

Mirror era - the hooded tribe

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Chapter 1

Sitting on the ground on a comfortable zafu of indefinable color, legs crossed, back straight, Kirah observed the void. In the half-light, only the roar of the wind turbines accompanied her in her meditation. The smell of the earth and the freshness of the rock around her, offered her a serenity that she could not find anywhere else. It was her refuge, her cave, her home. Modest, like all those in her city, it was small and protective. The lower part, dug into the ground, served as a bedroom for its three inhabitants and the upper part, nestled in the hollow of a rocky outcrop, was dedicated to daily occupations. The kitchen was conspicuous by its absence. The lack of water and fuel had changed the customs, the inhabitants cooked and ate their meals together, by quarter, in the greatest conviviality. Each family took turns in preparing the meals. This economical method also had the advantage of making the population more united, allowing them to easily find solutions to everyday problems, without having to call upon higher authorities who could devote themselves to a more global management. It was a time of joyful exchanges where strong bonds of camaraderie were created. Each person considered his neighbor as a member of his family. The troglodyte buildings provided a natural barrier to the hot sun and the devastating winds. The family of Kirah who benefited from this was more fortunate than others, who saw the upper part of their habitat made of simple metal sheets from the recycling of plastic waste, manufactured in the time of the oil generations. The people of Kirah were not very proud of the actions of their elders and had learned a lot from all their mistakes. It was difficult to give an age to Kirah, she seemed neither young nor old. The beauty of her azure eyes was matched only by the intelligence of her gaze, which reflected both the ardor of youth and the wisdom of old age. Her rather shapely figure, her curly blond hair accompanied high and marked cheekbones. Her full lips and the roundness of her eyes were in harmony with her pale Caucasian complexion. Her contemporaries, most of whom were thin or even skinny, with black almond eyes or even slanted eyes, had flat faces and large noses. Kirah's features and pale complexion betrayed his western ancestry, which today was largely a minority. The dominant ethnic group had its origins in the peoples of the ancient continent of Asia, mixed with those of the ancient continent of Africa, as evidenced by their dark hair, sometimes straight and sometimes very curly, and their pale complexions. Few were completely black-skinned, whose community was established much further south. What did people think when Kirah revealed her face, astonishment surely but also a lot of curiosity, because she emanated an almost palpable strength. It was as if she had already lived through many setbacks and misadventures without ever having left her city. Of average height like all her people, she was nevertheless broad-shouldered and had to assume strong responsibilities: she was a Protector. Her gaze went from a folder on her lap to the rough wall in front of her. She was trying to see something that she could not discern, far from her, far from today. A young blonde girl who looked very much like her, with a youthful air to boot, broke the spell by entering abruptly. - What are you doing?" the young girl said in a rush. Kirah raised her head, a wide smile instantly appeared on her face as if a puppeteer, placed above her, had pulled on the nylon strings. - I'm here, I'm recovering, Mahai" replied Kirah. Mahai was showing off her eleven years of age in a casual way, which made her mother happy, nothing is more beautiful than innocence, she thought. Youth is the most beautiful and the greatest

of riches, one cannot steal it, nor envy it, one can only admire it. Kirah was pleased with the evolution of her daughter and found her as beautiful as the day she was born. Of course she had physical characteristics comparable to those of her mother, but Kirah was confident, she had not been shamed in her youth so why should her daughter suffer one day? The physical heritage of their ancestors made them exotic today... The young girl seeing a folder placed in front of her mother, seemed suddenly more serious. - When can I know? Mamou, I am grown up now, I will listen with wisdom, I promise you" said mahai in a convincing tone. - Kirah gave her a look full of tenderness and affection, she adored her daughter. She was very proud; she had no doubt that Mahai would become a great protector, courageous and infallible. Her education would be long and difficult, because channeling her intuition and sensitivity would not be easy, it could even be dangerous. The education of the children was the responsibility of the parents and the parents alone. The guardians only checked from time to time that this obligation was not neglected. Schools that were too expensive and difficult to run or too controversial because of religious abuses had disappeared. The parents taught all the basic notions as well as those leading to a trade. For that, most of the trades had their doors open to whoever wanted to know the trade in question, like the recycling workshops on the edge of the city or the restoration workshops on the ramparts. Mahai came to curl up against his mother. The smell of her hair imposed itself on Kirah's nostrils and had a comforting effect on the heart of this mother who was basically worried about her offspring. -Mahai was already looking into the binder, eager to learn more. The girl had only ever seen the protective box containing the old photo album, a testimony to a time so long ago that no one in the community had any memory of it and no one could testify to it in their lifetime. This binder was a priceless treasure, almost fossilized. The brown and brittle plastic did not envy the feverish pages. The care taken to keep it alive had been beneficial so far. The metal rings could no longer be opened or closed and were content with the latter position. The ravages of time had eaten away and yellowed the photos in the album, only the scenes in the center of the image were recognizable. The once vivid colors had faded. The majority of the photos depicted three boys staring into the lens and the photographer must have been their father or mother, themselves absent from the photos. Mahai had seen a camera at the grand palace and knew how it worked. The children were sometimes surrounded by white, wearing hats and warm clothes from head to toe, sometimes surrounded by blue, with a single piece of cloth around their waist hiding their attributes or surrounded by green, caps on their heads, shorts and sneakers. These images were shocking and incomprehensible to Mahai. - "Mamou, how beautiful, how beautiful they are!", her eyes were wide open as if the young girl wanted to get the images more inside her. "The colors are beautiful, explain to me, what are they doing?" Mahai could not believe her eyes, all her current environment, houses, clothes, everyday objects, were sandy, earthy colors, dull, without relief, or appeal. Then Kirah delved into the world of the ancients and said, "These natural elements made up the earth centuries ago. The white, which you can see when children are dressed warmly, was called snow or ice, cold and compact elements of a season called winter or of the polar regions. The children played in the snow by sliding or they formed balls and threw them to each other creating harmless battles." - But fighting is bad" "Yes, of course, but it was only a game, nothing serious... today these practices would be inadvisable". Kirah turned into a teacher, wanting to instruct the innocent child as best she could, but the story was so full of

