “And by the same token, we are obliged to give up our own promise.”

“I fear we will have to resign ourselves to the promise of death,” said Donatien, giving way to deep discouragement.

“Not necessarily ... Here’s what we’re going to do.”

Taking advantage of the serpent’s nap, the brothers worked out their plan. Bertillac threw out one end of his mother’s silk scarf. Donatien seized it. Bertillac then sent a small bag along the improvised rope, with some bread and bacon he had left, to help his brother gather his strength. When his brother had eaten his fill, Bertillac sent him a pot with a sticky, spicy cream, with a sickening smell, telling him to smear it over his body. He did the same, holding back the urge to vomit. And they waited patiently for their custodian to wake up.

After a few hours, the snake came out of its lethargy. Annoyed by the unusual smell of decay in the cave, it shouted, “By what

misfortune has my dinner gone rotten? No doubt the older of the two is no longer good to eat, but the second one has just arrived and should suffice to appease my hunger.”

Sniffing heavily, it slid over to the ledge where Bertillac was perched. A grimace of disgust further disfigured its hideous face.

“Can you rot even faster than your brother?” it asked.

“I fear my poor physical condition will make a poor delicacy of me,” dared the fearless boy.

“I cannot bring myself to fast any longer! Come what may! I’ll swallow you both right away.”

“Wait!” Bertillac insisted. “I may have a solution.”

Suddenly interested, the serpent paused as it prepared to engulf the young prince.

“I’m listening,” it said

“Nature has given you your instinctive disgust to protect you from poisoning. My entrails, and those of my brother, are rotten enough to poison your digestive system. But here at the bottom of my bag I have some miraculous seeds which, when ingested, will protect you against such dangers. Swallow them and you will have all the time to swallow me, without fear. But beware! There are only enough seeds to immunize you against one of us. Save my brother and you can feed safely. Eat us both and you will die.”

“Who says you aren’t lying to me?” the snake asked suspiciously.

“Look: everything is written here in this medical text.” And the bold lad brandished his book of poems in proof of his good faith.

The illiterate snake merely flicked its tongue over the small leather-bound book, pretending to recognize the title. Its hunger got the better of its distrust and it slithered toward the young prince. Bertillac nimbly threw the seeds from the small hemp bag into the gaping jaws of the reptile, who then seized him and swallowed him up whole.

Horrified and frantic that the ruse had failed, Donatien tried to keep his composure.

After a few minutes the snake started coughing. Bertillac had set fire to the seeds in its stomach, and as they slowly burned, they gave off a thick greenish smoke, rising up the animal’s windpipe and escaping through its mouth. Suffocating, unable to breathe any oxygen into its single lung, the snake was choking. After endless minutes, the monster finally died, slumping loudly and heavily onto the floor of the cave.

Donatien immediately jumped off his ledge, landing a few metres below on the coiled, lifeless body of his jailer. With his dagger, he cut through its thick skin to free his brother trapped in its entrails. The brothers hugged each other in a long embrace.

They then each seized a torch and began exploring the cave to find the treasure left by their mother. After hours of fruitless searching

they were about to give up, when Donatien spied a small silver box wedged into a hole. He held his torch closer. The ivory lid seemed to be sealed. No lock was visible, so the box remained shut, despite all attempts to prise the lid open. The older brother was about to force the lid with his dagger, when Bertillac held back his hand: "Brother, do you think our mother would have wanted us to break it open like this? I think we should look after this box, keeping it intact until we find the trick to open it."

"Ah, there you go with your respect for nature, people and the objects they make," Donatien quipped affectionately. "But aren't you curious to see this treasure that's been so coveted and protected?"

"No," replied Bertillac simply, to the surprise of his brother.

Donatien buried the precious box in his pocket, resolving to be patient ... for now. And they began searching the cave for the exit. But neither of them could remember the way back and they got lost in the maze of rocks and crevices. After a few hours spent in vain trying to find the right direction, they sat down, exhausted, on a flat stone. How would they ever get out of these strange, winding passages?

Suddenly Bertillac remembered what their father had said: "I commend to each of you a ring. Take the time to discover the precious stone and understand the symbols inscribed around the ring. They will be your guides."

The precious stones had led them both to the cave. The rings with their thousand symbols would probably tell them how to find the exit. He asked Donatien to show him his ring. They looked at the engravings in the gold settings. But the meaning of the arabesques was abstruse and inaccessible. That's when Bertillac had an idea. He placed the rings side by side, turning them until they fitted together perfectly. And the symbols revealed their secret: a map emerged on each side of the rings. Feeling invigorated, the two young men rose quickly and followed the maze of underground passages according to the directions disclosed by the matching rings. Before long, they came out into the open.

Alas, they were a long way from their father's castle. How would they manage to walk so many miles in the melting snow, exhausted by their captivity? At once, they heard the familiar trot of the donkey, who came up to meet them. Bertillac hugged the neck of his companion. He set the weakened Donatien on its back and walked alongside.

The journey home was long and tiring. When one of the brothers had reached the limit of his strength, he rode on the donkey while the other dismounted for a few miles, in turn, till they saw the familiar drawbridge of their childhood.

It had been twelve moons since the king had accompanied them to the foot of the Great Gate to bid them a good journey, and he now longed to see them, to hear their tales of the

world as it had become and to discover the outcome of their quest.

With the decorum fitting to their rank, the three men embraced. The brothers told of the frozen forest roads, the inns, the fortune-tellers, the snake, its disloyalty, their imprisonment, their subterfuge, the ivory and silver casket and the tenacity of the brave little grey donkey.

“Father, I have failed,” confessed Bertillac.

The king looked at him, in grave surprise.

“The rocky crevice held a single precious box, which Donatien found. For my part, I return with hands as empty as when I left, and no treasure to give to my future wife. I have been unable to fulfil the promise you made to our mother. I have not respected my word. I beg your pardon.”

“There is no need to belittle yourself, my child. The quest is not over yet for either of you.”

The brothers waited in amazement for their father’s explanation.

“Outsmarting the hateful vigilance of the snake and finding the treasure were easy tasks. Your real challenge is to open the box!”

Easy?! Had their father listened to their story? What did he know about the real dangers they had faced, sheltered behind the walls of his castle?

Donatien exploded. “What seems easy to me is sending us both out in the middle of winter to find a treasure you have never had the courage to find yourself. And to make a promise to

our mother that did not commit you to anything!” He was fuming.

Without showing any signs of anger, the king said quietly, “I understand your frustration, my son. But your rage cannot justify your insults and disrespect.”

Then, pretending to ignore Donatien, who was trying to regain his calm and composure, he continued, “The key is hidden in your mother’s favourite place. I wish you luck, my children.”

The brothers found themselves once again in the little blue-and-gold room. What was the mother’s favourite place? It took them only a few minutes to rush up to the castle keep where their mother had set up her laboratory. For days, they inspected every corner, opened drawers and cabinets, leafed through books and manuscripts ... nothing.

They found nothing.

One night, when were deeply annoyed and despondent, they settled on the canopy bed of the queen in the hope that by lingering in her private chambers, they would find fresh inspiration. In this room, hung with small, faded tapestries and full of bottles with delicate fragrances, they began daydreaming, remembering the sweet, precious memories of the times when their mother had hugged them and let herself be kissed by them, forever telling them that there was nowhere on earth where she felt better than in the crook of their joined arms, so chubby and eager for love. The tone of her

voice and laughter resounded clearly in their memories.

The solution came in a flash. Why had they not thought of it before? Donatien took the small box from his pocket. The two brothers joined their hands together and tenderly cradled the precious box in a gesture that was so familiar to them.

And the lid opened.

Inside, there were two small notes, one with Donatien's name on it and the other with that of Bertillac, carefully folded and sealed. Their hearts raced and they had to take a deep breath before they could read what was written there.

