

ISABELLE D BOUTIN



WHISPERS

THE FORTRESS SERIES BOOK I



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To my parents,
Thank you for your never-ending support.

Chapter One

Ifa woke with a start, her nightgown stuck to her clammy skin. She sat down gently on her mattress and tried to calm her beating heart. She dreamed frequently but never remembered her dreams. She took a deep breath and climbed down the ladder attached to her bed. The floor creaked under her bare feet as they touched it. The room was dark, the curtains drawn tight, but a faint light filtered through them. A soft, steady breath came from the bed at the foot of the ladder. Her grandfather was still sleeping. He was usually the first to get up and seeing him asleep brought a loving smile to her face. She put pants and a sleeveless sweater on and went outside, drawing the curtain and quickly closing it behind her.

In the common area, her neighbour Janis was feeding her youngest child. She greeted Ifa with a brief smile and resumed her unsuccessful attempts. Little Sory was always reluctant to eat her morning mush.

“There’s hot water on the stove if you want some”, Janis whispered to her.

“Thank you”, Ifa replied.

She helped herself to a cup of hot water, unhooked some herbs from above the stove and dropped them into the steaming liquid. She sat down at the table facing Sory and smiled at her.

“Eat, my love, then you can go and play”, she said, pointing to the door.

Janis’ two oldest children were already outside – Ifa could hear them talking in the alley. Sory’s eyes widened and she opened her mouth gently for her mother. A few bites later, she disappeared to the door to join her brother and sister.

“You’re good with her”, Janis told her. “She’ll do anything you ask!”

“We love each other very much”, she and I, replied Ifa, her nose in her cup.

The heat from the cup almost burned her hands and cheered her up a little. She hated waking up sweaty from a bad dream. When it happened, she always felt uncomfortable for a few hours. Her warm drink helped her to keep grounded in the present moment.

A few images of her dream were floating in her head. She was walking in a dry forest in the wake of an unknown man. She remembered seeing flowing water, a river or stream of some kind. She shivered. The only river she knew was the one that bordered the City and its waters looked more like a pool of mud than the clear liquid she had seen in her dreams.

She was brought out of her thoughts by a loud voice from the alleyway and then by the disturbing silence that followed it. The children went quiet. A shadow appeared in the frame of the door.

“What a good morning, isn’t it?” Tamer cried out in his thunderous voice as he rushed in the common area.

Janis and Ifa looked at him without reacting. The man used to appear unexpectedly at Ifa and her grandfather's house. Tamer was a guard from the Fortress and was mainly concerned with keeping the City safe. Almost all the citizens hated him. Arrogant and intolerant, he terrorized everyone by constantly watching them and threatening to report their actions to the Council.

For some time, he had set his mind on Soroban, Ifa's grandfather, and visited him almost every day.

"Soroban is still sleeping," Ifa warned him as she saw Tamer approaching their room.

He gratified her with a petty smile that seemed to say "So what?" and drew the curtains, shouting.

"Get up in there! Early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise!"

Ifa clenched her teeth. Her nostrils fluttered with indignation. She pushed her chair back noisily, grabbed her shoes by the door and went outside chewing her lips.

*

Titus stood motionless in the square, eyes closed, his face turned to the wind. He had always loved and envied the wind, which could travel for miles, always with the same ardour. He took a few seconds to appreciate the soft sensation of the breeze on his burned skin as he watched the sun shining timidly under the thick cloud cover. With his eyes closed, he took a deep breath and remembered his morning meeting. The exchange with his client had gone well. The latter, satisfied with Titus's find, had rewarded him well with provisions and a small object well wrapped in a piece of filthy cloth. He brushed the package in his pocket and rubbed his thumb against the sharp tip of the blade. A knife. It was very rare to get your hands on sharp knives –

every citizen jealously guarded any potential tool or weapon.

Titus was grateful to his client for taking the trouble to conceal it from prying eyes that might have witnessed the exchange. For indeed, throughout their discussion, Titus had noticed a well-known haughty figure at the other end of the square. Far from hiding it, Tamer always watched him. The guard usually closed his eyes to the bartering of goods in the City, but he always kept an eye on Titus as he moved about. Tamer had warned him that a word from him would be enough to force him into the Fortress. He had no reason to denounce him for the time being—fortunately—he was content to keep an eye on him, to remind him of his fragile posture.

Titus set off again and rushed into the street at the end of the square to go home. The wind had completely disappeared now that he had taken refuge behind the walls, or rather what was left of them. The area was in an advanced state of disrepair, debris from a past that no longer existed. The city must have been magnificent once, Titus thought as he looked at the stones that stood before him. He liked to let himself dream about that past. He imaged his neighbourhood with its colourful houses and clean, unspoiled windows. He could see the river and its clear, drinkable water, which above all was full of fish. He smiled at the idea. He had never seen any, except in pictures in an old book from his childhood. He wondered if, in the distance, in other bodies of water, fish still existed.

“Someday I will go,” he thought. “I’m convinced there’s a better life out there somewhere.”

Lost in his thoughts, he had finally reached his house. A myriad of noises and smells was reaching him from within. People had had time to wake up and start their day during his morning excursion. He lifted a corner of the canvas that

served as a door and entered the occupants' common space. The old houses had been turned into dwellings, called rooms. The size of the rooms varied according to the number of people living in them. Titus's tiny room suited him because he could easily lie down in it and store the few things that belonged to him. Above his bed, a few old nails supported his clothes and his half-timbered hat, which he always forgot when he went out. A brown plastic crate was used to store tools. A few utensils and an iron bowl completed the set. On the crate was an oil lamp, dried out. He almost never used it, preferring to spend his evenings with others. Most of the people who lived alone also frequented the common space for eating or socializing. Fires were not lit in the rooms, especially in the summer, as they were suffocating.

Raina was busy at the fire, as she usually was every morning. She was good at using leftovers, gathering scraps of vegetables and other foods to make soup and helping people in the area. With food rationing becoming more and more frequent, many citizens were struggling to feed their families. Raina's soup helped them. In exchange, some brought her leftovers so that she could cook for them, others provided her with services or offered her objects.

"Good morning, my dear!" Raina said, rushing towards Titus. She rubbed her hands on her apron and smiled as she touched his cheek.

"I can't help worrying when you go out that early in the morning."

"Don't worry, Raina, I'm taking every necessary precaution."

Raina was Titus's room neighbour. She could have been his grandmother, and she always acted a little bit like it. For him, who had been alone since childhood, Raina had become his only family. Long white strands of hair were

coming out of her bun and falling in front of her eyes. She blew them away, but to no avail.

“Let me help you,” Titus said. He put a rebellious strand back into her bun and asked her how she was.

“Oh, I’m well, very well. I had a good night’s sleep despite the heat. But it’s you that interests me. How did it go this morning?”

She went back to her cauldron to watch the cooking.

“It went very well. By the way, I brought you a present.”

He handed her a glass jar with vegetable peelings in it.

“However, I ran into Tamer again.”

“He’ll never leave you alone, you know that.”

“Yes, I know,” Titus answered with a sigh.

Titus knew it all too well, but he hated to worry Raina and preferred not to give her too many details so as not to torment her.

“He was there, but as usual he didn’t say a word. He was just observing me.”

Raina raised her eyes from her cauldron to look straight at him. She seemed to be about to reply when the canvas lifted at the far end of the common space. Surprised, she welcomed the newcomer with joy.

“Ifa! To what do we owe your visit so soon?” she asked.

“Tamer came by, so I thought I’d better go out in the meantime.”

She didn’t need to say more. As much as Tamer kept track of Titus’s whereabouts, he never left Soroban alone either.

“Ah, how about that? He’s paid you a nice visit too?” Titus asked.

Ifa turned to him, surprised.

“What, he came here?”

“No... I met him on the streets. He’s watching me again.”

“And he accosted you?”

“No, he watches me from a distance, but he’s not hiding it.”

What else could he say? Titus’s profession had chosen him in spite of himself, because he showed little disposition for physical exertion. However, he excelled at building relationships with others. This gift had led him from an early age to exchange all sorts of things in order to survive. Few occupations were suitable for the Council, which ruled over the Fortress and the City. Repairing, making, building – that was the kind of work that was valued. Bartering, smuggling, and dealing with other citizens were highly inadmissible under the rules. However, most of the guards turned a blind eye to these activities. Tamer, no. The guard, a vindictive and insatiable man, reminded anyone that he had the power to enforce the law. For years, he’d been focusing on Titus, and no one knew why.

“At our home, he doesn’t just observe,” Ifa continued. “He hardly bothered to announce himself before entering. He appeared in the house and before I could even speak, he was already drawing the curtains and plucking Grandpa out of his bed with his big, proud greetings. He has no respect for elders!”

She shook her head and swallowed her saliva.

Raina approached and grabbed her shoulders.

“My dear child. Soroban is stronger than you think. Even though you see his physical strength diminishing day by day, his mind remains clear and his intelligence surpasses Tamer’s. He’s not afraid of him, don’t you be.”

Ifa nodded and wiped away the tears that had appeared in the corner of her eyes. Raina rummaged under the table and pulled out a glass container.

“Take this, and bring it to him from me. Tamer must have left by now.”

Ifa bowed her head to look at the jar Raina was handing to her. Broken cookies—a specialty Raina made from cricket flour—piled up in the bottom.

“Thank you, Raina. He’ll be delighted. I’ll see you soon.”
Ifa waved a hand to Titus and Raina before she left.

*

No sooner had the canvas closed behind her than Ifa stopped for a few moments. Visiting Titus and Raina always invigorated her. She doubted that Tamer had already left. She had noticed that the interval between his visits was getting shorter, and each time he stayed longer. She took a deep breath and blew as she counted the seconds. “1, 2, 3 ... 17, 18, 19, 20, let’s go.” Ifa looked down at her hands – they had finally calmed down and stopped shaking. She smiled as she looked at the container Raina had given her. Soroban loved these cookies.

She set out down the street to return home. The City spread out in a narrow strip crushed between the cliff and the dry river. At times, the water rose and you could see some flow in it. Most of the time, it was just a muddy puddle, which you could cross on foot if you were not afraid of getting stuck. Nobody would go in there. The other side seemed even more deserted than theirs. Sometimes children would challenge each other to cross and bet on who could go furthest. Ifa had never seen anyone make it through the mud and onto the rocks that could be seen far away on the opposite bank.

As she walked, she reached the edge of the City: a wall less than one metre high that defined the City limits. Leaning over, one could see the sand that had formed the riverbed several metres below. People said that water used to flow up to the wall. They said that big boats used to dock

there with thousands of people on board who came here to take their vacations. It was Soroban who told her most of these stories that he had learned from a diary written by an ancestor. This diary had been passed down from hand to hand for generations. It contained incredible accounts of life during that time. This life seemed impossible today; straight out of a children's story.

Ifa sighed, looking into the distance. She had never been outside the city. She had never even dared to take part in the famous challenge of the crossing with people her age. She was afraid of what might be hiding in the muddy water. She was afraid that she would never be able to return. The children made fun of her at the time, saying that she was afraid of everything. Instead of daring, she had always preferred to stay with Soroban, especially since her mother had died. Ifa kicked a stone near her foot and resumed her walk to their room. She preferred not to think about her mother too much.

Ifa and Soroban lived in one of the smallest dwellings in the City and had a family of two mothers and three children living next door. Ifa liked to spend time with them. She often looked after the children while their parents worked in the common area or at their posting. Josette, her neighbour, was away a lot. Her work as a courier for the Council required her to explore the area in search of resources, leaving Janis and the children behind. Josette had returned the day before, to everyone's great joy and relief. She had been gone for several weeks and they were beginning to fear that she would not return. The job of courier was the most dangerous of all – some of them never returned from their expedition.

Access to their home was through a dark alleyway paved with uneven stones, confined between the buildings and the cliff. Ifa looked up to the sky, but could see nothing

but the opaque white clouds and a few twigs that dotted the rock surface. Sometimes a guard sat at the top of the wall, his legs hanging down in the air. This thought gave Ifa chills. She hated it. She was always afraid that one of them would fall and she would find his body, crushed in the alley.

Their house stood out from the others because it had a door. Soroban had made a wooden plank on wheels that could be slid in front of the doorway, and that protected from the weather better than a canvas. The Council forbade the installation of any form of lock or bolt, but at least privacy could be simulated by closing the door. The door remained open throughout the warm season, however, to avoid suffocation from the heat. Their home was divided into three sections: the common area on the right near the entrance; Josette and Janis's room, which occupied the entire left side, filled with all sorts of things Josette had brought back from her expeditions, including several toys for the children. Finally, long canvases isolated Soroban and Ifa's room at the far end.

Janis was still sitting at the table and crushing nuts with a mortar. She raised her head when Ifa entered. Ifa greeted her and glanced at her room at the far end, the canvases completely closed.

"Is Tamer still there?"

"No. He left a few minutes ago, but I haven't seen your grandfather. He didn't come out to show him out."

That surprised Ifa. Soroban invariably escorted visitors back to the gate, even the inconvenient ones like Tamer. Ifa thanked Janis and went to the back to find her grandfather. Lifting the canvas, she found him sitting at his work table. Their room contained an impressive number of objects and furniture. Their beds were bunked, which left enough space for a desk on which Soroban sometimes wrote, but also a large table with tools on top, at which Soroban was sitting

at the moment. He was leaning his head over a sheet of paper, his eyebrows furrowed.

“I am back,” said Ifa, trying not to startle him.

“Hello, Ifa. Did you have a nice walk?”

Ifa nodded yes and took a chair to sit next to him, the tension rising in her body.

“What did he want this morning?”

Soroban turned towards her and took off his glasses. He seemed tired and Ifa’s stomach contracted as she looked at him. He had a serious look that didn’t bode well. He touched Ifa’s hands, which were resting on her thighs, and plunged his eyes into hers.

“Ifa, we must talk seriously.”

Chapter 2

That tiny little sentence generated a shot of adrenaline throughout Ifa's body. Her heart leapt into her chest. She swallowed with difficulty; a lump in her throat. She could see that he was looking for his words, unsure where to start. She looked at him as she waited for him to speak again. Without his glasses, he looked comical, almost childish. Today, youth had disappeared from his face because of his drawn features and sad eyes. Soroban was now sixty-two years old. His hair, once a beautiful curly golden mane, was now sparse and in great need of a cut. A few curls hung on his forehead, wet with sweat.

He pushed his chair back, got up and began to move aimlessly around the room, grabbing and putting down whatever he could get his hands on.

"Popo? Tell me what happened," Ifa asked him.

He turned and smiled at her, it had been years since she had called him Popo, an old affectionate nickname from her childhood. She felt the need to relax the atmosphere, to get close to him at that moment.

"Tamer. He came to pick up a tool I fixed for him."

"Yes, I saw him this morning. That's why I left. Oh, that reminds me!"

She turned around and grabbed Raina's jar on the desk where she left it when she came in.

"Raina asked me to give you this."

Soroban smiled tenderly when he saw what was in it.

"Dear Raina, she knows how to please me. I'll pay her a visit to thank her."

He opened the jar and took out a piece which he ate immediately, with his eyes closed. He put the jar down on the table and turned towards Ifa, rubbing his hands together, as if to get rid of imaginary crumbs.

"So that's it. Tamer came to collect the tool and asked for my help with the Council's new agricultural plan."

"What plan?"

Soroban began to explain to her that the Council had voted to reorganize agriculture to favour fast, high-yielding resources, but that these crops needed more maintenance and especially water.

"No, Ifa whispered. No, they can't ask you that!"

She could feel the blood beating in her temples and thought she would collapse within seconds. She closed her eyes and swallowed with difficulty.

"They can do it and you know it very well. Tamer says I'm the only one who can generate enough filtered water to do this".

Ifa shook her head and tried to look at Soroban through the tears in her eyes.

"You know the law, the Council can requisition any healthy person if their work can help the community," he reminded her.

Soroban approached Ifa.

"When the time comes, I will be forced to go and stay there."

"I don't want to! You can't stay under Tamer's command, he'll make you suffer."

“Ifa, he will not supervise me, I will work for a member of the Council. They will ensure my safety.”

“Of course they will, you won’t even be able to get out! You will be their slave! How will I manage without you?”

“Ifa, you’re not a child anymore. At twenty-one, you’re a self-sufficient adult. You no longer need a guardian, so I can’t stay with you, and you can’t come with me.”

“You talk as if everything is already decided! Did you say yes?”

“No, of course I didn’t. I told him I’d think about it.”

“Fine, then let’s go. Josette says there are a lot of resources around here. If we try, I know we can find the perfect place to live. A New World!”

Soroban shook his head and sat down in his chair. He looked so fragile at that moment. Ifa was gasping for breath. It was impossible – he couldn’t accept the demands of the Council. He couldn’t follow Tamer in this senseless requisition. Surely someone else could help, not his grandfather who had worked all his life and who should be able to enjoy the years he had left. As if he was reading her mind, Soroban turned to her, looking very serious.

“Ifa, I’m old. You know the life expectancy; it’s half a miracle I can still work. It would not be possible for me to go on an adventure – and to find what? It’s desert all over! How many days would we have to walk to get food? I am healthy because of my inventions and because I can eat well, thanks to our community, thanks to the Council’s cultures. I wouldn’t survive long in the wilderness.”

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked her in the eyes.

“I can’t leave. I’ll have to accept.”

Ifa stepped back and pushed him away.

“What about everything you always said? You always told me that we had to be self-sufficient and not let

ourselves depend on the Council. That we had to find other ways! And you want to spend the last few years you have left there? They won't let you out, you know that. We won't ever see each other again!"

Tears streamed down her cheeks and her voice was trembling, but she didn't care. She realized that she was almost screaming, that her whole soul was revolting at the thought of losing her grandfather forever.

"My beautiful Ifa, I trust you. I know you'll be all right. I've thought it over and I think it's the only choice I have left. Tamer will keep coming after me as long as I don't accept."

"Fine. Keep him waiting as long as you can."

Soroban approached Ifa again to take her in his arms, but she pushed him away.

"Tamer is a tyrant, I refuse to be persecuted by him! I will not let him kidnap you and lock you up on the other side!"

Soroban looked down.

"Believe me, I'd like to find a solution, but it's the only way."

"You're going to have to convince me, because I don't believe it at all. I'm going out – don't wait for me."

She left the room without allowing Soroban to respond. Janis and the children looked at her without speaking. The youngest's lips were trembling and her eyes were full of tears.

"Is he leaving, Popo Soro?"

Ifa stopped in her tracks, took a second to put a smile on her face, twisted by anger, and knelt down in front of little Sory's chair.

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

She kissed her on the forehead and left the house.

*

Ifa was enraged. A mixture of outrage and helplessness was eating her head and heart away. She had hated Tamer for as long as she could remember. She had lived with Soroban since she was eight years old and the guard had always terrorized them. And now it was finally happening: Tamer was carrying out his threats. For years, he'd been warning Soroban, telling him that one day he'd have no choice but to give in and follow him. But Ifa was willing to do anything to stop him. Soroban was in good health, yes, but few people in the City were older than sixty-five. It was inconceivable that Soroban would spend his final years away from his loved ones. Away from Ifa.

She crossed the street from her house and went to the Square. In the past, trees had grown there. Maybe people had come there to spend time in the shade and rest. Now there were only rotten stumps. The trees had long since disappeared from the City. Ifa herself had never seen any, except for the ones she could see in the distance, to the south. A few withered brown lines rising straight up to the sky.

She turned back towards the cliff. The fortress stood there, undisturbed. A great stone wall overlooking the City as far as the eye could see. Every once in a while, there appeared a guard who kept watch by walking for hours on end, waiting for who knows what. What dangers could they be watching for? There hadn't been an insurrection in years. Ifa had never experienced one, but Soroban had told her the story of a revolt when her mother was a child. The people of the City had tried to break down the gates of the Fortress.

Just before the rebellion, the Council had determined that everyone should contribute to the smooth running of

the community. They had established a policy of assigning a trade or occupation to each person with a particular ability or aptitude. Each citizen became a resource, and was requisitioned to the Fortress, away from the City and their friends and family, to provide labour for the Council. The fruits of this labour was then distributed among the inhabitants. But the labourers were never seen again.

The rebellion had failed miserably. The guards had rushed into the City, shamelessly attacking anyone who stood in their way. The battle had lasted barely two days. In those two long bloody days many were wounded, and many died: all citizens. The guards then returned to their side of the Fortress, taking the few remaining prisoners to stand trial. They had never returned.

No one had ever dared to rebel so openly again. Of course, the Council didn't requisition everyone. The others were allowed to continue to live according to their needs and wishes, but if they did not serve the Fortress, they did not receive any food in exchange. Many people, like Soroban, worked primarily for the people of the City, but also performed small services for the Council in order to gain access to food distribution.

Ifa did not contribute. At the age of twenty-one, she should have started working a long time ago, but apart from helping Soroban, she had not acquired any skills. She was afraid of everything, she never dared to take any initiative. If Soroban left the City for the Fortress, she'd have to find something to do. She couldn't survive on her own. She could never accept charity from others. That thought caused another stampede in her chest. She sat down on the floor and closed her eyes. "1, 2, 3..." She had learned to count in her head to slow down her breathing when it became too fast. It helped her to calm down a little. But

today it was harder. She got up and decided to walk around the City to clear her head.

Soroban chose the easy path. He didn't want to fight anymore. Ifa saw his capitulation as surrender and couldn't bring herself to accept it. "But what could convince him?" she asked herself aloud. A child passing by looked to her with big eyes. She smiled at him and he quickly ran away in the opposite direction.

Ifa was heading towards the river again. Something in that empty space had attracted her since she was a child. It was its tranquility that made her feel good. Near the river it was always much quieter than on the streets. The noises disturbed Ifa, but she didn't tell anyone about it, because it was frowned upon. The noises affected her more than others, because she saw them as well as heard them. Each sound triggered different colours and shapes in her eyes. The wind made small, grey, almost transparent ripples. Conversely, someone shouting or working on something often generated lightning, peaks of colour ranging from green to red, through the whole spectrum of oranges and yellows. In addition to this sensitivity to sound, she also perceived the presence of people around her. When someone approached her, she felt their warmth, as if they were emitted a glow all around them.

Ifa had never talked to anyone about these reactions except for her friend Kal. Kal saw colours in the sounds too. Kal could talk to Ifa in her head without even uttering a sound. They could talk when they weren't even together. But Kal was no longer there. People like Kal and Ifa were called whisperers and they were considered dangerous. They were feared, and if the overseers found one, they would be captured .

Ifa didn't know what had happened to Kal. One day, he simply disappeared from the City. She couldn't hear him in

her head anymore. Ifa had cried for days after he left, feeling strangely lonely all of a sudden. Her mother had explained to her what whisperers were, and why Kal had disappeared. She had made her understand that it was better for whisperers to hide their gifts, and to act like others. Ifa hadn't known, but she had always believed that her mother knew she was one and that this caution was directed at her. She wanted Ifa to be safe. They had never spoken of Kal or the whisperers again. Ifa would have liked to ask her about it. She would have liked to know how she knew so much about it, but she had never dared, after her warning.

"So, Tamer left?"

Ifa was startled. Titus was standing next to her, and she hadn't felt him coming. It happened to her sometimes when she was concentrating on her thoughts. She became completely unaware of everything around her.

"Yeah, just before I came back. He's still making threats to requisition Soroban."

"He's been doing that for years, hasn't he?"

"Yes... but this time Soroban is going to accept."

Her voice broke down and she let go of all the emotions she'd been holding back since she'd left the house. She couldn't stop. Her throat was so tight that her crying was accompanied by uncontrollable sobs. Titus took her in his arms without saying anything. He stroked her hair silently. He himself felt great anger at Tamer, who was always on his heels, intimidating him with his presence. The bastard was now going to break up a family and destroy one of his only friends. He swore in his heart to take revenge on Tamer. No matter what it took, he would succeed in thwarting the tyrant's plans.

Chapter 3

Titus returned home, shaken by his encounter with Ifa. He had never seen his friend in such a state, as she always had a neutral face, in almost every situation. He could barely accept what was happening to Soroban, but even more so Ifa's reaction. To his knowledge, she had never really had to work or earn her own living. She would be in great need of help and comfort if her grandfather disappeared. He turned a corner and saw Tamer coming out of a house. He was putting something in his bag, smiling with satisfaction. "Hey, Tamer!" called Titus.

The watchman looked up to find the voice that had hailed him and saw Titus, who had had time to get closer.

"My good friend, Titus! What are you doing here?" he asked him with a condescending look in his eyes.

"I should be asking you the same question – you never go this far down the street, as far as I know."

Tamer walked towards him, a big smile stuck on his face. Titus stood still, staring him in the eyes, his head thrown back to keep eye contact.

"You won't tell me how to do my job. If I have to visit people in your neighbourhood, you're certainly not going to stop me."

“And who are you here to threaten? The widow Olivier? Her neighbour, Juno? Cibebe?”

“What difference does it make to you, tell me?”

Tamer was now even closer, almost touching. He laid his hand on the knife he always wore on his belt, to make Titus realize that one more word from him would be enough to make him use it.

“I don’t like people threatening my friends,” Titus replied, swallowing, with his eyes fixed on the weapon.

Tamer laughed.

“You’re talking about dear Soroban, aren’t you? News travels fast – I only came from his house this morning! You’ll know these aren’t threats, I’m only carrying out the demands of the Council. His knowledge could help people. It’s against the law to keep it to himself.”

Tamer put his hands on Titus’s shoulders and pretended to straighten his collar. A black cloud passed over the street.

“You might want to think about getting home before the storm hits. Don’t worry about Cibebe. All she did was pay what she owed me. And as for Soroban, soon you won’t be able to interfere. In a few days, he’ll be out of your life.”

He turned and walked away up the street. Titus growled. He would find a way. He continued walking home and realized he’d been keeping his fists clenched ever since he saw Tamer. “I really need to learn to stay calm with him,” he thought.

He found Raina in her room. She was busy mending a piece of clothing. Titus came in and sat down beside her. Raina always left her canvas open in case anyone needed to talk to her. She had never liked closed spaces and preferred to live close to others. Titus paused for a long time, looking at her. Raina knew how to wait for confidences without rushing them. Titus hesitated. He

wanted to ask for advice about Soroban, but he suspected that Raina's answer would disappoint him. His eyes were fixed on Raina's hands. Her nimble fingers, though deformed by age, moved quickly and efficiently over the cloth. Her needle disappeared, to reappear farther away and, little by little, reduce the hole that adorned the shirt she was patching. He turned into the common space and gathered his courage to speak.

"I met Ifa in the square."

Raina still said nothing and continued her work, concentrating. She nodded gently to show that she had heard him.

"She said that Soroban will give up and accept the requisition, he continued, lowering his head, looking stubbornly at his hands resting on his thighs."

He felt strangely tense. Anger he knew well – fear, too – but a new emotion was growing in him. He was struggling to swallow, as if he had eaten too many cricket cookies. He saw her move out of the corner of his eye, and looked up to see that Raina had put down her work and was watching him.

"I suspected it. And believe me, it is probably the best decision. It's astonishing that he resisted for so long."

Titus rose suddenly.

"The best decision? Ifa certainly does not think so!"

He wanted to throw the chair across the room, to make as much noise as possible, to shake Raina, to reason her. All the anger he had managed to control from the street was rising inside him, ready to pour out on the poor woman.

"You are still young, Titus, you have everything to discover, and so does Ifa. Soroban has resisted all his life and has been intimidated for years. Do you know why?"

“Because it makes no sense to succumb to these barbaric methods! Because the Council abuses people and manipulates those who work for them!”

“No. He did it for Ifa. He did it to stay with her. He couldn’t accept when she was a child, because he would have had to take her with him and he insisted that she should live in the City. That she should choose her own future. He always wanted to help people, but he wanted to help her first. Now that she’s grown up, there’s no reason for him to stay.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense! Helping citizens is what he does now with his workshop, he helps the people around him.”

“He’ll be able to intervene on a larger scale once he’s there. Contributing to the harvest is helping the whole city.”

Titus was about to go up in flames, he was so enraged. He didn’t believe for a moment that the Council’s innovations were really helping the city. He was convinced that they were keeping most of what they were growing, and that the City was only benefiting from the crumbs, the leftovers. He was going around in circles, moving between the soup kiosk and Raina’s room, looking all around him to find someone who would share his point of view. But they were alone in the house.

“Soroban trusts the Council...” Raina began.

Seeing that Titus was about to interrupt her, she raised her hand and continued.

“... And I know you don’t understand, but he thinks he’ll have a bigger impact over there. Please don’t try to change the situation, you’ll get into trouble.”

*

Ifa had gone home after dark and had crawled into bed without speaking to Soroban, who was working at his table. The next day, when she woke up, Soroban was not in their room. She got out of bed, put on her boots and tied her hair back. She felt uncomfortable about their quarrel the day before. She pulled back the canvas and saw him in the common area at the table with Janis and Josette.

“Good morning,” Ifa said, taking her seat on the right of Soroban.

“Good morning, my darling.”

He handed her a glass of water he had obviously prepared for her. Janis and Josette looked at each other and smiled at Ifa in turn. Janis had baked some flatbreads and offered one to Ifa who gladly accepted. She ate her bread, piece by piece, taking care to keep her eyes fixed on it to avoid the gaze of others. She was mentally preparing to address her grandfather when she heard knocking. Janis got up to open the door. The door slid open with a loud metallic noise and a huge silhouette appeared in the morning light.

“Good morning everyone!” Tamer’s voice echoed loudly throughout the room. “I wanted to remind you that it’s distribution day today!”

“There’s no danger we’d forget,” Janis mumbled between her teeth.

Tamer pretended he didn’t hear.

“You’ll notice that there is less food this week. With the drought of late, we’ve had to cut back on rations.”

“What?” Janis looked shocked. “It was so frugal the last time and you’re saying it will be worse this time?”

“Yes. You know what they say. If we had access to plenty of water and could improve our techniques, we might be able to do better.”

“And what are you waiting for?” Janis asked.

“We’re waiting for the right time. Or rather the right person, right Soroban?”

“We can probably improve the process, Tamer, but I don’t think now is the time to talk about it.”

Soroban was trying to quieten things down. It was a low blow for Tamer to bring up the subject in front of Janis who was struggling to feed her three children and had to deal with Josette’s repeated absences.

“No, I think it’s a very good time, indeed!” Janis protested. “You have a solution and you don’t put it into action?”

Soroban was silent. The guilt was rising inside him at an exponential rate. Many citizens would have said exactly the same as Janis when they heard of a possible solution. Anything that would help increase food rations should be implemented quickly, for the good of all.

Ifa could no longer stand by and watch Soroban being gnawed by remorse. She put her glass firmly on the table and dared to broach the subject that had obsessed her since the previous day.

“If the problem lies in the lack of water, and crops not adapted to our climate, why not look elsewhere for answers?”

“Look where?” Tamer asked her, staring at her as one would at a crazy person.

“North!”

Tamer laughed meanly.

“The famous fertile Great North? The forgotten paradise of our ancestors? You believe that nonsense?”

Red rose to Ifa’s cheeks and an adrenaline rush made her hands shake.

“Of course I believe it! Why does everyone talk about it if there’s no such thing as the Great North? No one has ever

gone that far – there must be something better! I bet we can find farmland and streams.”

Janis switched her gaze from Josette to Ifa, incredulous.

“Ifa, I’ve been searching the country for years and I’ve never seen anything like it. What’s over there – Josette pointed north with her chin – is emptiness, and ruins everywhere.”

“We have to go further, that’s all!”

Ifa was convinced that this was the solution to their problem.

“And who’s going on that beautiful trip to wonderland, eh? The Great North is a story we tell our children to make them sleep at night. I’m surprised your grandfather never told you otherwise.”

Tamer talked to her like she was five years old. Of course it was a story they told the children, but to Ifa that didn’t mean it wasn’t true. Most stories and legends were based on reality. The Great North would solve all their problems. If Ifa could convince Soroban to go there with her they could start afresh, create a new life outside the City.

“You’re free to believe what you want, Ifa. I’m telling you, there’s nothing but death out there. The future is here and your grandfather will help us make it better,” Tamer concluded with a pat on Soroban's back, along with a wink.

He took the glass in Soroban’s hand, swallowed the contents in a single gulp, then left the house without a word.

*

Ifa spent the rest of the day in thick fog, with a heavy head and weak legs. How to convince Soroban that the key lay in the Great North? Ifa knew absolutely nothing about travel or what was out there. She had always been too

scared to even think about getting out of the City and exploring. This time, however, she felt an impulse in her soul, an instinct that drove her to set out in search of that lost place. She had been walking around in circles in the square for quite a while when she suddenly found her answer. Josette! She was the only person who could help her.

Ifa ran to the house and found Josette sitting at a table in front of a herbal tea, her head bent over a large piece of crumpled paper.

“I’d like you to tell me about the outside,” announced Ifa without preamble.

Josette raised her head and sighed with a wry smile.

“You seem quite convinced that this is the solution to your problem, don’t you?”

“Yes, absolutely,” answered Ifa.

“I’m willing to tell you what I know, but I doubt that it will really help you.”

Josette took a big sip and gently put her cup back on the table without taking her eyes off Ifa. By purest chance, they were alone in the house. Janis had gone out with the children for their daily walk and Soroban had gone to visit a client. Ifa hadn’t seen him since lunch. So they were alone to talk without being disturbed. Josette took a deep breath and began her explanation.

“When I go out of the City for the Council, I never know if it’s the last time I’ll see my children and Janis. I’ve already told you that there are only ruins outside. That’s partly true. Sometimes you meet people who have chosen not to come together as a community, and live by plundering other people’s resources, or attacking couriers like me. Believe it or not, life is easy here. The guards keep us safe.”

Ifa listened carefully, mentally taking notes. She didn’t dare to interrupt Josette, but a thousand questions were

racing through her mind. She wanted to find out everything from the outside, and thus create a plan, put together an argument that Soroban couldn't say no to. Finally, Ifa asked: "How far have you gone?"

Chapter 4

The discussion with Josette had greatly enlightened Ifa about the journey she planned to undertake with Soroban. She would need a few days to gather everything, but Ifa was confident that she would be able to leave the City within three or four days. Titus could certainly help her in her search for materials for the camp, and Raina could provide them with some supplies for the first few days. Ifa listed all the materials in her head so that she would not forget anything: a shelter, containers to purify the water and carry it, and warmer clothes for cooler nights. They were both equipped with strong and comfortable shoes to walk long distances. The hardest part would be carrying their equipment. But Ifa was sure that Titus could find them large backpacks like the one Josette used when she left the City.

Ifa wanted to have everything planned before talking to Soroban about her idea. If he could see how serious she was about her approach and that she had planned everything, he might admit that it was the best solution.

She had spent the afternoon talking with Josette. Janis had returned with the children and then they had been busy together preparing their evening meal. Ifa planned to

eat alone with her grandfather in their room. She would take the opportunity to ask him questions and understand his reasons for accepting the requisition. Knowing more about his arguments would help her dispute them.

With Janis and Josette, she had made cricket bread that she intended to serve with peanuts and nut butter. That way her grandfather would notice Ifa's ability to design a complete meal in spite of the little food available: an indispensable asset for leaving!