nostalgia and pain that her personal emotion wanted to take over. Kirah picked herself up and swallowed her bitter saliva: "The blue was the sea and the ocean and covered three quarters of the planet, they were made of water. It was pleasant to bathe in them during the season called summer or in the hot regions, that is to say, you would lie down inside and make movements of arms and legs allowing to move in the water." - "Incredible! But how could all that water disappear?" Mahai was flabbergasted and could not conceive of her world in blue. Her voice became more and more acute. Kirah understood perfectly that her daughter was unable to imagine the ocean when she had only known dryness, sand, rocks, dry wind and heat. - It's a long story that deserves to be told more" Kirah paused, she knew that these fabulous and far-fetched images were going through her little girl's mind like a fairy tale. Kirah continued anyway. "Green represented nature. The plant world provided abundant oxygen and made up most of the fertile landscape. These children lived in the countryside, in an area less populated than the cities. What characterized the countryside was abundant flora and agricultural production that could feed the entire earth." Kirah was transported to a world that must have been idyllic, prolific and pleasant. - But how could they destroy everything with a smile on their face?" she said, looking at the three children who were laughing out loud at the camera. Mahai was angry, she was trembling. - Mahai, my daughter, you mustn't blame the older generations" Kirah took her softest voice so that the words would reassure "not everything is their fault. What is done is done. It is not a particular person who is to blame, but men have overestimated the capacities of the earth and their intellectual capacities to face adversity and then natural phenomena, independent of human action, have also contributed to the complete transformation of the planet. All this has built our world today. I understand your anger but your learning curve will be long. It is positive to feel, to express your feelings, but be careful not to let them guide your actions and influence your reason too much." Kirah paused. The fire that had been burning in Mahai's eyes a few moments earlier had disappeared. - We've talked enough about the heritage, your brain needs to meditate on all this new information so that you ask yourself the right questions and not question everything. Did you hear my daughter?" kirah adopted the most tender intonation possible. - Mahai was disappointed that she couldn't continue this discussion, to see other pictures of this world that seemed so strange to her and to know her heritage better, but she felt that knowledge alone could be difficult to accept and that it was necessary to meditate on all these implications. Mahai respected her mother immensely and if she advised to postpone this discussion until later, it would not even occur to her to upset her. Deep down, Mahai felt that it was all unfair... she hardly enjoyed anything, neither white, nor blue, nor green... and at the same time, she had no reason to complain either. She was well fed, her parents were loving and caring, her home comfortable; her friends, were loyal and pleasant. What more could one ask for...her attitude would have been ungrateful if she had whined to her mother...but still...her people deserved better. When you consider how abundant and fertile this planet had been. Mahai finally wondered if this attractive heritage was a gift or a poison. Kirah, on the other hand, dreaded the moment when her daughter would know everything about the past and therefore about the future. Her childhood would be turned upside down and she would plunge into the adult world without even realizing it. This prospect frightened him and his accompaniment had to be irreproachable. On her side, her daughter was not aware of the possible consequences of