The heavy tears of children rolled down their cheeks, slightly wetting the words so harmoniously written on the paper.

When their father entered the royal chamber, Donatien and Bertillac knelt before him, one hand on their heart and the other on their thigh, as they read out together:

"I Donatien, I Bertillac, pledge here before my king and father to honour the memory of my ancestors as they have given me life, to be true to who I am, to rejoice in the fortunes of those around me, to respect the living and at all times to do the best that it is possible for a man, as I now am, to do."

In the courtyard, a little brindled donkey with a thick, tousled mane, chewed on a bunch of fresh herbs.

THE VILLAGE ON TOP OF THE CLIFF

At the very tip of the end of the world, where the waves crash against the rocks, is a land swept by winds and doused with ocean spray. The fishermen's faces, necks and arms are powdered with salt, digging lasting cracks in their hands as they put out their boats every day, casting their nets in the hope of catching fish to sell at the market town a few miles away.

On the top of the cliff overlooking the tumultuous ocean stands the village of Kornouac. The narrow streets once flowed with life, like the blood that runs through the body of a vigorous, carefree adolescent. The children once drew crazy patterns with the tips of their clogs in the wet grass meadows that spread out behind the small stone chapel, beyond the crosses that mark the final resting place of the dead. The sound of bagpipes

and viols, mixed with bursts of thunder in November, once accompanied the evenings and greeted visitors in search of food and shelter for the night. Fires burned in the vast fireplaces, warming hearts and bodies dampened by the thick fog that curled around the standing stones, between anthracite skies and the earth whipped by ocean winds. At harvest, the granaries were full, year in, year out, and the fishing catch in fine weather was enough for everyone to survive on.

Those harsh but happy times are now gone ...

In the forest outside Kornouac lived a woman called Guermande, whose red hair was plaited into two long braids. Her cabin was suspended in an ancient oak tree with a solid trunk and majestic branches. She was feared in the village, and the children were strictly forbidden to play near her home. Some said she was mad; others called her a witch, saying she had the power to bewitch the soul; but many came to her in secret when the doctor's potions proved powerless to treat the newborn or the old. She was forbidden access to the streets of the village and she never ventured further than the cemetery, where, by the full moon, old women reported having seen her dancing on the graves to the sound of a tambourine.

That year, the heavy summer rain had drowned the grain in the fields and the roads became a quagmire. Autumn was no kinder, forcing the fishermen to renounce their fishing

trips; and when winter came, the village shivered under a thick layer of snow. Attics, cellars and larders emptied. Hungry rats abandoned the hiding places where they usually multiplied. It was not uncommon to fall asleep with hunger gripping your stomach, but for the first time in years, people feared for the lives of their offspring and their own.

There was a feverish air in the chapel when everyone gathered on Sunday to celebrate the New Year. The parishioners expected much from the priest's sermon, praised as he was for his great wisdom and clear-sightedness. Psalms and pious songs accompanied requests to the Divine for the sea to calm and the sailors to finally be able to take out their boats.

Suddenly, Guermande rushed into the chapel. Her clothes were drenched from the melted snow that had fallen on her as she fled from the storm – something that never usually bothered her. When she entered the house of God, everyone turned to her and fell silent. Although born in the village she never attended the services, so there was something unusual and disturbing about her presence. She ran up to the altar, distraught, with a frightening rattle in her chest. She lay down on the steps, in wild, desperate prostration.

Her body convulsed, emitting hoarse sounds, seemingly from Beyond, as she lay face to the ground. No one understood the meaning of the strange words she spewed out.

The men and women, dressed in their Sunday clothes, moved tightly together as a protective reflex, sensing the danger. The church rustled with their frightened whispers. The priest, at first surprised, finally regained his senses and raised his hands, palms facing the congregation, accompanying his gesture with words to reassure his flock and call for calm.

He approached Guermande, now silent and motionless. The moment he laid his hand on her shoulder, she suddenly sprang up. The crowd let out a cry of amazement. She turned toward the congregation who then saw her blood red hands and rolling eyes. Women hid their children's heads under their coats. Guermande walked down the aisle, her haggard eyes seeming to search for someone. When she got to the ninth row, she stopped in front of a young teenager who was staring at her.

While only moments before, heavy snowflakes beat against the windows and the wind howled, now there was nothing but a chilling silence. Everyone held their breath. Guermande stretched her hand towards the reddened face of the young boy, who dropped his twin sister's arm, and drew his ear to her mouth. Guermande whispered a few words. The boy collapsed on the ground, his body rigid. She drew a small crimson circle on his forehead. The child's mother rushed to try to revive him. His father approached Guermande, threatening her with his fist:

"What have you done to my son, witch?" he hurled in rage.

"Your son is not dead," replied Guermande in a trance. "He will wake up when our village finally awakens."

The people looked at each other dumbfounded. What was she talking about? Surely, this wild redheaded woman was raving mad to make such remarks!

The priest came up to Guermande and ventured warily,

"Tell us, daughter of the woods, what is this about?"

"Your fields are flooded, the sea is raging, famine will soon take away your children and your parents," she predicted. "Only the child with the generous and loving heart will save you. But will you be able to save him?"

No one understood the meaning of her words. What was the significance of this esoteric prediction? Save who, how, from what?

Guermande then drew a second, imaginary circle in the air around the teenager who had been stretched out on a bench, and gave him a last look. She wrapped herself in her sodden coat and left the church as quickly as she had entered. Outside, the snowstorm was raging again. Her silhouette disappeared into the white mist.

The heavy wooden door closed on the lost and frightened believers.

A huge hubbub arose and it took several minutes for the priest to restore a semblance of

order and get the villagers' attention. All eyes were turned to the lifeless body of the young man, sympathizing with the pain of his helpless parents. Under his shirt, you could make out the beating of his heart and his weak breathing. He remained unconscious, despite his mother's caresses. Beside him stood his sister, Ganaëlle. The tears swelled in her blue eyes, and rolled down her flushed cheeks, as she wiped them away with the back of her sleeve.

The priest went up to the altar and spoke to his congregation:

"Dear friends, this test God has sent us, we will overcome, just as we have always overcome the previous ones," he said, trying to reassure them.

"But what kind of test are you talking about?" asked the father of the twins, whose anger now gave way to fear. "We do not know what evil has overcome Gauvain."

"And what awakening was the savage speaking of?" asked a furious villager, giving voice to the bewildered anxiety of the parishioners. "How do we know it's not another of her ramblings? Her witch's ways, her spells, her ungodly practices in our forest are the cause of our misfortune! God is punishing us for tolerating her evil presence for too long. That's why we're dying of hunger!"

Several men and women agreed. The witch had to be chased away. Then God would have mercy, everything would return to order and the bread and fish would be back on the tables.

"And my brother?" asked the girl with hair so blonde it seemed white, like summer, caught in the sunlight.

"What about your brother?" said a man, annoyed and vindictive.

"What will happen to Gauvain if you banish Guermante? Will he ever wake up from the sleep that her words have plunged him into?" she asked, with growing anxiety.

"What's urgent is to get out to sea so we can each feed our families. And ... as for your brother. I ... I fear more for the lives of my own children," added the man, not lowering his gaze, but still looking away.

An old woman put her hand on the girl's arm: "Sometimes, you have to sacrifice one to save many."

"How dare you?!" shouted the girl. Her despair grew even greater when she saw her dumbfounded parents, who seemed resigned to submitting to supernatural forces and the law of the village.

She desperately looked around for support from the congregation. No one dared to come forward. The last few years had been challenging and miserable and if the young man had to be condemned in order to bring back good fortune, many were already resolved to do so.