While waiting for Soroban's return, she decided to go out to meet him and escort him home. The evening was hot and sticky. The cold season had not yet arrived. However, the days had begun to shorten and now the sun was quietly disappearing behind the horizon. Ifa did not like to walk in the alley after dark. She was not afraid of the dark, but she was afraid of what could be hidden there. The guards kept the City safe, but sometimes people, mostly women, were attacked in the evening. Ifa's mother had taught her how to react in such situations, but she hoped from the bottom of her heart that she would never have to apply her knowledge.

At every door she passed by, Ifa heard the noises and conversations of the inhabitants. A few laughs filled the air, in amongst household sounds of clattering utensils and pots boiling over fires. Ifa sketched out a smile as she heard two children chatting animatedly and then burst out laughing in unison. The people of the neighbourhood seemed happy. As happy as one could be in the difficult conditions they were used to living in. After all, if all you know is misery, you get used to it, she thought. With the cold season coming up, food distributions would be more and more spaced out, and their contents would get thinner. Last year, many people didn't make it through the season, especially older people and young children. The heat was

always welcomed back with great joy, as it meant the return of crops and insects.

Her heart tightened for a moment. A few days before, she had also felt this simple happiness, this joy of living with her grandfather despite the difficulties. Now she realized that she would never again feel so light, so carefree. She became aware of the injustice of her life as a citizen. She had always known it, but accepted it, not seeing the need to change the situation. Today, her whole body was revolting, joining forces with her thoughts and her soul to find a solution.

She felt completely disconnected from her neighbours. As if she was the only one with her eyes open while everyone else lived in darkness. What would happen if she dared to bring up the subject with the other citizens? Would she manage to express her ideas in order to convince her friends and neighbours to leave this half-life and find an exile somewhere else, somewhere they could all start afresh?

Lost in her thoughts, Ifa had ventured to the end of the alley, and found herself at the foot of the steps leading up to the Fortress. She looked up to the gate that separated the City from the fortifications. Four guards were posted there tonight. Ifa frowned, astonished. Usually only one or two guards would defend the gate because it was insurmountable and impossible to open. A complex system of pulleys had to be used simultaneously inside and out. It was therefore impossible for a citizen to enter without an accomplice on the other side to activate the pulley.

“Good evening,” said Ifa. “What’s going on?”

“Continue on your way. We’re not allowed to give out information.”

Ifa remained frozen for a few moments. The guards weren’t used to chatting, but normally they at least

answered the questions they were asked. Something must have happened earlier in the day. Soroban would probably know – she would question him when she found him.

Ifa glanced to her right to another set of steps, which led to the square, and saw no sign of Soroban returning, so she decided to turn back and wait for him at home. She would take this opportunity to prepare a hot drink to accompany their meal. She crossed the entire alley again. It was completely dark by now. The sun lit up the horizon with thin orange and pink slices. At the end of the alley, Ifa met a couple of neighbours who were walking home, arm in arm. They looked at each other with a loving gaze that could deceive no one. Ifa greeted them with her hand – and they gratified her with a beautiful synchronized smile.

Inside the house, the children were still sitting at the table. The two older ones were playing checkers together and the younger one was watching them with bored eyes. She would probably have liked to join in and was looking forward to her turn. Ifa kissed them on the forehead, as usual, and crossed the common area to sneak into her room. She grabbed the lamp on the shelf next to the entrance and turned it on. A soft orange glow lit up the room and Ifa turned to close the canvas and enjoy a few moments of privacy before her grandfather returned. She looked for the teapot and found it on the counter at the back. She put the lamp on the table and turned around to pick up the teapot and the jar containing the dried herbs she was going to brew for their meal.

As she turned around a second time, she noticed that the room seemed tidier than usual. Several of Soroban's tools and instruments were out of place. His water filtration equipment and the trunk containing his belongings were nowhere in sight. Ifa began to worry. She scanned the room to see if anything else was missing and then she saw the

piece of paper on the table, stuck under a candle. She rushed to see what it was and recognized her grandfather's cursive handwriting. It was folded in half, and had her name on the front: "Ifa". She hiccupped in surprise and sat down on the chair. She placed the lamp next to the paper and unfolded it to read the message.

My dearest Ifa,

It is with a heavy heart that I write you this letter. I wish I could have spoken to you in person, to be able to take your hand and explain it all to you. But time is running out at an alarming speed and I have to leave now. I know that your opinion differs from mine and that you would like me to stay here with you, or even leave together for an impossible quest to the Great North. You say it yourself, Ifa – I'm old. Such an adventure with you, though exciting and probably highly rich in discoveries, would be too arduous for the poor man I have become.

I've decided to follow Tamer of my own free will and leave for the Fortress this afternoon. I wish to help my friends, my fellow citizens, and you, my dear Ifa, blood of my blood, to achieve a better quality of life. If my knowledge and skills can benefit you, I'd like to try. I will miss you every minute of my life. I will think of you every day and I hope that my work will improve the crops and give you better chances.

I know you probably feel betrayed. I should have taken the time to explain everything to you and I regret it bitterly. I hope you'll be able to forgive me and accept it. You have an inner strength that you don't even know exists and you will find your way in this life. You are now an adult, the young woman you have become fills me with pride. I dare to hope that I have taught you enough to get by in the City. So that you can create your own occupation and your own

network of customers and friends. Raina will help you if you need it. Janis and Josette will be there to support you and our room will remind you of everything we shared.

I must now end this message with a warning. Don't go to explore the Great North, don't try anything to get me out. Surveillance will be stepped up as soon as I leave, Tamer warned me. You're my most precious thing in the world, I wish with all my heart for you to stay safe and healthy.

Your Popo Soro who loves you with all his heart. Forgive me again for this paper farewell.

Ifa put the letter down with trembling hands and shallow breath. The room was spinning before her eyes and her peripheral vision was darkening. As her breathing quickened, Ifa tried to count the seconds to calm herself, but she couldn't do it. She shook her head and arms in an attempt to stop her tremors, but the tension only increased. She pushed her chair back violently, rushed out of the room and the house without saying a word to anyone, and began to run up the alley towards the fortified gate. Tamer was at the foot of the steps.

"Slowly, slowly young lady. You'll never get to the top."

"Leave me alone, you bastard! I want to talk to him, I have to talk to him!"

Ifa struggled with all her might to push Tamer away, but he stood still like a statue.

"You can't. It's impossible for anyone to pass through the gates, except the guards and the requisitioned, you know that."

"Then requisition me! I won't leave without speaking to him!"

"You?"

Tamer burst out laughing.

“And what in the world would we need you for? You’ve never done any real work in the City, you don’t belong in the Fortress – you’d be useless!”

Insulted, Ifa kicked him in the shin, which made him give a muffled cry of pain. She went around him and began to climb the steps. A guard stopped her by using his body as a barrier and Tamer grabbed her shoulders from behind.

“Get out of here. It is too late. He has left you a letter. It will be the last communication you will get from him.”

Trembling, Ifa looked frantically around her as if to find a familiar face or a way out, something that could help her out of this nightmare. Then she felt a comforting warmth that enveloped her from head to toe, a bit like when she drank Raina’s soup. This reassuring warmth gave her the strength and courage to calm down and pull herself together. A friendly person was approaching. She closed her eyes and considered her options. Fighting Tamer and the four guards was foolish – she would only succeed in getting herself arrested, which would do nothing to help Soroban. She swallowed and exhaled slowly to calm the heart that wanted to leap out of her chest.

“All right, all right, she answered,” resigned. “I’m leaving.”

Tamer motioned to the guard to let her go and stepped back to let her pass down the stairs. Ifa wiped her nose and eyes with the sleeve of her shirt and walked down the steps towards the square. Then she saw him, near the wall, moving slowly in her direction. She strode towards him and threw herself into his arms without saying a word.

Chapter 5

Titus had gone out after dinner to meet a client. He rarely went out in the evening, being more of an early-morning merchant, but circumstances sometimes forced him to do so. This was the case that night. The exchange had always gone well with this client, but this time the result exceeded his expectations by far. He found the packet in his trouser pocket and brought it to his nose. The smell reminded him of his childhood. He had harvested a good quantity of medicinal herbs that Raina could use. Raina would enjoy them as much as he did, if not more. It had been worth crossing the entire City to get such a treasure!

He had reached the square when he heard a woman's cries of anger and frustration. It was rare to hear raised voices in the City, and when it did happen, it was rarely for a good reason. He turned around and walked towards the voice, putting his hand behind his back to check that his little knife was still there. He was reassured by its presence, light and strong under his clothes.

The shouting had suddenly stopped. He continued to move forward cautiously all the same. Women were

sometimes assaulted after dark. He hadn't witnessed such an event for a long time and hoped that he was wrong and that no one was hurt. He saw a shadow running down the stairs and only recognized it when its foot landed on the last step. She stepped forward and let herself fall into his arms.

Her hair smelled like cricket bread and he felt her warmth enveloping him in a second. He wanted to talk to her when he noticed that she was crying softly. Not big sobs like the day before, but silent cries that made her shoulders tremble. They remained in each other's arms for a few minutes before she let go of her grip and took a step backwards with her eyes fixed on the ground.

"Soroban left today while I was out. He agreed to follow Tamer. It's over."

Titus drew closer and held her again without speaking. He could hardly see what he could say in the situation. Ifa was visibly devastated by her grandfather's departure and no words would have been worth the comfort his arms were giving her. He pressed his chin to her head and lost his gaze in the space around them. The place was deserted. People usually went home at sunset except on very hot days when some tried to cool off after dark. The wind rose quietly and Titus enjoyed the gentle breeze as he closed his eyes. A wind of change. Ifa's life would metamorphose now that Soroban was gone. She'd have to find something to do if she was to survive.

Ifa stirred a little under his grip. She shivered. Titus offered to walk her home, which she accepted with a brief nod of her head. The walk seemed to revive her spirit, and she began to talk to him quickly, determined.

"I wanted Soroban to go with me in search of the Great North, but he said that he was too old and weak for the journey. He said that his skills would be put to better use here, to help the people. I don't believe that for a moment."

Ifa gritted her teeth and looked stubbornly ahead.

“Why don’t you believe it?” Titus asked.

“I don’t believe his skills are the only solution to improve our lot. I know there is somewhere else where we could live free and grow our own food.”

“In the Great North, is that it?”

She stopped abruptly and turned to look him in the eye.

“Exactly. And I intend to prove it to them all.”

They had arrived at her house. Ifa stopped in front of the sliding door and looked inside. Everything was quiet, the children were probably asleep. Only Janis and Josette were still sitting at the table, talking in low voices.

“I’m going to have to tell them that he’s gone,” she said, gesturing toward them. “And I’m going too.”

“Are you really planning to leave?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. Titus didn’t take time to think. He could see the pain on Ifa’s frightened face. He knew she would never change her mind until she found a way to save Soroban. Trying to get him out of the Fortress was perilous, but most of all, impractical. The only way to do it would be to convince all citizens, and the Council, that there was life elsewhere. He put one hand on Ifa’s shoulder and leaned over to look her in the eye.

“I will go with you. We’ll find the Great North together.”

*

The next day, Titus and Ifa met to finalize the plans for their expedition. They both wanted to leave as soon as possible to take advantage of the warm weather. In a few weeks, the days would start to get colder, making their journey more difficult. They sat at the table with Josette, who repeated her most important safety tips.

“The ideal is always to find high ground so that you can see from all sides. If you walk into a valley, you may not have enough time to react if there is an attack. Also, during the night, take turns standing guard. You won’t meet many people, but if you do, chances are they won’t be peaceful. Don’t take risks and don’t trust anyone.”

Ifa nodded. She listened very carefully to Josette and took in all her knowledge. Over the years, Josette had accumulated more days outside of the City than within it. If anyone knew what they were talking about, it was her.

“So do you think we have everything we need?” asked Titus, pointing to the corner of the room in which a whole bunch of various objects was stacked.

Josette nodded.

“What you’re missing is experience. If you have to defend yourself, will you be able to do it?”

“No worries on my side,” Titus answered. “I’ve been used to doing so for many years.”

“Yes indeed, but this time Ifa will be with you,” Josette said gravely.

Ifa said nothing, sitting on the other side of the table. She bit her lip as she listened to them talk. She was determined to leave; she wouldn’t change her mind, but Josette had just pointed out that she had never had to defend herself in her whole life. Soroban had been more than a guardian, he had provided her with everything she needed, without ever having to fight or put herself in danger. She had, however, a big advantage over all the others. She could sense an alien presence from several metres away, allowing them to take shelter long before they were discovered. Unfortunately, she couldn’t talk about it at all. This kind of power was frowned upon, even by people she trusted. She continued to bite her lip as she

quickly thought of an argument that could convince Josette of her ability to travel.

Janis, who had been following the conversation from the beginning, was giving Josette insistent looks. They seemed to have engaged in a mute dialogue, without anyone understanding. Ifa jumped at the opportunity to divert the attention away from herself.

“What are you two up to?”

Josette gave her lover a dirty look that made her look sheepish. Janis then took a deep breath and spoke.

“I think Josette should go with you.”

Josette scowled back in her seat.

“Do you realize what this means?” Josette asked her spouse. “It’s a dangerous journey and above all it would put me in a position of flight before the Council, and you’d be reprimanded!”

Janis let out a dry little laugh.

“You’re dying to do it! Ever since Ifa told us of her plan, you’ve been ruminating! You’re passionate about adventure and travel. If they leave without you, you’ll spend the next few weeks worrying, and regretting that you didn’t go with them.”

It was Josette’s turn to blush. She crossed her arms without speaking. Ifa glanced at Titus and saw that he was holding back so as not to laugh. Their conflict seemed almost comical.

“You told me that you had to return to the mission in a few days anyway. The Council will believe you have left as planned, and no one will know the difference.”

Josette was sinking deeper and deeper into her seat. She was now staring at the bumpy surface of the table and still hadn’t opened her mouth. Janis continued her monologue.

“At the end of the day, this is still a mission for the Council, isn’t it? If you find... no, *when* you find the Great North, everyone will benefit. This is more than just a few pieces of metal!”

“And what about the children?” Josette asked, coming out of her silence.

“I’ll take care of them as I do every time you’re away. It doesn’t change anything for us. But it could greatly influence the chances of success or failure for Ifa and Titus. Think about Soroban!”

Josette sighed. Janis knew how to deal with her, how to find the right arguments to push her to accept. She confessed defeat and Janis gave her a big smile as she leaned back in her chair, proud of her success.

“I will gather my materials and notify the Council of my imminent departure. Hopefully they will provide me with some food for the journey. We’ll take off at dawn tomorrow morning. Be prepared.”

She got up and left. Ifa was relieved to know that Josette would accompany them. Thanks to her, they wouldn’t waste time exploring places she already knew. Her experience would be an indispensable asset for orientation and setting up a camp, activities that were completely unknown to her and Titus. Ifa looked at Titus, who had a strange look on his face.

“I have a feeling that it will be an interesting trip, with two stubborn women!”

Ifa gave him a blow on the shoulder, which he dodged and laughed.

“Now I must go and tell Raina. I’ll ask her if she can provide us with some useful herbs. I’ll be here tomorrow morning.”

He went out as quickly as Josette a few moments earlier. Ifa felt drained of all emotion. Petrified. The day

before, she had had lunch with Soroban and was looking for a way to leave with him, and now she was leaving *for* him, accompanied by two people ready to risk their lives for her project. She hoped with all her heart that she had not made a mistake. That the Great North was truly filled with farmland and fresh water. She hoped beyond all else that she could return with this confirmation and thus save Soroban, but also all the inhabitants of the City, to let them know of this lost world so that they could finally live, free and healthy.

Chapter 6

Soroban looked around to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. His belongings were piled up in his trunk and his tools and instruments were loaded into a box. He sighed, a little nervous, and nodded to the supervisor accompanying him. Tall, with shaved brown hair, the guard didn't talk much and was content to do what was asked. At that very moment, this consisted of transporting the trunk and the toolbox on a wheeled cart. Tamer grabbed Soroban by the shoulders and told him that he had made the right decision. They left the room and Soroban followed them. He took one last look at the letter in the centre of the table. Tears streamed down his face. He would have liked so much to say goodbye in person. But Ifa would never have let him go. It was better this way. Much easier.

Tamer led the way into the alley, back straight, nose up. He displayed the satisfied manner of a man who had accomplished a great feat. Soroban followed him, shoulders down. In a few minutes, he would pass through the gates of the Fortress and leave the City behind him, his birthplace and the place where he had lived for the last sixty-two years. His throat was tied, remembering the

people he'd known. His parents, who had given him a safe and happy youth. His wife, who had left him giving birth to their beloved daughter, his only daughter who had been his reason for living for so many years. And Ifa. Ifa, who would have to face life alone now. He smiled faintly at the thought of her. He had always wanted to protect her from everything, and perhaps he had exaggerated. She who had never worked by herself all these years. She would have to fend for herself now. His heart squeezed against his will. It was no longer time for regrets – he had made the decision to leave, and he had to focus on the future.

The day was hot and the sun was blazing. Drops of sweat ran down his hair. Soroban could hear the laboured breathing of the supervisor behind him as he tried to push the cart over the uneven pavement. They arrived at the foot of the steps. Soroban turned one last time in the hope of seeing a familiar face. That's when he saw her. Raina. She came out of a house at the foot of the steps, her basket of herbs slipped on her arm. She must have felt she was being watched, for she raised her head to find her eyes meet with Soroban's. They stared at each other as if to convey all the emotion they were feeling at that very moment. Raina seemed to understand what his presence meant at the city gates, accompanied by two guards. He maintained contact with her for as long as he could. He tried to express to her his friendship, his love, his thanks for all these years spent together. He silently asked her to keep hope in life, to take care of Ifa and to remain the person he had known. His eyes filled with tears and he sent her a kiss blown with his hand. Raina put her hand over her heart and nodded. This simple gesture showed him that she understood.

Soroban turned around and began to climb the steps. A third supervisor had come down and was helping the second to carry the cart to the top. The door opened slowly

and curiously, almost silently. Soroban had always expected to hear a squeaking sound at the door. He was almost disappointed. He crossed to the other side with a hesitant step and his eyes widened. There was no one on the other side, except for a guard holding the pulley. There were several buildings on either side of the street. They all seemed to be in excellent condition. There was glass shining in the windows and each building had a door, a rather rare feature on the City side. But what struck him was the flowers planted in the ground. Long rows of flowers bloomed on either side of the path. Soroban had never had the chance to see such a sight. Nothing grew below, except for the twigs that dotted the cliff. Soroban was dazzled by the panorama of colours before him, so much so that he had stopped walking.

Tamer turned to him and looked at him mockingly.

“You’ll have many more opportunities to see them, go ahead.”

The second guard had resumed his wagon pushing. His task seemed much easier now, given the flat, levelled ground inside the Fortress. The door closed behind them, and this time Soroban heard a rattling sound as it was locked. There was no turning back now. It was a well-known fact: the fortified ones never came out, except for those guarding the City or the couriers. Everyone else was forbidden to leave. It was even forbidden to communicate with anyone inside the City. Soroban felt a chill along his back. He was afraid, but he tried not to focus on it.

Tamer started walking again and Soroban continued to follow him for a few minutes. He looked all around him and stored up as much information as possible about his surroundings. Everything looked the same. The buildings were made of a grey material that looked like stone that had been crushed and then reformed into smooth,

homogenous surfaces. A few windows were open above the bouquets of flowers that spread from one door to another. The sun was at its zenith, so none of the buildings shaded the pedestrians. Soroban was hot and getting thirsty. He was not used to walking for very long and when he had to, he preferred to go out early in the morning or at the end of the day. He usually reserved noon for lighter work or a nap.

They arrived at the intersection of two streets and Tamer turned left. Behind a building on their right there was an open space, somewhat like the square in the City, but with several benches. Here it was less deserted; a few people were sitting and talking. On the other side of this square stood a large building of several storeys – Soroban counted at least five – still made of that unknown material that seemed cold and rough to the touch. He understood that Tamer was heading there and followed him.

Tamer was silent, contrary to his habit. Soroban had finally agreed, so he didn't need to speak any more. Soroban didn't miss his incessant babbling at all. They entered the grey building, where a man was guarding the entrance. Tamer nodded and the man replied with the same gesture. Soroban noticed that he was wearing a black armband on his right bicep, like all the other guards. He wondered for a few moments if this armband meant anything, but he was taken out of his reflection by their arrival in a huge circular room into which the sun was shining. Soroban looked up to a large bay window through which the sky could be seen. The back wall was made of glass as well. In the centre of the room was a round table surrounded by seven chairs, all occupied. Everyone turned to the newcomers in the room.

A woman stood up and joined them.

“You must be Soroban. Thank you for answering our call.”

She held out her hand to him and he shook it awkwardly.

“Tamer no doubt explained what we expect you to do?”

“He told me that you needed help with the agricultural plan?” Soroban asked. “I was given very few details.”

The woman gave him a kind smile.

“Come and sit with us, please. Kal, can you bring us a seat please?”

A young man with carrot-coloured hair and a freckled face appeared as if by magic and approached a chair around the table. Soroban hadn’t noticed him when he entered the room. He stared at him for a few moments and immediately recognized him. Kal gave him a quick glance and his look made Soroban understand that he did not want their relationship to be known. Soroban looked away and sat down beside the woman who had spoken.

“Thank you, Tamer, you may go. Please take the gentleman’s effects to his new home.”

Tamer bowed politely and went out, accompanied by the second watchman. Kal stood at the far end of the room, near the windows, with his hands folded in front of him, motionless and silent. Soroban was stunned to find him here, he who had disappeared so many years before. Soroban had always believed he was dead. The woman on his left began to speak again, and Soroban gave her his undivided attention.

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Dylan, and we are the Council,” she said, gesturing to the rest of the people around the table.

She smiled a lot and expressed herself in a calm manner. Her ash-coloured hair was freshly cut at the chin.

Her eyes radiated a lively and honest spirit and she seemed perfectly confident. Soroban wondered if she was running the place and then he remembered that the Council was a democratic institution, each member having equal power.

“I am the promoter of the agricultural plan. So we will have the pleasure of working together.”

She began a description of the plan, which consisted mainly of reviewing current crops and improving them to increase production. Yields were steadily declining and the council was trying to make each plot as profitable as possible.

“You will have to help us with the plans, whether we need to rearrange the plots to devote more or less space to each crop. But also to assist us with the water issue. Tamer says that you have created a filtration system and that you supply a large part of the City?”

“Well...”

Soroban was hesitant. He suddenly panicked, wondering if his skills would really meet the Council’s expectations.

“Yes?” Dylan encouraged him.

“I have indeed created a method of purification, but it is being used by the citizens themselves. I helped them get started and they are now self-sufficient. My philosophy has always been to teach rather than to give.”

Someone moved to his right and caught his eye. Several councillors had turned to him with questioning eyes.

“All right, so people will be able to continue to get by now that you’re gone.”

Soroban nodded and tried to get his thoughts together.

“It goes without saying that it will be a different system that will have to be put in place here. I’ll be able to visualize the requirements better once I’ve visited the plantation.”

“So be it.”

Dylan stood up and thanked the other members of the Council for coming.

“We’ll adjourn the meeting, if you don’t mind. I’ll present the crops to our friend. Kal? Come with us.”

Kal nodded and set off after Dylan. The Council members exited through a door that Soroban hadn’t noticed. Dylan approached the glass wall at the back of the room and Soroban finally saw what was behind it. Unlike the City, where you couldn’t see to the horizon, here the space stretched before their eyes. Plants and green sprouts of all kinds spread out over a distance that was difficult to assess. Dylan looked at him with a big smile.

“Surprising, isn’t it?”

Soroban realized he was holding his breath. He let out an admiring sound.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” he whistled.

“Wait until you get down there to fully appreciate it.”

Kal pressed a mechanism and the window opened. Soroban felt the air caressing his cheeks and ruffling the curls of his hair. A staircase became visible in front of them and they took it down to ground level and the plantation. Soroban’s legs had difficulty carrying him after walking from his house. He rejected this thought to concentrate on the impossible vision that was before his eyes. It was a miracle, something unexpected. He had often imagined the plantation, but to see the extent of it made him almost dizzy.

Kal noticed his discomfort and handed him a walking stick that he had just taken from near the door. Soroban gratefully accepted his help and set out to follow Dylan on the tour. Dylan gave him a brief explanation of the crops involved in the plan. Most crops were targeted except for squash and peanuts, which were already very successful. Everything else had to be reviewed, moved, fertilized or

watered according to the needs of each plant. Dylan had high expectations. The Council was counting on her to double the production of these hectares and ensure enough crops to survive the winter.

It was a big challenge. Soroban squinted at the scale of the planting. Sweat was dripping from his forehead and he regretted not having brought a hat with him among all his belongings. Kal gave him a pat on the shoulder and handed him a straw hat with a chin movement that meant “take it.” Soroban had forgotten Kal’s particularities. He was always ready, always ahead of the needs of others. He was beginning to understand why he had been kept in the Fortress and why he seemed to be escorting Dylan everywhere. A man like him was a tremendous asset to a group in a position of power. He wondered for a moment if Dylan knew what he was, and he decided that she did. Of course she had to know – that was his greatest quality. So his powers were somehow accepted. Soroban weighed this information for a few moments, then continued to follow Dylan and listen to her monologue. Her voice was calm and almost soporific, and Soroban had to force himself to stay focused.

They walked through the fields, and Soroban noted everything he saw. The land was suffering from the intensity of the crops. The soil was dry, and yellow leaves hung loosely on most of the plants. Soroban tried to keep a neutral face, although he noticed that Kal looked at him seriously with every new thought that crossed his mind.

“That will do for today, Dylan said eventually. From now on, Kal will be able to accompany you wherever you go. You have access to everything inside the Fortress. Kal will show you around. I welcome you among us, Soroban. We will have great success together, I am sure.”

Chapter 7

It was dark in the common area. The faint flame of a lamp swayed and created impressive shadows. Sitting at the table, Ifa and Josette were quietly eating a grain mixture accompanied by dried fruit. Josette was busy putting together the different maps she was going to bring on their journey. They were waiting for Titus. Ifa felt nerves gnawing at her stomach. She wondered what she would find on the outside, but more importantly, whether she would be able to complete such a journey.

The door slid on its wheels and Titus hurried inside. He was carrying a bag on his back. Ifa looked at him for a moment. He was dressed as he usually was, trousers in a neutral shade and a faded shirt in a thin fabric that let the air through. He had good shoes that looked sturdy, although worn. A wide-brimmed hat completed his outfit.

Ifa finished her meal and put away her bowl. She picked up Soroban's old hat he'd left in their room and closed the canvas on her way out. The morbid thought that she might never return entered her mind. She chased it away at once. "I must come back for Soroban," she thought.

Josette looked at her to make sure she was ready. Ifa nodded briefly. She saw Josette enter her room, probably to say goodbye to Janis. Janis hadn't shown up in the common area, but Ifa knew from experience that she would get up early when Josette left for a mission. Ifa took the opportunity to grab her bag, which had been sitting by the door since the previous day. She pushed the hat onto her head and went outside to wait for her travelling companions.

They set off westward with a light step. The sky was clearing behind them, proof that the day would soon dawn. When she got out of bed before dawn, Ifa always felt as if the night would never end. However, the sun had never missed an appointment and crossed the horizon tirelessly every morning. No guards were posted at the City limits: they only watched over the City and the Fortress gates. Citizens could leave if they wished, although few did. Everyone was afraid of what was out there. They lived in the certainty that being gathered in the City gave them a security that was not available elsewhere, plus they received food for their labour.

So the group was able to leave without any problems and walk along the road that followed the river. The road was level up to the horizon, which would make their expedition easier for the next few hours. The morning air was silent, except for the sound of the wind, which stirred up dust, twigs and a few dead leaves. Ifa usually liked peace and quiet, but now she wanted to talk to calm her nerves.

"What did Raina say when you told her we were leaving?"

Titus straightened the straps of his bag upon his shoulders.

"She was not very surprised, I must say. She saw him the day before yesterday."

“Soroban?”

Titus nodded in response.

“He went to visit her?” Ifa asked.

“No, she went to see a patient in your alleyway and passed him as he was going up the steps with Tamer.”

Ifa concentrated so as not to let tears come to her eyes. She imagined the scene and her heart clenched.

“Was she able to talk to him?”

Titus shook his head.

“He had already started to climb the steps. She told me that he seemed confident. He was moving on his own, no one was forcing him.”

Ifa nodded in agreement. That was good. A wave of relief surged through her stomach. She had imagined a scene in which Tamer pulled Soroban all the way down the alley and beat him. It was, of course, completely illogical since Soroban had seemed certain of his decision. He had probably surrendered himself to Tamer. Ifa was silent. Her need for discussion had evaporated. She was driven by one motivation only: to go as far north as possible, find water, land and return to free Soroban. She hadn't yet considered how she might rescue him. They would have plenty of time to think about that once their quest was complete.

“If we succeed, how will we get your grandfather out?” asked Titus, almost reading her mind.

Ifa rejected that thought – Titus wasn't a whisperer, it was just a coincidence; he too was thinking about this problem on his own. She didn't know what to say, and she didn't dare to say that she had no idea.

“I'll take care of it,” replied Josette, who walked a little ahead of them.

She hadn't opened her mouth since they left, just led the group and scanned the horizon and their surroundings.

She had turned towards them and was now walking backwards.

“I’m the only one of us who can get through the fortifications. I’ll set up a meeting with the Council and get him out.”

She turned around again and continued walking as if nothing had happened.

*

The sun was fully up now; they had been walking for about two hours. They had passed several ruined buildings. Josette had explained to them that they were old abandoned houses. All the useful objects in them had already been recovered, either by Josette or by others. She mentioned that some people who preferred to live outside the City had taken up residence there a few years back. Josette had met a man one day while exploring this area. He seemed peaceful, but hadn’t wanted to talk to her after finding out where she came from. Maybe he thought she would force him to come back with her. She had left him alone. On her next visit, he wasn’t there anymore. That happened sometimes. These people were nomadic, never staying in one place for very long. They would leave when they couldn’t find any more resources.

The road was getting closer to the river. Huge boulders were piled up at its edge. It was quite different from the City and its walls. Ifa kept her eyes on the ground in order to spot the insects that came across their path. She had captured several of them since they had left, keeping them in a cloth pouch hanging from her waist. An extra supply of food would be greatly appreciated. From time to time she would raise her head to look out at the horizon and observe the landscape around her.

It was deserted. As in the square, you could see the opposite bank of the river. A few ruins broke the monotony here and there. She saw a huge pile of scrap metal in the middle of the river. Then, just next to it, a silhouette completely covered with greenery that seemed to connect the two banks.

Ifa approached Josette to question her. She was looking at the ruins, with a smile on her face.

“It’s impressive, isn’t it?” she asked.

Titus joined them in a few strides and stared at the two specimens to their left.

“Two bridges once connected both sides of the river. They allowed people to cross by car, back in the days when people still used them. As you can see, one of them collapsed a long time ago. The second one is completely covered by moss. Too bad you can’t eat it – it would make a good supply for us!”

“Are you sure about that?”

Ifa had the sudden urge to get close to the carcass to collect all the moss. She had never seen so much greenery in her life. It was almost unthinkable to imagine a plant that was not edible. Raina had always told her that all plants had a purpose.

“Yes, I assure you. You can’t eat it, but some bugs feed on it, so you find a lot of it around here. Let’s take a break and you can continue your hunt if you want.”

Ifa took her bag off her shoulders and walked a little further, searching the ground with her eyes. She had seen collapsed constructions in the City before, but never as huge as this one. She raised her head and could see where the bridge had been, a large metal platform protruding into the void at the end of the cliff. She tried to see the other side, but the sun was dazzling her. She closed her eyes a few times and saw spots of light, which indicated that

several insects were nearby. She opened her eyes again and continued walking towards the shore, where a few small, dried, stunted groves were growing, under which she found larvae and pinworms, quickly inserting them into her pouch. She continued from grove to grove, searching them as she approached the river.

Once her pouch was full, she turned around and climbed up to find her companions waiting for her, sitting on the ground near the road. A noise from the water startled her and she lost her footing and fell on her hands and knees. A burning pain spread in her hand and along her arm at the same rate as the long lament that escaped from her mouth. She grabbed her right hand in her left and saw blood flowing from a large cut in the middle of her palm. Grimacing, she got up and walked towards the group. Josette was already halfway between her and Titus.

“Are you all right?” Josette shouted as she reached her.

She looked at Ifa’s hand and pursed her lips.

“It’s all right, we’ve got medical supplies.”

Ifa followed her to her bag. Josette took out strips of cloth and a jar that seemed to contain a sticky, smelly paste.

“The best ointment in the City!”

She winked at Titus, who was grinning.

“Yes, I’ve already experienced its effects,” he replied.

Josette looked at Ifa and explained.

“It’s Raina who makes it. I’m surprised you don’t know it, the children grew up with it!”

“I don’t think I’ve ever hurt myself,” Ifa said, straightening up.

She rummaged through her memory and couldn’t remember a time when she could have been hurt as a child. She admitted that she had never dared to put herself in danger, which explained a lot.

“What happened? Did you fall?” Josette asked.

“I heard a strange noise coming from the water. It distracted me and I lost my footing.”

“Probably a fish! Great! There are so few of them. I’m going to go down to the sand and try and catch it.”

She finished Ifa’s bandage, grabbed a long stick with a sharp end and a piece of light cloth and disappeared behind the groves. Ifa had never seen a fish before. Soroban had told her about them and shared memories of his childhood, and the few times he had been lucky enough to eat one. She loved listening to him talk about his youth. With his eyes fogged up, he would dive into his memory and help her imagine all those extraordinary adventures. Titus looked at her with a smile on his face.

“I hope she makes it. I’ve always dreamed of tasting it!”

Ifa smiled back at him and looked at her bandage. The pain was gone now and the bleeding had stopped. She blamed herself for hurting herself so stupidly just a few hours after they’d left. She hadn’t felt the fish before she heard it. She wondered if it was because she had never come across one before. Maybe her mind could only detect the presence of living things she had seen before? Or was it because the fish was underwater?

A cry of joy interrupted her reflection. She and Titus stood up and saw Josette climbing the bank among the groves, the piece of cloth wriggling in her right hand.

“I’ve got it!”

She tied the corners of the cloth and hung it on her backpack.

“We should get back on the road. We can prepare and cook it later. We still have hours before nightfall.”

They nodded, and set off again.

Chapter 8

Soroban had been following Kal for several minutes down the grey corridors of the building. He was trying to remember his way around, but everything looked the same from one floor to another. Giving up on the idea of memorizing his path, he realized that he would have plenty of time from now on to explore the place. After all, this was his new home. He watched Kal closely. His calm and steady gait gave the impression that he was hovering over the ground. The young man had grown since he'd last seen him. Of course, it was more than ten years ago! He wondered when they would finally have a chance to talk, as he was dying to know what had happened since his disappearance.

They arrived at a door, just like all the others, but Kal stopped in front of it. Like in the City, there were no locks on the doors. Far from reassuring him, this resemblance made him shudder. Kal let Soroban enter first, then followed him and closed the door. It was a fairly large room, larger than the one he had shared with Ifa. A glass pane covered most of the back wall. A bed occupied the right-hand side, next to which was a work table and shelves for storage. His trunk and the box containing his tools had been

placed nearby, waiting for him. Soroban had to admit that he felt quite comfortable there.