these discussions. Mahai obviously did not understand her mother's reluctance to pass on her heritage, which created a distance between them. In some ways, Mahai preferred her father, who was easier to understand and live with. He provided for all the family's basic needs and did not complicate the relationship between them. In fact, she wondered what he was doing right now. Mahai stood up, with a small pout, disappointed to have to leave her mother's bosom. She put back on her long tunic which seemed dull from afar but which up close revealed a clever patchwork of sandy color gradations. It was obvious that the different pieces came from several old clothes, but the whole was still harmonious. Kirah observed her daughter standing on the threshold, ready to go out. She made her long hair disappear into her hood, covering her head, nose, mouth and partially her eyes. Outside the houses, the whole community, men and women alike, wore this head covering, which protected them from the sun, the wind and the dust. This particularity of clothing gave the name to their society: the Hoods. When Mahai came out of the darkness, he blinked in reaction to the excessive luminosity, despite the presence of solar panels that covered the whole city, but there were many gaps that let the deadly rays through. The panels fulfilled their primary function of providing energy, but the artificial ceiling also provided shade and coolness for these humans who lived in ancient Saharan conditions. Above them, windmills accompanied them in these same functions, they also cooled the burning panels attacked by the sun. They were constantly battered by the wind and when a gust stronger than the previous ones shook them with a bang, the inhabitants quickly returned without even a glance towards the deadly sky. This cursed wind was saturated with sand and noxious gases but allowed the use of wind turbines continuously. The wind turbines, in order to be protected from the violent gales, had horizontal blades like those of the old helicopters. Moreover the oxygen content in the air being very low, the dome structure of the solar panels allowed the oxygen generated by Eden, the only food garden of the city, to remain close to the ground and to benefit the inhabitants. All this complex structure palliated many climatic disadvantages and allowed the life of the capuchins to be as comfortable as possible. Kirah watched her daughter, her only daughter, walk away, not without apprehension. As a mother, a visceral fear gripped her: she would never have another child and the thought made her dizzy. Her daughter represented the future of her people, whose balance was so fragile. The human genome had been altered to include the inability to produce more than one child in the female DNA. Human overpopulation and environmental deterioration had led to this extreme measure, instructed by the women themselves. Was it inhumane to intervene on the deep nature of man? Or was it necessary to let the deep nature of woman destroy her species? The feminine intuition that had set these milestones thought that the single child was a necessary evil for the survival of her species, but for how long? Hearing footsteps behind him, Rahain turned his head and discovered his most beautiful treasure. - Mahai, my daughter, have you been here long? - "No, dad, what are you doing?" - "Nothing much, I'm trying to improve the performance of this fan" Rahain held the object in front of him and looked like he was having trouble with his plans. Mahai thought his father was handsome, he didn't have any particular beauty mark like being blond with blue eyes, but his beauty was intrinsic, it imposed itself to everyone who looked at him. His voice was soft and strong at the same time, the protection emanated from him, despite him. His company was pleasant, she understood why her mother had chosen him. His shoulders were high and muscular, which was not common

among the people of the East. His square jaw gave an impression of robustness and courage. But what she liked best about him was his deep black eyes, which inspired confidence at first sight. - I have to go to Eden, are you coming with me? - "With great pleasure dad, mamou has problems isn't it" - "Don't worry my daughter, she protects us" said Rahain while taking a small cart on wheels filled with empty earthen pots and amphorae for water. Mahai confidently took the outstretched hand. Everyone reached the center of the city, Eden, on foot. The solar transports were reserved for the inter-city trips. Moreover, these big caravels could not have circulated in the maze of narrow and winding streets. Mahai was looking forward to this walk with his father, even if it was not exactly a pleasure walk. Since walking requires extra oxygen, it can quickly become dangerous for young children. The depletion of oxygen had also had consequences on the life span of humans who no longer aged beyond 50 years. Rahain kept his daughter's pace light and slow, commenting on the houses or stopping to talk to anyone they met. This little walk would take longer than it should, but there was no rush. The hoods lived to the rhythm of their strides and everyone enjoyed being in the heart of the city. This place, protected by glass walls and managed by a closed circle of non-religious "initiated monks" living in the garden, contained a source of fresh, unpolluted water in its depths. This spring alone determined the location of the city and the survival of the humans who lived there. From it also flowed the life of the trees, plants, flowers, nourishing crops, but also the life of insects, rare fish, amphibians, rodents and birds, the only survivors of ancient times. The proliferation of animals was controlled according to needs only, no surplus but no shortage either, so that each terrestrial species could survive. Here, the role of protection took on its full meaning. Eden produced fruits, seeds and plants which were distributed equitably to the families according to a list scrupulously followed by the monks. This contribution of vitamins was welcome, but also very rare, and therefore synonymous with celebration. The little girl had caught her breath and was eager to take a sip of water from Eden. A small assistance was gathered in front of the door, admiring the luxuriant vegetation behind the glass walls, it was not difficult to guess that the assembly was only composed of father and children, because even encapuchonnées their statures did not leave any doubt. The women were absent, not because of the physical effort that the march demanded, but because of their work which demanded more responsibility than that of the supply. Finally, an ochre toga, recognizable among all, made its appearance, followed by a dozen of its colleagues, their arms loaded with colored victuals. The call began and each one stepped forward with his name, or rather with his first name, more original and less litigious in the sense of heritage of the term, determining the person concerned, to collect the precious sesame. Mahai did not want it anymore, like most of the children present. Rahain gave his daughter a sip of fresh, clear water and she enjoyed it as if she had never drunk anything so good, which she had. The luxury lay in the fact that she could still enjoy these products because outside the city walls, the land was barren and could no longer feed any living thing. Times were hard and dry and the hearts of the people had never been so light and cheerful. The distribution of the food took place with joy and gladness and no one would have had the idea of envying his neighbor's portion, either by quantity or by quality. The emotions were palpable even through the hoods. It goes without saying that the important oxygen supply in the vicinity of Eden, was not foreign to the ambient jubilation. This day was a day of celebration simply by