After a while, the priest suggested to his congregation that a procession be held the following Sunday, followed by a prayer vigil. Six men were appointed. They would take the

cross out of the chapel and walk through the streets of the village at nightfall, followed by the residents. Psalms and incantations would be recited, incense would be burned, appealing for the grace of God. Putting its trust in divine mercy and the priest's decision, the crowd dispersed and everyone returned to their homes.

Only Ganaëlle remained, kneeling before a small wooden statue depicting a black Virgin holding two young children in her imperial lap, each with the same features. She clasped her hands in prayer, imploring the Holy Virgin to bring her brother Gawain back to consciousness. She prayed for many long hours.

It was dark and there was snow on the ground when she left the calm of the small chapel of Kornouac.

In the week that followed, there was talk everywhere. In the house of the twins' family, a vigil was kept over the sleeping body of Gawain. Nobody had seen Guermande.

On Sunday, the procession was held. At the hour of Vespers, the faithful gathered on the narrow square in front of the chapel. Before long, the six porters appeared, carrying on their shoulders a sort of wooden stretcher on which was placed the cross surrounded by small flickering candles. The long march began through the wind and cold. The sound of soft music filled the frozen air. Everyone, head down, communed with their own thoughts. When the procession was over, they returned

to the chapel, putting their faith in the mercy of Heaven.

As they prepared to return home, the villagers saw a huge fire in the distance. A thunderclap rent the night. A shudder ran through the crowd still bathed in the atmosphere of the evening. Ganaëlle, quickly joined by the priest, headed the crowd toward the fire. In the middle of a frozen, immaculately white clearing a huge elm was blazing. The flames seemed to lick the sky. Nearby, the temperature was unbearable. Large earthen bowls, full of water and strange herbs, had been placed at the four cardinal points. Barefoot in the snow, Guermande danced around the burning tree, occasionally spraying her face and arms with the content of the clay vessels. Out of nowhere came the sound of a drum marking out the rhythm. The people of Kornouac watched, stunned by the spectacle. The old women were quick to recognize this barbaric trance as proof of the savage's nocturnal trips to the cemetery. Shortly after they arrived, Guermande ended her wild dance.

Turning to the crowd, she intoned: "Generous is the she-wolf that receives the child of man to save him from being devoured. Blessed are the men whose arms support each other. Fortunate are the hands that offer and share. How have you been unable to join your efforts and join forces, people of Kornouac? How have you been unable to welcome into your hearts the child with glowing hair?"

“Keep your insults and reproaches to yourself!” spat out one of the women. “And spare us the sad spectacle of your faltering mind!”

“Calm down, I pray you,” implored a man quietly and firmly, sheltered from view by the shadow of the night.

The villagers turned around, trying to make out the man’s face in the darkness. His hoarse voice seemed very familiar. His grating words seemed to come from the old tree against which he leaned, hidden from the firelight. He stepped into the light. A gasp went up from the crowd. The elderly crossed themselves. The men raised their muscled arms to defend the quaking women. The incredulous children tried to understand, while staring at the huge man with the fiery hair and weathered face in front of them.

The priest approached him, “So you’re back with us, Diciac. Should we rejoice or worry about your presence?”

“Rest assured, father. I’m just passing through the lands of Kornouac. The storm forced me to find shelter and my steps led me here. Had I not seen the elm on fire, I would probably have passed by without even seeing the village.”

“Who are you?” Ganaëlle asked.

Before he could answer, Guermande approached, “He is the one who brings misfortune. He is the one who set fire to my parents’ house and left them to perish, without coming to their aid.”

“You are mistaken, child. I’m not who you think I am.”

Nobody dared say a word. Then, from the back of the field came the weak, reedy voice of an old man, “Diciac speaks the truth, Guermande. He’s not the one who set your parents’ house on fire.”

“You’re lying!” She shouted at the old man, her voice drenched in tears. “The proof is that he fled the village soon after the fire.”

Beneath the trees, Diciac stood silent.

The old man continued, putting his warm, trembling hand on Guermande’s shoulder, “I know the truth. Do you want to know it?”

The crowd protested. The village had no use for these forgotten quarrels! The past belonged to the past. Why drag up old stories? What mattered now was for their good fortune to return.

“Luck will never moor at the foot of our cliffs,” predicted the old man, until Kornouac has regained its dignity.

And turning to Guermande, he again asked, “Do you want to know the truth?”

She nodded.

The crowd crept closer to the old man, to listen to his story: “There was a time when our village lived a quiet life. The men worked together to build the boats. They spent long days out at sea and shared the fishing catch between them. In summer, they cultivated the fields and harvested them together. The women watched over

their neighbours' children at play just as their own. Our pagan rites coexisted with Christian ceremonies. We found the words to overcome the conflicts. Everyone had enough to eat."

He paused for breath and looked around at his audience. Some were annoyed and embarrassed. He stared into their eyes and saw them lower their faces to the ground. He continued: "One day, a rich merchant docked in Kornouac. As is the tradition, food and shelter were offered. But in the evening, the merchant chided the simplicity of our homes and the lack of ambition of our parents. He told of the fabrics and jewels of the city, the gilded mirrors and silver chalices. He praised the merits of cities where everyone worked toward their own glory, saying that the whole kingdom had adopted these customs and that the fortunes of all were growing steadily. The wealth was such that women did not bend their backs in the fields and the men drove about on carts."

In the crowd, you could hear some coughing and clearing their throat.

"When he had left, the village held counsel. Many dreams had been kindled. One man tried to restrain them from these pipe dreams but nobody listened to Diciac. He was booed. The next day, each father was building his own boat. Soon, hedges separated the meadows. Within weeks, the village was unrecognizable. The first fishing season was good, the first harvest was generous, reinforcing people's sense of having made the right choice. So it was

again the following year and the next. But then heavy summer rain drowned the grain in the fields and turned the roads into a quagmire. Autumn was no kinder, forcing the fishermen to renounce their fishing trips; and when winter came, the village shivered under a thick layer of snow ... like this year."

A murmur ran through the assembly. Guermande urged him to continue. Could it be that Diciac was not who she thought he was?

"It became clear that, alone and isolated, no one would come out of this adversity. But, draped in their pride and selfishness, the people preferred to persist. Diciac came to talk to them, begging them to listen to their hearts and reason rather than their pride. His words were in vain. That night, a terrible tragedy occurred. The house where Diciac lived with his family, a little higher up the cliff, caught fire. He called for help again and again. His shouts were lost in the night. When the first men finally arrived to lend a hand, his wife and son were dead. Only the twin daughter, aged just five, had survived."

Guermande flinched. The old man felt the presence of Diciac by his side before even seeing him.

"In the morning I entrusted you, gentle Guermande, to the forest healer. She promised me she would take care of you. Rage, bitterness, and the poison of violence flowed through

my veins. I had to go far away, not to yield to the treacherous calls for revenge. In parting, I cursed the village,” Diciac confessed with remorse.

Turning to the men and women of the village, he said, “I resented you all for giving up our fraternal, generous way of life, for taking so long to come and help me, to have let them die.” His voice choked.

He took Guermande’s hand in his, “Daughter, I beg your forgiveness.”

Hesitantly, the girl put her hand on her father’s.

“And my son?” roared a man. “It’s your curse and your daughter’s witchcraft that have left him floating between life and death!”

Diciac held her hand more tightly. Guermande spoke: “Our destiny is one. Our souls are connected. Only the child with the pure and loving heart will save you. But will you be able to save him?”

She ran off and could not be found for the following weeks.

The next day, the men took counsel. They invited Diciac to talk to them about life beyond the cliff-top meadows. He told of the kingdoms and their fortresses, territorial battles, power games, vanity, greed, fear ... as always. But he also spoke about sharing, exchange, support and trust. He emphasised how this was intertwined and complex, and how there is hesitation in the face of choice. The men pondered his words.