The window let in a lot of light. He glanced out of it and saw the river in the distance. Several lamps decorated the walls of the room. It was well thought out so that he could work both during the day and at night. Thinking about the work that awaited him suddenly made him feel tired. He felt tense, and wondered if he would be up to the task. He sat down on the bed and put the walking stick down beside him without a word. Kal sighed and sat down in a chair directly in front of him.

“I imagine you have a lot of questions.”

“That’s an understatement.”

Kal scowled and stretched his legs out in front of him.

“So as you can imagine, when I left the City I landed here. At that time, the members of the Council were different than today and one of them, Hubert, took me under his wing. We had all heard rumours about the fate of the whisperers who were being unmasked, but nobody really knew. In the City, it’s almost entertainment to speculate about what happens on the other side of the walls.”

“I wouldn’t call it entertainment. People are scared. Making assumptions helps them deal with their fears.”

“Maybe it does.”

Kal was moving around in his chair. He seemed uncomfortable.

“The truth is, in the past they were either exiled or killed. It all depended on who was on the Council at the time of their capture. The rulers dictate many laws and regulations, but these can be changed as soon as the councillors deem it necessary.”

Kal described his arrest when he was seven years old. Like any child of that age, he had been playing and

challenging his friends to do all sorts of things that were generally inadvisable, such as walking across the river or making fun of the guards. Unhappily for him, he had blundered and revealed his power to a watchman by making fun of his thoughts.

“At the time, I could hardly tell the difference between what people were thinking and what they were saying. So I exposed myself by my naivety and my somewhat rebellious spirit.”

Kal had been taken to the Fortress and presented to the Council. All the whisperers passed before the Council, which then decided their future: exile or execution. Hubert, who sat on the Council at that time, had managed to convince the Council to detain Kal, or rather to imprison him, since he was only a child. His fate could be determined when he reached the age of sixteen, the age of autonomy.

He was given a room and a guard was placed in front of it. In time, Hubert was able to remove the surveillance and Kal was free to walk around Fort Victory. This was the name given to the large building in which the Council met. This building had housed the government of the old city for years until the day it had fallen and the Council was formed. It was then renamed to celebrate the victory. When Kal had reached the age of majority, he had had to face judgment again. But all the councillors were now accustomed to his presence, so it was decided not to exile him. Dylan offered to requisition him to her service, and so he became her shadow.

“I looked for a way out for a long time. Especially in the early years. I missed my family. I missed Ifa. But after a few months I heard from a watchman that they were gone... so I thought it best to stay here.”

“She missed you a lot, too. Ifa. After you left, she didn’t dare get close to anyone.”

Kal sighed.

“It’s awful it had to happen this way I would have liked to keep in touch with her, but I would have put her in danger.”

He got up.

“You’re excused from work today. Tomorrow morning I’ll come and see you. If you have any questions, I’ll be able to answer them, or we’ll talk to Dylan. In the meantime, you can take a walk, you don’t have to stay here. A meal will be served at 6pm, on the ground floor, near the Council Chamber.”

He put his chair back and walked out of the room as Soroban looked on. He was overwhelmed by the day’s events. He had agreed to leave Ifa, but had not at all expected to meet her childhood friend. He almost felt as if he was betraying her by talking to him, even though she thought he had been dead all these years. Soroban rubbed his eyebrows, he felt the onset of a migraine. He began to unpack his things and make his room a little more welcoming, then he lay down on the bed to sleep before mealtime. He felt a great need for calm and rest.

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Soroban was moving through the corridor trying to find his way back to the Council Chamber. Fortunately, he noticed that the corridor walls had signs showing directions to the stairs. He went down to the ground floor and then directed himself by the buzz of conversation. The dining room lay at an angle to the Council Chamber. It also had a huge bay window overlooking the plantation and several long rectangular tables, one behind another, at which a dozen people could be seated. Most of them were occupied, but there were still several free seats. Soroban

set his sights on a space at the back near the window. He realized that he wanted to immerse himself as much as possible in the greenery. He walked to the back and looked around to see a familiar face. Without success. He didn't recognize anyone.

He didn't know how the meal service worked and tried to find out by observing the other diners. Most of them had a plate in front of them already. Soroban looked around the room and noticed a woman standing behind a counter with large trays and plates. He walked up to her and greeted her.

"Are you new?" she asked dryly.

"Yes," Soroban replied hesitantly. "I'm not sure how it works."

"Do you have your points card?"

Soroban looked at her for a moment, stunned. No one had told him about a points card. He was about to reply, stammering, when he heard a voice behind him.

"It's all right, Clara. He's with me."

Dylan gave him one of her big smiles with perfect white teeth and handed Clara two cards. They each helped themselves to a plate and Dylan walked him back to the back table.

"Thank you", Soroban said. "Would you like to sit with me?"

"Of course! I'm sorry, in the madness of the day we didn't think to tell you about the card system. It's very simple. We have to earn what we get. In the City, you trade items, but here we use this."

She showed him a piece of cardboard the size of the palm of her hand.

"Every fortified person has one. This is our currency system. You get a card after each week of work. On the card, there are points and each point has a value. You can use points to buy your meals, but also personal effects like

clothes or items for your room. When the card is completely used, you have to earn a new one.”

Dylan explained at length how the points were calculated and the value of the meals and other items he could buy. She told him that those who were requisitioned were entitled to a free first card and handed him his with her usual smile. Soroban looked at the piece of cardboard for a moment and then slipped it into his shirt pocket.

“Be very careful with it, because you can’t replace a lost card. You have to wait until the following week to get a new one.”

“I’ll take care of it, thank you.”

“So Kal gave you a tour of the Fortress?”

“Quickly. He took me to my room and told me how to get here. I doubt I’ll be able to find my way back on my own after dinner!”

Dylan laughed. Her loud, lively laughter echoed through the room.

“We’ll find someone to take you back. I’ll let you finish your meal – someone is waiting for me. Have a nice evening!”

She got up and took her plate with her to sit down a few tables away with a man whom Soroban recognized as one of the members of the Council he had met earlier that day. He lowered his head and concentrated on his meal, which consisted mainly of a vegetable stew as well as a patty and a spoonful of a brown paste that Soroban identified as peanut butter. He ate quickly as he watched the people in the room. Most of them were sitting in groups and chatting together. Soroban had never imagined that there were so many fortified people. Apart from the Council members and the guards, he could not identify the role of these other people. Probably requisitioned like him. But he didn’t know any of them. He wondered if he would

have the opportunity to meet or even work with any of them.

Then, he noticed a familiar face in the crowd. Tamer, with his usual superior air, straight shoulders, and powerful gait. He held a plate in his hand and sat directly in front of Soroban.

“I should say ‘welcome,’ I guess! So how do you like your new home?”

Soroban finished his bite, put down his fork and crossed his hands under his chin before replying.

“After just a few hours, I cannot give a formal opinion. One thing is for sure – we eat well around here.”

Tamer tore off a piece of his patty with his teeth and chewed for a long time, looking Soroban in the eyes.

“Yeah,” he answered with his mouth still full. “We might not see each other very often now. I spend more time downstairs than here. Except for meals.”

Soroban did not know how to answer. ‘That’s good,’ would have been insulting, and ‘That’s a shame’ would have been too far from the truth. Honestly, he was relieved to learn that Tamer would be a smaller part of his life. He hoped, however, that he would leave Ifa alone and not bother her too much. He simply answered ‘Okay’ and wished him a good night’s sleep as he got up to clear away his empty plate. He didn’t want to sit with Tamer too long.

He put his plate down near the serving area with other dirty plates and realized that he still did not know the way back to his room. As he left the dining room he ran into Kal, who was leaving at the same time. He had not seen him in there. The boy really knew how to pass unnoticed.

“I’ll take you home. Try to take notes this time,” Kal smiled.

Chapter 9

They had walked all day with little or no stopping. Ifa hadn't felt any pain in her hand since Josette had applied the ointment, but she was very tired. She kept this thought to herself, wanting to avoid complaining to Josette, who was used to this kind of expedition. The landscape had generally looked the same since their departure. They had now left the banks of the river and were walking north. Josette explained to them that the road she had chosen was an old highway: a road where only cars had travelled at high speed. The surface of the road was bumpy and cracked in many places in which a few twigs grew. Ifa would bend down and pick the grass when she recognized it. Most of plants could be eaten, so she would save them until they stopped for dinner.

They had climbed a long uphill slope for quite a while and were now starting their descent to the other side. There were hills and mountains in the distance, but these were tinged with a dried-up yellow. This was certainly not where they would find arable land.

On either side of the road, old dilapidated buildings and abandoned cars were falling into ruins. Ifa tried to imagine

what life had looked like at a time when these places were busy, when cars were running and people moved quickly from one place to another without getting tired.

Josette had kept up her habit of walking backwards in front of them. She always seemed to be on the lookout for any threat that might arise, but so far they hadn't come across anyone or seen anything that could be described as dangerous.

The wind had risen and brought grains of sand and dust that made Ifa cry. Titus approached, a big smile on his face. He kept his eyes fixed on the horizon.

"You look very happy."

It was an affirmation, but also a way to make him talk. She was beginning to find silence difficult after all the hours of walking.

"I love the wind. It's always been good to me. The wind, at this stage of our journey, is for me a symbol of luck."

He hadn't taken his eyes off the horizon.

"I've never considered the wind lucky."

"And yet, it's the wind that keeps us from bursting into heat every warm season."

"That's true, but it's not luck either."

Titus didn't answer. He kept smiling and staring at the mountains in the distance. The sun was slowly going down on their left, and their shadows were getting longer. Josette went to a place where the road split in two. "We'll camp there tonight," she pointed to a building with bare windows and a broken roof.

"It will soon be dark, let's settle down while we still have some light. I'll make a fire and we can cook the fish!"

Ifa's belly responded to this with a great rumble of hunger. Fish. It would be the first time she had eaten it. She followed Josette down the road, Titus behind her. They entered the building through a metal door with a shattered

window. Several shards of glass adorned the floor. Ifa looked at the room they had just entered. There was a table, or rather a counter, at the far end and a few metal shelves in the corners. In the centre was the remains of a fire. Josette rummaged behind the counter and reappeared with a few pieces of paper that she gathered in a pile on top of the cold ashes.

“I’ll be back,” she said as she stepped outside.

Ifa looked for a place to sleep and decided to place her blanket near the fire, but away from the door, which reassured her in a way. Titus put his so that their heads were against each other. Her stomach complained. She would have liked to help with the fire or preparing the fish, but she didn’t know how. She thought to herself that she really had a lot to learn. It was lucky that Josette had decided to go with them – Ifa would never have been able to manage on her own. How would she have kept warm or healed her wound?

She sat down on her blanket and began to nibble on a dandelion leaf that she had picked earlier on the highway. Josette came back, her arms full of dead wood. She began to arrange the smallest pieces in a sort of pyramid over the bits of paper she had collected and then rubbed two stones from which some sparks flew. A few seconds later, the sparks had turned into a fire that crackled happily in the middle of the three. Josette took out her knife and began to prepare the fish. Ifa watched her attentively in order to learn how to do it. Josette seemed to appreciate her role as a mentor so much that she explained everything she did step by step. Titus was also watching closely. Once the fish had been gutted, Josette put it on a metal grid over the fire. Slowly the air filled with the delicious smell of cooking and their faces lit up in anticipation.

“We should be able to go even further tomorrow. From here, we have a few days before we reach the mountains, mostly on flat ground. We’ll move faster.”

Ifa and Titus nodded their heads. Ifa couldn’t help thinking that it was a good thing that at this time of the year the days were getting shorter. Josette wanted to walk every day from sunrise to sunset, which meant long hours.

When Josette had the fish ready, she filleted it and put it on a piece of cloth so they could all help themselves. Ifa and Titus smiled like children about to discover a new phenomenon. They each grabbed a piece and looked at each other before putting it in their mouths. Titus closed his eyes and let out a long “mmmmmm” of delight. Ifa chewed softly to appreciate the warmth and taste of the fish. A sweet, slightly salty taste that stimulated her taste buds and gave her a sensation of fullness she had rarely encountered. Josette also ate with her eyes closed. The three of them burst out laughing when they saw each other. There’s nothing like sharing good food after an exhausting day to strengthen friendships.

They finished their meal by discussing the next day and what they might find in the distance. Then Josette added some more wood to the fire and settled down in front of the door for the night.

“This way I will be able to wake up quickly in case I need help. There’s no need to keep watch here, we’re still on bare ground. Goodnight!”

Ifa and Titus wished her goodnight and went to bed on the other side of the fire. Ifa watched the flames dance before her, her spirit wandering towards Soroban and the City. She was thinking of those behind her, of Janis and the children. Of Raina, who found herself deprived of the two closest people in her life: Titus and Soroban. She felt guilty.

Did she do the right thing? Should she have stopped Titus from following her?

"I'm convinced that everyone is all right," Titus said.

She hadn't noticed him watching her for a while. He took her hand and turned onto his back to stare at the ceiling. "We'll find out, I'm sure we will. And we'll come back to the City."

Ifa answered him by pressing on his hand, then let go of it and turned on her back as well. She quickly fell asleep, letting herself be carried by the lights of the fire dancing under her eyelids.

*

Their days were all the same. Get up at dawn, have a quick breakfast of pancakes and bugs and then walk until sunset, or a little earlier if they found a place to spend the night. Most of the time they slept under the stars, lying in a circle around the fire. When they did, they would take turns keeping watch for a few hours at a time. As Josette had predicted, the road was relentlessly straight and their pace quickened.

It was not as hot as the previous days, even though the sun was shining on the desert road. Titus had come out of his silence and jokingly talked about everything and nothing. Ifa was laughing all the time, she was learning to relax and enjoy the present moment, even if her stomach twisted when she thought of Soroban or their return. Josette, on the other hand, always stayed away from them. She didn't talk much, and concentrated on the road. Sometimes she would have them explore some of the buildings that were a little off the road, then they would start walking again. Since she had notified the Fortress that she was leaving on a mission, she could not return empty-

handed. She was especially interested in the aluminum pieces she stuffed in her bag. Sometimes she would get her hands on useful items such as bedding, clothing or kitchen items. They shared the loot between their respective bags. When they returned, they would give it all back to Josette for the Fortress. Sometimes they would find canned food or dry food. These moments were invariably treated as a celebration. Ifa would discover some food she had never eaten, and they would preserve most of it, but would allow themselves to consume a little on their meal breaks.

Occasionally, Josette would talk a bit more and tell them anecdotes from her last missions. Ifa always listened to her attentively, amazed at discovering the world through these stories. Everything captivated her, from stories of rain and ice storms to encounters with nomads. Titus asked many questions – dazzled like Ifa, he wanted to know everything. They became experts in all kinds of tasks. They shared the jobs of building a fire, of setting up camp and preparing meals. Little by little, they grew in skill, thanks to Josette’s teachings.

They had been off the concrete path for two days now and were moving around in the wilderness. The wet smell of the trees and the softness of the moss had taken the place of the hardness and warmth of the road. The forest was filled with a mixture of tall, dead trees that rose stubbornly to the sky, surrounded by the small, soft, tender stems of healthy saplings. These young trees danced in the wind and the sound of their leaves accompanied their progress. Ifa felt strong emotions of excitement and joy when she saw the green and pale yellow colours of the forest.

“The soil is fertile here, isn’t it? For all these trees to grow!” asked Ifa.

“Fertile enough for trees, yes, but look at the ground,” Josette replied.

Ifa had knelt down to feel it. The ground was uneven and rocky, the trees were digging their roots between the rocks, and the rest was covered with moss. She sighed. Soroban had explained to her that the ideal soil for growing crops had to be moist and loose – no sand, no clay, and even less rock. In addition, it was always better to have a water source nearby, and their trio hadn’t encountered anything bigger than a thin stream since they had left five days earlier.

“It’s not our final destination, but it will be a perfect place to spend the night,” Josette replied with a faint smile.

They set up camp and lit the fire. Since their arrival in the forest, they had been accompanied by a multitude of small rodents scurrying all around them. Titus had developed impressive reflexes to capture them. So they were able to add these prey to their diet. Ifa discovered the pleasure of hunting and preparing food over a fire. But she knew that the few animals found in the forest would not be enough to feed an entire population. Subsistence depended on crops, on production that would ensure their long-term survival. They had to continue their research even further.

Josette had confessed to them when they left the road that she was now guiding them into an environment that was completely new to her. She had never been so far north before, usually content to excavate the ruins of the old city. The forest offered nothing of great interest to the Council, except for a few herbs or plants that were not being re-grown. Another courier was in charge of finding plants, and Josette was content to look for materials.

It was Ifa’s turn to keep watch. She sat a little outside the circle of their possessions and took a deep breath of the

fresh air and nature around her. She loved the smell: a mixture of earth, moisture and dead leaves. She lay on her back to look at the stars. Seen from here, it was exactly the same sky, the same stars as in the City. Soroban had explained to her that the luminous cluster tinged with grey, pink, yellow and blue was called the Milky Way, the name of their solar system. With the help of books he had in his possession, he had taught her a few astronomical notions. She listened to him, captivated by his words, frightened by the vastness he described to her.

She closed her eyes and tried to taste the memory. Little Ifa, four or five years old, sitting on her knees in the square, her neck completely bent backwards observing the stars with him. His mother watching them, sitting a little further away. She sometimes stared at the stars too, with her heart elsewhere. Ifa had always wanted to know where it wandered to on these evenings, but she had never dared to ask.

The sound of the wind in the leaves created green waves softened by blue splashes behind her eyelids. It was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen. Then she felt a heavy warmth invade her and opened her eyes hastily. She stood up silently and went to shake Josette and Titus.

“Quick, wake up. There’s something nearby!”

Chapter 10

Josette grasped a long knife in one hand. Her pupils spoke as she tried to pierce the darkness to see any shape or movement. She ranted against the light of the fire that blinded her. Ifa rushed over the embers, trampling them with her boots to plunge their camp into darkness. Little by little, they could now make out the trees in the night. Ifa concentrated on identifying where the heat was coming from, where the presence was. It was getting closer... behind, close! She turned quickly to Titus and shouted, "Watch out!"

Titus turned his head and came face to face with a small beast whose yellow eyes glowed in the dark. The beast growled and showed its fangs as it approached him. Ifa noticed that it seemed to have injured a leg. Titus backed away slowly, keeping his eyes on the beast. Ifa, frightened, glanced from the animal to Josette, petrified by fear. Josette was motionless, the knife held out in front of her.

Titus stumbled and fell from behind, muffling a cry. At the same moment, the beast leaped up and pounced on him, its fangs raised, its muffled, guttural growl echoing through the night. Titus pushed it back with a foot and an

arm, and straightened himself up as best he could on his knees. The beast had turned around and leaped towards him again. He raised his right arm and hit the animal in the throat with all his might. The beast cried out in pain and began to scream, its mouth raised to the sky. Titus struck a second time and the beast collapsed on its side, breathing heavily. Ifa cast her horrified eyes from the animal to Titus' hand. His hand was clenched on the handle of a knife from which a dark, smelly liquid was dripping.

Titus sat panting, completely soaked. He wiped the blade of the knife and his hand on his trousers, then, shaking, put the weapon back in its holster hanging from his waist.

"What was that?" he asked, pushing back the hair that was falling in front of his eyes.

Ifa approached the animal to get a better view. It was about two feet tall and three feet long, with a long, bushy tail. Its ribcage still rose and fell faintly through its shaggy, smelly fur. A large open wound in its neck oozed a dark, metallic-smelling liquid that spread slowly over the ground.

"I think it's some kind of cat, or rather a wolf?" Josette said. I've never seen one, but I've heard about these beasts. They rarely attack humans, so they say. Perhaps it felt vulnerable because of its wound? I thought I saw it had a limp in one leg.

Ifa knelt down beside it and looked at it. It seemed almost asleep, its eyes half closed. Its breathing was fast, uneven. Its neck was bleeding profusely. Slowly, it stopped breathing. Its rib cage fell still, inert. Ifa felt the heat escape its body, a little like the smoke that disappears once the fire has gone out.

"Are you all right?" Ifa asked, turning to Titus. "Did it bite you?"

Titus seemed to be slowly recovering from the shock. He lowered his eyes and scanned his body, passing his hands over his arms and legs.

“No, it didn’t. No wounds, I just got the fright of my life.”

Josette took a few steps as she scanned the darkness in the directness from which the beast had come.

“There are no others,” Ifa announced.

The damp heat of the beast had disappeared. No other animal haunted the night, Ifa was convinced.

“I’m going to check anyway,” Josette replied, rejecting Ifa’s answer.

Ifa was upset. She had never felt a presence disappearing like that. It was as if the animal had lived with her for a few minutes and then left her. She was left with a feeling of abandonment, of emptiness, an emotion she couldn’t describe. But she was certain of one thing, the animal had been alone. The danger was over. Josette came back a few minutes later, walking slowly.

“I don’t see anything else. It must have been alone.”

Ifa didn’t answer. She continued to observe the animal. Without realizing, she started stroking its fur. It wasn’t particularly soft, but it seemed warm. It would be a useful skin to keep warm when the cold season came, but she didn’t know how to do it and the idea of wearing it made her shiver with terror.

“Can we eat this?” Titus asked, pointing to it.

“I don’t know,” answered Josette. “But I’d rather not try it.”

“Okay, then we should get rid of it.”

He got up and took the beast in his arms and disappeared from the group behind the trees. A few minutes later, he came back empty-handed.

“I dropped it off a little further away. It will serve as a meal for the rats, no doubt.”

Josette nodded and looked up to the sky. It was still very dark, but the stars were fading, giving hope for the coming dawn.

“The sun will be rising soon. I suggest we leave as soon as we’ve eaten.”

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The atmosphere within the group had changed since the encounter with the beast. Titus had stopped joking; he had become nervous and jumped at every rustle of leaves. Ifa would have liked to talk with him, but she never felt comfortable with Josette nearby. Probably because she didn’t talk much and was always focused on the mission. Walking, moving forward, eating, sleeping: that summed up Josette’s way of thinking pretty well. Ifa needed more human contact, especially as she realized that Titus was losing confidence in their journey.

At the end of the day, they made camp in a small clearing. They had decided to set up a system of ropes attached to the trees around them, to warn them if an animal approached. Ifa found the idea rather superfluous, as she trusted her internal feelings much more than her ears, but she had to admit that a solution was needed to watch over their space when it was not her turn to be on guard.

Josette took this task to heart and quickly covered a large area by winding ropes from tree to tree and hanging the items collected in the first few days of their journey. If a beast passed by, it would hit the various objects, and the noise would allow them to react in time. While she did this, Ifa took the opportunity to sit near Titus.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I can’t get its image out of my head. Besides, I have to endure the smell of dried blood on my clothes. If I could at least wash myself a little, but without water it’s impossible.”

They rationed the water as much as possible, because they hadn’t seen fresh water for days.

“Yes, I guess so.”

Ifa hesitated. She didn’t know how to talk to him without feeling like she was lecturing him or sounding condescending.

—“You know what Raina always used to say to me?”

He turned to her, intrigued. He greatly respected Raina’s opinion. Her wisdom and deep compassion made her the perfect confidante, but also the perfect advisor.

“She told me that worrying about the future wouldn’t stop the future from happening. Worrying about seeing a beast again won’t keep any of them away from us.”

Ifa had never been able to put Raina’s words into action. She was careful not to mention that to Titus, though. The latter said nothing, but stared at Josette who was working a few metres away.

“You reacted well yesterday,” Ifa continued. “You acted as you should, you protected yourself and at the same time, you protected all of us. I’m glad that nothing happened to you, I’d never forgive myself.”

She moved away to get some metal plates out of her bag and started to attach them to the ropes herself.

“You wouldn’t have anything to apologize for,” Titus replied. “You didn’t force me to come, you didn’t even ask me to come! It was me who wanted to follow you, remember.”

He smiled at her, a little embarrassed.

“I think I wanted to live a little adventure. Yes, I’d like to find the Great North and free Soroban, but the trip attracted me in another way.”

Working next to her, he began to tell her about his daily life in the City. He had always believed that there was a better place far away, but he had never dared to leave, because he wanted to help the people around him. Raina often said, “It is better to start by helping those around you than to help elsewhere. That’s what he tried to do at the risk of his own life sometimes. But when Soroban decided to give in and follow Tamer, he felt the need to act. He couldn’t help but dream of the day when they would return victorious from their quest and liberate the people by showing them a better world, a world where they could grow their own food. A world where they would be free at last.

Ifa liked to listen to him talk. They had known each other all their lives, but had never had the opportunity to talk for more than a few minutes. Titus worked hard, but most of all, Ifa avoided getting too close to the people around her. Losing Kal and her mother had been two painful experiences, so much so that she now ran away from relationships with other people. The only exception to the rule was Soroban. He was the anchor that had remained after those two successive departures. It had allowed her to stay the course, to continue to live.

Titus spoke of his dreams, of the life he saw for the people. He dreamed of flowers and fruits and vegetables in abundance. He dreamed of children running and playing freely in the wilderness. He dreamed of the animals he knew from the books he had got his hands on over the years. After meeting them yesterday, he added that he dreamed much less about them all of a sudden.

Little by little, he was regaining his mood and his energy. Ifa smiled, as she listened to him, she regretted having always kept him at a distance. They could have become very good friends. This trip made her question her entire thought pattern, all her beliefs. Her deepest values were shaken, but curiously enough, she didn't feel afraid of all these upheavals.

Josette came back to them by rubbing her hands together.

"Thank you!" she said, noticing their rope strewn with all kinds of objects. "I think that's enough for tonight. We'll adjust in the next few days if necessary."

It was almost dark, and finally suppertime. They hadn't captured any animals since they had met the beast. They had seen a few field mice, but none of them had expressed an interest in hunting. So they settled for patties and herbs and ate silently in front of the fire.

"The trees are more plentiful here, and I'm confident that we'll find water tomorrow. Then we can follow it to its source. I bet if there's fertile land, it must be near a body of water."

Josette began to explain what she had learned by studying the maps she had been carrying with her since they had left. They didn't have the knowledge to identify exactly where they were, but Josette had a good idea of their rough location. According to the map, there were a few streams running through the area.

"If we don't find water tomorrow, we'll have to consider walking for longer, maybe even after dark. Our supplies are dwindling rapidly."

With these words, Josette lay down and wished them a good night. Ifa and Titus nodded their heads, their lips pursed. Neither of them liked to move around in the forest

at night. They took their places around the fire and quickly fell asleep.

Chapter 11

Ever since the incident with the beast, all of Ifa's senses were constantly alert. This hypervigilance meant that she sometimes found herself in Titus' and Josette's heads without meaning to. She caught disparate fragments of their thoughts. As soon as she realized this, she cut off communication and concentrated on something else. For example, the sound of her footsteps through the dead leaves, or she would look up at the sky to follow the movement of the clouds. 'It has to be there, it has to be there! Once again, Ifa had intruded on Titus's thoughts. She shook her head and approached him in a few steps. Talking to him would help him keep his mind closed.

"How are you today? I mean, are you better?"

Titus looked at her and gave her a big smile.

"Yes, I'm much better. You cheered me up yesterday when you told me about Raina. I miss her very much, and she'd tell me to stop believing that the past is going to happen again. Today I'm focused on our journey, on our search for water and a better world."

Ifa smiled and let Titus get a bit ahead. She looked around to collect as many grasses and insects as possible.

As water became scarce, the few shoots she found helped her stay hydrated.

She was bending over to pick the mint leaves that fluttered under their feet when she felt, before she could hear it, the movement of water from a small waterfall. Slight green and blue curves dancing vertically in her eyes. She raised her head and heard Josette cry out for joy. "At last," she trumpeted. The three of them started running towards her and saw the gently babbling brook, hidden among tall grass topped with pretty downy brown spikes that Ifa had never seen before. She wondered for a moment if it was an edible plant, but was brought out of her reverie by Josette, who fell to her knees at her side and slid her hands into the cold water to drink.

"Wouldn't you rather wait for me to filter it? That would probably be safer, Ifa suggested."

But Josette ignored her and drank in sips whatever she could keep between her cupped hands. Titus cleaned the dried blood from his hands, a little downstream from Josette. Ifa knelt down in turn and opened her bag to take out the large container which was used to purify the water according to the method created by Soroban. The system wasn't perfect, but it still allowed for a quick result. It didn't change the taste of the water, however, and sometimes it had to be boiled for a few minutes to avoid nausea. The water was clear and odourless, but Ifa would never have dared to drink it straight from the stream without treating it first.

Ifa worked on the filtration as quickly as possible. When her work was finished, she poured the clean water into bottles for their personal use. She then plunged a large container into the stream and filled it completely. This water would be used for cooking later in the day. Josette looked at her questioningly.

“What are you doing? We’re going to follow the stream from now on. No need to stock up!”

“Just a precaution,” Ifa answered.

She had always followed the principle that it was better to be safe than sorry. She rearranged her bag to put the container at the bottom and distributed the gourds to each of them. They set off again in the direction the stream was leading them. Its discovery had given them hope. Hope that they would find a welcoming place at its source, one that could sustain life. Soroban’s history books had taught him that humans had always settled along the water’s edge in the past, to facilitate transportation and food. Water was the source of life; it would be the source of their new life.

They walked around talking about everything and nothing, about the people in the City. Josette was talking about her children; she was eager to tell them about their encounter with the “wolf”. They would probably be scared, but they loved their mother’s mission stories. Ifa smiled as she imaged the little ones’ heads when they returned. They would ask them a lot of questions!

The vegetation was more varied now: all kinds of grasses covered the ground. Pretty purple flowers were growing along the bank of the brook, through the downy ears of grass and large groves of long golden stems. Soroban had told her that most grasses were edible. However, they had to be turned into flour to eat them, a process unthinkable in their case.

Ifa was lost in her thoughts, busy watching with fascination the spectacle of the water flowing beside her. Clear water, flowing gently with a nice lapping sound. Rich, floral scents were perfuming the air. She breathed in deep breaths, her eyes marvelling at all the new things. This spectacle alone made up for the difficulties of the last days.

Her senses were fully awakened when she felt a great warmth around her. She looked up and around to see where it came from. It was different from their encounter with the animal. This time she felt a human presence. A presence that stood still, waiting or watching. Ifa approached Josette and tapped her on the shoulder.

“There’s someone close by. I can feel it.”

Josette stared at her with surprise. Obviously she didn’t understand what Ifa could feel, but she remained on the lookout all the same. Titus had come towards her and was looking at her. Josette nodded her head and they continued to walk slowly. Straining her ears to listen for a noise, whatever it might be. Ifa had the unpleasant feeling of being watched, spied upon. Like prey on a hunt.

A shape suddenly landed in front of them, from the sky, or more likely from a nearby tree. A man, dressed in black and brown, stood in front of them, brandishing a sharp stick in front of their faces. His skin was dark, like that of a man who spent all his days in the sun. His hair was long, tied back at the back of his neck, and he looked threatening. His eyes jumped from Josette to Titus to Ifa. He frowned and watched them attentively. Too closely. The same way we look at someone who tells us an important or disturbing story. Ifa’s mouth opened slowly. In front of her stood a whisperer, she would have sworn it.

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Ifa couldn’t believe it. Since Kal, she had never met another whisperer. And unfortunately, there were only two ways to find out if someone really was one. Either to ask them, which she would never dare to do, or to let them in. Ifa had closed her mind for so many years, she had never dared to open that door again, except when she

inadvertently slipped up, as she had the last few days. She had no way of knowing whether she was putting herself in danger by exposing herself in this way.

The stranger put an end to Ifa's questioning with a simple "Come". His voice was hoarse and weak, but it was impressive and compelling. The three companions exchanged worried glances without saying a word. Back to reality, Ifa felt the anxiety rise in her body. Who was he and where would he lead them? Was he alone? Were there others like him, others like her? Titus stared at him and nodded his head, making the decision for the group and walking behind the man. Ifa and Josette followed him silently. Ifa stared at the stranger. He had the confident gait of someone who knew the area well, but kept his stick pointed in front of him, ready to react if necessary. Unfortunately, he was guiding them away from the creek. Josette left traces of their path: she scratched the trees with her knife as she passed by, breaking branches and pulling up grass. If Ifa was not mistaken, the man noticed all her efforts. But he didn't say anything. He hadn't uttered any other words since he had ordered them to follow him.

Ifa's thoughts returned to the possibility that he was a whisperer. Since she had never met one, she wondered what would happen if he tried to read her. Could he get into her mind without communicating with her, or was he breaking into a void? If so, he must have understood that she was forcing that emptiness and if not, he must have felt her questioning. She realized with shock that somehow the man must have guessed that she was also a whisperer. A shiver ran down her spine and goose bumps spread all over her body. Unmasked, that's what she was. She felt her legs weaken and her vision blurred, but decided to keep her mind closed until she could see where he was leading them.

They were now walking along a well-defined path. The ground was solid and flattened, no vegetation was growing. On either side of the path, dried grass gave way to trees with more and more lush leaves rustling in the wind. The three friends looked everywhere at once, amazed by so much greenery, so many colours and smells. At times, they would come across a man or a woman, climbing a tree, or just standing along the path. They watched them all pass by attentively, but no one spoke to them or followed them. After what seemed like a twenty-minute hike, they came to a clearing where there was a wall of logs tied together. The wall was breached by two towers, each guarded by a watchman armed with a sharply pointed stick, as was their leader. The leader nodded his head to the guards and led the three captives to the other side of the wall.

Still trembling, Ifa looked around her with great interest. On either side of a central path, a multitude of log buildings rose up. Smoke was billowing from the roofs of some of them. Green plants grew between each house, through which Ifa saw red and orange spots. She recognized tomatoes and peppers. She quickly glanced at her two companions to see that they were also drinking from the spectacle before their eyes. Neither of them had ever seen fresh vegetables before. The only vegetables they knew were from the baskets of the Fortress. Ifa could feel her heart beating in her temples. She didn't understand what was going on. Who were these people? Why did he bring them here? More importantly, how had they managed to create such a fertile, vibrant village?

Children ran and squabbled across the path in front of them. Ifa looked at them and smiled. She saw this village as the paradise she had always dreamed of. Was this the Great North? Had they found it after such a short time? She didn't have enough eyes to see everything, to assimilate

everything: the welcoming houses, the fruits and vegetables growing within reach, the people! People of all ages, all busy with various tasks. Over here a woman washing clothes in front of a house, another working with a knife and a piece of wood. Over there, men building a sort of cart. The noise of their work mixed with laughter and loud voices. The smells of baking perfumed the air.

They finally arrived in front of a building that was bigger than the others, and the man who had led them there motioned for them to wait. Ifa turned towards Titus and Josette, but neither of them dared to speak. They hesitated between laughing and crying, between amazement at having found this place and fear of what would happen next. The man came out quickly, followed only by a woman who turned around and stopped in front of them. She was tall and stood a good head above their leader, who was still and silent at her side. She had dark skin, short, frizzy black hair and her androgynous body was hidden behind a long black tunic.

“Welcome to our home. My name is Alix.”

She paused and watched them one by one for a few moments. Ifa had the strange impression that this one lingered on her longer than on the others. She was tempted to lower her eyes, but she steeled herself and looked up at her again.

“You have come a long way, you must be tired. Think of this house as your own, where you will find food and shelter for the night.”

She turned around and walked towards the building. Titus and Ifa looked at each other for a few moments while Josette followed Alix inside. Ifa swallowed, shrugged her shoulders and followed.