the expression of the spontaneous happiness of each one, which gave back to the word "celebration" all its first meaning. Rahain filled his amphorae, loaded his belongings into his trailer and prepared to make the reverse trip. These victuals were reserved for the families, and would only be eaten when they were all together. He hoped to comfort his companion who was in the grip of the greatest doubt at the moment and to give back the smile to his daughter, because they were dependent on each other. This symbiosis was the cement of their family. Rahain associated his thoughts with an observant look towards his daughter, and could only say to himself: I am proud.

CHAPTER 2

Thinking, Kirah watched her daughter and her companion walk away. She had to pull herself together to see things more clearly. Her hypersensitivity and her reason were fighting a fierce battle, one wanting to defend innocent girls at any cost and the other asking her to show humanity to a young man. Usually calm and meditation could calm her sensitive ardor, but in this case she lacked tranquility. She would have preferred not to have to chastise anyone. In a micro-society like the one of the hoods, no one could flout the rules with impunity. It was necessary to react in a just way, with great firmness. The strongest punishment, in his eyes, was exclusion: the offender had to leave his family forever without any hope of seeing his family again, his parents if they were still present, his child if he had one, his friends. His thoughts turned to his daughter, how could she live away from her without ever seeing her again? This idea was unbearable for him, impossible, it was impossible. These days, anxiety took all the place in her heart and in her head. Nothing made her laugh or smile, everything made her afraid. She needed calm, tenderness and affection. She knew who she could find it with. Cole was her oxygen. Where could he be at this late hour of the morning? Let's try the workshop first, she thought. It was customary for established middle-aged women to have a young apprentice to teach them what it meant to be a woman before they bonded with their permanent mate. However, it happened that these couples lasted as long as the legitimate union. Only the woman was the decision-maker; her regular partner had no say in the matter. Cole worked in a workshop on the edge of the city, Kirah knew the way by heart and her steps led her there without a moment's thought. Even though she had an important job, she didn't wear anything special or recognizable. She blended in with the color of the sand and rock. Only the sound of her footsteps, brushing the dusty ground, betrayed her passage. Cole lived with three other young people his own age. This type of living was very common among young bachelors because it optimized housing and energy. No home was used for anything but the comfort of one person, it was inconceivable. Ah, there he was! Kirah arrived out of breath, she had almost run without realizing it. From behind, bare-chested, pounding a room. His muscles bulged with the rhythm of the blows, he was beautiful, he was young. Cole felt that one observed it, it turned over, and of the first glance, knew. He could recognize it between thousand, the hood was not an obstacle. Besides, he didn't need to see her face to know her state of mind. The responsibilities of a protector were overwhelming... and she was so frail in his eyes. He respected the rule set by Kirah, which forbade him to meet with her outside of her own wish. So he waited for her to come to him, each time he felt a jolt of heat throughout his body. He was transported, nothing else mattered. He rushed to hug her, dropping his hammer to the ground. "I missed you," he said with a short breath.