One of the fishermen stood up and held out his paddle to the man sitting next to him: “My boat is agile but I cannot fish, row and steer the boat alone. If you come out to sea with me, I’ll help you harvest your hay this summer.”

Soon all agreed to build a bigger boat than the little family boats; one they could put out to sea even in heavy squalls. They promised to farm the fields together, as in the past. They took the time to come to an agreement. In the evening, everyone went home, their stomachs still aching from hunger, but with lighter hearts and a spirit of hope.

From January to March the village resounded with the sounds of hammers and saws. There was as much laughter as swearing. From the top of the cliff rose a cloud of sawdust and sweat, which every day revealed more of the imposing silhouette of the Kornouac boat. On the first day of April, the launch took place amid applause.

But Gawain still lay sleeping.

One morning, as the summer light awakened the flowers and butterflies, Ganaëlle found Guermande in the meadows on the edge of the forest. Kneeling in the fragrant grass, her flaming hair flowing over her shoulders and back, she gathered plants, filling the apron she wore tied around her waist. Without even looking up, and carrying on with her task, she said, “Words and deeds are like plants. There are some that heal and others that kill. Did you know that?”

“How do you recognize which are which, woman of science,” asked Ganaëlle candidly, hiding her joy at having finally found her.

“Woman of science?”

“Your knowledge appears to be great. You understand the power of herbs, roots and flowers, you master the preparation of ointments and potions that heal. And you can fathom the human heart and read the depths of their soul.”

“You endow me with many powers, young lady.”

“I saw you at work. I know that through your care, many have been healed. I know that your words have plunged my brother into a deep sleep. I also know that they will bring him out of it.”

“Do you really believe that I hold the key of dreams and wakefulness?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And why should I undo what has been commanded by the forces of nature?”

“Because our village is now ready.”

“I do not decide anything, you ought to know that.”

“But you converse with nature. She will listen to you if you plead in our favour.”

“Why should I be nice to you, you who have so often mocked me, denigrated me, dismissed, accused and ... wounded me?”

“Because it would help your soul to grow. By forgiving, you will show us the path of forgiveness. By loving us, you will help us to love, to love each other.”

“Love?”

“Yes, love.”

“It seems that you have already understood a great deal.”

She finally looked up, her grey eyes looked deep into the blue eyes of the girl.

“This is what you’re going to do ...”

While the men and women were finishing the harvest work, Ganaëlle came to them:

“Inhabitants of Kornouac, together you have been able to build a boat and plough the fields. The tables are laden again and the children run through our streets. But the state of my brother Gawain has still not improved.”

“It is indeed sad, ventured a woman, standing up. I sympathize with your family’s pain.”

“There is a way to wake him up, just as you have managed to rouse our village from its long years of scarcity ... of fellowship even more than food.”

Everyone listened as she spoke.

“Here is a bowl of water like those Guermante used on the night of the elm fire.”

“That witch is back, then?” cursed a man armed with a scythe.

Ganaëlle chose not to reply. She simply said, “Here is a basket of medicinal plants: lavender, marigold, thyme, chamomile, mint, wormwood, lemon verbena, lemon balm, mugwort ... Choose the one that attracts you most. Hold it for a moment and fill it with the finest intention you can think of.”

After a moment of hesitation, a man approached, “Ganaëlle, I don’t know whether your concoction will be beneficial to your twin. But, for the sake of you and your family, I’ll choose one of your wild herbs. He picked up a sprig of lavender and said aloud: ‘solidarity.’”

The others followed suit and soon the bowl was filled with a mixture of herbs with their thousand scents and virtuous messages.

“Thank you all!” cried Ganaëlle, already running towards the hut perched up in the oak tree.

Guermante then sprinkled a fine, slightly purplish powder onto the herbs and boiled the mixture before pouring it into a flask.

Ganaëlle carefully carried the little flask that burned her fingers slightly, taking it to her brother’s bedside. She gently lifted his head and poured a few drops into his mouth. She watched him impatiently. She lay her head on the pillow. Nothing. No movement. She waited a long time, in growing desperation. Her parents tried unsuccessfully to calm her grief. Their mingled tears finally overcame their hopes and they fell asleep.

In the morning, Gawain’s bed was empty. Panic-stricken, all three called out to him, in vain. Ganaëlle ran to Guermante’s home. And there, sitting on a branch of the oak, was Gauvain, radiant, his near-white hair blowing in the wind, eating an apple, under the tender, amused gaze of his hostess.

“Gawain!” cried Ganaëlle. “He’s awake! Gauvain has regained consciousness! The potion healed him! He’s healed! He’s alive!”

He dropped down to her side and hugged her warmly. The villagers came running, and full of their own joy, surrounded the two intertwined twins.

“Any adventure, however singular, involves our entire community,” Guermante ventured to remind them, smiling.

Leaning against a tree, Diciac nodded in approval. At his feet lay the bundle of his belongings.

THE LAND OF ENBAS

There was once a time that was so dull and cold that the neurons in people's brains preferred to erase it from their memory. The sun raced across the heavens. The solar disk was constantly covered in a thick veil, its limited spectrum bathing the world in a pale light. Many of the wavelengths were excluded, leaving only a reduced range of pallid colours, giving everything a rather greyish tinge. The amazing thing is that the people of those days were completely unaware of the greyness.

In those remote and forgotten times, the country of Enbas prospered. Although each year was just like the last in every way, the start of the cold season was the occasion for the Emperor to announce to his people the number of cubisons the nation had grown by over the past year. This announcement was followed

by a strict, orderly ceremony, in which people demonstrated to each other their scrupulous respect for their allotted places in the parade, which lasted all day and all night. Wearing the official uniform of their caste, the Enbasians marched, crossing and re-crossing each other in a meticulous choreography, whose perfect execution could be viewed on large, flat, rectangular screens. A timer counted down the minutes and seconds. When “0:00” was displayed, the number of new cubisons appeared and everyone was allowed to shake hands with their two nearest neighbours to mark their pride and satisfaction, with no further demonstrations of excitement.

Cubisons were the cubic metal cells, three metres on each side, attributed to each inhabitant on the day of his birth and given to him as his home when he came of age. By counting the cubisons they counted the number of births. Counting cubisons was considered more efficient, more scientific and therefore much less random than counting living, that is, moving beings, thus avoiding regrettable statistical errors.

The workday began at 8:00 a.m. and ended at 8:00 p.m.. An intricate network of silent aerial trams provided transport for everyone to and from their Labour Site. Each inhabitant had memorized the most direct route assigned for each of their authorized movements and respected them scrupulously, thus avoiding

any congestion in the endless corridors, any delay or confusion of any kind.

After the parade, everyone went home to enjoy a day of rest and sweet food, to mark the exceptional, festive nature of the occasion.

Disputes and conflicts were non-existent, the grounds for them having been carefully and gradually removed.

This civilization of intense and unprecedented optimization was the pride of the Enbasians, who devoted their efforts and intelligence to its daily perfection.

But at the start of the cold season in the year ZSC131 a most unforeseen and unusual event occurred.

The ceremony had been going for several minutes when, in the 101st row, in the 101st column in the 101st place, an Enbasian from the Omega caste stumbled, dragging down the ten Enbasians who marched before him.

The military music, the only score allowed throughout the kingdom, stopped abruptly, suspending the entire parade in an awkward stillness. Nobody knew what to do. Should we stop? Should we continue? Was it proper to help the fallen Enbasians to get up? As there was no precedent for such a mishap, there was no automatic solution. The tension rapidly grew in the ranks. The giant screens showed close-ups of the Enbasians on the ground, which only added to the considerable discomfort. Somehow, the ten Enbasians got up, stiffly flicked the

imaginary dust off their uniforms and, with as much dignity as they could muster, turned their heads to the podium from which the Emperor gazed impassively at the sad spectacle unfolding before his eyes.