They found Alix sitting on the floor on a woven carpet in several shades of red. She invited them to join her, and

they complied dutifully, without taking their eyes off her. In the centre of the rug was a coffee table on which grapes and berries had been placed. They were alone in the room, and Ifa wondered if there were other people living there because of the size of the house. A quick glance showed her that her house could have fit in there two or three times over. Alix showed them the fruit and invited them to help themselves as they wished. She herself unhooked a bunch of grapes and began to separate them and eat them one by one, silently.

Ifa was eager to ask questions, to find out why they had been brought to their community rather than being allowed to continue on their way. Unaccustomed to sitting on the ground, she shifted to find a better position. She heard Josette clear her throat to her right.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Alix. However, we must get back on the road quickly. Can you explain why you brought us here?”

Ifa swallowed. Josette could be so direct! What if those questions made Alix angry? She noticed her hands trembling and felt her stomach tightening. “No, this is no time to panic! Breathe.” Ifa closed her eyes for a few seconds and tried to calm her breathing.

“You don’t waste any time, do you?” Alix exclaimed.

She smiled and didn’t look offended.

“Ugo discovered you on our territory. My guards are under orders to bring back everyone within the village perimeter. They simply obeyed. It’s our job to ask questions.”

She put her hands on her thighs and looked Ifa squarely in the eyes.

“What are you doing here?”

Chapter 12

Soroban had spent his early days in the Fortress meeting many people whose names he had, for the most part, forgotten. He had also spent a lot of time on the plantation, together with Kal, studying the different cultures and drawing up a plan of the present facilities. His new routine was slowly taking shape. Every morning, he would go down to the fields to take notes. Then he would go back to his room, where he would write up his notes before taking a nap. When he woke up, he would write down the steps he needed to take to improve the crops. He would spend the rest of his days talking with Dylan or other members of the Council, and in between meetings he would walk around the Fortress.

He didn't like staying at the Fort very much. He had been used to being able to move around all his life, to breathing fresh air. Even in his home, there were frequent draughts. At the Fort, the air was dry and stuffy thanks to the windows, which were perfectly sealed and impossible to open. Every day that his schedule allowed him, he set himself the task of visiting a new part of the Fortress. He was given a white armband that allowed him to move

around. If a guard questioned him, he simply had to show his armband and the guard would let him pass. The only place he did not have access to was the steps going down into the City. No one but the guards were allowed to go down there. Dylan made sure that Soroban understood all his rights, but also all the prohibitions that were in force in the Fortress. She gave him a copy of the Fortress Charter and had him memorize it.

1. The Council has absolute power over the entire City and the Fortress.

2. Members of the Council shall be elected for life, unless they deviate from the Charter or resign.

3. It is forbidden to disseminate information discussed in the Council before it is made public.

4. It is forbidden for anyone except supervisors to pass through the gates.

5. Fortified persons must wear their armband at all times and only frequent the places authorized by the armband.

6. Any decision or law may be overturned if a majority of the councillors agree.

7. Points cards are neither exchangeable nor transferable.

8. The Council may requisition the assistance of any person as long as he is in good enough health to do so, if his work can help the population.

9. Any person defying any section of the Charter will be tried and subjected to exile or the death penalty.

That morning he had gone down to the plantation as usual to meet Kal. Kal followed him on his visits, but for the rest of the day he was Dylan's shadow, staying close to her to answer her questions. It turned out she had a lot of

them. Soroban wondered if this was simply a way for her to keep an eye on him.

“Your plan is going well, it seems,” Kal mentioned to him as they walked through the rows of potatoes.

“Yes, it is. Well, let’s just say that my first impressions are confirmed as the days go by. I’ll start with the water treatment system, but what we really need here is a complete overhaul. Not just to choose the best performing plants, but to redesign everything. Variety is useful in agriculture. The soil is suffering.”

Soroban leaned between two plants whose leaves were hanging softly. He stuck his hand into the soil to gather a handful. He reached out his hand to Kal, palm up.

“You see this earth? If it was healthy, I could squeeze it in my hand and it would still fit the shape of my fist. See how it crumbles.”

He shook his hands.

“I don’t even need to wipe them off because the soil is so dry. A healthy soil can retain its moisture despite a lack of water. Not forever, of course, but at least for a few days. But we only watered this last night.”

He started walking again and crossed to the other side where tomato plants were lined up as far as the eye could see.

“Vegetables are good choices, but the layout is not adequate. I’ll have to discuss this with Dylan. Do you think you can set up a meeting with us today? My report is complete, and I’d like to present it to her before the next Council meeting.”

The Council met as often as necessary. As the agricultural plan was a priority, a meeting should be scheduled as soon as possible.

“Of course. I’ll see if this afternoon suits her. Good day, Soroban.”

Kal put one hand on Soroban's shoulder before heading for the stairs. Soroban had quickly grown accustomed to his presence. He had liked the boy very much when he played with Ifa every day. He respected the man he had become, especially since he knew that he was not living the life he would have liked. Sometimes life left you no choice and some people or dreams had to be put aside in order to survive. Sometimes individual survival had an influence on the well-being and survival of many other people.

He had agreed to give up everything to come here for exactly that reason, after all. He did not lead an unhappy existence at the Fort, only a lonely one. He felt a lot of pressure, but at the same time the pressure made him dynamic. He felt that his work would make a difference, even more than when he was repairing wheels for the transport chariots. He felt like he did when he had invented his water filter. It was an invention that had earned him the Council's recognition and brought him here. A method that had also allowed many families to survive, year after year.

Yes. He was convinced of it. He could improve production, but to do so, he would need Dylan's support in dealing with the Council. So he had to be well prepared. He climbed up the steps, slipped through the glass door and through the Council Chamber into the corridor leading to the main entrance. He heard voices whispering. Voices that had a threatening tone: two people were engaged in a conflict. He approached slowly and hid behind a corner, waiting for them to finish. He hated fighting, but he also hated getting in the middle of a conversation that didn't concern him.

At times the volume would rise and he would begin to hear not the words, but the voices. Or rather one of the voices. He recognized it over everything else: Tamer. He seemed to be in a frightening rage. His voice went up and

down with every sentence so that Soroban only picked up a few words: “baskets... City ... exile” – nothing understandable to his ears. He closed his eyes and waited for the end. If Tamer lost control of his emotions like this, the conversation would either end soon or turn into a real fight. He raised his voice again, and Soroban heard very clearly this time.

“I won’t be taken in because of your foolishness!”

Soroban held his breath. Clearly, this was not a discussion he should have witnessed. He had to stop Tamer becoming aware of his presence. Knowing his angry temperament, he also knew of his propensity to use violence to restore control in the event of a disruption. The voices grew louder, followed by a jostling sound and a muffled scream. Footsteps resonated and moved away toward the exit. He heard someone breathing heavily, then again footsteps started to move, but this time in his direction. Panicked, Soroban turned and noticed the door to his left. He reached out his hand and was relieved to feel the handle turn and the door open. He slid inside and closed it behind him without a sound. The footsteps continued on their way to the dining room.

Soroban sighed, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and waited a few seconds before coming out. He took the opportunity to look around him – he had never been in this room before. Kal hadn’t shown him around it. The back wall was completely glazed, like the other rooms on the ground floor. Numerous shelves rose from floor to ceiling covered with jars, and wooden crates occupied the rest of the space. A food reserve!

Soroban approached the shelves and saw the vegetables and fruits of all kinds that were marinating in the jars. The crates contained potatoes, carrots and other root vegetables. This was where the crops ended up once they

were harvested. There was enough to feed hundreds of people for months on end.

“This is probably the reserves for the winter,” Soroban said aloud.

He was on his way out when the door opened.

A guard stood in front of him, with a surprised look on his face. He and Soroban stared at each other for a few moments. Soroban wondered if his presence was permitted in this room, and if not, what the consequences would be. But he remembered that his armband gave him full access, according to Dylan. It made sense that he should have access to the reserves since he was working on the agricultural project, didn't it? While these thoughts were racing through his mind, the supervisor stammered a few words of apology.

“I'm sorry, I thought I heard a noise, I wanted to check that everything was all right.”

“Yes, everything is all right. The noise must have come from next door.”

“You're probably right! I'm sorry.”

He left immediately without asking any more questions. Soroban had the fleeting impression that it was possibly his interlocutor who had no right of access to this room. He dismissed the idea and left. He promised himself that he would ask Kal. He would tell him whether the guards were allowed in that room. Now that he thought about it, this place was considerably important. The room should be guarded if all the citizens and fortifications depended on it year-round.

He looked down each side of the corridor before he went out. Tamer and his opponent had indeed disappeared. Soroban followed the corridor and rushed down the stairs to his room. This near encounter with Tamer had reminded him of the City. He thought of Ifa and

wondered how she was doing on her own. He comforted himself by thinking that Raina was visiting her and that Janis would look after her too. She was fortunate to be surrounded by good people, all the same. Thinking of her touched his heart. He missed her so much. He would have liked to communicate with her, but it was strictly forbidden. Perhaps he could ask Tamer to give her a message? He shook his head and immediately dismissed the idea. He would never dare. Tamer was vile enough to use this request to bring Soroban before the judge. It was forbidden to bribe the guards for any reason. Tamer would denounce him without even taking a minute to think about it.

If ever there was a man without emotion or loyalty, it was Tamer. From a very young age, he had shown that family did not matter to him by betraying his father and forcing him into exile. Soroban still remembered that sad day. The days of exile were always painful experiences for all citizens. The guards would visit each house to take the residents out and force them in small groups along the streets to witness the distressing spectacle. Flanked by two guards, the exile crossed the entire City and headed west with a simple jute sack containing a few meagre belongings tossed on his shoulder. The guards always came back alone and the banished ones never reappeared. A clear message to all citizens. Few dared to defy the regulations after witnessing their first exile.

Once back in his room, Soroban set to work and began writing his report. He did not know if Kal would be able to arrange a meeting with Dylan soon, but he continued to write up his observations and plan. One of his goals was to build an automatic irrigation system, which could be easily achieved with the help of gutters and cables. But the most important point was the rearrangement of the plants. At present, vegetables were sown in rows over a long

distance, common varieties gathered in the same place year after year. Soroban wanted to introduce crop rotation and use the benefits of companionship to facilitate growth. All this was common sense in small-scale farming. It was written about in every book he had had a chance to read over the years. It was inconceivable that the architect behind the development of the plantation did not know these basic principles. He then proposed to create planks of different heights to separate the varieties, as well as to set aside fallow sections to allow the land to regenerate. Finally, there was the problem of fertilizer. There was no animal husbandry in the Fortress. In fact, apart from rats and other such vermin, Soroban had never seen an animal in his entire life. So he must look for a vegetable fertilizer, or a way to feed the earth. That's when he came up with the idea of using compost. It was almost too simple. He would have to ask the nutrition advisor whether Dylan managed that too, to find out what was happening to the waste in the dining room. He knew that in the City almost everything was reclaimed, mostly by Raina, but he didn't know enough about the customs in the Fortress.. If the meals did not generate any waste, there would surely be some from the production itself. The leaves of the root vegetables, the roots of other vegetables – everything could be used.

He finished writing these questions in the margins of his report, put down his pencil and stretched his back, satisfied with the task at hand. He bathed in a pleasant state of contentment, his head bubbling with ideas, the adrenaline of work well done flowing through his veins. At this very moment Soroban was happy with his new life.

Chapter 13

The three looked at each other for a moment in silence. Alix didn't look threatening, but after all, how could they know that? Since their arrival, the inhabitants of this village had been disinterested in them. The travellers would not be the first to be received in that big house and share fruit with the one who seemed to be running the village. Josette cleared her throat and broke the silence.

"I'm a messenger for Fort Victory. I was on a reconnaissance mission."

"Ah, Fort Victory, yes. We know a lot about it here."

Josette raised an eyebrow in the hope of finding out more, but Alix was patiently waiting for the rest of her story.

"So we were walking north when we were invited to follow your man."

"Ugo."

"Ugo, okay. He appeared in front of us and asked us to follow him and we obeyed. I didn't know there were people living in the area."

Alix nodded. It was probably a good answer, or at least she seemed to accept it.

“What about them?”

“Excuse me?” Josette replied.

“You say you’re a courier – that doesn’t explain who these two are.”

“They’re friends. I live in the same house as Ifa and Titus is an old friend.”

Alix got up and smoothed out the folds that had formed on her tunic. She walked a few steps, staring at the wall in front of her. She was tapping her fingers against each other. Ifa was beginning to feel ill. She felt as if the temperature in the room had just risen sharply. She put her index finger around her collar and was almost surprised to feel that it was not touching her throat. She was finding it difficult to breathe.

“Is it common for friends to follow a messenger in the Victory culture?”

Ifa felt her heart squeeze. Josette was getting tangled up in this story. Should they tell the truth? What did they have to lose? Gathering up all her courage, she cut Josette off, who was about to answer, mouth wide open.

“We accompanied Josette in an attempt to find the Great North.”

Ifa almost rolled into a ball once the words were spoken. Had she blundered? Alix looked at her, her eyes wrinkled, a smirk on her face.

“You did? Sounds fascinating. Can you tell me more?”

Ifa didn’t know what to do. Her cheeks were burning. She looked at the carpet and focused on the way the fibres were intertwined.

“No? No details?”

Alix approached her and crouched down, staring at her attentively. Ifa looked up to meet her gaze and spoke again.

“You’re a whisperer, aren’t you? Are all of you?”

Josette let out a cry. Titus frowned as he glanced at Ifa in panic. But Ifa couldn't take it anymore, she was sure that Ugo was one, and the more she looked at Alix, the more convinced she was that the latter was one too. She didn't know why. Was it the way they looked at them? Or was it the way they had communicated without saying a word when they had arrived? She swallowed with difficulty and mentally counted in her head the time it would take for her to exhale. She just couldn't believe it. It was as if the words had slipped out of her mouth without permission. She always took time to think before speaking. Had she completely lost her mind? Alix kept looking at her closely. She frowned and her eyes showed an air of confusion, mixed with amusement.

"Good guess, darling. We are. Just like you."

*

By provoking Alix, Ifa should have known that she was in danger of revealing herself in front of her friends. She didn't dare look at Titus and Josette, but felt their heavy eyes on either side of her. The heat had gone to her head and it was her ears that were now boiling. She clenched her jaw and stared into Alix's eyes.

"Good point," she confessed.

Titus moved somewhere to her left. She turned to look at him and saw what she had long feared. Misunderstanding was painted on his face. A mixture of anger, and fear perhaps? No, it was the sense of betrayal she recognized in her friend. Ifa felt like getting up and throwing herself into his arms to apologize, but Alix still looked at her in surprise.

"How do you do it then? I can't see anything in you. No matter how hard I try, you're a blank page."

That answered her question. By closing her mind, not only could she not receive information from anyone, but also no one could read her. Maybe that would be an asset if the situation got worse.

“I don’t know. I decided to close the door years ago. It’s become normal for me.”

This answer seemed to satisfy Alix, whose face cracked with a big smile.

“Your friends need an explanation. I’ll leave you two alone for a few moments. Later, I’d like to show you something.”

She walked to a door on the right side of the room. Ifa looked down. She didn’t know what to say. Strangely, she was beginning to feel ashamed of having hidden her power from Titus all her life. And Josette too. They had been living together for years. Ifa’s stomach was twisting in her belly. The fear of rejection reappeared in full force. She had wanted to put all that aside for so long that she had almost forgotten how people reacted to whisperers. According to the citizens, all whisperers were untrustworthy. What would her friends think?

She asked Josette with her eyes. She thought she would be more open to accepting her difference. Josette was staring at her. She didn’t seem ready to talk or to leave, which encouraged her. She turned her head towards Titus. He had stood up and was walking back and forth on the carpet, glaring at her from time to time.

“So all these years you’ve been spying on me?” he asked, holding back from shouting.

He clenched his fists and his face was distorted by pain. His eyes glowed. She tried to approach him, but he backed away.

“Of course not!” she cried. Do you remember Kal?

“I don’t see the connection!” Titus replied.

“He was my best friend, but more importantly, he was a whisperer, too. He got captured. Or so we thought. When he disappeared, I just got scared. I disgusted myself and decided I didn’t want to be a freak. I closed my mind and since that day I have never communicated with anyone or listened to anyone’s thoughts. Except lately. When I’m stressed, sometimes thoughts come by themselves, but I can close the door and not hear anything. Even as a child, I never used it with anyone but Kal. Until today, he was the only person who knew who I really am...”

Her voice broke and she fell on the carpet crying. She hid her face in her hands, ashamed that she had lied, ashamed that she was different. She would have given anything to go back a few minutes and keep her mouth shut. Not to say out loud what she was thinking. She was sobbing loudly, washed up on the coloured carpet.

“So, you... can read minds, right?” Josette asked as she approached slowly.

She knelt down next to Ifa and looked at her, waiting for her to look up. Ifa sniffed and wiped her eyes with her hands.

“Not really reading. It’s more like hearing a person’s thoughts, like an echo. Kal and I used to be able to talk to each other. All I had to do was think about him and he’d respond to me, like an echo in my head. It was a game for us. We’d try to hide things from each other and play who could guess before the other. I guess that’s how I learned to stop too.”

“That’s, uh... amazing!”

“I’m sorry. I never meant to lie to anyone. I just wanted to put it all behind me and be like everyone else. It’s not something I’m proud of! Everyone in the City would hate me if they knew.”

“I wouldn’t.”

Josette smiled frankly at her. Her gaze was meant to be friendly, like that of a mother with her child.

“You are the way you are, and those abilities don’t frighten me. I even find it useful. As a courier it could have been helpful to me many times and saved me a lot of trouble.”

“Thank you, Josette.”

Ifa was starting to breathe normally again. Her hands were shaking, but she felt she was regaining control of her emotions. She risked a glance at Titus. He had sat down on a chair a little further away and stared at a point on the ground in front of him. He wasn’t ready to talk to her, but didn’t seem to want to run away yet either. Ifa breathed a sigh of relief. The door on the right opened to let Alix pass through silently. She was very tall and slender, and her gait was calm and almost aerial. She came to stand just outside the carpet facing them and crossed her hands in front of her.

“Now that the confession has been made, I can explain who we are, because I can see that you want to know.”

Titus retreated to his corner and Josette blushed a little. Ifa listened attentively, intrigued. She wondered who the group was and how they had come together like that.

“We are a community of about five hundred people. We have been living here for more than a hundred years. After the event, when the towns were destroyed and many people died, we did what you did. Most of us moved to small, closed communities where we found safety and support. Years passed and as telepathic abilities developed in our founders, they were driven out of their towns and villages. Non-whisperers find it very difficult to accept our difference. I know it’s the same at Fort Victory, as we’ve welcomed a few from there over the years.”

Ifa's heart leapt in her chest. Kal! Maybe he was here right now. Ifa was dying to find out, but let Alix continue.

"Over time, our founders managed to build this community piece by piece. Some of them had knowledge that was vital in case of survival. Others were learned experts in farming and construction. We have created this safe place for those of our species. A place where no one could come to hunt us, because we are masters here. We are far away from everything. Even in the old times, this space was completely covered by trees. No roads passed through it, so we stayed safe. We have lived there ever since, and do everything in our power to keep our peace. This means watching out and taking those who approach it."

"And what do you do to those who find you?" said Titus.

He was still angry and defensive. Yet his question was a legitimate one. Why had they brought them here? And more importantly, what was going to happen to them now? Alix looked at him for a few moments before answering.

"It all depends on their attitude towards us, my dear. And also on the reason for their visit."

"So in our case? What's it going to be?"

"I haven't yet decided what fate will befall you."

She spoke plainly, without unnecessary words, with a piercing, though non-threatening, look in her eyes. Ifa hoped Titus didn't have too many bad thoughts for her, because obviously she was listening to them. He must have been aware of them. Perhaps he was even mentally responding to her, because suddenly a smile appeared on her face and she nodded her head.

"So be it. I'll start by showing you around while we talk. It might answer some of your questions."

She invited them to follow her and the four of them left through the door they had used when they arrived. The big house was in the middle of the village. On either side were the small houses they had seen when they entered the village, each separated by plants of all kinds and lots of greenery. They walked around the big house to find a similar scene on the other side. The only difference was that between the buildings there was a dirt road, like a line drawn down the middle of a page. They walked along the path dotted with houses and came across a group of people working. A little further to the right was an open space surrounded by a fence. Alix walked towards it, opened the fenced gate and entered the enclosure. Josette let out a shout and Ifa turned towards it with a question mark on her face. Josette stared behind Ifa with her hand over her mouth. Ifa turned her head and saw it: an animal had approached Alix, who was giving it something to eat and caressing it.

“We are lucky to share our village with animals,” she explained with a smile. “I don’t think you’ve ever seen one, have you?”

Titus passed Josette and Ifa and walked towards the beast. He was speechless. He reached his hand to touch its skull, and horns that had been cut off. The animal sniffed his hand and, no doubt realizing that he had nothing to offer him to eat, turned its head away and went back into the enclosure.

“Two goats, a few chickens and several horses,” Alix said.

She seemed satisfied with their looks of amazement.

“They provide us with milk and eggs. The horses help us with the work. They are very efficient at carrying heavy materials such as wood and old metal that our couriers find on their way. Without them, this village would not look the

way it does today. In addition, they allow us to fatten our crops, so we don't lack anything."

She went back to the gate and they came out of the enclosure one after the other.

"That's it. You've seen how we live. We're a peaceful community. We do not attack anyone, but we are prepared to defend ourselves if necessary. You're the first group we've had in here. The people who come here are usually lonely and in bad shape. Your good condition seemed strange to us, that's why Ugo brought you here and introduced you directly to me."

They had returned to the front of the big house and several people had gathered around them. The atmosphere was heavy, not only because large grey clouds had formed in the sky, announcing rain, but also because everyone was staring at them. Some villagers looked at them with concern, others with open hostility.

"We usually ask strangers to address everyone to explain the reason for their presence. We then vote to determine their fate."

Chapter 14

There was a knock on the door. Soroban sat up from his unorthodox position; he had fallen asleep at his desk. It took him a few moments to understand what was going on. He mumbled “come in” and cleared his throat at the same time. The door opened and Kal entered.

“I saw Dylan. She’s available to meet with you now. Are you ready?”

“Yes... definitely.”

Soroban gathered his papers, made sure his file was complete and put his glasses back on his nose. He quickly read the final notes he’d added earlier. The impromptu nap had given him a headache and he was having trouble putting his thoughts back in place. The morning seemed far behind him. He looked outside and saw that the sun was still shining, so he must not have slept long. He retraced his activities of the day and suddenly remembered the reserve, which at the same time reminded him of Tamer.

“Have you discovered the reserve?” Kal asked him.

Soroban was startled, still surprised at Kal’s intrusions into his head.

“Yes, by chance. I noticed that it was rather well stocked, which surprised me. I thought the situation was critical.”

“You and Dylan can discuss it in a few minutes.”

“OK, good.”

Soroban put these documents in a file and walked out of the room with Kal behind him. Dylan was waiting for them in the Council Chamber. She was alone for now, but she explained that the Council was meeting later in the day, so it was a perfect time to discuss the plan. Soroban presented her with the results of his analysis and the plans he had drawn up for the water supply.

“The biggest problem,” he said finally, “is the quality of the soil. The soil is crumbly, it no longer holds water and therefore dries out quickly. But most vegetables need a lot of water to reach their maximum production.”

He stopped to swallow and looked at Dylan. He was confident in his ideas, but suddenly hesitated.

“Please continue.”

“Yes. That’s the way it is. The ground has been overused. Growing the same crops in the same place for too long impoverishes the soil and eventually reduces the performance of the plants.”

“You have a solution, I suppose?”

Soroban clears his throat.

“Yes. Firstly, we’ll have to organise a crop rotation for next season. Some vegetables can be beneficial for fertilizing the soil, so I’ve drawn up a calendar and a five-year rotation plan to deal with that.”

He handed the plan to Dylan, who observed it.

“A section is empty, is that normal?”

“Yes... the literature on the subject recommends letting a plot rest for an entire season. I propose that each plot be set aside once every five years.”

Dylan closed her eyes and rubbed her eyelids.

“Anything else?”

“Yes... one last thing. It would be beneficial to fertilize the soil so that it contains more nutrients each year. To do this, it could be useful to compost.”

“Compost what?”

Dylan seemed exasperated. Soroban was feeling weak in his chair. She’d asked him for a complete plan, which he had provided, but judging by her reaction, she might have been expecting a magic formula, not a bunch of steps and rearrangements.

“Compost, decomposed plant matter. For example, you can use the inedible parts of plants. It can also be food waste, you know – what people leave on their plates at the end of a meal. I don’t know what’s being done about that right now.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes... for the moment it’s the most urgent thing I see, and it will have an impact in the short term, so next season. Unfortunately, at this time of the year, it is too late to act before winter.”

Dylan retrieved all of Soroban’s papers with a trembling hand. She seemed to have turned a little pale since they met. She put the papers in order and cleared her throat.

“Very well, then. I want you to stay with me and present your plan to the Council. You’re the expert, and I’m afraid I can’t explain every step to make sure it’s understood. I’ll check with Paul about the food. He’s in charge of the logistics of the Fort and therefore the meals and kitchens.”

“Do you have any concerns? You seem a little, shall we say, nervous.”

“Yes. I mean... I’m worried about the next year. We’ll have to go a long way with this year’s production. Several

months will have to pass before next season brings its first crops.”

“Still, the reserve seems quite full.”

“Have you seen the reserve?”

Dylan’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Yes,” Soroban replied. “A bit of a coincidence, I must admit. Was it a forbidden place?”

“No, of course not. You have access to almost everything. The reserve as well. Did you find it well stocked?”

“Yes! With all that’s in there and what’s left to harvest, I don’t think there’ll be a problem for the next year. In fact, I was a little surprised, considering Tamer’s insistence that I come to work. I’d just assumed that the situation was drastic.”

While talking, Soroban noticed that Kal was pacing near the wall. He seemed agitated. He kept his eyes closed and his breathing reminded him of Ifa’s breathing when she tried to calm down. “What’s going on?” he thought. Dylan spoke again abruptly.

“He was insistent? Could you be more specific?”

“Well, he...”

Suddenly, Kal started moaning near the wall. His eyes still closed, his face was twisted in pain. He seemed to be struggling, even though he was alone. Dylan suddenly got up and ran towards him.

“Kal!” she shouted. “Kal! What’s happening? Come back to us!”

*

Dylan and Soroban were on their knees as Kal slowly regained consciousness. Dylan was completely overwhelmed by what had just happened. Soroban had

difficulty understanding. He didn't know they were so close to each other. Besides, something in her reaction made him think that this wasn't the first time this had happened. Seeing Kal's eyes open, Dylan ran out of the room. Kal was now sitting on the floor with his back against the wall and rubbing his temples with his fingertips.

"Is everything all right?" Soroban asked. "What happened?"

"I'm fine," he answered, straightening up a little. "Nothing serious. It happens to me sometimes, it's... well, it's hard to explain."

Dylan returned, holding back from running, with a glass of water in her hand.

"Drink," she said.

Kal took the glass and swallowed the contents slowly. Dylan's face was full of worry, like a woman concerned for the love of her life, or even her child. Something very maternal had just appeared in her.

"Do you want to tell me what you saw?" she asked.

Kal shook his head and took another sip of water.

"Not now. It's all right, it's nothing serious."

He tried to get back on his feet and Dylan helped him by supporting him with one arm. He was pale, and fine drops of sweat were dripping on his forehead and down his cheeks. His hair looked more orange than usual in contrast to his pale skin.

"If you don't mind, I will take a break before the Council meeting. I need to isolate myself for a while. I'll be back in time."

"No problem, Kal. Go home and come back to me in better shape in an hour."

He left the room walking slowly, still rubbing his temples with his fingertips. Dylan, with an empty glass of water in her hands, went to place it on a table against the

wall by the door. She took a deep breath, scratched her forehead and began to speak again.

“What was it we were saying again?”

“Far be it from me to meddle in what is none of my business, but... is there something wrong with Kal?”

Soroban was worried about Kal. Dylan didn't know the connection between them, so he had to be careful with his questions, but he needed to know more. Dylan exhaled a trembling air. She hesitated.

“Kal has... well, visions. And sometimes, when he's... exposed to several frictions at once, it's as if he's feeling the emotions of all those people at once. He says it's very painful, but it's not dangerous.”

Dylan then turned to him and looked at him seriously, her eyes locked onto his own.

“I trust you, Soroban. No one must know Kal is having these visions. He could be in danger if it gets out. I believe you've grown attached to him, or at least respect and appreciate him in some way, that's why I'm telling you this, but this conversation has to stay between us.”

“Yes, I like him. He's a nice, upstanding man. I'll keep his secret.”

They just stood there staring at each other and didn't know what to say or do. A strange understanding was emerging between the two of them, with Kal as a common thread. Soroban wondered if there was some other connection between Kal and Dylan besides work, but he thought after all that it was none of his business.

“So, finally, what were we talking about before all this? Ah yes, Tamer! You said he insisted you come to work here?”

“Yes, he did. He visited me often. He kept telling me that the Council needed me, that sort of thing. He reminded me of the requisition law.”

Dylan straightened up and clenched her jaw.

“Did he threaten you?”

Soroban trampled, avoiding her gaze.

“I mean, yes... well, no. He never made any proper threats, but it was always implicit in his speech, let’s say.”

“Thank you for your honesty. He’s right, the law does exist. However, we always prefer to recruit people based on their goodwill rather than scare them with the law.”

Dylan walked to the glass wall and looked outside. Soroban watched her as he waited for the next move. But she didn’t speak anymore. She just stared out at the fields, her arms folded behind her back.

“We still have about half an hour before the Council meeting. You can withdraw if you wish. I need a few moments alone.”

Her voice was one of obvious sadness. Soroban granted her request and left her alone with her thoughts. He moved automatically towards the main entrance. All this business with Kal had made him want to be alone too. He relished the opportunity to gain half an hour of solitude. The Council Chamber gave a glimpse of the sun shining outside, and Soroban went out to enjoy it. The sun was getting rather scarce. In summer it was always hidden behind a mass of heavy white clouds, while in winter it rose late and set early. The best time to enjoy it was at the convergence of the two seasons. The weather was gradually cooling. One could walk outside without suffocating in sweltering heat, but also without the need for warm clothing.

Soroban headed without thinking towards the street of flowers. He called it this because the presence of the flowers had fascinated him when he had arrived. In truth, he didn’t know whether the streets had names or not. He had not bothered to inquire about the subject, which seemed so foolish to him. The sight of the flowers in the

groves made him relaxed again and made him dream of better days. He passed some fortified people on his way and smiled politely at them. He spent a lot of time alone in his room, so much so that he hardly knew anyone yet. When his plan was in effect, he could perhaps devote himself to his social life. Making friends, why not?

He walked along the street of flowers, soaking up the smells and colours, and then walked up to the big public square to sit down and wait for the meeting. He had no way of knowing what time it was, but a bell rang throughout the Fortress announcing the Council meetings. He was in no danger of arriving late. He took a seat on a secluded bench and took a deep breath. He tried to remember the smell of the flowers, which unfortunately did not reach him here. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the warmth of the sun on his face. The sun was starting to set – it would be dark by the end of the meeting, so he might as well enjoy it.

He suddenly felt a presence at his side – someone had just sat down next to him. He kept his eyes closed, concentrating as he revelled in his few minutes of freedom, imagining himself down in the square with Ifa before returning for dinner.

“I’m sorry you had to witness that earlier.”

Soroban opened his eyes and turned his head to see Kal at his side. He looked sad and embarrassed. Soroban smiled slightly. At that moment, Kal looked like the little boy he’d known at the time. The one who was ashamed of having done something stupid.

“Don’t worry about it. Do you have this kind of seizure often?”

“More and more, unfortunately.”

Chapter 15

Ifa almost choked when she heard Alix. Determine their fate? What exactly did she mean by that? What were they going to do with them? Titus and Josette were giving each other panicked looks. Nobody knew what to do. If only she could have guessed what the villagers had in mind! 'But what a fool I am!' she thought. 'I can find out what they're up to!' But was it a good idea to open the door to her mind right now? In front of all these people who might come in? Ifa was thinking fast. "What if I tried to communicate with just one of them?" Concluding that it was worth a try, Ifa took a moment to calm down. She mentally counted to twenty and felt light, her breathing amplified but slowed down. She closed her eyes and concentrated on visualizing a connection between herself and Alix. A physical bond, or something like it. She imagined a thread connecting them. An indestructible thread which cut through all other energy. She had to chase away the bonds Alix had with the members of her village and thus ensure an intimate exchange. At last she felt a light, a small fragment, open in her head and spread this sought-after echo. Yes, she had succeeded!

Alix turned towards Ifa, an air of surprise on her face.

"What are you doing?" she asked her mentally.

"I want to know what's going to happen to us."

Josette and Titus stood still and watched the villagers gather around them. Ifa motioned to them to wait before speaking or acting. They were not to sabotage her efforts.

"I have just explained to you," Alix replied. *"You tell us your story, and we decide what to do with you. It's simple."*

"I understand. But I think you've already made your decision, regardless of our story. Am I wrong?"

Alix held her gaze without looking away. Ifa was no longer aware of the others around her. All her attention was focused on maintaining this bond and fighting with those who wanted to break it.

"You tell me. What are you doing here?"

"We told you earlier, we're looking for the fertile Great North. We must bring back proof of it to save my grandfather who has been requisitioned. All the time we spend here is delaying us in this mission, and meanwhile, no one knows what's happening to him there!"

"How do you do that? Control my mind that way? The link with the others is broken!"

"I don't know. I'm just doing it. When we're finished, I'll give them back to you."

"So be it."

Alix had an inner struggle going on on her face. She hesitated and, curiously, Ifa could not get into her mind.

"It seems that you are blocking your access too," she remarked.

Alix replied with a smile and turned to the villagers.

"I need to speak with her privately for a few moments. Let's leave the other two between them in the meantime, we'll be back soon."

Alix reached out her arm to Ifa and invited her to follow. Titus looked at Ifa and she motioned to him that all was well. Their conversation had restored her confidence. She didn't know why, but she felt that she and Alix had a lot in common. She seemed rather peaceful to her. Alix walked through the village around the big house. She looked up at the sky and the buildings.

"You see all this? It wasn't built in a few days. We've been working for years to create a unique and sustainable living environment."

Ifa nodded her head, she could well imagine the long years it must have taken.

"We chose this place not because it was fertile or because the land was suitable for cultivation and construction. Well, probably it was a decisive factor at the time. But above all, it was because we are several days' walk from all the communities known to our members. In addition, we have access to a river, whose water is clear and clean enough to drink without the need for filtration."

Ifa thought of Josette, who did not want to wait before taking a drink from the stream. All in all, she had had good instincts. She smiled as she remembered their joy when they had discovered the creek, then frowned at the thought of their shock when Ugo had ambushed them. Alix continued her speech.

"We could have chosen any other place like this, do you understand? North or south, it doesn't matter."

Ifa waited for the rest without saying anything. She wondered where she was going with this story.

"Don't you understand? The Great North doesn't exist! The earth is made to welcome life, it's only a question of knowing how to adapt to its state!" Alix almost shouted this thought to her. Ifa remained stunned.

"What?"

"You understood me. The Great Fertile North is here, it's there, it's at Fort Victory too!"