He wished he would never have to loosen his embrace. Kirah was reassured, that pure love still existed, as if there had been any doubt. His anxiety was rotting his life and obstructing his sensitivity. The warmth of her partner's body comforted her like a good bath would have done. And suddenly one of the most wonderful memories she had of her father came back to her. The unforgettable day when he surprised her with a bath for her tenth birthday. The feeling of well-being and relaxation that the water gave her body and mind was unparalleled. Mahai, with all the love his mother had for him, could never enjoy such a gift, given the scarcity of water. Kirah was beginning to relax, sinking into her muscular arms, broken with fatigue and stress. The protector knew that she loved him too much and that their separation would be difficult, but for now she wanted to enjoy it. All these good moments spent with him, would be beautiful memories, when her body would be too old, to feel the emotions of the carnal love. Cole was slightly taller than her, he moved aside a little and without letting go of his embrace, removed the hood. Of Mediterranean type, rather stocky, Cole had pretty brown curls, deep black eyes and the skin borrowed of sun, "that it is beautiful" thought she. He stroked her hair, as a loved one does to a child. Cole was not her confidant, she kept him away from her concerns and that was fine. He was both proud and terrified of losing her. "So what were you doing before I got here?" "I don't even remember, it doesn't matter anymore," he said, glancing at his workbench. "No kidding, I'm not just interested in your firm little ass... you can tell me about your work too" she said with a mischievous little smile, "Nothing too exciting, just routine, fixing a palisade for the ramparts" he said pointing to the room with a huge crack in it. "And with your quo-habitants, everything is going well ... the young Johana always makes advances to you" she said jealously. "Stop with that, you want, there is nothing between her and me and you know it well, since there is only you" he said while kissing her fiercely as proof of his feelings. "Yes, for now but it is with her that you spend all your nights ... " "Yes and my nights are with you in my dreams, because you are with Rahain is not it?" Kirah glared at him at this reply, Cole recovered. "I dream that all this will change and that we'll fly away to places where nobody knows us and where we'll be happy together... but this is only a dream: I'll keep on twisting plastic while you strut around with Rahain. To end this discussion that was going nowhere, Kirah kissed him tenderly. She didn't want him to be bitter and she couldn't offer him more at the moment. "Let's not hurt each other, shall we" "But I remind you that it was you who started it" "Yes, that's right, sorry, but I'm getting stupidly jealous, hold me tight". Cole accentuated his embrace, kissed her on the forehead, and closed his eyes savoring the moment, she was his and he was hers. Rahain and Mahai were making good progress despite their load, eager to find Kirah and to see the wonder of all the food on her face. Rahain was careful with his daughter's pace because the walk could turn into a nightmare. In spite of the hood, he could guess her feelings through her body language: whether her shoulders were high or low, whether her arms moved harmoniously or not, whether her steps were heavy or not. The dress codes had increased the intuition of all the inhabitants. With a little interest, everyone recognized each other and when faced with a stranger, one could guess whether he was available or not. At the same time, the hoods were a people who didn't trust appearances, because they knew that underneath the clothes there was a human being who needed consideration. Rahain turned his attention back to the streets of the city. Despite the noise of the incessant wind, it was pleasant to stroll around, his city was pleasant, and at the same time, he knew no other.

The narrowness of the accesses gave an intimate and confidential side, favourable to the meetings. They were not yet in their neighborhood but noticed small groups that seemed to whisper as they approached, heads tucked into shoulders, a sign of suspicion. "They must recognize us," he thought. The community was shaken by the affair, and everyone was anxiously awaiting the verdict. Rahain realized the urgency of the decision and the impact it could have on his entire family. The violence of the wind echoed the violence in the hearts of men. A brief glance at Mahai reassured him, she was not aware of anything at the moment. Protecting children from the cruelty of men was one of her primary responsibilities. Suddenly her jaw tightened and her pace quickened. Lacking air, Mahai quickly asked for a break, despite Rahain's desire to be home already. A short man, wearing a tunic of doubtful color, took the opportunity to ask for news. "Rahain, Mahai, how are you?" Rahain recognized the figure and began to be suspicious. - "Everything is fine, as you can see we are back from Eden" he said in a light tone to hide his fear "And how is Kirah?" added the curious man. "Very well, I thank you, we join her". "We'll soon have some news, won't we?" "Of course the decision will be made soon, but we shouldn't rush into it either, don't you agree?" "Yes of course, you're right". The innuendo and the heavy atmosphere made Mahai nervous. "We're going, dad, Mamou will be waiting for us if we take too long. Rahain took advantage of this escape and went on his way. Mahai, for her part, was not unhappy to have left this individual who had made her father uncomfortable. Finding her mother and sharing the day's harvest with her, to bring back her smile, was what occupied all her thoughts. The steep alleys were becoming familiar, they were getting closer to their neighborhood, which was more rocky but also steeper than the central part of the city. Rahain was gloomy and worried, just like the community, but for him the situation was more delicate because of his companion's decision making function. This time it was Mahai who accelerated at the sight of the houses. The neighborhood was quiet, they didn't meet anyone. Rahain was relieved. Finally Mahai arrived first, out of breath, her calves were on fire, with a sudden gesture she made the protective curtain of the entrance fly. "Mamou" she shouted with joy. Nobody, nobody, the room was empty. "Oh no, she's not here" she said, turning back to her father who had joined her. Mahai's shoulders slumped all at once: what a disappointment, she knew that her mother's absences could be very long if she was in the company of the other protectors, and in the meantime she would have no news. "Dad, she's not here" she said desperately, snuggling up to her father who consoled her. "It's okay, she's going to come home, help me, we'll unload the cart and prepare a beautiful platter of fruits and vegetables for her" he said with conviction to keep face. In his heart, he too, was disappointed. Where was she? Had she made her decision? The two acolytes set to work valiantly, buoyed by the hope of a reunion. Mahai grabbed a basket from a shelf. She wanted it to be perfect, with a play of colors and shapes to highlight their present. On the table she began to lay out the dishes to better match them. Rahain watched his daughter, who put her heart into it, while he arranged the jugs of water, oil, sorghum and lentils. Dates and plums stood next to carrots and beets. Onions and cashews competed with olives and figs. Mahai was very good at creating and organizing; his sensibility matched the task, his father only had to admire without intervening. Finally, they didn't have long to wait; no sooner had they finished arranging and presenting than Kirah came to the door. She took off her hood, showing a beautiful smile, without even having discovered what was waiting for her. Mahai jumped at her without