The timer stopped the countdown. Petrified into a compact mass, the parade held its breath, waiting by an instinctive common accord for instructions from their Leader. The man, of medium height, was seriously overweight, barely concealed by his regalia. Permanently perched on a small box which two of his guards had the distinct honour of carrying in turn, he had an amazingly powerful voice, which was somewhat surprising, given his size. The Emperor raised a chubby finger, pressed the little button on the microphone in front of him and spoke to his people: "My dear subjects, this incident, as unprecedented as it is regrettable, cannot remain without consequence. Will the Omega Enbasian in the 101st row, of the 101st column in the 101st position stand up and face His Majesty?"

Nobody dared blink, as the imperious, amplified voice of the Emperor summoned everyone to complete submission.

Further away on the vast granite esplanade, the man accosted by the Emperor and responsible for what everyone already thought of as an utter outrage, finally rose and, incredibly, left his row, ascending towards the imperial platform to speak directly to his Sovereign.

The Enbasians were stunned! The audacity! The lack of discipline! The disrespect! They trembled inside at the mere thought of the inevitable reprisals that would follow this revolutionary act.

In no way intimidated by the charged atmosphere, Omega 101, born in the year ZSC101, addressed His Majesty Enbasian XV, fifteenth in the line of the Enbaside dynasty that had reigned supreme for nearly ten centuries over the Enbas nation, which it had founded.

"Your Majesty, please forgive my impertinence. I must tell you: my fall actually had nothing to do with chance."

A frightened shiver trickled down the spines of everyone in the parade. Not only did this 101 Omega dare to step out of line, and speak to the Emperor, which given his caste origin was a crime in itself, he even insinuated having deliberately caused this terrible incident! The man was obviously crazy and would soon be sent to the asylum-hive in the hinterland, where he would be administered the appropriate sedative to combat his dementia.

Immediately, two guards seized him by the arms and lifted him up to carry him out of sight. Omega 101 did not struggle, but chose to continue, "Is Your Majesty not curious about the reason for my fall?"

The Enbasians were dumbfounded. What an incomparable insult! Their astonishment now rivalled what had become a dull sense of dread,

particularly in the ranks of the inhabitants of the Omega caste who now feared for their lives. One of their kind had not only violated the cast-iron laws, but, even worse, had done it again, for all to see. Shame and stigma instantly enveloped his peers. As fear seeped into the shirts of their uniforms, they waited, stiffly, for the sentence.

One of the guards was already gagging the insolent man's mouth with his gloved hand, when, to general amazement, and breaking an ancient tradition, the Emperor replied, "Your impudence is equal only your recklessness, Omega 101. Did you realize the significance of your acts?"

The eyes of the guards darted from left to right. Should they let the villain speak? They themselves risked imprisonment if they allowed him to talk, even briefly, with Enbasidian XV ... Under their shiny helmets, their thoughts ran wild.

"Your Majesty, it is because I am fully aware of it that I address you in this way, continued Omega 101, who had managed to prise his face from the hand of the guard on his left."

"Put him down!" ordered the sovereign.

Then, addressing the criminal, he said, "What is the reason for which you're prepared to risk your life?"

Omega 101's smile flashed on the screens. A gasp escaped from the crowd. A smile! Everyone had heard about them, had even seen

pictures of them in an old history book, but nobody had ever seen a real smile! And where had Omega 101 learned to smile? Who taught him that expression that came so naturally?

"Dancing!" he exclaimed, smiling even more radiantly as he said it.

A stunned groan rippled through the countless rows from north to south and from east to west. The intrepid man had dared to utter a forbidden word! Despite their superhuman efforts to immediately erase from their memory the seven letters that made up a word that was as prohibited as the action it described, the Enbasians could no longer think of anything else. A thick fog obscured all the parts of their brains, creating multiple synaptic short circuits, preventing any thought and any management of the growing anxiety invading every member and every organ of their bodies.

"Dancing?" asked the Emperor in a tone so chilling that his words seemed to be sliced through with a wire; the air was stifling.

"Yes, dancing, Your Majesty."

With clenched teeth and barely parted lips, Enbasidian XV repeated the taboo word, as if he, in turn, was deeply confused. But the moment was very brief, if indeed it ever happened.

"Guards! Take Omega 101 away from here! Let him be treated quickly, before his delusion contaminates Our good and loyal subjects."

At that moment, something staggering happened: 101 Omega laughed. Interspersed with hilarious bursts of laughter he managed to utter

a few words, saying loud and clear, "Dancing, a delusion?" And he burst out laughing again.

The guards were already taking removing him from the parade when the Emperor changed his mind and stopped them.

"Omega 101. Where did you learn to dance?" he threw out suspiciously.

"Nobody taught me to dance, O Eminence. I learned by myself ... after seeing other people dancing."

"And who are these dancers that you claim to have seen?"

In the crowd, the tension was palpable.

"I saw them from afar," confessed the man who was already secretly thought of as Omega the Lost, "through a tiny hole in the border wall of our revered territory, to the west, where the sun suddenly goes down at 6:00 p.m."

"So you ventured into that forbidden place?" hissed the Emperor. "Your offences are piling up Omega 101. Do I need to remind you that the penalty for those who venture to the limits of our great country, is death?"

"Your Majesty, my wandering into the western border area was due to an incomprehensible computer error in my route. While I was trying to find my way back, I was amazed to find that the horizon suddenly stopped. Unable to explain this phenomenon by our physical laws, I decided to approach."

Omega 101 paused for a few seconds, as if lost in thought. Soon, he continued, "I felt my way

forward with my hand. And I couldn't believe it! I felt something made of plastic, invisible yet opaque, which absorbed all thought, including that of my own image. Thoughts were racing through my head. I was trying to make sense of it all. That's when I noticed a small hole suspended in the air ..."

The crowd tensed, torn between wanting to listen to Omega 101's story and fear of the punishment that was bound to strike at any moment. Against all odds, Enbasidian XV invited the rebel to continue. He seemed mesmerized. In unison, those who had been marching in the parade just minutes earlier, now stood frozen, incredulous at this scene that was becoming increasingly surreal.

"By what miracle could a hole puncture the vacuum? The very question showed how illogical and absurd the situation was. I went up carefully and looked through the tiny hole."

The Enbasians held their breath.

"My forehead rubbed against matter that my eyes couldn't see. I stepped back, scared. But my curiosity got the better of me and I went back to look through the hole, as carefully as I could. I was amazed at what I saw ..."

Omega 101 stopped to make sure the Emperor would let him continue. Enbasidian XV was unmoved, his face more ashen than ever, showing neither approval nor rejection. A strange, unfamiliar expression transformed his gaze, which was both severe and lost. The

giant screens showed the XXL version of this metamorphosis. Omega 101 chose to continue, despite his creeping fear.

“Beyond the tiny hole and what I considered, without proof, as the border fabric of our beloved country Enbas, lay a world of colours, lights, music, laughter and dance.”

He paused to enjoy the pleasure that rippled through him in at this happy memory. “Please understand, Your Majesty: I was stunned by the sight,” he continued, feverishly. “None of my teachers had ever mentioned the presence of another dynasty. Suddenly, behind a veil, which I never knew existed, I saw a rural area populated by people who are certainly much less developed than we are, with no computers or even electricity, but so alive! Their songs, their embraces, their joy, the incredible disorder in the way they intermingle, the wooden tables laden with food, cups, fruit, and tantalizing unknown dishes ... and the dancing! I couldn’t take my eyes off that friendly, joyful spectacle ... and I stood there watching in amazement.”