Ifa's head turned and she felt her heart racing. She couldn't assimilate the information. It was impossible! Everything in the City was dry, nothing grew except twigs. In the Fortress, the rations were constantly being cut back.

"The Councils, the governments, all those who run communities like yours, they don't do things the right way. They produce in large quantities, wear out the land and then struggle to regain the fertility of yesteryear. Our members come from all over: Fort Victory, Softa, Solid River, South Bay. They all tell us the same story when they arrive. The harvests dried up over time and then the leaders got scared and rationed the food. Some of us left of our own free will. Others were chased away because they were different. But in the end, it was for the best. Everyone has a role to play here. Everyone is master of their own crops and we share the rest. Our way of doing things respects the land and life and benefits no one."

As they were talking, they had returned to the front of the big house. Titus and Josette were sitting on rocks near the entrance and stood up when they saw them. Ifa glanced at Alix.

"Is all this true?"

"As true as I'm talking to you."

Tears came to her eyes and she pursed her lips. All this way for nothing. All that hope, gone. Their plan had fallen through in just a few minutes and the possibility of freeing Soroban and leaving with him was gone with it. Ifa sat down on one of the rocks and buried her face in her hands. How can I tell them this news now? More importantly, what was going to happen to them?

"Come," Alix ordered, pointing to the house. "The others can wait a little longer."

Ifa nodded and they followed her inside a second time. This time it wasn't anxiety boiling in Ifa's veins, but despair.

"I think you should take a few minutes to summarize our conversation for your friends."

Ifa agreed and set about explaining to Josette and Titus what Alix had told her. No Great Fertile North. No new life. A dream shattered, but above all, no way out for Soroban. Tears ran down her cheeks without her even trying to wipe them off. She felt utterly devastated and unable to imagine a sequel to their story. She might as well sit here on the colourful carpet and let her tears flow forever, since all hope of a better world with her grandfather had vanished.

"I have to admit that I'm not that surprised," Josette announced, very softly. "If the Council is able to feed us all, it's because farming is possible, even in our lifeless region. But why hide this information? We could break up the stone that covers our streets and squares and use these spaces to grow our food!"

"To keep power, quite simply."

Titus hadn't uttered a single word since he had heard about Ifa. He was calm now, but his features had hardened. His cold eyes radiated a new pain. A mixture of anger and resentment.

"Of course. We all know about Tamer's fascination with control. He's certainly not the only one who thinks like that! By hiding the truth from us, the fortified feed us in exchange for work. Without us, they might not be able to do it! Without Josette running around the region for supplies, without Soroban to repair their equipment, without all those people who provide services in exchange for meagre provisions. We don't even know what's happening on the other side! Maybe their bellies are full three times a day!"

Ifa's tears had stopped flowing by now. She was watching him again carefully. She had often seen him angry with Tamer, but he had never rebelled against the whole system. Ifa looked at her hands and saw that they were shaking. She slipped them between her thighs and counted mentally. '1, 2, 3...' All this was not good for her sanity. Her head was spinning and she thought she might faint. '15, 16, 17...' the lights had stopped dancing in front of her eyes. She turned to Alix.

"What are you going to do with us now? Why are you telling us all this if you are going to let the village decide our fate?"

Alix took her place on the mat. She waited a few moments before answering.

"That depends. What is it you want? Have my revelations changed your quest?"

Ifa looked at the other two while biting her lip. Of course, the whole thing was a game-changer. However, Ifa still wanted to find a way to get Soroban out, no matter what. Josette looked at her. Her nostrils were fluttering. Ifa didn't need to hear what she was thinking to understand it. She wanted to go home, to Janis and the children. She would go back one way or another, even if she had to run away. She shifted her gaze to Titus. Titus still had the marks of anger on his face. His mouth made a pout. Was it disdain or opposition? Ifa spoke up.

"I think Josette wants to go back. Her family is there in the City."

Alix agreed and signaled her to continue.

"Titus... I don't know what you want. As for me, my primary goal was to find a way to free Soroban. That's always been my wish, but now I'm at a loss to know how to get there."

Titus nodded.

“I’m just like you. Nothing matters more to me than freeing Soroban. However, maybe we can take the time to make a plan, if you give us the opportunity to stay a little longer... and then to leave afterwards,” he added, questioning Alix with his eyes.

She smiled.

“Thank you,” she said. “I am conveying your wishes to the others. You seem to me to be honest people. Let’s go out – if the others have any questions, they’ll ask you themselves.”

Titus frowned. Ifa looked at him without understanding, then concluded that Alix had passed on their requests directly to the others while they were talking.

Once outside, a group had gathered in front of the door as they had earlier in the day. Ifa noticed that not everyone was present. She wondered whether this was a good sign or not and looked at Alix. She replied, *“Here you don’t have to be ashamed to be a whisperer. You can accept who you are. You can open the door for them. They will take you as you are.”*

Ifa hesitated for a moment, then decided to trust her. If Alix was telling the truth, it would be the first time in her life that she could be herself, without hiding any part of it. This desire for freedom made her break down all her barriers and she opened herself up to everyone for the first time since Kal’s disappearance. Several echoes burst forth at the same time. Ifa closed her eyes and smiled faintly. She had forgotten how deafening it could be in a crowd. She noticed that she was able to isolate thoughts and focus on the ones she wanted. She opened her eyes again and looked around the villagers, partially listening to the discussions that were taking place in her mind. Most of them seemed to agree to leave her group free. Some feared they would stay a long time without contributing and

preferred that they leave immediately. No one seemed to want to hurt them. Ifa dropped her shoulders in relief. She had had to maintain enormous tension in the last few hours without realizing it. Some villagers turned to her and greeted her, recognizing one of their own in her. Alix raised one hand and the voices fell silent.

“The group has made its decision.”

Titus and Josette turned to her attentively as they waited for the rest.

“We accept your temporary presence in the village. You may leave when the time is right. In the meantime, you will stay in the big house and participate in community life. If you wish to stay, of course.”

Ifa looked at his friends and observed their reaction. Titus finally showed a smile. He turned to her and she gave him one back, relieved that he was finally letting his guard down. Perhaps one day he would be able to forgive her. Josette wiped away a tear. Ifa walked towards her and took her hand.

“Do you want to go home?” she asked.

Josette nodded her head, giving free rein to her tears.

“It’s a wonderful place, but I’d like to go home. I miss the children. I must also soon think about returning to the Fortress. If I’m away too long, Janis risks reprisals. I have a responsibility to her, to our children.”

Ifa took her in her arms and stroked her hair. They had never been very close even when they lived together, but since the last few days she now counted Josette as a friend.

“You can leave right now if that’s what you want. Titus and I will be back soon, we just have to find a solution.”

She looked at Titus to ask for his consent and he agreed. Josette was still crying, but a smile appeared on her lips. The thought of seeing her children again encouraged her.

“I’ll do it. It’s too late now to leave today – I’ll leave tomorrow morning.”

Chapter 16

Kal moved nervously on the bench. He was still shaken from his episode that afternoon, and hesitant about what he could tell Soroban and what he should keep to himself. Dylan already knew too much – was it wise to involve a third person in this story? Soroban looked at him and invited him to confide in him. He resolved to talk to him about it later. Time was already running out.

“We should go home. The Council begins in a few minutes.”

He got up and waited for Soroban, who rose and walked quietly toward the fort. The Council bell rang in their ears. Kal smiled at Soroban.

“I have a very good sense of time,” he winked.

They were the first to arrive at the Council Chamber. Dylan hadn’t returned yet – she had gone to sit outside to take time to digest everything Soroban had told her. Kal had tried to warn her that the plan would require many changes, and that they might be different from what she had imagined, but she had chosen to ignore it. He could not blame her, she was afraid that the Council would not accept her proposal – even if it was Soroban’s – and that she would

be blamed afterwards. As she had never known any place but the Fortress, her greatest fear was that she would have to leave. Even though, as Kal often told her, no law could force her to leave if she hadn't broken any rules. She finally arrived and Kal tried to send her courage with a smile. He could feel her nervousness from across the room, and he wasn't alone. Soroban also noticed his rigid gait, his fingers tapping on his right thigh, and his left hand whose knuckles whitened as they gripped his report. She took her place at the table, Soroban to her right, and the other councillors entered one after the other.

It was customary for Kal to remain in the room standing near the wall. He was not allowed to sit at the Council table. He was only Dylan's assistant. At least, that was the official title they gave him. Friend would have been a better term, he thought for a moment. After years of working together day after day, they had definitely become friends. His role was to record what happened during the meeting, because his memory was phenomenal. Of course, written minutes were also taken as a precautionary measure.

Dylan also asked him to do something else that no one else knew about. He had to make sure that there were no conspiracies or betrayals within the Council. Dylan was the only one who knew his particularity. Besides Soroban, now. Kal knew some of the councillors would be outraged to learn of it, and he was careful not to let it show. His implicit task was far more important and required more attention than mentally noting what was being said. And some meetings were more complex. Especially the ones they knew, or at least suspected, would be conflictual.

Dylan started the meeting. Council rules said that the person whose area was on the agenda had to facilitate the meeting. She presented Soroban's plan with great ease and confidence. She had understood everything he had

explained to her earlier in the day. She remembered all the details and gave concrete examples about the different crops and redevelopment plans as proposed by Soroban. The councillors listened attentively. All generally agreed with the proposed changes. Some wondered about a few unnecessary details, but all in all, everyone was in agreement. Dylan had earned a reputation as a woman of intellect, and was trusted to state the facts.

Finally came the moment when she had to explain the problem of soil quality and overproduction. She began her explanations a little more weakly. Her voice trembled at times at the end of her sentences. Kal saw Soroban wiping his hands on his trousers under the table. He himself moved a little to the back of the room. The tension was high. Kal noticed a few councillors starting to move around on their chairs. But worst of all was the carmine that had formed in his head. Anger was growing in the minds of some counselors. Kal tried to segment the words from the thoughts. He had experienced enough of other people's conflicts for one day. After a few seconds, he finally managed to calm down and focus on one at a time. Finally, Paul, the head of logistics, took the floor.

"If I understand correctly, you're telling us that we have to decrease the quantity of plants to increase production? That makes no sense at all!"

Several other voices joined him in protest. Dylan's much-feared moment was coming. Soroban tried to intervene.

"If I may..."

But he was quickly silenced by Paul's overreaction.

"You! You think you know it all even if you just set foot in here a few days ago! Do you think we're going to be able to feed everyone by leaving one out of every five empty

plots every year? How many families in your beloved City do you think one out of every five plots of land can feed?"

Dylan stood up spontaneously.

"Paul!" she shouted. "You leave Soroban alone. He's a consultant and he's the best resource we have for machinery and knowledge of agriculture. I checked all the facts he mentions in the library and he's right! The previous advisors did not put these techniques in place. If they had, we would be in a much better position right now."

Paul calmed down somewhat, but continued to grumble.

"That's all well and good, but the current production barely meets the demands. We still have to ration the portions, we'll never make it through the winter. I can hardly imagine next year with fewer plants."

Dylan took a slow breath and thought. She hesitated. Kal understood what she was about to do and wanted to stop her, but in doing so, he was jeopardizing his own safety. So he just clenched his jaw and hoped for the best. She laid her hands on the table and bowed forward, looking into Paul's eyes.

"It's strange, all this."

"What do you mean? Your plan? Indeed, it's very strange!"

There was some laughter around the table. The others just watched attentively, eager to hear what Dylan had to say.

"No, I'm talking about the stores. You're saying we'll struggle to get through the winter despite the rationing. Yet the plants outside are still teeming with all kinds of vegetables that weren't harvested. And most importantly, the storeroom is full."

Exclamations of amazement, incomprehension and anger burst out all around the table. Paul's cheeks went

through the whole palette of reds. His lower lip had completely disappeared, and the upper one rose up in a rather ridiculous grin.

“This is completely untrue! We are struggling to maintain an acceptable level of food for the Fortress!”

The councillors were completely beside themselves. Everyone was talking at the same time and looking worriedly between Dylan and Paul. One of them got up and pushed his chair back noisily. All heads turned towards him. Victor was in charge of justice for the whole Fortress. He was known as a neutral man who only took part in discussions to give a considered opinion, in accordance with the rules. When he spoke, everyone listened to him. Kal did not like him very much. He was taciturn, unsympathetic and a loner. However, Kal considered him one of the straightest people in the Fort. Victor was not a man to betray the Council or the laws.

“Let’s go to the storeroom. Then we’ll find out for sure.”

All nodded sharply.

“Excellent idea,” said his table neighbour.

Helena was in charge of security. She was short and chubby. She single-handedly managed the entire team of guards. She didn’t usually interfere in other people’s areas. She already had a whole lot of problems to manage with surveillance. She raised her head high and invited the others to join her.

Kal hadn’t taken his eyes off Paul. He seemed crazed, he was looking around frantically and he had suddenly started sweating profusely. Kal was concentrating on him, yet he couldn’t understand what he was thinking. “What are you up to?” he thought, squinting. All the councillors had set out for the storeroom, Paul included, and Kal lost his way among the figures walking in the corridor. Dylan led

the way with Soroban. They arrived at the storeroom. Kal saw the light from the lamp that Dylan held in her hand illuminate the corridor and then dim as it entered the room. He finally caught up with them when they were all inside. Dylan was going around the room with her lamp to illuminate all the shelves for the councillors to see.

“Unbelievable!” said a voice.

“There must be months’ worth of food here!” said another.

Dylan spoke again.

“It seems Soroban was telling the truth. The earth is of poor quality and is not producing at its full capacity, and yet we manage to have all this, and more!”

She pointed to the plantation behind her. They couldn’t see anything, the sun having set, but everyone understood what she was talking about.

“Improving production will allow us to consolidate distribution and thus ensure better health for all. However, I am sure that I am not mistaken in saying that we will not lack anything this winter.”

The councillors nodded their heads to show their agreement. Kal was looking for Paul, but saw him nowhere. Dylan shouted.

Kal saw a sudden movement at the back of the storeroom and before he could react, he saw Paul violently attacking Dylan with a wooden crate.

Shouts of protest and surprise rose up in the storeroom. Dylan collapsed to the ground, unconscious. Paul still had the crate in his hand and looked around in panic.

“Don’t come any closer!” he shouted. Kal made his way through the aisles of shelves. He was trying to get close to him to disarm him, to subdue him.

“No one must touch the storeroom! You can’t cut back, it’s impossible!”

He seemed to be losing his mind. A large vein was pulsating in his neck, his feet kept repeating the same small steps: two forward, two backward. As if he was preparing to fight or run away. Running away was impossible, with the members of the Council clustered in front of the door. Soroban was crouched over Dylan and was checking her over. Kal was getting closer, but not close enough to make a move. Helena had also got closer to Paul. He looked at her, his eyes threatening.

“Don’t come any closer!”

“Of course, I won’t. Whatever you say, Paul. Please, put down that crate, will you? Let’s go and talk on the other side while Soroban takes care of Dylan. She seems to need first aid.”

Kal, distraught by these words, turned his head towards Dylan. Blood was spilling on the floor, but he couldn’t see the wound. He was thinking at full speed, his mind boiling. All thoughts were converging on him like a tsunami. Black spots appeared in the corner of his eyes. He closed his eyelids tightly and leaned against a shelf. “No, it’s not time, stay here!” The wave was too strong and it carried him away.

*

He was walking around the square and looked behind him to make sure no one was following him. He was all alone. Night had fallen, which made it easier for him to move around, but the risk of being followed without him noticing was always present. At the far side of the square, he rushed to the first street and climbed up towards the walls. He saw a faint glow coming from the houses. It was

a cool night, which meant that the beautiful season was coming to an end. His breath turned to mist with each exhalation. He entered a building at the far end of the street. It seemed uninhabited – no glow filtered through the boards covering the windows. He went upstairs and walked to the far door, which he opened. It was a storage space about two by three metres filled to the brim with wooden crates stacked one on top of the other. “Wonderful,” he whispered. He closed the door gently and came out with a big smile of satisfaction on his face.

*

Kal resurfaced and took a few seconds to remember what had just happened. “Dylan!” he thought. He found her still lying on the ground, Soroban at her side. Paul wasn’t in sight. He came out of his hiding place between two shelves and saw Paul held by Victor, the wooden crate lying on the floor, damaged. The counsellors had regained a semblance of calm. Paul wriggled and fought, but could not escape Victor’s grip. Victor spoke.

“I suggest that we take Paul to lockdown. We can proceed to trial in the morning. It’s well into the evening. It’s time to eat our meal, but above all to rest.”

The five remaining councillors nodded in agreement.

“Kal, Soroban, we’ll leave Dylan in your care.”

Victor left the storeroom with Paul, struggling and trying to defend himself.

“You don’t understand! The storeroom is paramount, we can’t touch it!”

Chapter 17

Ifa, Titus and Josette had entered the big house, arm in arm, smiling. Their expedition was not going as planned, but they finally felt safe in the village. Alix showed them around the big house beyond the central salon where they had spent most of their time since their arrival. The house had a few bedrooms as well as a room that served as a kitchen in the winter. A stone oven had been built there and there was a huge fireplace outside. Alix explained to them that it could be used all year round, but that in the summer, most of the food preparation was done outside. The whole house was arranged around this room and the living room, with the bedrooms evenly placed on each side for maximum heat distribution.

The three companions decided not to separate for the night and all settled together in the same room. Knowing that this would be their last night together they wanted to enjoy each other's presence for a few more hours. They shared an evening meal with Alix. They enjoyed the hot soup full of large chunks of vegetables. It was perfect for the cooling weather. Buns made by one of the villagers accompanied the soup. This apprentice baker made his own

flour from different ingredients. But tastiest of all was the butter and cheese that Alix served them to go with their bread. Ifa had never tasted anything so delicious. She glanced at Titus, who ate with his eyes closed and sighed long sighs of satisfaction. She smiled as she lowered her eyes to her plate. She had almost forgotten the disappointment of their failure. In their misfortune, they had fared rather well!

They were discussing everything and nothing. Alix told them about the history of the village and the people. They had a few births each year, which seemed to touch her deeply. She was proud of their community and spoke passionately about it. She told them how they had been fortunate enough to raise animals. One of the villagers had arrived in the village several years ago with his herd of goats following him. He had left his farm after it had burned down and was looking for a safe place to shelter and take care of his animals. A whisperer too, the presence of people and their energy had led him directly to them.

“So everyone’s a whisperer here?” Titus asked with a mouth full of bread.

Alix smiled at him.

“Not all of us are, but a great majority.”

“And the others, don’t they feel excluded? They manage to fit in?”

“Yes. We don’t believe in segregation. That’s why we use speech to communicate most of the time.”

“Yet our “trial” was held in thoughts, right?”

Alix laughed.

“Your trial?”

Titus blushed a little and shifted his position. He didn’t particularly like to sit on the floor to eat and Ifa saw him fidgeting all the time in search of comfort.

“I mean, your consultation on what to do with us.”

“Yes, that’s right. However, this consultation is done on a voluntary basis. Those who want to give their opinion do so and those who do not want to simply go about their business. It was pure coincidence today that there were no typical members of the assembly present. As I say, we are in the majority, so the chances of that happening are higher.”

Titus seemed to accept this answer and continued to chew his bread. The food was good. They had had enough food to feed themselves for the last few days, but eating with a roof over their heads without fear of an animal attack was completely different. Titus had returned to his usual pleasant mood. He was very interested in village life and asked a lot of questions.

“Do you all have a specific occupation?”

“You mean does everyone have a different task to help the community?”

Titus nodded his head, his mouth still full.

“No, they don’t. We are a community, but we all function independently. Some offer their services for collective needs and some don’t. Everyone grows their own vegetables and we exchange certain foodstuffs. In terms of security, again, it’s volunteers who offer their names. We all live together, but separately, if you will.”

Alix was happy to answer Titus’ questions. She was proud to introduce them to her village. The travellers felt that she cared about her community.

“Were you born here?” Ifa asked.

Alix smiled at her as she swallowed her soup.

“Yes. My parents came here when they were still kids. Their families traveled together. They were looking for the Great North too.”

She smiled as she talked about them. A melancholy smile, full of love.

“Their families decided to stay and a few years later I was born. I never knew the outside world except through the stories shared with the newcomers. Without having been there, I know about the larger communities like yours, or South Bay. I have never felt the need to leave. We really have everything we need to be happy here.”

Ifa liked to hear her talk. She had a certain charm and the words flowed from her mouth like a gentle stream, never stopping, and she liked following the thread. Then Alix was silent, her gaze a little unfocused. Ifa looked at her companions. Josette smiled back at her. She seemed happy to be leaving the next day. Titus didn't notice that Ifa was looking at him. He was immersed in watching Alix, as if she was the only person in the room. Ifa quickly looked away.

They sat together for a while, chatting and sharing their meal. Afterwards, Ifa, Josette and Titus went to the room where they were to spend the night. Alix wished them a good night and retired to the other side of the big house. Ifa thought that living alone in the big house must be sad, and lonely.

They quietly set up their beds, reassured that they didn't need to stand guard or hung ropes and metal plates around their camp. Ifa shared this thought with the others, who laughed in turn.

“Unfortunately, I'm going back into it tomorrow. Several days of half-sleep to come!” said Josette. “But frankly, I can't wait. I don't like to be gone so long.”

She lay down in her bed and closed her eyes.

“I'm exhausted. I'll talk to you in the morning!”

Titus bid her good night and turned to Ifa.

“I'm doing the same, can you turn off the lamp? Tomorrow, we'll see if some of the villagers can help us come up with an idea. Maybe some of them have experienced something like this before?”

Ifa nodded her head and blew out the lamp. She laid down on her bed, put her blanket back on it and pulled it up under her nose. She felt an intense tiredness, both in her body, battered by their many days of walking, but above all a great mental fatigue. She had lost the habit of conversing mentally over the years. When Kal was around, they had spent almost all their time chatting without saying a word, but she did not remember ever feeling tired at that time.

Kal. At times, when she began to think about him, she felt a strong tension in her chest. She wanted to scream to let out her rage, her sadness at having lost him. He was so young, so funny. Her best friend, her confidant. She wondered what would happen to him as an adult. Would he have kept his pretty, disheveled red hair? She laughed under her blanket.

“Kal, I miss you, you know,” she thought as she visualized his childlike face.

“I miss you too, Ifa.”

*

Her first reaction was to think she had fallen asleep. She looked at the room in the dark and saw that Josette and Titus were already asleep. Titus was snoring softly next to her. She bit her lip hard. A taste of blood tickled her tongue. She was definitely not asleep. But that was impossible. Did the thought of Kal make her think he was still there? What if he was? What if Kal was alive? Could they communicate with each other, even if they were so far apart?

“Kal?” she said. She felt completely ridiculous. She must have mixed up her memory with reality.

“I’m here, Ifa. I’ve always been here.”

Tears came to her eyes and she put her hand in front of her mouth to avoid crying and waking the other two. A ball of heat was burning in her chest.

"But how? How can it be? I thought you were dead!"

"I live in the Fortress. I've been here for thirteen years. Since I left. I wish I could've kept in touch with you, but I couldn't. I would've put you in danger."

Ifa could no longer hold back her tears, which she let run freely down her cheeks. She got up and left the room, nervous that her tears would wake her friends. She brought her blanket and sat down on the carpet in the large living room.

"I'm so glad you're alive! Are you healthy?"

"Yes. We don't lack anything on this side of the walls. Good hot meals, a draught-free house, everything's fine."

Ifa could barely hold back her sobs. She could barely keep the connection with him., She let herself be carried away by her emotions and then had to concentrate on getting back to him.

"Have you seen Soroban? Tell me he's okay."

"He's doing very well too. I see him every day, I help him with his work."

Ifa thanked heaven for the news. She never thought it would be possible. She would never have believed that Kal was still alive or that she could get in touch with him.

"All these years, I closed my mind. I was angry, I was afraid. I decided to ignore my powers and become a normal person. And the day I decide to open the door again, there you are. It's absolutely incredible."

"Seems like we were thinking about each other at the same time. It was like that back then, too, remember?"

Ifa smiled in the dark. She remembered it all too well. They were always thinking of each other. Every day, almost every minute. It was so easy with him.

"I'm surprised we can talk to each other from so far away!"

"From so far away?"

Ifa's smile faded away. Of course, Kal had no way of knowing where she was right now. He must have thought she was in her bunk bed at the end of the alley. She swallowed with difficulty.

"Ifa, where are you?"

"Far away."

What more could she say? How could she explain to him the purpose of her mission, and especially that it had failed?

"Ifa. Have you forgotten how it all works? You're the echo in my head, I'm aware of everything you're thinking about."

"It's true. I forgot."

She put her hands in her face and began to explain everything to him: the journey, the beast, the village, Alix, but above all the revelations of it. Kal listened to her attentively, without intervening in any way. When she had finished, he spoke again.

"Soroban told me about the idea you had. He didn't think you'd dare, though. I must confess, I'm surprised myself!"

Ifa was almost insulted, but had to admit he was right. She herself found her own recklessness astonishing.

"What you're telling me doesn't surprise me, though. After all, why should the Fortress be the only place where food can be grown? Things aren't as we thought on my side of the wall either. Something's brewing, and I'm afraid of what will happen. I want to get your grandfather out of here. I may have found a way, but I have to break almost every rule in the book to do so, and betray the trust of the only person I care about here."

"Kal. You're scaring me. What's going on?"

"So far, nothing. But something's going to happen, I can feel it. Dylan – a councillor – was attacked tonight by another councillor. Something's going on with the food supply and I'm afraid a bigger conflict is coming. Since Soroban is involved, I want to keep him safe. I'll need a few days at the most."

Ifa's heart was wrapped up in her chest. If something happened to Soroban while she was days away, she would not be able to accept it. She exhaled and counted mentally, "1, 2, 3..."

"Ifa. I'm still here. Stop counting."

She laughed. He had always been able to comfort her in every situation.

"I have the situation well in hand. I'm in the best position here to keep him safe. However, what you learned in the village may help me. The more I know about the crops, but also about what is happening outside, the more I will be able to act, or convince the right people to act for me."

Ifa told him everything she had seen in the village, but also in the forest. She told him about the animals, about the development of the village, but also about the ruins that were found everywhere on the road between the city and the forest. She told him everything she remembered from her discussions with Alix about the whisperers from elsewhere, from other communities. They talked and talked, until, several hours later, they fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 18

The sky was laden with a huge mass of compact clouds that barely let the morning light through, making the air humid and heavy. The atmosphere was heavy on the side of the Fort as well. The councillors were gathered in the Council Chamber, which had been rearranged for the occasion. The large round table had disappeared and in its place the chairs were set out in rows with their backs to the bay windows. At the front of the assembly, only one seat was enthroned. Metal rings were set in the armrests of the seat and on the front legs. Heavier rings were inserted into them piece by piece, forming a chain, the ends of which clasped the wrists and ankles of former councillor Paul. The first row of chairs was occupied by five councillors, immobile and silent, their faces closed and their eyes fixed on the accused. Victor was standing next to Paul, with his hands clasped behind his back, waiting to begin his speech.

No one spoke. Paul kept his eyes on his bound hands. One of his feet was stomping on the ground. Soroban had taken his place behind the row of councillors. A few other people were quietly entering the room discreetly, silent, with a solemn air appropriate for such an event. He

recognized Clara, the lady in the dining room, as well as a man whom he saw regularly on his travels, but whose function he did not know. He greeted him with the usual nod. A few overseers took their places on either side of Paul. Then, as if upon a signal, Victor began to speak in a loud voice.

“Dear colleagues, neighbours, and fortified friends, we are gathered here today for the trial of Paul, formally charged with assault and attempted murder of Dylan, the councillor responsible for the farm plan. He is also charged with lying, which adds treason to the list of charges. The acts of which Paul is accused took place last night in the storeroom next door to this room in front of nine witnesses, including myself.”

A few disapproving murmurs rose up among those who had not been present the day before, the councillors remaining obstinately silent.

“The witnesses have appointed a spokesperson who will explain in detail what happened yesterday. We will then proceed to questions and sentencing proposals, following which I will render my decision. As a witness myself, I did not participate in the appointment of the spokesperson. Witnesses, please announce your spokesperson.”

Helena stood up.

“We have chosen Soroban to tell the story. As a consultant, we consider his opinion neutral and impartial.”

She sat down. Soroban got up with difficulty – he’d forgotten his cane in his room. He had hesitated when the Council had asked him to recount his testimony since he was not really familiar with legal customs. Helena had convinced him by explaining that his lack of knowledge of the people involved ensured his neutrality on the issue. He cleared his throat and leaned on the back of the chair in

front of him. He avoided looking at Paul, as the sight of the chains made him uncomfortable. Instead, he locked eyes with Victor and began to tell what had happened the evening before, as experienced through his eyes.

He told the story of the meeting and the reactions of the Council to the unveiling of the plan. Mainly, Paul's reaction when Dylan mentioned that the plan called for a reduction in the percentage of land under cultivation to let the fallow land rest. Soroban explained that he had tried to intervene to explain the theory behind the proposal, but Paul had prevented him from doing so. He mentioned that he had discovered the stores a few days before, quite by chance, and that he had been surprised by the amount of food. He had not made a big deal of it, for he did not know how much food was needed to feed the entire population. However, he had told Dylan about it later in one of their conversations.

He was getting hot and bothered about taking on the role of spokesperson. All eyes were on him. The fate of a poor, desperate man was in his hands. He put a hand to his forehead to wipe away the sweat he felt beading and resumed his story. He now recounted how Dylan had told everyone about the state of the reserves, and the reaction of the Council members and the subsequent decision of the group to check the storeroom. From that point on, his memories became somewhat confused.

"We entered the storeroom, and Dylan turned on a lamp and scanned the shelves to show everyone what was on them. A very respectable amount of fruits and vegetables of all kinds, and several bags full of peanuts. All the councillors seemed surprised at the amount of food that had accumulated. Dylan explained that the harvest was not yet finished in the plantations and that many items would be added to the inventory in a little while. She was..."

He was struggling to put his thoughts in order and noticed that his hands had started to shake.

“...I don’t remember exactly what she said, but she mentioned that the current reserves would probably be enough to last the entire cold season until next year’s harvest. That’s when Paul...”

He stopped to exhale heavily.

“That’s when Paul came up behind her and hit her on the neck with an empty root vegetable box. I didn’t see it coming, I hadn’t noticed that he had walked away from the group for a moment. She collapsed to the ground and I knelt down beside her to see her injury. When I looked up, Victor had a hold of Paul, and that’s how it ended.”

His whole body was now shaking. He didn’t want to explain what had happened afterwards, when he had brought Dylan back to his room with Kal’s help. He didn’t want to talk about the pool of blood that had spread under Dylan’s body and onto his trousers. He felt weak and very tired. The events of the day before did not fit with his experience so far of life at the Fortress.

“Thank you, Soroban. Witnesses, is this testimony consistent with what you experienced yesterday?” asked Victor.

The five councillors present nodded their heads. People in the room were struggling to keep their emotions in check. Footsteps rang out, and a man burst through the door frame. Tamer stood there, one hand leaning against the wall, breathing loudly. He seemed to have run a long distance, his cheeks were red and his hair stuck to his forehead. What shocked Soroban, however, was the expression on his face. He looked worried, even panicky, which was in sharp contrast to his usual self-confidence. He greeted Victor, who invited him to take a seat.

“As is customary, I will now ask the accused to tell his version of the facts. Paul?”

Paul looked up at Victor. He still had the same panicked look on his face as the day before. His eyes were bloodshot, and deep purple circles hollowed out his cheeks. He looked ten years older than the day before.

“Who cares what I did? You’re making a big mistake! You must not touch the supplies! You’re going to get us all killed!”

He stood up and lost his balance, because the chains connecting his arms to the chair wouldn’t allow him to stand fully. He fell back to the chair with a thud. There were murmurs of discontent in the room. One of the councillors Soroban tried in vain to identify rose to his feet.

“Yes, Joachim?” Victor inquired.

“I have a sentence proposal.”

Victor lowered his chin and invited Joachim to give his opinion. He was a councillor who spoke little during meetings, so although Soroban remembered that he was on the Council, he had no idea of his role and didn’t know his name until that moment. He was small and chubby, with hair all around the sides of his head, the top of it shining in the daylight.

“I propose exile, blindfolded, two days’ walk away.”

A few heads nodded, and someone shouted a well-felt “I approve” in the angled row. Soroban didn’t know how this part would go. Would the fate of the accused be determined by the people in the room? He met Tamer’s gaze. Unfathomable, sitting straight in his chair, he never took his eyes off Paul. Victor began to speak, but stopped just as abruptly. Soroban turned away from Tamer, whom he was still observing, and saw why Victor had gone silent. Kal had just entered the Council Chamber. He had put on a long black shirt that reached down to the middle of his

thighs and pursed his lips tightly. Soroban felt his stomach tighten. He noticed that Kal's nostrils were flaring, his eyes were foggy, and he looked away from Paul.

"I am sad to report that Councillor Dylan left us this morning."

*

Someone shouted in the congregation. Paul struggled in his chair, trying to escape his chains. Most people were looking at him, and the others stared at Kal without reacting. Victor was the first to respond verbally.

"By "left us", you mean?"

"She died in her bed just a few minutes ago."

A leaden silence fell over the room, all eyes on Kal. His tight lips disappeared in a thin line across his face, his tired eyes staring into the emptiness before him. His jaw was outstretched and his fists were clenched at his sides in a disturbing immobility, like a statue, petrified. Soroban wanted to get up to join him and try to comfort him or at least listen to him, but he was frozen by the protests of Paul, who was struggling in his chair.

"It's impossible, let me out of here, I want to see her! I'm innocent, untie me!" he shouted suddenly, just as all eyes were on him.

Several people got up, chairs scraping the floor. Someone shouted, "Murderer!" The words of some were mixed with others in a deafening din. Kal was still standing, but had retreated to the wall, where he used to stand during Council meetings. He looked straight ahead, his lips pursed. Soroban saw Tamer hurry out of the room, but no one seemed to notice him. Suddenly Victor shouted a cry that was heard above all others and incited the crowd to silence.

“Sit down, please!”

The participants returned to their seats, despite the anger welling up inside them. Helena and several other members of the assembly were crying.

“The news of Councillor Dylan’s death forces me to amend the charge against former councillor Paul here. We find the accused guilty of lying, treason and murder. Any previous sentencing proposals are obsolete. As stipulated by Fortress regulations, the sentence for murder is death. This will be carried out at dusk in the square in front of the Fortress. Anyone who has information that could change this decision is requested to come forward immediately.”

Paul gave a long and painful howl. The two guards at his side removed his ties, pulled the accused from the chair, and forcibly removed him from the room. There was heavy mood in the Council Chambers. Everyone was talking at the same time. Some were crying loudly, while others shared their disbelief.

“Murder at the Fort! When was the last killing? I can’t remember,” one of the guards asked his neighbour.

“At least twenty years, if not more!” replied the neighbour.

Victor spoke again, clearing his throat to restore calm to the assembly.

“It is true that the last such accusation was made a long time ago, and most of us were not present to testify to it today. I would like to point out that today, on the day of the killing, we ask you to carry out your usual duties with the same efficiency as usual. Tomorrow you will have a day of rest during which we will celebrate the life of Councillor Dylan. Please clear the room.”