preamble. "Mamou, you're back! "I'm here, I'm here, everything is fine. Her face, marked by relaxed features, betrayed the memory of the moments spent with Cole, which did not escape Rahain, who immediately lost his beautiful smile. He realized that she had joined his young alabaster in their absence and it saddened him, but he would say nothing, and remain cheerful, for his daughter. - "Look, mamou, what we prepared for you, it's beautiful isn't it?", Mahai beamed with happiness, pleasing her mother was a huge reward, even if she noticed that her mother's mood had already changed without her intervention. There, in the shadows, behind her daughter, Kirah discovered a huge basket of fruit arranged with taste, warmth and love, which evoked a true impressionist artist's painting. "This is a wonderful gift, my daughter, I am very touched," she said, visibly shaken. - It's not a big deal, we just had to put them together properly," said Mahai modestly. "Don't say that, it's a basket that you've given a lot of attention and love to, it shows. The most important thing in a gift is to put yourself in the place of the person who is going to receive it, so that their joy is immense and that's exactly what you did with this harmony of color and flavor. It is sad not to know how to give a gift, because it shows a lack of interest in the other person and therefore a lack of affection. But you, my daughter, you are like clear and fresh water, you know how to show your love, thank you very much" said Kirah while kissing her on the forehead. "Mamou, I did not do it alone, Dad, helped me too" she hastened to add. "Yes of course, I already know the qualities of your father, he is like a torrent, strong and lively" she said kissing him. Rahain took the compliment heartily, he should be satisfied with it. His mother's attention returned to the basket, a motley mix of root vegetables, legumes and nuts. A string of dates topped the basket, with pretty branches of sorghum and millet, staple foods, arranged in ears. Kirah also recognized two jars of honey and olives. In the center was a mango, a promise of vitamins and flavor. Mahai had created a beautiful firework display with the orange flowers of the aloe vera plant. It was magnificent! Eden was a few acres in size and the land was wisely used to sustain the community. Food agriculture could not be expansive and was completely controlled. Centuries-old fruit trees and cultivated land coexisted on numerous small plots. All water-intensive crops such as corn, coffee, rice, soybeans or leafy vegetables had disappeared and were replaced by cactus plants, roots and hardy vegetables adapted to the lack of water. Kirah was overjoyed, what more could she want: a feast, a caring daughter, a wonderful Cole, and on top of that she was ready to give her decision. They sat together around the center table, holding hands, and inwardly thanking life for giving them so much joy and happiness.

Chapter 3

Full from the feast and exhausted from her journey, Mahai went down to rest. The hottest hour of the day was a good time for the youngest and the oldest to take a nap. Kirah, on the other hand, had to talk to Rahain. "I've made up my mind," she said flatly. "It is a good thing, the community is nervous, our reactions are observed." Said he calmly. "You didn't have any trouble on the way?" worried Kirah. "No," answered Rahain, who hid their unpleasant encounter from her. "And Mahai, is she affected by all this?" "I don't know, it's hard to say.