He paused quickly, then continued, “Life flowed through me, an unknown feeling of energy, a powerful impulse that set me tapping my feet to the rhythm. I observed the natives on the other side of the veil for hours. And when I finally managed to tear myself away from this rapture, it was pitch dark. Back home, I tried to copy the movements, remember the music and hum the lyrics. And every

day since then, I’ve practised dancing. It’s such a feeling! It’s like ...”

The Enbasians hung on Omega 101’s words, as he broke off the story to savour his happiness. Their imaginations were filled with the evocative images described by their fellow citizen. While they dared not move, they couldn’t deny the curiosity that invaded them; they too wanted to catch a little glimpse of this world that was so different, so warm and appealing.

“Go back to your place, Omega 101, and do not leave it again!” the Emperor announced solemnly, not commenting on the words of his unruly subject.

“Am I a prisoner?” ventured Omega 101.

“Not in the least,” replied Enbasidien XV ironically. “As long as you do not attempt to escape.”

Omega 101 saw the syringe in the hand of one of the guards. He looked down. He understood.

“My dear subjects. Today’s regrettable incident testifies to the fact that we need to work even harder to finally eradicate any residual deviation from our great nation. Omega 101 will be placed in solitary confinement for the duration of his treatment. We order you return to your cubisons in the most complete silence. Work will exceptionally resume tomorrow. Anyone who evokes in any way the events of our annual parade will be immediately sentenced to death. Disperse!”

Within minutes, the huge square was deserted, pristine, without the slightest trace of

having been the scene of Enbas's largest gathering, or of the stain that had marred it.

In the weeks and months that followed, the Enbasians strove to erase their memory of the parade. They finally succeeded and Omega 101's existence became utterly alien to them.

Meanwhile, in the asylum-hive, the latter was forced to follow a strict programme of intensive chemical treatment to purge his whole being of its deviant tendencies and dangerous recollections. He was about to receive the final injection, when the male nurse in charge of his daily treatment questioned him, as discreetly as possible. "Tell me Omega 101, does this world really exist? Is it true that people feast and dance there?"

From the depths of the torpor he had been kept in for months by high doses of substances, Omega 101 smiled.

The nurse insisted. "Omega 101, do you remember what you claim to have seen?"

"Dancing ...," murmured Omega 101, starting to hum an unfamiliar tune, which was totally prohibited.

"Tell me, please," tempted the nurse.

And despite himself, the patient told him about the party, the different generations sitting side by side, bodies moving in rhythm, instruments, shared meals with raised glasses, people calling back and forth, drowned out by the laughter, the women's dresses, their curves, and much more.

"Women," repeated the nurse, moved and pensive.

In the land of Enbas, the women lived apart, in a hive in a secret location, where they were artificially inseminated. They raised their children until the age of 18 months. The young male Enbasians then went to their first learning centre, supervised by men. For the rest of their lives, they never met women again.

"Yes, women, young girls who dance and twirl freely in the arms of men and young boys. They laugh together in this natural mixing of gender, age, origin." Omega 101's words became clearer.

"Would you be willing to take me tonight to the western border of the country?" ventured the nurse.

Suddenly Omega 101 became suspicious. What if the asylum's administration was trying to trick him to test whether the treatment was working? What if all this was just a ploy to condemn him forever and push him toward the pit of oblivion where unredeemable prisoners were sent to die?

The man in the white coat understood the hesitation on the part of the patient he had been in contact with for many months.

"Omega 101, I understand your fear. Like you, I am from the Omega caste. All I can offer as proof of my sincerity is this."

He took from his pocket a tiny photograph of a young woman, smiling sweetly. On the back,

written in tiny, graceful letters, was the word: "Mum."

Omega 101 looked up, meeting the gaze of his medical supervisor. He was moved by what he saw: joy, distress and anger lightly moistened his eyelids, eyelashes and the dark circles under his eyes. He nodded his consent.

At nightfall, the two men left the ground of the asylum-hive, passing through a secret tunnel and onto the prohibited road leading to the place where the border veil was slightly pierced. With some emotion the nurse peered through the hole. His whole body shook and he soon began to dance a few steps, as if suddenly moved by an irresistible inner force. Omega 101 smiled at the sight of his guardian and now friend, as he wriggled. After a few moments, the nurse turned to him, his face beaming with a smile.

"So what you said is true, Omega 101. What a wonderful world bubbles at our borders! How did our nation come to give up such pleasures? Over there it's full of life and sharing, while here, it's all order and limits. And it's still light there, whereas here the sun has been down for almost two hours."

A dubious expression came over his face, as he said, "Could it be that what we see is all lies and artifice, a kind of show, and this land just a few metres away from Enbas is just a sham?"

"Lets go and see!" suggested Omega 101 rashly.

The nurse hesitated before realizing that the acts they'd already committed since the morning were

punishable by the pit of oblivion. He nodded and they soon set about carefully widening the hole in the veil to clear a pathway to the land of Enhaut.

They timidly approached a banquet table set in the middle of a meadow of flowers. A girl with long, light brown hair braided with ivory-coloured ribbons called out to them, "Come over here. Are you friends of my uncle? Have you come to celebrate his wedding with us?"

"Yes," stammered Omega 101, desperately trying to remember what the word wedding meant and troubled by girl's beauty in a way that was unlike anything he had experienced before.

The two men approached. They were soon served wine, invited to share the bread and dragged into a frenzied country dance.

The lanterns had been burning for a long time when they took leave of their hosts and reluctantly returned to the chill of the sterilized hospital rooms. But in their drunken heads a plan was already forming.

The next day, a group of chief physicians questioned Omega 101 with the rigour of a lie detector. They read the nurse's detailed report, counted the doses administered, and were satisfied at the apathy of the young culprit, concluding that his recovery was complete.

However, according to the procedure, throughout his probationary period, Omega 101 was to be placed under house arrest in an annex to the asylum-hive and allowed to sit in the yard for a few minutes every evening.

On the first evening, the nurse joined him. Together they entered the secret tunnel and emerged into the darkness of the night in an abandoned field, away from the residential hive. After a few moments, they were joined by other young people from their own caste and from neighbouring castes. Together they travelled, camouflaged, along the path leading to the entrance of the world of Enhaut.

The wedding tables had been put away, but some musicians were gently plucking at their instruments. Couples danced lovingly, fruit and cakes passed from hand to hand and women cradled sleeping infants in their arms to the sound of guitars and mandolins. The Enbasians, looked on silently, dumbfounded.

When she saw Omega 101, the girl with brown hair invited him and his friends to join the villagers. Immediately, lively music started up and accompanied them throughout the night. Just before dawn, the Enbasians, sated by the notes and rhythms, returned to their cubisons.

Each night, more and more people came to join the new experience of friendship, dance and laughter. How did their nocturnal escapades remain unnoticed? This was a complete mystery. But in a few weeks, thousands of young Enbasians had been sparked by the pleasure of conviviality.

So, when the first day of the cold season of the year ZSC132 arrived, a particular, barely perceptible excitement stirred in the air, one

that was completely unheard of in Enbasian memory. Nevertheless, the parade began right on schedule, with the sound of the eternal, unique military music. The Enbasians paraded, crossing and re-crossing each other in the same choreography.

And then suddenly, to the surprise of the old and the Emperor, the musicians introduced a new note, then another. On the vast granite square feet stumbled, arms lost the rhythm, bodies hesitated. A third note, a fourth, a new tempo was improvised and soon, the parade was in a state of utter confusion.

“Guards!” shouted Enbasidian XV.

The guards were rushing to encircle the unruly ranks when a noisy, colourful crowd invaded the square, armed with tambourines, accordions and songs.

The girls’ skirts swirled in a profusion of colours and frills, laughter came from the women’s mouths, the men opened their arms, embracing the Enbasians, and generously offering wine and cider.

All the young Enbasians, having learned to dance, now led their elders. Overwhelmed, the guards could not resist.