The crowd lined up to leave the room in a rather calm and orderly fashion. Soroban crept among them to find Kal, who hadn’t moved. He persisted in his observation of the

wall in front of him, but Soroban suspected his mind was elsewhere.

“Are you coming?” Soroban asked him.

Kal nodded and they both left the Council Chamber. Soroban took him outside, to the same bench where they had talked the day before. He’d only known Dylan for a short time, but the news of her death was hard to digest.

“Do you know what happened? She seemed stable when I left her last night.”

“I don’t know. Blows to the head can cause all kinds of damage. I watched over her all night. Her breathing seemed stable, but I couldn’t seem to...”

Kal chewed his lip. Was he hesitant to say what was on his mind, or was he trying to stop crying? Soroban ventured.

“You couldn’t get inside her head?” he asked softly.

Kal’s eyes filled with tears and he shook his head. Soroban put an arm around his shoulders and pulled him towards him. Kal silently rained down his pain. Without a sob or sigh. Simple tears of pain and sadness ran down his cheeks. They sat like that for a few minutes as Soroban looked up at the sky again. He was content to be there for Kal, a boy who had come of age and was now suffering the loss of a friend. A few minutes later, Kal slowly straightened up and dried his face with his hands.

“This morning I felt her presence. It was as if she surfaced for a few moments. I saw images running through her mind. There were all kinds of people, of all ages, walking and working on the plantation. The plantations were full of all kinds of colourful vegetables and fruits. Some people were sitting on the ground in groups and sharing a meal under the shade of majestic trees. But what was most beautiful was that there were no walls on either side of the plantation. You could see the horizon, where there were

green luxurious hills on each side of the river. The river! The water was rippling and clear, like the filtered water we treat every day at the Fort. “

Soroban listened speechlessly. He had closed his eyes and seen this vision, this dream. Had Dylan wanted to go even further with the plan? Did she want to destroy the walls that separated the City from the Fortress? Soroban smiled. Fine tears were now streaming down his cheeks, wetting his lips with their salty taste. He was pulled from his thoughts by Kal, who answered his questions.

“I believe she did. I believe she had a plan beyond the plantation, and I will do everything I can to implement it, but first we must get you to safety. What happened with Paul – I think that’s the trigger for something dangerous.”

The wind gently picked up. Soroban looked up and saw that the sky was slowly clearing. The sun was coming through the mass of clouds and a patch of blue appeared. Soroban understood this breakthrough as a message. Kal was right – it would be up to them to implement Dylan’s plan.

Chapter 19

Ifa woke up stiff, her arms bent in an uncomfortable position, her back sore. It took her a few seconds to understand what she was doing lying on the carpet and then she remembered. Kal! What fantastic news! She smiled as she got up and went into the room to find Josette and Titus, eager to tell them that Kal was still alive. She was surprised to find the room empty. They must have woken up before her and gone out and let her sleep. She noticed that Josette's belongings were missing and ran outside, hoping that Josette hadn't left already.

The sun burned her eyes when she opened the door of the big house. It was a sunny day, the kind that was rarely seen. The sky was blue and cloudless. A perfect day. Ifa saw it as a good omen for what was to come. She found Josette in front of the big house with Ugo. Ugo had a basket full of all kinds of food in his hands. Josette was displaying a flamboyant smile of gratitude.

"Ifa!" she shouted as she saw her. "Ugo came to bring me a basket of provisions for the return trip. In addition, he offered to escort me to the stream."

“That’s normal. I almost made you prisoners there – I’ll take you back to where I picked you up. It’s protocol when people leave us.”

Josette thanked him again and then proceeded to transfer the contents of the basket to her travel bag. Ifa felt her stomach tighten, not knowing if it was because Josette was leaving or because she needed to eat.

“Are you leaving soon?”

“Just now. I was waiting for you to wish you good luck for the rest of your quest.”

She closed her bag, checked that everything was well tied up and went forward to take Ifa in her arms.

“Promise me you’ll be careful on the way home,” Josette said with a motherly look on her face.

“I promise. Aren’t you waiting for Titus?”

“We’ve already said our farewells. He left to explore the village with Alix this morning.”

Josette put her bag on her back with a slight sigh and then glanced at Ugo, who answered with a smile.

“Let’s go!”

She took a quick step away and raised her hand in farewell. Ifa watched them leave with a touch of nostalgia. Her friend was returning home. She would be reunited with Janis and the children and their lives would return to normal. For her and Titus, nothing was certain yet. There was still so much to plan! She walked around the village, thinking about the last days, about her disappointing and inspiring conversation with Alix. She thought about the way the village worked – everything seemed so simple. Everyone seemed happy and healthy. Working separately while helping each other, respecting the land while feeding off it – all these concepts were totally new to her and yet she had the nagging impression that everything was so

logical, so simple. Too simple not to have been implemented in their community.

Was Titus right in claiming that the founders had created their community in this way only out of lust for power? Ifa thought it was completely insane! The village was the perfect proof that strength lay in the sharing of resources, in autonomy. The people here seemed happy, healthy and, above all, free! Ifa thought about the other communities mentioned by Alix: South Bay, Softa, Solid River... where were they located? Were they so similar to Fort Victory? Ifa felt a whirlwind rising up inside her that looked nothing like her usual panic. She was experiencing a rush of adrenaline and curiosity. Why had she never thought about what was happening beyond her home? Of course, she had often imagined the fertile Great North. She had naively imagined it as a virgin space that no one had ever set foot on, but curiously she had never imagined that other people could live elsewhere, in communities that were foreign to hers. Now she realized her foolishness and her egocentricity, she who had only ever cared about herself and the ten or so people who were part of her inner circle. Her world was now opening up to so many possibilities. It was like a second birth, the discovery of a new universe.

She had been walking for several minutes already and hadn't come across Titus, or Alix for that matter. "But where could they be?" she thought. A lady who was harvesting huge yellow tomatoes that looked like they were about to burst smiled at her and nodded towards the pen. Ifa smiled back and thanked her. She had forgotten all about her ideas and the presence of other whisperers. And what a discovery that had been too!

She approached the enclosure and found Titus there with Alix. She was sitting on a small wooden stool and

brushing a goat while chatting with him. Ifa opened the door and approached them, narrowly avoiding a second goat that was just about to run through the enclosure. The second goat approached and when she saw that Ifa had nothing to offer her to eat, she jumped away.

“Good morning, Miss! Didn’t you want to sleep with us?” Titus asked her as a greeting.

Ifa smiled and suddenly remembered that she hadn’t had a chance to talk to Josette about Kal before she left.

“I had a strange experience last night after you fell asleep. I came into contact with Kal.”

Titus’s eyes widened.

“What’s that? Is he here?”

He looked all around him as if Kal would suddenly appear from his hiding place. Ifa laughed.

“No. He’s at the Fort. He’s been there for thirteen years, can you believe it? I always thought he was dead.”

Ifa then began to tell Titus about her exchange with Kal, and Alix listened while she continued to look after the goat. She was now crouching down and looking carefully at the animal’s hooves. She then took a knife out of a pocket and began to trim the animal’s hooves. Ifa tensed.

“Doesn’t it hurt?”

Alix laughed.

“Well, if I cut it too short, it does. But I’m used to it. We have to cut them regularly, because if they are too long she hurt herself.”

Once the four hooves were trimmed, Alix whispered a few words to the jumping animal. Ifa took her eyes off the goat and resumed her summary of the previous day’s conversation by recounting Dylan’s attack. Titus frowned with a concentrated look on his face.

“An attack?” Alix interjected. “I didn’t know the people at Fort Victory were prone to violence.”

“I don’t think they are. Things happen in the City sometimes, especially to women...”

Ifa cleared her throat, a little uncomfortable.

“...but I don’t know what’s going on in the Fortress. Kal seemed scared. He says he’s going to try to break out Soroban.”

“So that’s our plan. With Kal’s help it’ll be easier.” Titus cut Ifa off, looking motivated.

Ifa scratched her head – she was thinking fast.

“I thought so too, but you know how hard it is to get through the gates. I wonder if there really is a way.”

Alix came closer and stood directly between them.

“There is. Follow me.”

*

Alix made them go back through the village towards the back of the great house. Titus and Ifa looked at each other, intrigued. Did Alix know about the Fort? It was impossible, since she said she was born in the village. Then probably someone else knew about the place. Ifa could hardly hold back her smile. What if the solution was there, right under their noses?

“Stop asking questions!” Alix mocked them. “This is the place.”

They had reached one of the back houses at the other end of the village. Like all the others, the house was built of planks of wood and logs, and a few plants grew on the façade on either side of the door. Ifa noticed a wooden crate filled with soil and a grate over which all kinds of seeds were stored.

“Manu is our insect farmer,” Alix joked.

She put one hand on the door and pointed at the cage with her free hand.

“Let’s say he builds cages and environments in which insects like to gather, which allows him to catch many of them and make his famous flour. He tells me that someone from your City taught him how to do this a long time ago.”

Ifa was flabbergasted. Someone who came from their home? It was as unbelievable as it was wonderful. They entered the house. The space was welcoming. A wooden floor covered the ground and the walls were lined with a kind of dried brownish paste. There was a stove in a corner and a table nearby. At the back, a canvas-covered doorway gave a glimpse of a room with a bed. A window faced the stove and let in daylight. The colour of the walls and the floor gave a warm hue to the place. Ifa immediately felt at home here, and a kind of healing warmth radiated through her body.

A man came out of the back room and greeted them. He was of average height, but his shoulders revealed the stature of a man who worked physically. His unruly hair framed his face and masked his ears. His brown eyes were bright and piercing even under the cover of the brown strands that fell in front. He smiled a big smile when he spoke.

“I was wondering when you would come and introduce me to my fellow countrymen, Alix!”

He introduced himself by shaking their hands and invited them to sit down. Ifa looked at him attentively without recognizing him, and noticed that Titus was coming to the same conclusion.

“No. We don’t know each other,” he announced with a smile. “I left twenty years ago, and by the look on your faces you must not have been born then, or if you were, you were still young children.”

Ifa and Titus nodded.

“So you left of your own accord?” asked Titus, saying aloud what Ifa was thinking.

Ifa had been astonished by Titus’s impulsiveness for the past few days. She had never known him to be like that in the City. After all, she thought, she had never really tried to get to know him. Manu didn’t seem to be offended by this and answered immediately, hands clasped in front of him, elbows resting on the table.

“I was captured and accused because I was a whisperer. But you probably already guessed that. I don’t know who’s on the Council now, but at the time, there was an old man, Hubert, who was rather nice. The fate reserved for whisperers varies from time to time, and Hubert, who was the advisor responsible for justice, judged that I should not be exiled or killed. He tried to convince the Council that whisperers were not dangerous and that they could be useful to them. In other words, he wanted me to spy for him.”

Ifa felt uncomfortable all of a sudden. Was that what had happened to Kal? Manu frowned as he looked at her.

“No, it’s nothing, please continue,” she answered to his questioning gaze.

“At first I thought the good would balance out the bad. Being torn away from those I loved had been difficult, but at least inside the walls I was safe and above all I was well fed. I can tell you that we eat better in the Fortress than we do in the City.”

“We knew it,” Titus muttered with regret.

Manu winked at him.

“Except that after a while, I got tired of this constant espionage. I was pretty free, but I had to attend all the meetings and listen to the mental reactions of the councillors, which was a deadly bore. I wasn’t a bad person before I was captured. I was more the kind of person who

liked to hang out in the square, watch the sunset, enjoy life. I felt trapped there. I probably could have kept going, despite my boredom, but the threats started. Some councillors started to intimidate me, demanding that I stop spying on them. They used to wake me up in bed at night and trip me up in the dining room so I would drop my plate. Real children! Several of these altercations caused me hardship on my points card.”

He stopped momentarily when he saw the questioning eyes of his two interlocutors.

“In the Fortress, we get a points card in exchange for our work. Each meal costs us one point, which is a kind of currency through which we exchange our work for goods. When I dropped my food on the floor, I had the choice between fasting now, or taking a new plate for an extra point, but running out of points to finish the week. One evening, as I was returning to my room after dinner, I was attacked in a hallway. I could feel them approaching, but there were three of them and they cornered me between them. I may be a whisperer, but I don’t have superhuman strength! They left me there, bloody. I had all the misery in the world to get back to my room. That night, I decided it was time for me to save myself. I didn’t know how I would do it, but I would. It took me three days to find a way and put my plan into action. I was lucky, because if I had been caught escaping, I would have been sentenced to death.”

Ifa escaped a faint cry, and quickly turned back to Titus. “The death penalty?”

“Yes, the death penalty. In the Fortress, it is the fortified ones who propose the sentences when a crime is committed, except for two situations: murder and attempted escape. In both cases, the judge pronounces the sentence of death, which is carried out the same day. They do not waste time with lengthy proceedings! Those who

manage to escape, they leave them alone. I didn't quite understand why, but they never came looking for me."

Ifa was completely flabbergasted by this revelation. To take someone's life was such a grotesque and barbaric idea. Her throat closed thinking of Soroban. What if he tried to escape and failed? She set about entrusting Manu with their project and told him about Soroban and his presence on the other side of the wall. As he listened to her, he first frowned and then his face lit up.

"Is Soroban your grandfather?" he asked in amazement.

Ifa felt a warmth invade her. Something in Manu's eyes made him believe he had known him.

"Yes..." she answered cautiously. "Did you know him?"

Manu smiled and his eyes shone for a few moments. A shadow quickly passed over his face before he regained his big confident smile.

"Yes, I knew his daughter, Aglaia, well."

He paused and a faint redness appeared on his cheeks.

"So, I had the opportunity to talk with him several times. A good man whom I loved very much."

Ifa shivered at the mention of her mother's name. This man had known her. They had been friends, maybe even lovers. She regretted not knowing more about her. She had died when Ifa was much too young to ask her about her friends and her life before she was born. She wanted Manu to tell her about her mother, but quickly dismissed the idea. The priority was to free Soroban, everything else could wait.

"So, she asked, can you help us get him out?"

"Yes, no doubt," he answered with a smile. "Unless the Council has modified the fortifications, but if not, there is a way out!"

"All right, we're listening."

“The most difficult thing for you will be to get in without being spotted.”

Ifa interrupted him immediately.

“Excuse me for interrupting you, but we’re not going in...”

It was Manu’s turn not to let her finish.

“So then how do you plan to get him out?”

“My friend Kal is inside. We’re in touch, he’s a whisperer too.”

Manu squinted his eyes and his mouth opened in a triumphant smile.

“Then it will be even easier!”

Chapter 20

Kal and Soroban were still sitting on the bench in the Square. Of all the fortified ones, they were the only two who had no task to return to. Soroban had to wait for an upcoming Council meeting and the appointment of a new agricultural advisor before he could go ahead with his plan. Kal, for his part, would have to wait until the next meeting to find out what would happen to him now that Dylan was gone. If their plan worked, neither of them would be present at the next meeting, as they intended to disappear as soon as possible. However, they didn't know how to do this. Kal had lived in the Fortress for many years and knew it well, but according to him, places to cross over were rare and, above all, well guarded. That's when he heard the echo of Ifa in his mind.

"Kal? We have a solution."

"A solution? A solution for what?"

"To help you get out."

Kal closed his eyes. Was this the long-awaited miracle?

"I must tell you something," Kal told Soroban. "I established contact with Ifa yesterday."

Soroban turned to him, his eyes shining.

“She is well. She says she has a way to help us.”

Soroban’s cheeks lit up bright red. He stood and began to walk back and forth in front of the bench.

“No. I don’t want her putting herself in danger to save me. It’s completely insane.”

Ifa who witnessed his reaction through Kal’s thoughts, retorted immediately.

“I won’t have to come looking for you. I’ve met an old fortified, he knows a way out. He escaped twenty years ago.”

Kal repeated this information to Soroban, who breathed a sigh of relief.

“Wonderful,” he breathed.

“According to him, it’s better to act when all the fortified ones are occupied, like during a meal for example. Not at night, because the security is reinforced.”

“During the hanging...” Kal thought aloud.

Soroban looked at him and frowned.

“Running away during the hanging?”

Kal nodded his head slowly, analyzing the possibility.

“All the fortified ones will be there. Executions are always very popular. I even believe the guards at the gate attend them. Or maybe they don’t. But this is a time when our absence will go unnoticed.”

“What hanging?” Ifa almost screamed in his mind.

Kal swallowed with difficulty. He still couldn’t accept the idea that Dylan was gone.

“I told you about the attack yesterday... unfortunately, the victim died this morning. The sentence for murder is...”

Ifa cut him off.

“Death by hanging.”

“Yes. It’ll be later today, at nightfall.”

“That’ll be the perfect time.”

This answer surprised Kal, not because of its content, which was quite logical, but rather, because it was not Ifa's voice that uttered it. Someone had interfered with their discussion. He shivered, worried.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"My name is Manu. Welcome to my thoughts."

Manu explained to him that he could get in touch with a third unknown person if that person was in communication with a known person. Since Ifa was near him and communicating with Kal, Kal and Manu could now communicate, too.

"It's almost magic!" Manu laughed.

Kal didn't understand, but didn't react. Soroban looked at him worriedly and waited for the next move. Kal didn't like to get caught between conversations like that and tried to clarify the situation quickly.

"Then can you help us? You were able to get out of the Fortress?"

"Yes, I was. That was over twenty years ago, and if all goes well, you'll be able to say the same thing twenty years from now!"

Kal felt a release of tension and his whole body relaxed. He told the good news to Soroban, who found it difficult to hide his joy. Now that Dylan was gone, neither wanted to stay. Soroban sat back on the bench, pensive.

"I wonder... is this the best decision? Wouldn't it be better to stay and fight from the inside?"

He looked at Kal and thought of Dylan's vision. If they were no longer in the Fortress, how could they make her dream come true? Kal had seen Dylan's vision come alive in his eyes. The Fortress and the Unified City, people living together, without armbands. He pouted and nodded his head. He reconnected with the others.

"It won't be possible, I'm sorry," he announced to Ifa and Manu.

"What are you talking about, Kal? You said you were in danger and wanted to save my grandfather! What's going on? I can't leave you two, you're my family!"

"We have a mission to accomplish here as well. It has to be done from the inside. It goes far beyond saving two people, Ifa. The whole community must be liberated from this archaic system. With your grandfather's knowledge we can feed all the people, and stop the requisitioning and segregation between the fortified and the citizens. Dylan had a dream, and only we can fulfill that legacy. I'm sorry."

His hopes of freedom had just vanished in a matter of seconds, but he knew it was the right decision. That only their self-sacrifice and their presence within the walls could contribute to a better future for all.

"Kal, no! I want to see you again!"

Ifa's voice echoed in his head, he could almost feel the sobs floating in his thoughts. He could barely keep his thoughts clear on his own.

"We have the knowledge to help you feed the people here too," Manu added. *"Our community is completely autonomous and democratic."*

Kal rubbed his face with his hands. It was one of the most difficult conversations he had ever had in his entire life, all in front of Soroban who seemed to find the wait painful. He watched him unrelentingly as if he was trying to pierce his mind in turn.

"I know," he said. *"But you who have lived among us before, you who have experienced injustice on both sides of the wall, don't you wish to see it abolished?"*

Manu remained silent for a moment. Kal waited calmly, ignoring Ifa, who was against him.

"You're right," he finally confessed. "But we can still help you."

"We're coming back, Titus and I. Starting today. We can help you from outside the walls," said Ifa.

"I'm coming too," Manu added. "It's time for me to take matters into my own hands."

Kal smiles.

"Thank you both. We'll see each other again one day, when the doors are finally open."

He turned to Soroban, his eyes shining with emotion.

"Now it's up to us. It won't be done in a day."

*

The sun was going down on the horizon and lit up the square with its orange glow. Its reflection in the large windows of the Fort irritated the eyes of those who approached to take their places. A hundred chairs had been set up, with their backs to the Fort, facing a wooden structure topped by a beam. A rope had been attached to the beam and a noose hung from the end of the rope. If the atmosphere had been heavy that morning during the trial, it was electric now. Dozens of fortified arrived one after the other and took their place on chairs as close as possible to the platform. Soroban had arrived a few minutes earlier, accompanied by Kal. They had spent the day together to go through all the possible options, from the most far-fetched to the most realistic.

They would have liked to convince the fortified that the Fortress and the wall were no longer necessary and that everyone would benefit from living in harmony with the City. However, it would be difficult to convince everyone. For while some would certainly agree, others would strongly oppose it. They then discussed the possibility of

provoking a revolt, of finding information that would push the inhabitants to bring down the Council. But what? They hadn't yet identified what the trigger might be. However, they both agreed that the sooner the better, while spirits were still warmed by Dylan's murder. Circumstances were on their side.

Soroban got a chill when he thought of Dylan. He'd asked to see her body, to say goodbye in private. He preferred not to have to do so at the ceremony scheduled for the next day. Kal had taken him to her room. He had taken the time to wash her before breaking the news at the trial. He had dressed her in clean clothes and combed her hair. It shone brightly against her unusually pale face. She was lying on her bed with her hands folded over her belly and looked well, healthy and rested. Soroban had stroked her hair and was alone with her for a few minutes, while Kal waited for him further down the corridor.

Soroban had quickly become attached to her and her way of seeing the best in people. She exuded an impressive positivity. He looked at her with even more admiration now that Kal had shared his last thoughts with her. If only they had had time to discuss it together. They could have found a way to convince people. Between the three of them, they would have succeeded.

A metallic noise took Soroban out of his thoughts as Victor walked towards the platform, accompanied by the two morning watchmen and Paul, still chained hand and foot. The chairs were now all occupied and several people were standing. All the fortified seemed to be present, from the overseers to the Councillors, the requisitioned and the natives. According to what was being said, this kind of event never happened, let alone with a Councillor as the accused. The murmurings came to a dramatic end as Victor climbed

the platform steps followed closely by the other three. He spoke in a loud and harsh voice.

“Thank you all for coming. We are about to witness an event that is unusual for many of us. I ask you to remain calm and seated. I hope I never have to relive this sentence for the rest of my life. Let this be an example to you. The laws of Fort Victory must be obeyed. They are simple and just for all to ensure our safety and the balance of our community. I invite the condemned man to say a few words if he wishes. I strongly advise him to use this time to repent for his actions and ask forgiveness for the harm he did to our community and the horrible end he put our friend and councillor Dylan through.”

For a moment there was complete silence in the Square. Everyone held their breath. Paul stared at the ground without saying a word. His lower lip was trembling and a drop was hanging from the end of his nose. Victor nodded his head and Paul was pushed towards the centre of the platform where the rope was hanging loosely. One of the two guards passed the rope around the convict’s neck. Paul began to cry loudly and tremble. The guard adjusted the rope around his neck, and the second guard hid his head with a piece of cloth that looked very much like a pillowcase. Paul began to scream.

“It’s not my fault! I didn’t want to hurt her! I was forced to lie about how much we had in reserve...”

The crowd was booing – insults were coming from everywhere at once.

“It’s Tamer! He forced me!”

As he said these words, Victor gave the signal and the first supervisor lowered a lever that opened the hatch in the middle of the platform. Paul fell. His body hovering over the ground in a solid, shapeless mass. Shouts came from the crowd.

“The nerve! Accusing another at a time like this!”

“Get Tamer! Arrest him!”

Several people got up and started throwing stones and other small objects at the hanged man. Others were shouting, some had a hand over their mouths in an effort to contain the nausea they felt. In all this hubbub, Kal elbowed Soroban to show him a silhouette sneaking away to the flower street.

“Tamer,” he whispered.

Kal and Soroban began to follow him.

“Do you think he had something to do with it?” Soroban asked, gasping.

“I’m sure of it. And you too, I know you’ve heard him threaten people before.”

The memories of his discovery of the reserve came back to him. Tamer had threatened someone – probably Paul – he was talking about baskets and exile... Soroban felt his blood freezing. He had been a witness! If he had dared to show himself, he might have been able to make a difference and Dylan might still be alive today. He raged when he realized Tamer was behind it all.

They had reached the flower street and saw Tamer disappear into an alley. Kal closed his eyes, and Soroban realized he was trying to get inside Tamer’s mind. He had no idea how his powers worked, but he’d finally figured out that it was best not to intervene. Kal reopened his eyes and signalled Soroban to follow him.

They entered the alley silently. The sun had now set, and the little light that remained lit up the alley with a deep blue glow. Soroban followed Kal without speaking, like a shadow. A few steps further to the left, Kal stopped in front of a wooden trapdoor. He opened it gently and went down, inviting Soroban to follow him. Kal closed the door and the

light disappeared completely. He grabbed his hand and guided him a little further into the darkness.

On this side of the trapdoor, they could no longer hear the cries and voices coming from the square. Their footsteps raised dust on the ground. Soroban could almost hear his heartbeat. He could hardly wait to see the light again, no matter where. But where were they? He reached out his free hand in front of him and tried to touch something to orient himself, but he found only emptiness. Kal seemed to know where he was going, always guiding him a little further forward. He slowed his pace.

“There are steps here – don’t let go of my hand, we’re getting closer.”

Soroban tightened his grip and let himself be guided. They went down one step at a time, in total darkness. Soroban felt as if he had completely lost his sight.

“This is the last one,” Kal whispered as he stopped. “Are you alright?”

Soroban nodded his head and realized it was completely useless in this darkness.

“Yes, thank you,” he said.

Kal let go of his hand. He heard him fiddling with something metallic, followed by a clicking sound and a slight creak. A blue glow appeared before them – Kal had opened a door. Glad to have his sight back, Soroban followed him to the other side. They were in a small rectangular room, and the blue glow came from the opposite wall where a large doorway was visible. He put his hands out on either side and felt wood under his fingers, possibly a wooden wall, or boxes. It was rough and solid, but it was still too dark to identify exactly what it was. Kal still led the way and turned back towards him.

“We’re out. We’re on the other side of the wall.”

Chapter 21

The crowd was still shouting at the platform. A few supervisors tried to calm down the most angry participants, without much success. Victor saw Helena talking with a supervisor. He approached her quickly.

“We must find Tamer,” he shouted, to be heard among the loud voices. “I don’t know whether Paul was telling the truth or not, but such an accusation deserves to be questioned.”

“I feel the same way.”

She turned to the watchman who looked at them without speaking.

“Gather all the guards and bring them back here. Except for the ones at the door. Ask them not to let anyone through tonight, especially not Tamer.”

The watchman nodded his head and took a quick step, accosting all the black armbands he came across and directing them to the platform. Helena stared at Victor in dismay.

“Tamer always behaved on the edge of the acceptable. For a long time I’ve heard rumours about him. They say he threatens citizens, that he abuses his power. It’s not

commendable behaviour, but it's not worthy of punishment. But if what Paul said is true..."

"Then we definitely have a big problem on our hands," Victor finished for her.

He climbed back onto the platform, heading for the open hatch where Paul's lifeless body was hanging limply. Victor took a deep breath and spoke, his loud voice carrying above the others.

"My dear fortified ones, I understand your frustration. We have had a difficult evening with the conviction and the awful charges that were laid at the same time. Helena and I will do everything in our power to find Tamer and interrogate him. In the meantime, I ask you to return to your homes. The memorial service for Councillor Dylan will be held in the morning, after lunch. We look forward to seeing many of you there. Please clear the square as soon as possible to allow us to proceed with the research. If you see anything that can help us, please speak to one of the Councillors. One of us will be in the Council Chambers all night."

A few people expressed their displeasure, but the guards who were flocking to the Square finally convinced them to go home. The first supervisor who had been asked to bring the others back returned to give his report.

"I took the message to the door. They did not see him but will keep their eyes open. I've spoken to every supervisor I've met, I don't think there are many missing."

"Thank you," said Helena.

She in turn climbed onto the platform. Victor had the rope that was still holding Paul's body cut and he fell to the ground with a thud. They put him on a cart and covered it with a beige cloth. They would take care of him later. Victor looked at the group of about thirty guards who were waiting for orders in front of them.

“Thank you for coming so quickly,” Helena began. “You’re relieved of your regular duties, except for the gate guards. Your job, until further notice, will be to find Tamer. We believe he’s still on this side of the wall, but he may have made it through somehow. So I want ten volunteers to explore the City, and the rest will search here.”

A few hands rose in the crowd.

“Those of you on guard at the gate, you’ll maintain your regular hours and assist with the search outside of those hours. Stay in teams of two or three, and never move alone. If you find Tamer, take him into confinement and notify Victor. We want a report every hour tonight. Thank you.”

The guards broke into small groups and scattered into the darkness.

“I’m worried it’s already too late,” Helena confessed to Victor, staring at the mass of guards leaving in all directions.

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye and shifted his gaze to the group that was moving away.

“I don’t know where he is, but we’ll find him eventually. In the meantime, we need to appoint two new advisors. I’ve been thinking about this Soroban, and I think he’d be a good candidate to replace Dylan. Let’s find the other Councillors and assemble tonight for the rest.”

*

Kal opened the door and walked straight ahead, Soroban following him closely. They were in a large empty space with high ceilings. In the darkness, Soroban saw a window on his right, through which the setting sun could be seen in the distance, and quickly approached it. He looked outside and recognized the City’s dwellings lined up side by side in the dim light of dusk.

“Are we out? As simple as that?” he asked Kal in amazement.

“I think so.”

Kal approached the window in turn.

“All these years locked up and a passage was hidden right next door! I wonder if anyone other than Tamer knows about it?”

Kal looked out of the window too, his eyes wide open as if to record all the images in his mind and build up an indestructible memory. He sighed.

“Even if I had known... I would have left, and then what? I would have been followed.”

Soroban looked at him without saying anything. He stepped back and walked to the exit at the end of the room.

“Are you coming? We’ll lose him if we wait any longer.”

Kal closed his eyes for a few moments and shook his head.

“I lost track of him. We could go out and look for him, but he’s on the run, he won’t let himself get caught so easily. Knowing him, he must want to get as far away as possible.”

“Do you think so? I’ve always thought he’s the confrontational type.”

Kal just kept looking out, standing still.

“Yes, he likes to confront those he considers weaker than himself. But against the Council, he wouldn’t dare. He panicked. I don’t know what he’s hiding, but if he ran away, it’s because he fears for his life. If the guards find him, he’ll be put on trial immediately and he won’t be able to defend himself. Have you seen how justice is done here?”

Soroban nodded his head. He didn’t like to imagine what Tamer was guilty of, but on the other hand, he certainly wouldn’t miss his presence.

“So, if we don’t follow him, what do we do?”

Kal turned and leaned his back against the wall.

“Two options. Either we get out or we go back to the Fort. If we get out now, we’ll be accused of running, and possibly connected to Tamer’s machinations, whatever they may be. Besides, if we leave there won’t be anything we can do about the future.”

He sighed again, his eyes darting between Soroban and the outside. The old man came closer and looked out in turn.

“I miss my freedom. I would leave now,” he said, staring at the horizon.

He straightened up and turned around, his posture indicating that he had made a decision.

“But if we get out, we’ll have to flee the City. We can’t go back to our former lives as fugitives, so we can’t help the citizens and bring down the walls.”

He put one hand on Kal’s shoulder.

“You’re right,” he said. “Let’s go back.”

They turned back and walked back through the narrow, dark room. Their eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness and so Soroban was able to identify what lined the walls of the cubby. Metal shelves covered the longer walls and were filled with empty wooden boxes. On the other side of the door, they climbed back up the stairs and through the large space with its dusty floor. Kal guided Soroban by holding his hand as they went. At last, they reached the trapdoor, which Kal gently lifted up. He stuck his head through the opening, checked that no one was in sight, and then slid out, followed by Soroban.

Back in the square they noticed that the crowd had dispersed and saw Victor and Helena addressing a group of guards gathered in front of the platform. Paul’s body had been removed, and only a piece of rope was hanging under the lintel above the platform. Soroban stopped and

observed the scene for a few moments. Torches had been lit, and their flames dancing in the night lit up the two councillors. Kal pulled his companion's sleeve and motioned for him to follow him around the platform, so that they could go unnoticed and return to the Fort.

"Is everyone gone?" Soroban asked.

"They were asked to leave the square, I guess. It's time for supper, we'd better get going too."

"I won't be able to eat," said Soroban weakly.

Kal looked at him seriously and brought his face close to his own.

"Neither will I, but we'd better be there and especially be seen. It's certainly not the right time to disappear!"

Soroban nodded his head and followed Kal to the dining room. As Kal had predicted, the room was packed and very noisy. Most of the fortified had a plate in front of them, but few of them actually ate. Kal noticed a few people crying. Others were talking loudly and expressing their dissatisfaction with the events of the evening. He quickly scanned the room and saw a few members of the Council sitting among the others.

"Let's go and get a plate and find a seat. Don't be afraid to talk to the people you meet," Kal added quietly.

Soroban greeted those around him and exchanged a few words with Clara as she handed him his plate. He thanked her with many compliments and walked to a table in the middle of the room. A few people were already seated there, but there were still some free chairs. Kal joined him a few moments later.

"Well done. But it wasn't necessary to put so much effort in with Clara," Kal winked.

"I figured it couldn't hurt, especially since she don't like me very much."

Kal laughed weakly and began to eat some soft, dull vegetables. Even they seemed to be depressed by the turn of events in the last few days.

“The Council will meet during the evening or the night to discuss what to do next. They have to appoint two new people to sit. Do you know how it works?”

Soroban shook his head, staring at his plate. He too was trying to eat without much appetite. He turned his attention to his cake, tore a corner off and began to chew it slowly.

“Every councillor on duty must nominate someone for the available position. In our case, they will each nominate two names. Usually, councillors nominate people with skills related to the vacant seats. For Paul’s position, it is possible that someone from his team will be nominated. In the case of Dylan’s position...”

He swallowed with difficulty and took a deep breath before continuing.

“Since she was in charge of crops and now no one else knows anything about them except you, it is very likely that you will be nominated to take her place.”

“Me? But that’s ridiculous!” Soroban exclaimed.

The volume of his voice turned a few heads towards them and his cheeks reddened.

“Quieter, please,” Kal whispered.

“But really, I just arrived barely a week ago. I only know the bare minimum about the Council and everything.”

“That’s never stopped anyone I know from sitting on it. But let me finish explaining. Each councillor puts forward a name and explains why that person is best suited to take the job. After that, the councillors vote and the person is initiated.”

“And these people, they’re not consulted?”

“Of course, they are not. It is a privilege to serve on the Council. To my knowledge, no one has ever turned down the post. If you are appointed, you must accept. Only the councillors can change laws and procedures. If there is any hope of change, your appointment would be a tremendous opportunity.”

Soroban finished his cake and swallowed his glass of water. His ears were red and his eyes shone.

“So all that’s left to do is wait, then?”

Kal nodded and offered him a knowing smile.

“By tomorrow it will be decided. Let’s stay here for a while longer. Something tells me that it shouldn’t be long now.”

He pointed to the far end of the room to Helena, who was talking to Anne, another councillor.

Chapter 22

Ifa, Manu and Titus had prepared their expedition with astonishing speed. In just a few minutes, they had filled their bags with their travel supplies: blankets, shelters, cooking utensils and weapons. Manu had added many foodstuffs from his crops. In truth, he had harvested everything.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, and even if I came straight back, I wouldn’t be back in time to harvest it all at the right time,” he explained.

The goodbye with Alix had been rather difficult. Ifa regretted leaving this place where she had finally been able to be herself. With Alix, she had learned to accept who she was, and she had been able to share her secret with her friends.