"I'll go report myself" said Kirah hurriedly, "nothing obliges you to hurry, neither the hoods, nor me, nor Mahai" he tried to reassure her. "I know it, I have peace of mind" she answered calmly. " Yes I noticed " " what does that mean? " " Nothing ". Kirah understood the implication but in her mind and in her heart, everything was simple and clear: she did not cheat on her companion, it was not an action against him. She loved him, even if it wasn't like the first day. She was just following the custom, there was no harm in it, no one could criticize. If Rahain did not live this relationship well, it was his problem and certainly not hers. Kirah pretended to be slightly tired, but she had not slept well lately, and went to join Mahai who was resting downstairs, without waiting for any remark from her stupidly jealous companion. Rahain stayed there, dazed, he loved her more than anything, he was suffering, but what was the use of fighting? The situation had a bitter taste, he devoted his life to his family, he only aspired to the happiness and well-being of Kirah and this is how he was thanked, it was not fair... Deep down Rahain knew that men were reaping today what they had sown for centuries. They had taken far too much advantage of their position as "dominant male" and now their grievances were in vain. Rahain went about his daily tasks: grinding sorghum rather than dark thoughts was the solution. At the turn of the stairs, Kirah surreptitiously saw her daughter's eyes open, she was not yet asleep. Kirah lay down beside her gently, kissed her head, her hair still smelled very good and this perfume acted like a repairing balm. The immobility of the moment plunged mother and daughter into sleep. Kirah needed to rest, listening to everyone was as tiring as it was exciting. A tired brain is not operational and the tests which awaited her, required the effectiveness of all her intellect. Kirah slept deeply without dreaming. Her brain was her working tool, she had to take care of it in order to be able to solve the problems encountered by her society, whether they were concrete or spiritual, simple or complex, whether they were related to the daily life or to the survival of the species. In spite of herself, the small movements of her body woke up Mahai who stretched. How good it was to be snuggled together in the warmth of their bed. Neither of them wanted to break this moment of intimacy. The maternal and filial love, the warmth of the bond, the underground protection, exacerbated the sensitivity of each. They were so close and their thoughts were so far apart. Mahai felt her mother's availability and dared to break the silence by expressing a grievance. - "Mamou, what do you think, could we leaf through some pages of the inheritance?" Kirah turned her head to the shelf above them, the chest was as always, in its place. "Yes why not if you want." Mahai put on a beautiful smile and immediately moved to a sitting position while Kirah grabbed the object. Kirah handled the precious heirloom, the only record of their ancestors' lives, with great care. Mahai enjoyed seeing the faces of the three young boys again, which were becoming familiar to him. Many of the photos showed large gatherings of people around colorful tables. In the center of the photo one of the toddlers was often blowing out candles on a huge cake. "Can you explain to me, mamou, what are they all doing?" "Well, you see, these are family celebrations that were called birthdays, they represented the celebration, every year, of the date of birth of the child. "And we did it all his life?" "Yes more or less, especially when the child was small, less when he became an adult: the lack of money, after the many financial crises, got rid of these customs." "I would like to celebrate my birthday". "I understand that, but in the end it's a day that passes like any other. The most important thing is to remember the first day, the day of birth. "Oh, yes, tell me again, mamou". "Kirah made herself

comfortable by supporting her head with her elbow, lying down, she felt good, so she began her story, which plunged her eleven years back, she was young and at that time she only wanted Rahain. "Your father was there with me and Alise, my lifelong friend of course, the contractions were strong, I was afraid but I was confident at the same time. I thought to myself that since the world is the world women were able to give birth to children so why not me. I had the impression that my body was traversed by electric currents, like in the middle of a storm, crossed by lightning. I could feel that for you too, these energy discharges were making you react and helping you to take the right direction to get out of my belly. I had the impression that my heart was beating so hard that it could explode. I kept telling myself that I would see you soon, it was the only thought that kept me going through the turmoil in my body. And finally, when you appeared, when my eyes landed on you, an immense happiness made me immediately forget all the subsequent pain as if it had been a necessary evil easily overcome. It was magic, my brain recorded you forever and my heart engraved you in my soul for eternity... Alise put you on my belly, your father was crying, he had sweated as much as me. We were happy to know you. With very small imperceptible movements you went up towards the nipples to suckle. Your survival instinct told you that you had to be fed and I only intervened a little to put you to the breast because you were already almost in position for that. I was amazed to make this discovery about the human being, me who is supposed to know him well... You were already so determined, it was impressive and also reassuring for the future of our species. Our survival instinct is so deeply rooted in our genes that we may always survive..." Kirah thought about her last words and hoped with all her heart that she was right. "Wow, that was amazing, do you think it will be the same for me, mamou?". "Of course, but don't be in too much of a hurry, one thing at a time. Mahai already knew the story of her birth but she never got tired of it, her mother was undoubtedly an exceptional speaker. It was also reassuring for the young woman in the making to know the history of her family's birth pains. This natural and obligatory ritual contributed to the perpetuation of the species. "Do you think I will have a boy or a girl? I hope I'll have a girl, I don't want a boy," Mahai said with a mischievous look. "Don't think like that my daughter, my joy was immense to welcome you and it would have been just as much if you were a boy or a girl. Would you have appreciated that I didn't welcome you with open arms if you had been male?" "No of course mama, you are absolutely right as usual." Mahai felt a little ashamed, it wasn't very brave of her to think what she had said, but she felt in her belly that she would still prefer a daughter, who looked like her and her mother to continue their female line. She would try to follow in the footsteps of her ancestor, the protectors did not exist and certainly never would. Mahai turned her attention back to the album, to lighten the mood and keep her thoughts to herself after all. "There, that's a bike, isn't it?" "Yes, on her birthdays it was customary to give the child a sumptuous gift. "How nice it must have been..." Mahai dreamed... "Sumptuous gifts". "The children of that time were not at all aware of the wealth that surrounded them: material wealth, comfort, communication and even food. This population made itself sick by eating too much or too badly", she said, pointing to the enormous cake that sat in the center of the table. "It was a period of splendor and carefree living. Children, influenced by fashion, were overwhelmed by toys, books, clothes, gadgets. They had become addicted to all the electronic communication objects they thought were indispensable." "Oh, and that's a canine, isn't it?" interrupted Mahai, pointing