The Emperor, eyes bulging, remained silent, unable to order his guards to repress this revolution. He suddenly felt a woman’s presence, and seemed to recognize her scent. At his side stood a woman of imperial bearing and soft features. She stroked the Emperor’s cheek.

The light touch drained him of his remaining strength. Incredibly, the man let the tears flow down his chubby cheeks. Giant screens gave live witness to his emotion.

A sudden silence descended on the square. Everyone looked at his Eminence crying quietly in his mother's arms.

"Viva la Mama! Viva Enbasidian XV!" cried Omega 101, instantly joined by the crowd.

The Emperor's shy smile appeared on the screen, as the unexpected permission to finally indulge in joy, celebration and friendship.

The joy was at its height when a messenger from the country of Enhaut rushed to the top of the imperial podium and grabbed the microphone: "Friends of Enbas, brothers of Enhaut, come! All of you! I come from the western borders of the land of Enhaut. Over there, there's a hole in the border veil: you can't imagine what an incredible world I saw there!"

THE MAHARAJA'S LADDER

Once upon a time, in a land bordered by the Indian Ocean, through the middle of which flowed the sacred river of Ispaghar, there lived a Maharaja whose desire it was to converse with the gods. However not one of them would agree to speak to him. Despite the majestic offerings he left for them on the steps of the temples, along the roadsides and on the banks of streams, the gods never responded to his request to talk with them.

So, one day, he decided to build a giant ladder to reach them in the clouds. From the realms of his palace he sent for the most accomplished architect of the empire, the most skilled and renowned builders, the most valiant men and the most powerful elephants. He ordered the most resistant wood, the strongest hemp and laid out his project. They were given five moons to construct the tallest ladder that had

ever been built and reach the heavens. The builders, proud and honoured, bowed before their Magnificent Maharaja and set to work.

After many long weeks, the Maharaja inquired how the work was progressing. Although he had gathered together the most reputed workers in the land and the most prestigious men of art, the building work was not progressing. Every night, the tower of wood and bamboo would collapse and every morning, the building would have to be started all over again. He was given no explanation as everyone feared how demanding and intransigent he was.

The Maharaja was very upset and impatient and henceforth, the walls of his palace trembled whenever the messenger told him of how the ladder kept collapsing.

One evening the youngest wife in his harem, seeing how humiliated he was by such an affront, spoke to him. "Your Highness, it is your desire to meet the gods with whom you feel equal. You have gathered together the best builders in the kingdom, obtained the most precious materials and the most ingenious designs are being elaborated. And yet your ladder to heaven hardly reaches the top of the apple tree that blooms in our garden," she whispered. "Dress up as a beggar and go for a walk around the building site tomorrow at nightfall. You could gather some valuable information."

At first, the Maharaja was shocked that his youngest concubine should dare to speak to him in such a way, and repelled by the idea that he should dress in shabby rags, however he resolved to follow the gentle young maiden's advice, as he simply had to discover why his divine plan kept failing.

And so, the following day, dressed as a beggar, he went to the building site.

A man noticed him and hailed him with contempt, exclaiming, "Tell me, old man, do you not know that this is the building site of our Great Maharaja, cousin to the all-powerful gods? Only those authorized by royal mandate have the right to set foot here. Are you aware that we are constructing the highest ladder that was ever built by man so he can make merry in the clouds with his fellow gods?" he continued. "He gathered us all together here; we are the most intelligent, the strongest and the most learned men in the kingdom. Together we are building a divine stairway. Your rags are not welcome here."

Shocked by the man's disdainful tone, the Maharaja felt his anger rising. But suddenly as though carried by the winds, the soft voice of his young concubine whispered in his ear: "My beloved Highness, hold back your wrath. Do not forget that here you are just a simple beggar. You had better continue to look around the building site to try to understand what is happening."

So the fake beggar, disguising his face in his tattered hood, turned to the man, "Forgive my ignorance, man of great knowledge. I am a mere beggar wandering from site to site trying to glean a pittance. And you? Who are you?"

"I am the tree planter," the latter replied proudly. "It is from my trees that the poles that you see in the distance were carved. The poles, which every day for the past three moons, we assemble in order to climb up to heaven."

"Three moons!" exclaimed the Maharaja, holding back his wrath with difficulty. "Your ladder must be very high by now. Would you show it to me?"

"Alas!" sighed the tree planter. "The truth is so difficult to admit. As yet there is no ladder."

"What?" The beggar pretended to be shocked. "And how do you explain such a mishap? Could it be that your wood is not strong enough?"

"Why beggarman how impertinent you are!" the planter huffed. "The problem is quite different. The hemp holding the pieces of wood together must be of poor quality, since every night they collapse before they even reach the height of the apple tree that blooms in the middle of the garden of our Highly Respected Maharaja."

"Would you know where I might find the hemp weaver?" the beggar asked.

"Of course! He lives at the end of this path, in the blue tent you can see on the left. I will take you there."

And so the two of them departed to visit the hemp weaver. They found him sitting cross-legged on a mat, drinking a glass of boiling hot tea.

"Master Weaver, this beggar man before you is trying to understand why every night our construction wobbles and collapses. I told him that my wood is the best in the kingdom, and that the most likely explanation is that the hemp you weave is too mediocre for such a noble piece of work."

With a black look in his eyes the weaver looked at the two men and leapt at them, furiously clutching each of their beards.

"How dare you suggest that the cause of our work collapsing is the quality of my hemp?" he shouted. "I have never heard anything so stupid nor so slanderous! My father was the master hemp weaver to our Venerable Maharaja, as was his father and his father's father. Our family has possessed the secret of weaving for centuries. There is not a weaver in the kingdom to match our craftsmanship."

He was fuming. A few minutes later he continued. "If you think about it, the fact is that if your posts were better carved, you would have cut slight notches in order to prevent the hemp sliding and the rope would hold everything firmly," he quipped. "Beggar, I can say, without hesitation, the fault does not lie with me. Without a doubt, the man who is at fault is the man who accompanies you."

The beggar watched them arguing. Finally, in a hoarse voice (he had disguised his voice so

they wouldn't recognize him) he interrupted, "If neither the wood nor the hemp are at fault, could the design of the ladder be defective?"

"Well, all things considered, I think the beggar might be speaking the truth," reflected the tree planter. "I've seen that architect strutting along the paths, giving orders and waving his arms about, unrolling his learned plans. His haughty self-assurance undoubtedly hides his shameful incompetence," he spluttered stiffly.

"Could it be that you are right?" the weaver responded. "I confess that I too have been irritated by his obsequious air and his bossy behaviour. And each time I go near him, he is quick to roll up his plans so I cannot see them."

The Maharaja felt his irritation rising. So, his architect was playing at commander-in-chief. How pretentious! He was the one who should be put in his place the very next day! Nevertheless he hid his annoyance as he suggested: "Should the architect not be questioned for an explanation?"

The other two nodded and all three left the tent. The first two hurried along the paths of the camp to the biggest tent. It was lit by many lamps and could be seen from afar. Only the Maharaja, hidden under his ragged clothing, walked slowly, feigning exhaustion, which he imagined to be suited to his personage.

After a few minutes they arrived at the opening of the architect's tent. A man standing at the entrance, called out to them. "What

may I do for you gentlemen at this late hour?" he asked.

He looked at the beggar's rags with an air of disgust; the beggar felt a shiver of shame and anger run down his spine.

"We have come to see your master the architect," the tree planter said, stepping into the light. "Do you not recognize us? Announce our presence! We are here about a matter of the utmost importance that must be resolved urgently."

The guard nodded his head and disappeared inside. A few moments later, he came out and invited them to join the architect in the warmth of the tent. The latter was sitting on a seat of gold and velvet. In his hand he held a silver goblet.

"May I offer you a little wine?" he suggested obsequiously. But when he saw the beggar, he hesitated.