“Thank you for everything, Alix,” Ifa said in an emotional voice. “I hope we will meet again one day, but if not, I will never forget your village and your way of life. I hope we can be inspired by you for the future.”

“You will always be welcome among us, and it will be my pleasure to help you in your endeavours. We may not see each other again, but I am sure we will be able to keep

in touch. I will accompany you on your journey, and I will stand by your side even when you return to the City.”

While she and Manu made sure everything was ready for their departure, Ifa watched Titus out of the corner of her eye as he prepared to leave Alix. Ifa had never seen him look at anyone like that before. He watched Alix intensely as if he was trying to memorize every detail of her face so that he could remember it forever. His ears had blushed as they talked, and their embrace seemed to last forever in Ifa’s eyes. She had refrained from paying attention to their exchanges, wanting to leave him this privacy. She had tried to keep her attention on Manu. He intrigued her most by his fascinating attitude. He had only waved his hand when he left Alix and she had not seemed hurt by this lack of closeness. Perhaps he was not a man to show much feeling.

Once Titus had separated from Alix, the three of them looked at each other with smiles on their faces, ready for their journey, and waved to the other inhabitants as they left the village towards the forest, the south, and their City.

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Titus couldn’t stop thinking about her. No matter how much he concentrated on the discussions with his friends along the way, observing all around him, his mind always came back to her. Their meeting had been a whirlwind of emotions. At first he had been overwhelmed by the surprise of meeting other people in this lost land, but then, when he had laid eyes on her, he had felt a magnetic attraction. He couldn’t explain what he felt, as he had never experienced anything like it. He had lived the first twenty-four years of his life so busy surviving that he had barely made any connection with anyone except the people he had travelled here with. And Raina. They were the family he

had never known, they had always been a part of his wisdom, of his life. Alix was the first person he had met outside the City. The first person he wanted to listen to talk for hours, to drink from her speech and get lost in her eyes. He sighed and smiled at Ifa who turned to him with an inquiring eye. He wasn't ready to talk about everything that was going through his head, and he hoped Ifa would respect that. He rejected the thought. Of course Ifa would respect him. She had spent all these years without ever interfering in his thoughts, she certainly wouldn't start today when she knew how much he hated the idea of being spied on in this way.

His thoughts returned to Alix. He saw the light reflected on her face that made her skin glow, her eyes resting on him as they left. He had never met a woman with eyes so black and deep. When she had left the house when they arrived, she had immediately fascinated him. She seemed to reign over everything around her, but in a fair, balanced way. She cared about others. He was charmed by the way she spoke, calm and self-assured as she explained their ways. At first, he thought he had been charmed by the village and their way of life, by all the greenery and freedom that came from everyone's movements. But then, he soon realized that it was the energy she radiated that kept him hanging on to her speech, hanging from her lips as if they were the source of all knowledge, the source of life. He saw her again, looking after the animals in the pen, teaching him so many things, but never judging his ignorance or enjoying it. His heart was stirred. He wished he could have stayed close to her this morning. He didn't know if she felt the same way about him. Part of him thought she did. Their embrace on departure had seemed too short and he had felt a connection, a pressure from her hands on his back

that made him think she wanted to see him again once their mission was over.

Was that possible? Could they have a future despite the fact that he could never communicate with her as she could with her fellow countrymen? Did their difference make their relationship impossible? He sighed again. Ifa turned around for the second time and stopped walking.

“Are you going to talk to me about what’s bothering you Titus? We still have a good four days of walking to do, and I don’t want to hear you sigh all the way home!”

Titus smiled and adjusted his bag on his shoulders. No, he really didn’t feel ready to talk to her about it.

“Sorry Ifa. I’m just a little discouraged by all that awaits us.”

“Tell yourself that we have the great advantage of being able to communicate with someone on the inside,” remarked Manu, walking ahead. “We’ll find a way. I’m looking forward to it, anyway!”

Ifa seemed to accept this and set off again, leaving Titus alone with his thoughts. Manu’s statement somehow reassured him. Even though his mind was not completely fixed on their return, he could not help anticipating the difficulties to come. They were planning to tackle something big and mighty. Alone, they could never have done it, but with the help of Kal and Soroban on the other side of the wall the odds were in their favour. He thought about Kal for a moment, wondering what he looked like. The last time he had seen him, he was just an arrogant child who liked to test the limits imposed by the guards. He must have had to mellow over the years to survive on the other side. He smiled, thinking back to the young Kal throwing stones down to the river, his red hair shining in the sun. He couldn’t wait to see him again.

*

In the Council Chamber, the condemned man's chair had disappeared and in its place was a large table draped in white. Victor had been standing in front of it and staring at it for quite some time. Through it all, Dylan's death seemed unreal. The judge had never known a death sentence at the Fort. Deaths were a fact of life, but the fortified usually died from illness or, more rarely, from an accident. Now, on the same day, two people had died at the hands of someone else.

Victor had hated having to order Paul's death. He took his role as an advisor for justice very seriously, but he considered himself a just person who valued human life. Most of the time he advocated exile rather than hanging. However, he was not able to change laws on his own. Never had two councillors been lost in the same day. Never had even one councillor been charged with any crime since he had been in office. He couldn't figure out what had happened. What was this danger that Paul had talked about? He blamed himself for having ordered the killing at the same time as the convict was making those accusations. A few more seconds and they could have figured it out. Now they had a fugitive on their hands and were under threat of an unknown danger.

While thinking about it, he began to move six chairs, which he placed at the back of the room around two tables glued together. The Council should meet as soon as possible, before the next day's ceremony. He went out to fetch water from the dining room and returned with a jug and a few glasses, which he placed in the centre of the tables.

He took advantage of the few moments of solitude he had before him. Any minute the other councillors would

arrive in the room and discussions would begin. He got up and walked towards the glass doors. The sun had now completely disappeared behind the horizon, but the sky was not dark enough for the stars to appear. The plantation was plunged into shadow, the different crops almost inseparable, each one reflecting the dark blue of dusk. Victor loved this time of the day when everyone went back to their rooms and the square became completely empty and silent. He liked to sit alone on a bench and look up at the sky to see the stars appearing one after the other. This mysterious expanse of light and colour above his head made him feel tiny. The sky took on a fragmented texture of hollows and peaks so clear that one could almost reach out and hope to touch these fake mountains. Such vastness created a shared feeling of well-being and oppression in his stomach, as if the weight of the stars weighed on the earth and only he was standing while the rest crashed. Victor felt alone in the world. It was during these moments that he began to think about what lay beyond the walls. Was it really a total desert as everyone said? Or were there other people living together in small communities like them? Victor knew this question would never be answered, but thinking about it made him melancholy. He watched the sky for a few more minutes until the plantation was completely dark and the first star appeared in the sky, then he went back to sit at the table, patiently waiting for the others. The moment of tranquility was already behind him and his mind returned to the concerns of the day.

Helena returned soon, accompanied by Anne. Between the two of them, they were now the only female councillors – the other four were men.

Helena sat down next to Victor and Anne sat on the other side of the table.

“I found everyone. The others shouldn’t be long now,” Helena said.

She was holding a cardboard file filled with several sheets of paper. Anne silently poured a glass of water. Victor looked at her for a few moments. She was small and thin, and often went unnoticed. She usually wore long ochre or white tunics that reached down to her knees, and moved with a straight, slow gait. Tonight, she seemed more relaxed, as if she was carrying a heavy bag on her shoulders. Her shoulders were slumped, giving her body a soft appearance, closed in on itself.

Anne was the councillor responsible for training and education. She made sure that the fortified children, for the few number they were, learned to read and write. She was responsible for the school system, but also for the training of adults when their assignment was determined. Like citizens, the fortified were assigned according to their skills and abilities and the needs of the Fortress rather than their own wishes. Only those who were appointed to the Council could choose their assignment, provided the position was vacant or the incumbent was willing to trade. Anne had taken the last vacant position when she was appointed. It was the education position. Fortunately, she was a very well-balanced and intelligent person who immediately adapted to the position. In fact, she was the last councillor to take a position. Two new people would soon take away her status as the most recently appointed councillor, which she had been dragging with her for two years.

“Are you all right, Anne?” Victor asked Victor, intrigued by her posture.

She swallowed a sip of water before answering in her soft voice.

“Yes, it’s all right. I found today very tiring. I never thought I’d witness a murder in this place! I thought we all

lived in harmony... I'm going to propose a change in the education program. We need to educate our young people about what happened so that it never happens again."

Victor agreed silently, while Helena responded with a sound in her throat.

"I believe that surveillance will have to be strengthened so that we can feel protected in the future," she said.

Victor moved on his chair.

"I don't think we're in any particular danger right now, Helena. Paul was convicted for what he did. Things should be getting back to normal. In any case, let's wait for the others before we start. We'll have to take stock of the current situation and solve the problem of the two vacant seats."

Helena gave him a black look, but didn't respond. Footsteps made them turn their heads towards the entrance of the room, as the three missing councillors arrived. They sat down around the table and Victor spoke again.

"Thank you for being here for this emergency meeting. We are currently engaged in a manhunt to find Tamer as a result of the charges that were brought against him by Paul. We will discuss the charges in a few moments. We also need to appoint two new people to replace Dylan and Paul on the Council before we make any other decisions. I invite you to submit two nominations each in turn. We will then proceed to the vote. After that, we will adjourn the meeting."

All approved the agenda of the meeting.

"I've asked all the guards to look for Tamer, except for the guards at the gate," said Helena. "Their orders are not to let anyone out except the guards stationed in the City. There's no guarantee that Tamer hasn't already left."

“And how exactly would he have got out? The gate was locked, wasn’t it?”

Helena gave him a dark look. The man who spoke was called Yvon. He was an upright and fair man who always saw the good in everyone. He only spoke when the subjects discussed touched on his primary function, health, in one way or another. Victor was therefore surprised to see him cut Helena off. Everyone was on edge, and no one seemed to be themselves since the previous day’s events.

“I don’t know how he could have got out. I just know that if he’s still here, he’ll be easy to find. If he’s not, it means he’s found a way out. According to Paul’s account, he and Tamer were hiding something from us. Who can tell what else they were hiding?”

Yvon nodded his head and fell silent. No one dared to speak up. Helena continued.

“When the guards bring Tamer back, he will be sent to pre-trial confinement. We’ll have to be ready to establish the charges against him.”

Victor had the unpleasant impression that Helena was trying to interfere in his area by talking about charges, and he wanted to speak to restore his authority, but was caught off guard by Lucas, the secretary.

“Shouldn’t we question him first? Since the only likely witness was Paul, and he is dead, it will be difficult to say exactly what he is guilty of.”

“Our laws are clear, Lucas,” began Helena.

Victor cleared his throat and stood up.

“Excuse me, Helena, but as the councillor responsible for justice, I rather agree with Lucas. It’s never too late to change our laws, we’re the best people to do so. That being said...”

“We’ll find witnesses if we have to!” exclaimed Helena. “For now, I think we can agree that he’s a fugitive. That’s a start.”

Victor fumed. Helena was really out of line.

“All right. Let’s set the first charge for tonight’s escape. When he’s found, I suggest we conduct a full interrogation to find out more...”

Helena opened her mouth to speak, but Victor didn’t give her a chance.

“At the same time, we will also try to find one or more witnesses to the agreement between Tamer and Paul. You can conduct this investigation yourself, Helena. Let me remind you that according to our rules, the person in charge of justice is the only one who can make a formal accusation. I therefore call for a vote on the introduction of a pre-confinement interrogation of the accused if no witnesses are available. All those in favour?”

Victor, Anne, Lucas and Yvon raised their hands. Helena froze on her seat and Joachim abstained.

“Thank you, everyone. The law will be changed. Lucas, can you make sure you write this down in the minutes?”

Lucas nodded his head and began to write quickly on the pad he had brought.

“While we wait for the next step, we must solve the problem of the two vacant positions on the Council,” Victor continued.

Chapter 23

The advisors were waiting for further decisions to be made. Someone cleared his throat in the doorway of the room. All heads turned towards him.

“Yes, Thomas?” Helena asked.

“Still no sign of him, ma’am. We’ve checked all the streets, alleys and common areas.”

“Thank you, Thomas. Continue inside. I want all rooms, homes and all premises searched. Check the plantation, too. I think it would be easy to get into it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He left immediately. Helena crossed her arms and frowned. She seemed very annoyed by the situation. Victor began to talk again.

“We are now at the point of nominating names for the two vacant positions. I think we should take it in turns to nominate the two people we think are best suited to fill the positions of Crop Manager and Food Manager.”

Yvon raised his hand timidly.

“Yes, Yvon?”

“I was wondering... is it really useful to have two positions for these responsibilities? Since both of them are

responsible for food and both are vacant, which hasn't happened for a very long time, wouldn't it be better to have them both incorporated in one seat?"

Helena cleared her throat.

"And what do you propose for the eighth seat? The Council is composed of eight positions – you can't include someone without responsibility."

Yvon frowned.

"I don't know. We can discuss it. Is there an area that needs more leadership? Or could we create a presidency role? We already have a secretary – we could have a facilitator who would chair the meetings."

"So you want a new Councillor, who doesn't know anything about our practices, to chair our meetings? That's a crazy idea!"

Helena used her most condescending tone to ridicule Yvon's proposal. Yvon's cheeks turned red as he searched for words in response.

"Not necessarily a new one! We could rethink the roles. Sometimes a vacancy is filled by someone on the inside. If I remember correctly, that's how you got your job."

Helena shot him a look and stood up suddenly, making the legs of her chair scream on the floor.

"What do you mean?" she shouted.

Victor stood up in turn and raised both arms in an effort to calm everyone's spirits.

"Yvon, Helena, please. Yvon's proposals are as valid as those of any of us. I don't think I'm wrong when I say that everyone should vote on the first proposal, which is to combine the cultivation and food posts into one."

A few heads nodded around the table.

"All right, who's in favour of combining the two Councillor positions, as proposed by Yvon?"

Once again, all hands were raised except Helena's and Joachim's.

"The vote being in favour, we have one new Councillor position to fill."

Helena sighed heavily. Joachim, for his part, watched her two hands resting on the table. Victor thought for a moment that he had voted against it just so he wouldn't upset Helena. A clear lack of confidence on his part. He made a mental note to add the subject of independence of mind to the agenda of a future meeting.

"Let's proceed step by step. I propose to appoint the person responsible for this new post first, and then we can discuss the remaining vacancy."

All agreed, even Helena, still frustrated, with her arms folded over her chest.

"I nominate our new consultant, Soroban," Victor began.

"I nominate Clara," Joachim added.

"I nominate Thomas," Helena said.

"Soroban," Yvon said.

"I nominate Charlotte," Anne added.

"Clara," added Lucas.

Lucas frantically noted everyone's nominations on the pad in front of him.

"Two names were nominated more than once. As our nomination process dictates, only these two names will be considered for discussion. I nominate Soroban, because he was Dylan's protégé. He was the one who created the development proposals for the new agricultural plan that we were going to accept before the tragedy that followed."

A few movements of discomfort caught his eye. The subject was difficult to accept, the pain too recent in everyone's heart.

“I therefore believe that he is best placed to set up the plan and thus ensure our future food development. Yvon, do you have anything else to add to this nomination?”

“Yes, I would add that he has attended some of our meetings already and therefore knows how the Council and each of its members works.”

“Thank you,” said Victor. “Who would like to take the floor to nominate Clara?”

Victor liked the nomination process. This active task was on his mind and he felt that he was taking control of the situation. As head of Justice it was always he who was in charge of conducting the appointments. He would have preferred to do so under other circumstances, but the pleasure he felt at seeing the electoral process in motion made him momentarily forget the reasons that had precipitated it.

“I’m proposing Clara, because she already works in the canteen at meals,” Lucas began. “She knows a lot about food and can therefore be a great help in planning the use of resources.”

“Thank you Lucas. Anything else to add, Joachim?”

Joachim shook his head. He was decidedly taciturn tonight. Victor scanned the table, asking if there were any questions about the nominations. No one spoke.

“I therefore call for a vote. Each in turn, please stand and name the person you wish to take the position.”

Victor was enjoying himself. Although it was far from necessary, he loved the protocol of having everyone stand in turn and summon their decision. “Soroban, Soroban, Clara, Soroban, Clara, Soroban.”

“Thank you, all of you. Four votes for Soroban and two for Clara. We have a new councillor among us!”

Some timid applause broke the silence of the Council Chamber. Victor noticed a few yawns being stifled around the table.

“I have a proposal to make,” Anne said as she rose to her feet. “We’re all tired from this trying day, and tomorrow, Dylan’s ceremony will make us even more emotional. I move that we adjourn the meeting and continue the day after tomorrow with the new Councillor in attendance. All the fortified will be released tomorrow for the occasion and I believe we deserve a day of mourning as well. Who agrees with me?”

Many agreed aloud and all hands rose in assent.

Victor smiled at Anne, astonished by this sudden confidence.

“You are quite right, Anne. Thank you for suggesting it.”

“Those who wish to stand guard tonight, stay here so we can make a schedule,” said Helena. “We need someone at all times in case the guards find Tamer.”

“I’ll stay,” Victor said.

“I’ll stay too,” Joachim agreed.

The other councillors went out to their rooms. Just before leaving, Yvon turned to them.

“I’ll be back early tomorrow morning to prepare the body for the ceremony. I hope we’ll have found the traitor by then!”

Victor thanked him and took his place with Helena and Joachim to plan the schedule for the night watch.

*

Soroban woke with the sun, dressed slowly and went downstairs. The dining room was almost empty. As it was a day of mourning, Kal had explained to him, the fortified would not be present at their occupations, with a few

exceptions. So he was not surprised that Clara was not at her station behind the counter in the canteen. Fruit, pancakes and peanuts were laid out in dishes on the table, accompanied by a pile of plates. Soroban helped himself and went to sit at the back, near the windows. The sky was clear and the sun low in the sky, so the plantation was still sleeping in the shadow of the Fort.

He had been at the Fort for about ten days and had adopted this table at the back of the room. He liked to look at the plantation while he ate. It reminded him of why he was there behind the walls. He thought a lot about Dylan, and the few moments they had spent together. He regretted not having had time to discuss the future with her, to learn more about the plan she had in mind.

Now he would go and say goodbye to her. He had never experienced a funeral ceremony on this side of the wall, but he imagined it would be similar to the traditions of the City. Kal entered the room a few moments later, helped himself at the counter and sat down beside him.

“Did you have a good night?” Soroban inquired.

“Better than yesterday, anyway.

Soroban smiled and finished his meal before resuming his speech.

“I’ve always said that death is a part of life, but sometimes I can’t accept it. I didn’t know much about Dylan, but the death of someone so young is always more difficult.”

Kal nodded his head gently, his eyes fixed on his meal.

“A few months after you left, Ifa’s mother died... did you know?”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

He pursed his lips and looked back at his plate.

“Poor Ifa... and poor you.”

“No parent wants their child to disappear before them, but it happens sometimes. I had a hard time accepting it. Ifa came to live with me and I did everything to protect her. I gave her everything I could, often working harder than I was able to to keep her healthy and safe. When she was old enough to work, I asked her to do me some favours, to help me out a little. She wanted to work with Raina with the sick, but I didn’t want her to. I was too afraid that she would get sick and leave me too. I was so selfish.”

Kal raised his head and looked into Soroban’s eyes.

“I would have done the same. I would have done anything to protect her if only I could have...”

Kal finished his meal in silence. They sat, one facing the other, lost in thought, their minds wandering to their missing family and friends. The dining room was particularly quiet, the atmosphere filled with sadness. A deep and melodious song rose softly through the walls. People got up, went to carry their empty plates and left the room in silence. Kal stood up in turn.

“This is the opening song of the ceremony. We’d better go too.”

*

They were among the last to enter the room. With all the chairs in the front rows occupied, they went to the back and found two free seats side by side. Yvon had put on a long white toga over his usual clothes. The pallor of his skin blended with the whiteness of the fabric. He was standing straight in front of the assembly, his head tilted forward and his eyes closed. He was softly singing a song of which Soroban knew neither the tune nor the words, not being able to identify the language. The result was majestic. The sound filled the room with great gentleness and quietness,

and allowed everyone to release their emotions by letting them be carried away by his voice. Soroban glanced at Kal. His eyes were closed and his skin was covered with goose bumps. Soroban imitated him and let his thoughts drift away while the Yvon continued to sing.

Finally, he fell silent and the congregation opened their eyes. Yvon took a few steps back, positioning himself close to the white-draped table on which Dylan's body was placed, hidden by a thin cloth. He cleared his throat and addressed the crowd.

"Thank you all for coming this morning. We are gathered together to celebrate the memory of our friend and councillor Dylan who passed away in sad and unfortunate circumstances yesterday morning. Dylan was a valued young woman. She had been on the Council for a number of years and worked with great passion to improve our food production and ensure that all citizens and fortified people received the food required for a healthy life. She left before she saw her big crop rehabilitation project come to fruition, but I am sure that the project will live on in her memory and that everyone will be able to benefit from it."

A few heads bowed around the room. The sound of sniffing and a few repressed sighs could be heard. Yvon's nose was red and his eyes were puffy.

"Dylan's absence will make a big hole in our community."

He turned and lifted a basket behind him with one hand. Then he came to stand by the door as four men approached the table and grabbed the handles of the stretcher gracefully hidden under the sheet with which Dylan was covered.

“We will now carry Dylan to the Place for Cremation. I invite you to take a flower from this basket before you leave.”

The stretcher-bearers lifted the body and made their way out, followed by the congregation, each stopping in front of the basket to take a flower. When his turn came, Soroban recognized the flowers from the flower street. He wiped away a tear and picked a perfect, bright red flower, which he placed in the palm of his hands, paying special attention not to damage it.

The procession went to the place where a pyramid of branches, twigs and pieces of wood of all kinds had been erected. The bearers placed the stretcher on the pyre. At Yvon’s invitation, they carefully removed the thin cloth that covered the body and withdrew. A few hiccups and sobs were heard in the crowd. Dylan sat enthroned on the pyre, the color of her echoing the ivory of her skin. She wore a simple, white dress and her feet were bare. Unable to contain his emotions, Soroban let his tears flow freely down his cheeks.

Yvon invited every fortified person who wished it to come and lay his flower on her body and say a few words of farewell. One by one, they all come forward slowly to lay their flower. Some said a few words in a low voice, others simply placed a hand on the body of the deceased. Soroban recognized the members of the Council as they passed, one after the other. In turn, he walked towards her, placing the flower in the centre of her chest, where her heart was still beating the day before. He whispered, “We will make your dream come true, rest in peace.” Then he walked away.

When the entire procession had passed, Dylan’s body was completely covered with flowers of every colour. Yvon approached, put his hand on her and said a faint “Goodbye Dylan”. He stepped back through the crowd and nodded to

the porters who were waiting a little further back. They approached, each carrying a torch, and set the pyre alight. The petals wilted slowly until they became blackened balls of colour, and the flames covered her entire body.

Chapter 24

The way back was very similar to the way out. With Josette gone, the atmosphere was different. Josette had always been very serious, concentrated on the task and alert to the slightest danger, while Manu was far from stressed. Being a whisperer too, he was much less nervous than Josette, knowing that no matter what danger might arise, he would feel it coming well in advance. He often spoke, recounting his memories of his time in the City, of his youth. But he never spoke of the moment of his capture. Ifa respected that. He'd mentioned the main points to them when they had got to know each other, and that was enough.

When they arrived at the stream, Manu had crossed to the other side, arguing that it was the fastest way back to the City. He'd said they could save several hours of walking. Ifa and Titus had accepted his suggestion, eager as they were to return. Ifa would have liked to follow a path she already knew, but she kept silent, preferring to agree with the other two. Manu continued walking, even after dark.

"If you stop early, you lose a lot of time," he said. "We won't be in bed for hours, so we might as well take the

opportunity to move forward rather than talk around the fire!”

The new path crossed a wide plain on which stood the ruins of ancient metal pylons, and without the canopy of trees the night seemed less black, the stars and moon providing enough light to see by. We might as well take advantage of it and walk, Ifa agreed. She was terribly anxious to return home, but anticipated the problems they might encounter. What would happen when they arrived? How were Soroban and Kal? She didn't want to communicate with him right away, preferring to wait until they stopped for the night, because walking in the dark required all her concentration. After several hours of walking under the stars, Manu pointed to a place in the distance, at the edge of the trees along the plain.

“There it is! We can sleep there tonight, it will be perfect!”

Ifa squinted to see what he was talking about, but she couldn't make out anything apart from the black shape of the trees. They turned towards the trees and Ifa finally saw what he had been talking about. A small building was standing out of the forest. Concrete walls, metal roof – the hut seemed to have been built hundreds of years ago. The door had been torn off. Manu went through the doorway first to look inside.

“Perfect! There's enough space for the three of us. We can block the doorway with this.”

He walked to a metal set of shelves against the back wall and pulled to move it. A deafening noise was heard. Ifa put her hands over her ears and closed her eyes. The noise was hurting her everywhere at once. Suddenly it stopped and she opened her eyes to see Manu smiling.

“It hurts, doesn't it? He almost laughed. Between the three of us, we can lift it up to block the entrance later. For

now, let's take advantage of the little light left to set up our equipment and eat."

*

The Council Chamber had returned to its usual appearance after having served as a court of law as well as a place of recollection. Soroban had chosen, not without hesitation, the place previously occupied by Dylan, and it was a little uncomfortable now that he was waiting for the meeting to begin.

The day before after the ceremony, the remaining members of the Council had come to talk to him as he watched the flames devour the pyre. He had then learned that he had just been appointed to the newly created position of Crop and Food Councillor. He had been congratulated and welcomed to the team with handshakes and pats on the back, while he stood there stoically, unsure of how to react. Kal in turn congratulated him after the advisors had left.

"See? I knew it," he said, a little snide.

The council was to meet again that morning to determine who would be responsible for the vacant seat. They were also to review the situation with Tamer. Soroban was therefore in the midst of a controversy, only ten days after his arrival in the Fortress.

He wasn't sure how to handle this new obligation. He was familiar with the crop plan, as well as the overall functioning of the Council, but he was unaware of the details of his new position, as well as the internal politics of this government. However, he could do nothing more than be present in the room this morning and wait for the next step.

Kal was not present; he preferred to wait for his assignment without interfering in the process. It would be Anne who would have the last word on his future assignment. Kal had not asked for anything, but Soroban had decided to intercede with her to place Kal under his command, or at least to allow them to work together. Without Kal, Soroban felt isolated, in spite of the advisors who arrived in turn, because he had not yet had the opportunity to establish links with them.

Joachim was the last to arrive. He carried a pungent smell of smoke with him. Soroban understood that he had had to supervise the cleaning of the place after the previous day's pyre. He took a seat in front of Soroban and the meeting could finally begin. Victor took the floor.

"First, I welcome our new councillor. It's a pleasure to have you with us! If you will allow me to summarize our last meeting so that our new member can get acquainted with the topics of the day and our priorities."

He then proceeded to summarize the meeting, going through the abolition of Paul's position to combine it with Dylan's and the need to determine a new position for the eighth councillor to be appointed. He continued:

"In my opinion, all this can wait a little while, because right now we have to focus on Tamer's escape. Any word, Helena?"

"I continue to receive reports from my supervisors on an hourly basis. We have searched all the streets and alleys and yesterday morning, after the ceremony, the guards began searching the rooms as well as the houses, without success. So I conclude that there are two possibilities. Either Tamer has an accomplice who is helping him hide, or he has managed to escape the Fortress."

She fell silent, weighing the effect of her statement around the table. It was Yvon who broke the silence.

“Which brings us to the big question: how could he get out? Can the guards at the door be trusted?”

“Of course, they can be!” Helena burst out. “My guards are trustworthy. Tamer’s rotten apple has not stained the whole lot!”

She took a few moments to calm down, swallowed and continued.

“If there is a way out, the guards will find it. There are currently sixty of them searching all over the Fortress. Tamer certainly didn’t fly away like a bird!”

His answer seemed to reassure most of them.

“What if we can’t find him? How long will we stay on alert like this?” asked Anne.

Helena leaned her elbows on the table and rubbed her face with both hands.

“As long as it takes. We have to find him. We’ll find him.”

Someone knocked on the door and Soroban recognized one of the guards by the black armband on his arm.

“Yes, Miguel?” asked Helena hopefully.

“He’s still nowhere to be found, ma’am. But we know where he left from.”

“What?” exclaimed Helena.

Soroban swallowed with difficulty, seeing in his mind’s eye the narrow closet, and the secret passage to the City.

“We found a passage that leads to a dwelling in the City. You might want to take a look at it.”

*

After three days of walking punctuated by pylons, fields and roads of all kinds, they finally arrived at the highway they had taken with Josette on their first day. Ifa and Titus looked at each other and smiled. At last they had arrived!

They would soon be back in the City, in their own beds and with their friends. Ifa approached Manu.

“Do you think we’ll arrive today?” she asked him.

“If you agree to walk after dark again, we’ll arrive tonight.”

He looked off into the distance and turned towards her.

“I don’t see the point of stopping to sleep when we’re so close. Might as well keep going.”

“I agree, Ifa agreed.”

She turned to Titus and he nodded back. They would sleep in their own beds tonight. Ifa thought of Josette and wondered where she was. She hoped everything was going well for her. They continued walking until sunset, moving quickly uphill without slowing down and almost running downhill. By nightfall, they were exhausted.

“I suggest we take a break to eat a little and rest. From here it’s all downhill and we’ll arrive in a few hours,” Manu said.

Ifa and Titus put their bags on the ground in response. Ifa sat down, leaning her back on her bag and stretching her legs. She felt tired, exhausted, and her feet were hurting her terribly. She could have easily fallen asleep there on the hard and uncomfortable surface of the road. They shared the last of their remaining pancakes and some fruits and vegetables. They had taken a lot of food with them, so they still had a good amount left, shared among their bags. Manu took out a container of water and passed it to the other two. Once his two companions had quenched their thirst, he stood up again.

“Let’s get going again before we fall asleep here!”

Ifa and Titus imitated him by struggling to get up, and they set off again, now going down the other side of the hill. They walked side by side for the first time since their departure, Ifa in the centre of the two men.

“Do you know where you will go when you arrive?” she asked Manu. “I mean, who were you living with when you were captured?”

“I lived alone,” he answered. “I was in a relationship and we were talking about moving in together, but we didn’t have time.”

Ifa felt uncomfortable asking. She looked at him furtively, but his gaze was fixed on the horizon. He seemed pensive, even melancholic.

“I had my parents – I’ll go and see them first. If they’re still alive...”

He smiled and turned to her and Titus.

“...It would be a nice reunion, wouldn’t it?”

“If they aren’t... I mean, if you don’t find them, you’re welcome at my house, Ifa offered timidly.”

Manu turned to her, smiling.

“Thank you for your offer.”

He fell quiet again and they continued in silence, each lost in their thoughts. Now they could see in the distance the carcass of the bridge under which they had passed the previous week, like a black mass barely lit by the light of the stars and the moon. Ifa was daydreaming, imagining what she would do when she arrived home. She was so tired that she started to imagine her bed and could almost feel the warmth and smell of her blankets. But the idea of sleeping alone without Soroban in the bed under hers was hard for her to accept. She almost hoped that Manu would accept her offer. Even though she didn’t know him very well, his company would make Soroban’s absence easier. Her mind wandered towards Kal. She hadn’t heard from him since their departure and almost thought she had dreamt their discussion. She tried in vain to get his attention. She convinced herself that he simply had to be very busy with

everything that was going on at the Fort, chasing away the idea that something dramatic had happened.

No, it was impossible, she was sure she would have sensed it, or that he would have got in touch with her. She left her thoughts and observed the landscape around her, or at least what she could see in the darkness. They were now approaching the last hill before arriving along the banks of the river. Soon they would be able to smell it, if not see it in the darkness. The two men didn't talk much, and Ifa wondered what they could be thinking about. Possibly the same thing she was thinking about – their return to the City. Like her, the two companions were expected by no one.

Titus had been very quiet on the journey home. He was usually in a good mood, always laughing. This time, he was withdrawn, taciturn. He had stopped sighing as soon as she had asked him about it, but Ifa knew he was hiding something from her. She had thought it best not to insist in spite of everything. Soon they would return to the City. Did it mean resuming their lives as they had been before? For Ifa, life would never be the same, she now had a mission. An important mission that would change the life of her entire community. Titus had said that he, too, would participate. Did he still feel that way? Was it because he regretted his choice that he had grown so quiet?

*

The seven counselors followed Miguel outside, crossing the long corridor of the Fort and the Plaza deserted by the fortified now returned to their assignments, and then descended along the alley. Soroban followed at the end of the line; he did not dare to speak, being afraid to reveal his knowledge of the place. The guilt quietly crept up into his

body, creating a weight in his chest. Should he have spoken earlier? Miguel led them to the hatch that had remained open and handed a lamp to Helena, who now led the group and followed her through the opening, giving her directions on the path to take.

“Straight to the bottom,” he announced.

Helena was advancing rapidly, her short legs moving at an impressive speed. They reached the stairs and went down. Soroban looked all around him, taking advantage of the glow of the lamp to discover the space he had already crossed twice in total darkness. The room was completely empty and as he had thought, the floor was covered with dust. At the bottom of the stairs, a corridor curved to the right and ended at a door. Helena opened it without difficulty and crossed to the other side, with Miguel and the advisers following her closely. Soroban, always last, recognized the wooden boxes he had touched two days earlier. A shelf covered the walls from floor to floor. It crumbled under dozens of wooden crates, some of which contained glass boxes. Soroban stopped for a moment to examine them. On the way to the room on the other side of the door, the crates and jars sparkled clean, no dust covered the floor either. He approached to see what was in one jar when he heard the voices rising a little further away.

The other counsellors had come out of the storeroom and were now standing in the window room, the same room in which he and Kal had contemplated the idea of going out and being free forever.

“Since we couldn’t find him anywhere in the Fortress, we believe he went out this way,” Miguel began.

“Silence!” Helena shouted.

Her eyes were hard, she looked around her with disbelief. She approached one of the windows and looked out.

“He walked out. Disappeared,” she said almost in a whisper.

The group looked at each other without saying anything, waiting for a reaction from him.

“No one saw him in the City?”

Miguel shook his head.

“The guards didn’t see him.”

“Let them look again! Announce to everyone that they must search every house, look in every square, behind every canvas from now until nightfall.”

Miguel seemed to be about to say something, but fell silent.

“If no one finds him today, we’ll discuss a plan B tomorrow. Thank you, Miguel.”

Chapter 25

They arrived in the City several hours after sunset. No light shone from the windows of the houses. The City lay dormant, silent as Ifa had never known it. The three travellers had separated at the entrance to Ifa's alleyway and agreed to meet in the square the next morning. She slid the outer door open and entered the house. She walked to the back to her room, trying to make as little noise as possible. She smiled as she entered, recognizing the shape of the furniture, despite the darkness, and the smell that reigned there. A mixture of dust, smoke and spices that reminded her of Soroban. They were very close to their goal now and, if all went well, they would be reunited soon.

She began to empty her bag, lighting the lamp on the table. A soft orange glow filled the room. Nothing had moved during her absence, of course, and she found this stability soothing in spite of everything. After nearly ten days, the calm of her home comforted her. Her bag contained cooking equipment, a blanket and a few other tools, but what interested her most was the food she had brought back from the village. She gathered it together in a crate and placed it next to her bed, with a large blanket

from the expedition spread over it to keep prying eyes away. If Tamer could get his hands on, she'll be sure to have it confiscated.