"The beggar is with us," said the weaver.

The architect handed him an earthenware cup filled with water. The Maharaja held back the sharp cry that was rising in his throat. He clenched his fists, forcing a deferential smile and lowering his eyes to the ground.

"This beggar you see before you has come to question us regarding the reasons for which the ladder commissioned by our Maharaja the Magnificent, collapses every night," explained the planter. "We have come to the conclusion that it is neither my wood nor the weaver's

hemp, which are causing it to collapse. It is clear that it is your design that is the reason for our failure, he said accusingly. And I'm sure that if you would finally show us the plans, we will see immediately that they are not worthy of our Heavenly Maharaja's exceptional request and that there are hidden faults in the design."

"How dare you insult me in my own tent?" grunted the architect. "How presumptuous and insane you are to dare to insult me in such a way. Get out before I have you thrashed!"

"Perhaps," ventured the beggar from beneath his hood, "the Master Architect would agree to show us his irreproachable plans so that all suspicions may be ruled out definitively?"

The weaver and the planter nodded in approval. The architect took a deep breath. He paused for a few minutes and then walked towards a long wooden cabinet standing against the canvas wall of the tent. He took out the plans and unrolled them on the table in the centre of the tent.

"See for yourselves!" he muttered.

The three men came closer and leaned over the impressive document. They were forced to admit that the measurements, the angles and the proportions, all seemed ... perfect.

"But then, if it is neither my wood nor the hemp, nor the plans which are defective, it must be the builders who are not performing their tasks properly," stated the planter, more convinced than ever.

"Let us search out the culprits!" urged the architect.

The three men left the tent, walking at a determined pace and headed for the centre of the camp, where the foreman lived. Just behind them, the Maharaja limped along on his own. Eager to show their displeasure, the planter, the weaver and the architect called out to the foreman vehemently before they even arrived. The foreman's body stiffened, his muscles tensed and his jaw tightened. He turned around, standing firmly on both legs, hands on his hips. Alerted by the abusive cries, the workers gathered around him. Everyone stood waiting.

"If the noble structure our Majestic Maharaja commissioned collapses each day it is because your men don't know how to do their job!" the planter burst out.

The foreman sniggered. Then, with a grave and solemn air, he retorted, "Throughout the whole of the kingdom, there are no more talented men to be found than those who stand here before you. These workmen, and their ancestors before them, built the palace of our Great Maharaja. I will not tolerate that their excellent reputation be sullied here!"

A huge uproar ensued with everyone shouting, insults flying and people spitting in each other's faces.

The Maharaja, in the background, remained silent.

Suddenly, amidst the commotion, a small boy hoisted himself onto a rock and held up his hand for silence. Everyone stopped talking.

“Before you start accusing the elephants as being the cause of our misfortunes, here is what I suggest,” said the child. Everyone pricked up their ears.

The boy turned to the beggar and said, “Stranger, the time has come for you to depart. Our disputes are of no interest to you. If by any chance your travels should lead you to the palace of our Maharaja the Almighty, invite him to come to the building site in one week.”

Taken aback, the beggar hesitated and then took his leave. The child’s insistence surprised him as much as it intrigued him.

The boy gathered the men in a circle. Standing amidst them he murmured a few mysterious words. After a few moments, they all returned to their tents.

A week later the Maharaja, having returned to his palace and all its regalia, ordered his black stallion to be saddled and galloped off in the direction of the building site.

Imagine his surprise when, in the far distance, he saw a ladder of wood and hemp stretching endlessly up into the sky! In a few strides he was at the foot of the ladder. The tree planter, the weaver, the architect, the builders and the little boy were all gathered around, smiling. In the palm of the child’s hand was a beautiful white bird.

When they saw the Maharaja, they all knelt down.

The boy bowed, walked towards the Maharaja and spoke to him, “Maharaja, before you stands the highest ladder that has ever been built. Let us climb it together. I will serve as your guide.”

At first the Maharaja was annoyed at the child’s audacity in inviting him to follow him, but then he realized he had never been so ready to converse with the gods. So he followed in the steps of the agile climber in front of him. The ladder, despite being firmly anchored in the ground, swayed in the breeze. The earth disappeared beneath them. Far below they could see the builders waving at them to continue their divine ascension. The air became purer and purer. The higher they climbed, the more it seemed to the Maharaja that the rungs of the ladder became narrower and narrower, so much so that upon arrival on the penultimate rung, he could only place one foot on the ladder. Keeping his balance, his hair flying in the wind, he reached out to hoist himself onto the cloud where the gods resided. But no matter how far he stretched, or how much he contracted his ankle, he could not reach the cloud. He felt tremendous anger rising inside him, mixed with frustration, helplessness and sadness.

And then he heard the voice of his wise young concubine whispering in his ear: “Oh my beloved Maharaja. Now you have climbed

higher than any man has ever climbed. Can you rejoice in such sheer happiness? And will you be able, down below, to recognize the divine in each bud that blossoms, in each drop of rain that glistens, in the sound of laughter escaping from the mouth of a child?"

The Maharaja didn't dare to become enraged, fearing that his ill temper might cause him to wobble and fall.

On the step just below, the boy gently removed a feather from the back of his beautiful white bird and held it out to the Maharaja who seized it, happy in this way to be able to regain his balance.

"Maharaja, with this long, immaculate feather, you can caress the cloud on which the gods reside."

The Maharaja took a deep breath. The wind blew upon his turban, which flew off, letting his hair fall in his eyes. The Maharaja carefully brushed aside the strand of hair and held his arm out. With his trembling fingers, he caressed the cloud with the feather. The Maharaja felt immense happiness being in contact with the air and the droplets of water. He felt lighter and happier than he had ever felt before. He let go of the ladder with the hand that was still holding on to it and waved his arms together, drawing arabesques of a celestial dance in the sky. With the feather maintaining his balance, he rejoiced at the extraordinary view before him.

A few moments later, the Maharaja and the boy were on solid ground once again, to the applause of the men waiting below.

The Maharaja stepped forward and asked, "To whom do I owe thanks for this divine ladder?"

Going towards the architect he said, "Architect without you, my ladder would never have existed. I thank you infinitely for this magnificent work."

The architect nodded his head gently and answered, "Oh venerable Maharaja, I am a mere architect."

Then the Maharaja went towards the weaver, "Weaver, receive my thanks for this sumptuous ladder and the robustness of your hemp."

The weaver nodded his head gently and answered, "Oh venerable Maharaja, I am a mere weaver."

Then the Maharaja went towards the tree planter, "Tree planter, receive my royal thanks."

"Oh venerable Maharaja, I am a mere tree planter. Without all my companions here, my precious wood would have served no purpose."

And similarly all the workers declared their modest contribution.

The child in turn praised the beautiful white bird for its help.

The Maharaja was about to thank the bird when it showed him its feather, without which it would not have been possible to caress the gods' residence nor dance in the skies.

And so the Maharaja spoke to the feather saying, "Oh feather, so fine and light, you enabled me to sway at the top of my ladder and commune with the heavens. Please receive my deepest gratitude."

"Maharaja, you are a great builder," said the feather. "Your scheme was as ambitious as it was noble. Now you are back on earth amidst us, I accept your thanks because it is justified. You speak the truth: Without me, indeed it would never have been possible for your dream to be realized."

The crowd erupted with laughter before so much pride and vanity.

The Maharaja went down on his right knee and bowed to the feather.

Some way off, his young concubine smiled to see him making his reverence.

Je tiens à remercier l'ensemble des collaborateurs de notre groupe pour l'attention qu'ils porteront à ces contes. Ils viennent nourrir cette culture singulière et cette intelligence du cœur qui font notre force et donnent tout son sens à l'œuvre collective.

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Mohed Altrad

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