It was with a light heart that she finally went to bed about an hour after her arrival. The night was still completely dark, thanks to the season, so she could enjoy a few hours of peaceful sleep and rest for the first time since her departure. She fell asleep promising herself that she would join Titus and Manu tomorrow, but above all that she would contact Kal before joining them again. She needed to know what had happened since their last discussion.

Children's laughter pulled her out of bed in the morning. The smell of cooking breakfast crept through the canvas. Ifa smiled when she heard the familiar noises: she was back home! She dressed quickly and opened the canvas to discover Janis and the children sitting at the table having breakfast.

"Ifa!" shouted at the youngest as she ran to snuggle in Ifa's arms. Ifa hugged her for a few moments and then raised her head towards Janis, who looked at her with horrified eyes. Ifa tried to reassure her.

"Josette is fine. Well, she was fine when we separated a few days ago."

Ifa began to explain to her the reasons why she had arrived earlier than Josette. She told her about Manu and the quicker road they had taken. These explanations seemed to calm Janis a little, but Ifa knew that she would only be reassured when Josette returned.

After the children left the table, Ifa told her about their expedition and the discovery of the village.

"Everything's so different there. Everyone is self-sufficient, but they all help each other. They even have animals! I have never seen so much greenery, variety, freshness. Wait a bit – I'll show you!"

Ifa disappeared into her room and took the food out of its hiding place to show Janis.

“Look at what I brought back!”

She put peppers of all colours and curly lettuce on the table.

“We also had tomatoes, but we ate them on the way.”

Janis felt the vegetables in her hands and held them to her nose. The peppers smelled fresh and the lettuce was still sprinkled with soil between its leaves.

“It’s incredible,” Janis began. “So it really exists? The fertile Great North?”

“It’s not the Great North that’s fertile, Janis. It’s all the land! Alix told us that we could grow food too. Besides, they do it in the Fortress, don’t they? We’ve been locked up here, where there’s no land to cultivate, but we know very well that on the other side of the walls they can do it!”

Janis was looking at her with a cautious look on her face.

“So, what are you suggesting? We’re no further ahead if we can’t find land on our side.”

Ifa hesitated to tell her about her conversation with Kal. She began to twitch her fingers without answering.

“What?” asked Janis.

“I’ve learned that there are all sorts of things going on in the Fortress,” she began, determined to tell her.

“What kind of things?”

Janis had got up and boiled water, probably to make herself a hot drink.

“Well...” Ifa began, “I don’t know exactly what’s going on, but I do know that a murder has taken place, a Councillor has died, and that it’s allegedly related to the food distribution. Perhaps something to do with the fact that we aren’t getting all the food that is being grown.”

Ifa had whispered this last sentence. For some reason she didn't understand, she felt wary about spreading this information. She saw Janis's face transform in front of her, from total incomprehension to sheer rage.

"It doesn't make any sense!" Janis exclaimed, banging her cup against the table. "On the one hand, we have a village that lives in abundance just a few days' walk from here, and we're also living in famine while food doesn't cross the wall, right?"

Ifa sighed and nodded.

"I don't know the details, but that's about it," she added. "I have to meet Titus and Manu this morning to decide what to do next."

"I'll go with you."

Janis took off her apron and put out the fire. Ifa looked at her in amazement. She had never seen Janis in such a state.

"I have three children that I can barely feed. Every day I fear for their health and their future. If we can change things to ensure a better life for them you can be sure I will be part of it."

She put on her shoes and looked at Ifa, who still wasn't moving, stunned.

"Are you coming?"

*

Ifa and Janis arrived at the Square and were surprised to discover a crowd of people. At the centre of the group, Ifa recognized Titus, who was moving his arms in what seemed to be an attempt to calm them down. Ifa and Janis looked at each other without understanding, and quickly approached. Ifa entered the crowd, elbowing her way through, and eventually reached the front row. She found

herself facing Titus and Manu. Everyone was talking at the same time and the cacophony made it difficult to understand what was being discussed.

“They’re laughing at us!” shouted one person to the right of Ifa.

Many others agreed. Ifa caught Manu’s gaze.

“The news of our journey spread quickly. People want to know where the food comes from and why they can’t get it.”

Ifa nodded her head and turned to Titus who seemed completely overwhelmed by the situation. The crowd was getting more and more agitated. In a few minutes the guards would arrive to break up the gathering. “Do something about it!” Ifa could read his thoughts. She stepped forward and raised both arms.

“Listen!” she shouted.

Discussions continued in the crowd, but the people in the front row fell silent. A few of them told the others to be quiet, and the crowd was still. Astonished, Ifa took a deep breath and began to speak.

“You know as well as I do that such gatherings are not allowed. We must disperse before the guards arrive.”

The shouting started again.

“What’s this story about a lost village?” shouted one.

“We want our share too!” shouted a lady at the back.

“The guards have been searching the City for two days and still no sign of the next food basket!”

Ifa swallowed with difficulty. She felt everyone’s anger, and her heart wanted to burst in her chest. They had to calm the crowd quickly before the guards arrived. Titus seemed panicked. Manu didn’t dare say anything. He had been away for over twenty years— no one trusted him.

“Hear me out!” continued Ifa. “I agree with you. The situation is unfair. I also want things to change, but

shouting won't change things. We need to be heard by the Council and for that we need someone beyond the walls..."

Discussions had resumed and no one listened to Ifa anymore.

"Let's make ourselves heard!" yelled a man in the front row, brandishing his fist. Several shouted their approval. The crowd turned and crossed the square, braying and screaming. The first had already reached the steps leading to the gate connecting the Fortress to the City.

"Oh, no!" Ifa said, putting her hand to her mouth.

Ifa turned towards Janis.

"Where are the children? We have to get them to safety – no one must stay in the streets, this could all end badly."

Janis ran to find the children and bring them home. Ifa turned back to Manu and Titus.

"What have we done?" she asked, on the verge of tears.

Titus came out of his lethargy.

"At least we opened their eyes. It was about time."

Ifa went to answer him, but Manu cut off his momentum.

"We'd better get closer to see what's going on."

*

More than fifty people had already amassed on the steps when Ifa and Manu arrived there. Only one guard was on duty that morning and was trying as best he could to fend off the first citizens who had thrown themselves at him. People were shouting and chanting from all sides. "We want equality!" "Give us what is ours!" Some had pushed the guard away and were now banging on the gate, shouting and screaming and pulling and pushing. The

tumult created by the crowd resonated throughout the alley, so that more and more people joined the group.

Ifa was on the verge of panic. Multiple bursts of colour welted the scene in her eyes, and she felt the ambient energy vibrating in her. Thousands of thoughts jostled in her head and created a dizzying whirlwind of images. She thought she was losing consciousness and caught Manu's arm at her side. Manu frowned, but seemed to be able to maintain control despite the intensity of the moment. She concentrated on her breathing and began to close the door of her mind. The colours and vibrations calmed a bit and she was able to get back in touch with her own thoughts. She noticed that several people in the crowd had objects in their hands: tools, kitchen utensils and various pieces of metal. She saw a metallic sheen and directed her attention to it just in time to see the hand holding it fall forcefully onto the head of the guard.

"No!" she shouted as she saw the victim collapse and disappear into the crowd. There was a mass movement as people advanced further and further up the stairs. Ifa tried to shout, to call for calm, but no one was listening to her. Anger and a sense of injustice had invaded the hearts of the citizens and nothing seemed to be able to stop them. She heard one cry among the others that made her raise her head to the sky.

At the wall at top of the steps stood a row of watchmen. One of them shouted.

"Go home, that's an order!"

The fury raged even louder on the steps.

"Never!" someone shouted.

"Not until justice is done!" shouted another.

Ifa, who had not taken her eyes off the guards, saw them bending down and grabbing objects at their feet, which they threw among the crowd. Clouds of dense, acrid

smoke spread through the alley. The thick gas instantly darkened the air, burning the eyes of the protestors. Ifa felt her throat closing; she was suffocating. The screams persisted, interspersed with coughing fits. The crowd dispersed and many left the alley to go back to the square. Some of the more reckless remained in place and continued to hammer the doors with their eyes closed and the collars of their shirts pulled up over their mouth and nose.

“You may gas us, but we won’t give up this time. It’s time for change!” said one.

There were now only about ten people left on the steps. Despite her irritated eyes, Ifa noticed the dark mass of the guard at the foot of the steps.

“Stop!” she shouted. “This man needs care. Let them help him.”

Two of the citizens suddenly noticed the collapsed man at their feet. They took a few steps back. Manu ran to the door and hailed the guards to the wall.

“Open the gate! He needs help. I’ll start the mechanism on this side.”

He pushed back the last few citizens who were still knocking on the door.

“Titus, come and help me!”

Titus, in turn, climbed the steps and helped Manu move the body of the guard to free the space needed to open the door.

“Can you open this door?” Manu shouted.

He tried to operate the mechanism without success.

“Not until everyone else stands back, one of the guards on the wall answered him.”

Manu glanced at Titus, who nodded. He reached out his hands to the last remaining men, imploring them to stand back.

“At least let them help him.”

The men gave him harsh looks, but followed him down the steps. One of them resisted, and Titus had to drag him by force into the square. The upper guard nodded to the guard hiding behind the gate. Fear was etched onto his face and he hesitated for a moment before he turned the mechanism. Manu imitated his gestures and the door opened slightly and creaked open. Two watchmen ran across. The first grabbed the wounded man under the arms and carried him to the other side. The second pushed Manu away and held him back from the doorway.

“No way I’m going back in there,” Manu winked at him.

The supervisor didn’t react, just blocked his way. Another man came out and closed the gate behind him. Manu looked at them for a moment and went downstairs to join Ifa and Titus, who were waiting in the alley.

The smoke had now dispersed and the citizens could breathe easier. Ifa looked up at the gate. Two guards were now guarding it, legs apart and cold eyes. One of them shouted at everyone to clear the area. The last of the citizens in the area cleared the alley and headed back to the square, where the others had gathered. Ifa bent forward, put her hands on her thighs and tried to calm down. Her heart rate had slowed down, but she was still having trouble breathing normally.

Manu grabbed her by the arm and caught Titus’s eye.

“Come,” he said, gesturing to them to follow him.

Chapter 26

Only two days. Only two days since his nomination to the Council and already a secret passageway had been found leading to the City, which the Council wanted to block as quickly as possible. And today, a riot had taken place in the City. Helena and Victor had been quick to contact all the councillors to arrange an emergency meeting. Soroban immediately went to the Council Chamber before he realized that, emergency meeting or not, everyone had to be assembled before they could start.

In the meantime, he had gone out into the plantation to survey the crop rows and clear his head. He was thinking of Ifa. In the last few days he had had little contact with Kal, let alone Ifa. He couldn't help but worry. Had she come back already? If so, did her expedition have anything to do with this morning's revolt? Soroban had been witness to events in the City on the few rare occasions that they happened, but on the side of the Fortress it was difficult to witness what was going on down below. Everything they knew came from what was reported from the Square. There were rumours that a guard had been attacked.

Security had been reinforced at the gate, along the wall and in front of the trapdoor leading to the secret passage.

Soroban had made his way around the plantation and was now going up the steps to the Council Chamber. He entered and was happy to see that almost everyone had arrived. He took place in the seat that was now his – Dylan’s old seat – and waited for Helena, who was the last to join the group.

“Thank you for coming so quickly,” she began as a welcome without even taking the time to sit down. “To summarize the situation, citizens came to the door this morning, hurling insults and complaints of all kinds, and finally attacking a guard. We had to use smoke bombs to disperse the group. They left the alley and the surrounding area, but we have still increased the surveillance at the door to prevent further attacks.”

She sat down and finished her sentence.

“Do we know the reason for their protest?” asked Victor.

“Do they really need one?” Helena asked sarcastically. “These people are like beasts, anything makes them angry!”

A quick look around the table told her that she was the only one who thought so.

“If I remember correctly, we haven’t had such a riot for years,” Helena. “So I doubt they just woke up this morning and wanted a protest for breakfast!”

Helena sighed.

“Miguel was on guard on the wall this morning, and he told me they were asking for more food, or something along those lines. Which is completely absurd. They get baskets every week, and in return for what? They barely even contribute.”

Soroban, who had remained silent since entering the room, was stung to the core by this statement.

“If I’m not mistaken, they get baskets because they can’t feed themselves. There is no fertile land in the whole City except at the bottom of the river!”

A few silently agreed.

“And where exactly are you going with all this?” Helena asked.

“I’m just saying that they have no choice. And having lived there for sixty years, I would much rather have been able to grow my own food than rely on those baskets!”

From the moment he finished his sentence, Soroban knew he had gone too far. Helena’s ears blushed instantly. Joachim, Lucas and Anne stiffened in their seats. Only Yvon and Victor seemed a little receptive to what he was saying.

“This method exists and has worked for several generations,” Anne began. “Our ancestors created this separation for the good of all. Crime had reached an alarming rate, people were dying in the streets, and no one was able to lead a normal life.”

“Yes, I know the story,” Soroban replied. “However, unlike all of you, I lived it on the other side of the wall. And I know that even though most citizens are very grateful for it, some of them have questions.”

That was more nuanced, he thought. He regretted not having opened with this statement. After all, it was true. Many households greatly appreciated the Council’s input. But he had also seen the effects of rationing on large families, sick children, and people living shorter and shorter lives.

Anne invited him to continue.

“Some people have questions. Why are quantities rationed every year? Some of the most ingenious have found solutions to ensure a more complete diet, for

example by sharing scraps or making flour. I have always reassured those around me by explaining that the climate made it more difficult to grow crops, and that the rations avoided the interruption of distribution in the middle of winter, for example. However, when I arrived here..."

"Yes?" Helena interrupted him. "Have you changed your mind? You think you know everything after you've been here, what? Two weeks with us?"

Soroban ignored this last comment and continued.

"After discovering the state of the reserves, I wondered if the sharing was always fair."

"Of course not," cried Joachim! "Citizens receive less because they contribute less, that's all!"

"They contribute less, compared to whom?" asked Victor.

"To us of course!" Joachim answered. "Everyone here has a role to play, an occupation. Below, there are many people who do nothing."

Suddenly, everyone started speaking up. On one hand, Helena and Lucas were arguing along the same lines as Joachim, and on the other, Victor and Yvon were almost screaming scandal. Soroban tried to speak again, but he couldn't get a word through the din. Anne looked around trying to make up her mind, then she climbed up on her chair and shouted, "Hey!"

They all fell silent and turned towards her. She blushed, surprised by her audacity and sat back down in her chair before speaking.

"Here we are organized, it's true."

Lucas and Joachim nodded their heads, supporting her idea.

"We have the school, we have our jobs, the Council, a structure. From what I understand, in the City they have none of that."

“Nothing at all,” Helena replied, convinced. “They are uneducated barbarians, who take no initiative, she concluded, sniffing.”

Someone grunted around the table.

“So be it,” Anne continued. “Maybe they’re like that because they’ve never been given the opportunity to be otherwise?”

“Anne raises an important point,” Yvon remarked. “Inequalities do exist. But are they so different from us, or is it our laws that have made them different?”

“It’s a stupid question, if you ask me,” Helena answered, leaning back on her chair. “Of course, they’re inferior by their nature, otherwise why would they have built this wall hundreds of years ago?”

She seemed so sure of herself, so condescending. Soroban felt an irrepressible anger building up in him, a need to shut her up. He wanted her punished for what she was doing, no matter what. He concentrated on his hands lying flat on the table to avoid getting carried away, trying instead to find the right way to make her see reason.

“I don’t know,” Lucas was saying. “I agree that their contribution to our community is very small. But has it always been the case? Unfortunately, there is no written document that explains why the wall was built. When I took office, I read all the archives, and the only information we know about the origin of the wall comes from word of mouth over the generations.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that they don’t contribute, argued Helena. So it’s right that their share should be smaller than ours.”

“Maybe if we think only mathematically,” Victor replied, elbows on the table, bent forward. “I wonder, are we really giving them the opportunity to contribute? The relationship between the outside and the inside is limited.

Only a few people are allowed through the doors. If you look at it like that, it is very difficult for them to help in any way!”

*

Manu had taken Titus and Ifa to his house a few streets to the east. His mother Emilie, who was still alive, had the surprise of her life when she had seen him return the day before. He had woken her when he entered, despite his efforts to keep the noise to a minimum. It was with a dull pain that he had learned of his father’s death several years before. She was all he had left. She was a woman with a beautiful, smooth face who looked at least ten years younger than her age. She had greeted the two young people with kindness and immediately offered them a cool drink with a vague aroma of a herb that Ifa had not recognized, but which had calmed their throats, irritated by the smoke bombs. Manu then told her about the morning’s events.

“It’s a long time since the people have revolted like that,” she said. “Maybe it’s time for things to change.”

“That’s what we hope,” Titus replied.

He had returned to his usual calm and mood after the morning’s upheavals. Ifa smiled when he saw him back to his usual self. He seemed to have been somewhere else for days. Suddenly she realized that she hadn’t had time to find out how his homecoming had been.

“Did you see Raina this morning?” she asked.

“Yeah. She was happy to know we were back. I’ll go see her in a few minutes, she’s probably worried about the riot.”

Emilie turned to him and put her hand on his.

“I’ll go with you, I haven’t seen her in ages.”

Titus smiled back at her.

“Are you friends?” he asked.

“Yes, we’ve known each other for a long time!”

Emilie looked at Ifa and Titus in turn, smiling like a grandmother who has been reunited with her grandchildren after a long separation. Ifa felt safe with her. She looked happily at her three companions. She had always been very lonely and felt now as if she had found a new way out. They continued to drink their drinks in silence. Manu was the first to speak.

“I’m afraid that the calm might be short-lived.”

“It’s true – everyone has been redirected to the Square. They’re probably looking for a new way to be heard,” Titus answered.

“As they should,” replied Emilie.

All heads turned towards her.

“It should have been done a long time ago, she continued. Back then, Raina and I wanted to change the world, I remember.”

She smiled, her eyes lost in the haze of her memories.

“Then Manu arrived and I wanted to continue our beautiful projects, but I couldn’t do it anymore. Finally, Raina decided that it would be more useful to help people here, rather than start riots that could have gone wrong. So she concentrated on helping as many people as possible through cooking and caring for them.”

She turned to them.

“Now, it’s different. The people seem ready for change.”

Ifa nodded almost imperceptibly.

“I was rather hoping to find a way to bring the two sides together, to work together to improve the lot of all, not to create a civil war. At least that’s what we were hoping for when we left the village a few days ago.”

"I think there's still time," Emilie replied with a mysterious smile.

*

Kal was waiting patiently. Ever since Dylan's death, he'd been waiting for the next move. What would become of him, having served the Council for so long? He hoped he could continue to work with Soroban, both as an assistant in his duties, but also in their plan to liberate the City.

Was this morning's protest going to open a door to reconciliation between the two sides? If only he had been able to attend the Council meeting that was taking place right now. He had long weighed the pros and cons of approaching the room and trying to get inside Soroban's head to find out what was going on. However, he no longer wanted to play the spy. He had therefore resigned himself to waiting for Soroban's report, if not to be silent about the discussions.

He was sitting in the square and thinking about Ifa, wondering if she had come back already. It was with a shiver of pleasure that he perceived her presence.

"We came back last night," she said. "Unfortunately, or fortunately, this morning's demonstration is somewhat our fault."

She told him the events as she had experienced them.

"We're at Manu's mother's house now, and she says that there hasn't been an event like this for years."

"It remains to be seen whether this riot will have a positive impact or not. The Council is currently meeting," Kal replied.

Kal looked at the wall in the distance and could see the watchmen perched on the palisade, looking down on the streets below.

"They have stepped up surveillance. What happens next could have serious consequences," he told her, hoping that she would understand the message and not try anything stupid.

"We're looking for a way to get in touch with the Council..." Ifa began.

"No. Don't count on me. You must keep your secret at all costs, I can't pass on any message from you."

"What if it stays anonymous?" she asked. *"If not, I'll find a way in. Manu said that a passage exists."*

"You're out of your mind, Ifa! If you enter, you'll be charged – it's a crime to pass through the gates without permission."

The trapdoor, the passage and the stairs leading to the City appeared for a few moments in his mind. He quickly dismissed the vision as he felt Ifa sparkle with joy. A great warmth came over him as Ifa cried out.

"Wonderful! Where is it? It's the perfect solution!"

Kal clenched his jaw and cursed his overly visual mind.

"Ifa, no, it's a terrible idea. You will be arrested at once. Besides, there are people blocking access right now."

"Even better," she replied.

And her presence vanished all at once. He raged, cursing himself, hating himself for never being able to control his mind as Ifa was able to. She didn't realize the danger she was putting herself in, blinded as she was by her desire to change everything. He had only a few minutes to react and did not have time to think about his decision. Growling between his teeth, he crossed the square, entered the Fort and made his way in strides towards the Council Chamber. All heads turned towards him as he burst into the room.

"Excuse me," he said. *"I'm afraid someone will try to come in through the passage in the next few minutes. You*

may wish to settle the situation before the guards get involved.”

He glanced insistently at Soroban. Soroban’s face turned somewhat white.

“Ifa?” he asked, silently.

Kal nodded.

Soroban got up and disappeared through the door, the other advisers after him.

Chapter 27

Ifa found the building easily, followed by Titus and Manu. It was located at the eastern end of the city, where the wall was at a right angle to the river. Ifa had seen everything in Kal's mind, despite his attempts to prevent it. She felt a little sorry that she had used her friend in this way, but it might be the only way to get in touch with the Council without being stopped by the guards. She was spurred on by an unparalleled motivation – she hadn't even stopped to think. Her plan was going to work, it had to!

"Ifa!" Manu shouted as he ran behind her. "We agreed not to try to enter! This is sheer madness, you don't know what's waiting for us on the other side when we get caught!"

"Stay here if you want, I'll take my chances," she answered without stopping.

Manu and Titus looked at each other for a few moments.

"As if we haven't had enough action for today!" Titus said, speeding up.

Manu grunted, unhappy at the prospect of crossing to the other side, but like Titus he didn't want to leave her

alone. He exhaled for a few seconds, his hands on his hips, then resumed his race to join the two young people who were still running towards the building.

From the outside, the building was in bad shape. The wall facing the river was half collapsed and large blocks of stone were scattered all over the ground. On the inside, however, the walls seemed solid and the stairs were in surprisingly good condition. They climbed up two flights, at the top of which Ifa recognized the large room with the windows that she had seen in Kal's mind. She opened the back door, exposing the shack with the box-lined walls. At the end of it two men were busy installing beams on either side of the door.

The two men stood still in amazement. Time seemed to stop for a few moments, no one daring to move. Ifa took it in turns to observe them, plunging into their thoughts.

"They're not guards," Manu told her. *"They have a green armband."*

Ifa hesitated for a second, wondering what the colour of the armbands meant. Then she dismissed the thought and decided to go straight ahead before they decided to call for help. Titus, seeing her rush forward, overtook her in two strides and threw himself at the man on the left to help Ifa pass. The man on the right grabbed the girl's arm. She was trying to free herself when Manu arrived and surprised the second man with an elbow to the chin. He fell to the ground, moaning. His accomplice, who had just been released by Titus, rushed to his side to make sure he was all right.

"Follow them!" he mumbled crookedly.

"I don't have to. There are guards all over the square, they won't get far."

Ifa was already at the top of the stairs and saw daylight enter through the trapdoor at the far end. She stopped

suddenly and told Manu and Titus not to move. On the other side of the trapdoor a whole group of people had just appeared. The silhouette of a small, plump woman stood out in the blinding daylight.

“Lucas, try to find Miguel. We need him,” the woman said in a calm and composed voice.

She stood motionless in the doorway and watched Ifa and her friends.

“Not only are you disrupting order in the City, but now you want to attack the Fortress?”

“Helena, wait!” called a voice a little further away.

Ifa looked at those around the woman and recognized Soroban who was trying to approach. Her heart leapt at the sight of him. A hand held back his shoulder as if to prevent him from moving forward, but Ifa couldn’t see who was holding him. Was it a guard? She turned her attention back to the woman.

“We are not responsible for this morning’s protest. We witnessed it, but we are not responsible for it,” Ifa answered in a voice that surprised her with its assurance. “We’re simply here to talk.”

“And how did you know of the existence of this passage?”

Ifa did not know how to answer. She wanted to avoid embarrassing Kal.

“*Say no more!*” she heard Kal’s voice.

“Helena, please!” the voice repeated.

Ifa then saw a man approaching.

“Let me handle this, will you?”

The woman turned towards him, and although Ifa could not see her face, she immediately noticed the woman’s anger in her movements.

“Your names?” the man asked.

The three answered without resistance.

“My name is Victor, adviser in charge of Justice. You have violated the rules of passage to the Fortress, and I place you in confinement awaiting your trial. Follow me.”

“No!” Soroban cried out.

He was abruptly pulled back by the hand that held him. Ifa saw a ray of sunshine shining on the red hair of the person who was holding him fiercely.

“Kal!”

She was panting.

“You gave us away?” she questioned him.

“Better Victor than a guard. Do as he asks. We’ll find a solution.”

Ifa turned towards Titus and Manu, who looked resigned.

“Let’s follow them,” she said.

*

They were crossing the square when they heard screams to their left. Several people were running, all wearing black armbands, heading towards the wall.

“What’s going on now?” said the woman named Helena, hanging on to the arm of one of the men.

“Another crowd in front of the gate! They’ve caught the two guards and are holding them hostage!”

Helena clenched her fists and frowned.

“Send twenty guards to calm the crowd and save their colleagues. Take the agitators into lockdown,” she spat back.

The man nodded his head and left in a hurry.

“Miguel?” Helena shouted.

The man stopped and turned.

“Use all force necessary. No charges will be brought against the guards.”

He nodded and ran to join the group that had formed at the top of the wall. The men were tying a system of ropes around their waist and seemed to be preparing to lower themselves straight down the cliff. The fear and adrenaline was palpable in the air as the atmosphere was so tense. Ifa was looking around, trying to understand what was going on, but more importantly, trying to find a solution to calm the situation. All force necessary. Did that mean hurting, or even killing?

“Wait!” she said as she approached Victor, who seemed the most appropriate person to address. “We need to talk. These people are just hoping that we listen to them. They want a better distribution of resources.”

Victor continued to walk, accompanied by the other people whose name or role Ifa didn’t know. Soroban had mysteriously disappeared along with Kal.

“We know how to improve the situation! We have discovered a village, not far from here, where everyone manages to produce enough for their own consumption. The citizens want to be able to contribute too!”

She was shouting. Her throat was burning up and blood was beating down her temples. Titus and Manu looked at her without reacting.

“I don’t know if this is a good idea,” Manu interjected.

Victor stopped and stared at her for a few moments, as if to see into her soul.

“Wait,” he asked the others who were with him.

They stopped at once.

“I’ll take them all into confinement, I’ll meet you in the Council room, and we will continue our discussion.”

They moved in line behind the group of councillors, heading towards the grey building with the large windows that overlooked the whole square. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Ifa opened her eyes as wide as possible to

drink in what surrounded her. In just a few days, she had discovered more places than she had ever seen in her entire life, and now she was walking through the Fortress, a place she had never imagined she would see. They entered and separated from the others. The councillors continued straight down a corridor, while Victor motioned for Ifa and her group to follow him in the opposite direction. Manu seemed particularly uncomfortable, his face livid.

"What's going on?" Ifa asked him.

"I never thought I'd come back here," he said. *"To confinement."*

"I'm sorry, but we had to find a way to get an audience with the Council."

"Do you really think they'll listen to us?"

"Victor seems open-minded. Then there's Soroban."

Manu didn't answer. He stared at his feet as he walked down the stairs, his jaw tight and his nostrils flaring.

"Kal?" risked Ifa, hoping that he would answer. *"Where are you now?"*

"I'm with Soroban. You've got yourself into a hell of a mess, Ifa."

"Not as much as the citizens! One guard said they took hostages!"

She heard Kal talking to Soroban and repeating her words to him.

"We're being taken into confinement. Victor says the councillors are to meet to continue their discussion. Are you going to help us get out of here? All I wanted was for us to be heard! I'm sure we can find a way to live together."

They reached the bottom of the stairs and rushed down a long dark corridor. Victor had grabbed a torch as he was coming down the stairs and the glow of it danced on the walls.

“Soroban says he’ll do everything he can to get you out of there. We have to split up, but as soon as I know more, I’ll let you know. I can’t follow him to the meeting.”

“In here,” said Victor, opening a door.

With his torch, he lit two lamps hanging on the walls and closed the door. The door clanged loudly as it closed. Then the sound of a key in the lock was heard, followed by Victor’s footsteps walking away.

“What do we do now?” Titus sighed.

“We wait,” Manu replied, resting his hand on the floor, his back pressed against the wall. “I only hope we don’t have to wait too long.”

*

Soroban had almost run to the Council Chamber and got there before Victor. Everyone else was already seated. Helena clenched her jaw and kept looking towards the door. Lucas and Anne wrung their hands. The situation was very tense. Soroban took his seat and a few moments later, Victor finally entered the room.

“We’ve got a lot on our hands today,” he said to start the discussion.

“A lot?” exclaimed Helena. “Two of our guards are being held hostage by the citizens, in addition to the one injured earlier. Three people entered without authorization and are now in detention. And who knows what’s going on at the gate right now?”

“The citizens are probably angry,” noted Anne across the table.

Victor looked at her for a moment and smiled.

“It’s true. Then we must find a way to calm that anger.”

“By giving them more food?” Helena said. “And then, when that’s not enough, they’ll protest again? It doesn’t

make any sense at all. We can't negotiate with these people."

"Do you have a better suggestion, Helena?" asked Yvon.

"The guards are fixing the problem."

"By force, of course," Yvon answered. "And you expect a positive result?"

"Of course – they'll be afraid! People who are afraid don't try anything."

"People who are afraid are dangerous," Helena, answered Anne. "Fear and ignorance don't mix."

Soroban watched without saying anything, looking for a way to calm the councillors and ease the situation in the City. He thought of Ifa with a tightness in his heart, a tremor running through his whole body. His granddaughter was imprisoned and would soon be condemned. What punishment was reserved for this kind of crime? Would her two companions suffer the same fate as her? He had had no difficulty recognizing Manu alongside Ifa. He had thought he was dead all these years, and now he had suddenly reappeared. Ifa had found him, wherever he had taken refuge. He was intrigued to know what had happened. Why had Manu disappeared? He had always suspected it, but how had he managed to get out, and above all why had he come back now, only to find himself imprisoned again? He brought his attention back to the room and spoke timidly.

"I don't believe that hurting or even killing people is the answer," he began.

"Neither do I," Victor's calm and composed voice answered.

Victor leaned closer, put his hands on the table and looked at the other councillors in turn.

"Our prisoner said something very interesting earlier."

Helena made a sarcastic sound that Victor ignored.

“She said that the citizens only want to be heard. How about giving them a voice for once?”

“How can we do that?” asked Lucas.

“Way to create a new uprising, Victor,” Helena cut in. “What are you thinking? Do you want people to die?”

Helena was sweating. It looked like she was going to burst.

“No,” replied Victor. “I’m proposing that we do what we can to change our methods.”

Yvon, Lucas and Soroban looked at him closely. No one else was talking. Helena had folded her arms and was looking at him defiantly.

“Go on,” Anne suggested.

“Maybe it’s time to look ahead, to rethink our system. Why not invite a citizen to sit with us to fill the vacant seat? That way we will give them a voice, while avoiding further excesses. I believe that the citizens will find this idea acceptable.”

“That’s it, he’s gone completely crazy,” mumbled Helena.

“Crazy or not,” he replied without looking at her, “it’s my proposal and I’m asking for a vote.”

“Oh, come on! How do you think you’re going to do that? Do you want to open the door? Do you want to destroy the wall?”

Helena stood up, talking and gesticulating with both hands in the air. She looked at the other councillors.

“Do you agree with this?”

Lucas and Joachim shook their heads, worried about opening the door and letting people move freely.

“No. I suggest that one person from the City be appointed to the Council and that only that person will be allowed through for Council meetings. This person will be

the voice of the citizens, and that way we can improve our relationship with them and end this rebellion before it's too late. This tactic has proven itself throughout history."

He looked around the table.

"Any further questions? Are you ready to vote?"

"And how are we going to choose this person? We don't know the people in the City," Lucas asked.

"I do," Soroban answered. "And many of them would be excellent candidates."

"Let's vote first and then we'll find a solution for the candidacy," concluded Victor.

Hands were quietly raised. First Victor and Soroban, without any hesitation, then Yvon and Anne followed. Lucas was the last to raise his hand after hesitating for a few seconds and, Soroban couldn't help but notice, throwing a worried look in Helena's direction. Helena kept her arms tightly against her chest, glaring at Victor. Joachim, as usual, kept his eyes and hand down.

"Five votes in favor. Thank you all," Victor said. "I'm sure we have made the right decision. We are the Council. We can change things, evolve and improve our policies for the greater good."

He stopped when he saw Helena shaking her head quietly.

"This is a mistake, Victor. "This will end badly."

Victor shrugged his shoulders and continued.

"So the proposal is adopted, Lucas?"

"Yes, I have noted it," he answered.

"As for the candidacy," Victor continued. "I propose to nominate this young woman, Ifa. In just a few minutes, she succeeded in making us understand the people's demands. She found the passage, had the nerve to cross to come and speak to us, and surrendered without resistance. We need a balanced person like her among us."

Epilogue

Ifa entered the Council Chamber accompanied by Soroban. The other councillors waited patiently. The last few hours had been trying. The short time in confinement had made her nervous, and it was with relief and disbelief that she learned of the Council's decision. She was so relieved that she barely understood the magnitude of the task ahead of her.

They had all climbed the palisade to see the battle below. Ifa watched with disbelieving eyes as the citizens fought against the guards. Raina and Emilie were struggling through the crowd to get the wounded further down the alley. Ifa had addressed them, her eyes filled with tears, asking them to stop the fighting. She had explained to them the Council's decision to finally give the citizens a voice.

Her tears had intensified when she asked them if they trusted her, and they agreed with a round of applause. Her eyes had wandered through the crowd to thank all those who had shown their enthusiasm and she had finally seen Josette, with her arm around Janis's shoulders. Her friend's lips whispered, "You did it. I'm proud of you."

She had requested that Manu and Titus be released without charge, arguing that they had merely followed her to ensure her protection. It was with a heavy heart that she had taken them in her arms one by one, knowing that from now on everything would change. That she would now spend most of her time in the Fortress instead of walking along the wall that ran along the square by the river with Titus. Fortunately, there would always be evenings and nights. She was dying to go home and tell Josette everything.

She smiled as she sat down at the big round table. In a few hours she would cross the gate and go home, and then come back to work in the Fortress every day, changing the world. Changing her world. Soroban may not have been free yet, but now that they were together again, things could only get better.

To be continued...

Thank you so much for reading this book. I hope you enjoyed it. If you did, I really would appreciate if you let a comment on the Amazon sale's page. This little action from you will be really useful to me.

If you want to learn more about upcoming projects and the launch of Book II, please join my fans list by clicking on this [link](#).

I hope to see you soon for another adventure with Ifa and her friends!