to an animal that was obviously having fun with one of the young boys. "It's a dog to be more precise, often families had an animal in their home. It entertained the children and was considered a member of their family. This was not the case in all parts of the world because in some countries men ate these animals." "That's strange," Mahai wondered, "and that's how they disappeared?" "No, as the climate changed and pollution increased, the large land and sea mammals disappeared first. Then it was the turn of the medium and small mammals, only the domestic mammals linked to human food resisted, but exploited on too large a scale, repeated epidemics had the last word. "It's sad, the world should be more cheerful and beautiful with animals everywhere". "Yes, and imagine, some of them also lived in freedom in natural environments that were as beautiful as they were different: whether in the north or the south, in the desert or in the jungle. The wild instinct dictated their way of life. It was an invaluable treasure. Today this primary world exists only through the insects that we raise to feed ourselves. The rare amphibians, rodents or birds that remain in Eden are not numerous enough to be representative of their species." Kirah paused, she could see that her daughter was affected by all the disappearances. "But don't forget, Mahai, that we use much of the energy we produce to conserve the DNA strains of the different species that once populated the earth. If the climate showed signs of improvement we could repopulate the earth." "Do you really think, Mamaou, that this day will come?" "We all hope so, my daughter, and in the meantime, just as the wilderness has disappeared, so perhaps the wildness will have disappeared in the hearts of men, so that all future earthlings, human and animal, will live in peace and harmony." Suddenly, looking at these yellowed, aged photos, a reflection of an ancient time, made Mahai perplexed: what could she do about it? Her helplessness frightened her. "The earth goes through cycles, we know of ancient times when other races of wild animals lived on earth, they disappeared to make room for other species. We must let the cycles unfold and the universe go towards its destiny. We are as much actors as spectators." Kirah's caress of her hair reassured her more than the words her mother spoke. One thing was certain for Mahai, the family would always be there to welcome and comfort her. She still had her eyes immersed in the album, which sometimes seemed to her like an evil object, which could carry in it an evil future... because even if the past was important, the future was just as important. Kirah's gaze was also on the illustrations, mirroring a nostalgia for a time that seemed much happier than today. Then she suddenly thought of her obligations as a protector. However her heart was not in it, the evocation of this past so envious but so little glorious in the end, did not leave her of marble, it either. What qualified her first was her sensitivity and there it was put at evil. What grieved her the most was the old feeling of injustice that reigned over their world and that unfortunately contaminated the youngest minds. Yet she had to go and do her duty and lay down a red ribbon as a sign of her decision. "Mahai, I have to go to the Agora," she said as she closed the album. "Well mamaou, we will look at the legacy again, won't we?" Both overwhelmed and amazed, Mahai discovered new and exotic stories through the knowledge of her ancestors that fed her wildest dreams. "You have to take your time with the discovery of the past, we'll come back to it later. Kirah stood up, taking a last look at the room... covered with carpets on the floor and walls to warm the mineral atmosphere, niches carved into the rock held sculptures, works of Mahai or herself. It was lit by candles... the magic carried this place out of time. "Mahai was already thinking about joining her neighbor and friend, Cassie, who was

the same age as her and with whom she played a lot. Kirah found Rahain upstairs still busy working with his hands as if nothing could change. "Are you going to the Agora?" he said without even looking up. "Yes, the sooner the better," she answered, putting on her hood. She was determined to finish it. She left with great strides, crossed the place, lost in her thoughts she did not pay any attention to the hoods which she crossed. Being gone too fast she was quickly out of breath and had to slow down her pace in the descent. Around the Agora, no one was strolling or waiting for an audience, the place was deserted. The rock building stood there, alone, massive, it was a little intimidating. Kirah hoped not to meet anyone inside, she wanted to avoid answering embarrassing questions. She was saving herself for the council. But what a disappointment it was when, as she approached, she realized that three ribbons were still missing. Three of her sisters were still undecided, so she would have to come back every day to see if all the ribbons were finally together or not. She had to turn back, what a pity, she who was full of enthusiasm at the idea of ending and returning to the daily business that hummed without surprise. There was something reassuring about the daily routine, but she understood very well the hesitation of her friends. The day was beginning to decline, and everyone was getting closer to their homes, as the city was not lit at night. In turn, Kirah was going to undergo the waiting of decision and she was afraid that her hypersensitivity would put everything in question, to think again would be a bad step. So, wandering in the darker and darker streets, she let her mind wander to Marie, her ancestor. Marie was an adult in the 2000's of the tanker era, she was the mother of the three children pictured in the album. Kirah was happy and proud to own such a rare and precious object that she would pass on to her daughter one day. As far as she knew, no capuchin owned such an item and most did not know about her family history. Of course, no one could ignore the history of the evolution of the earth, but to have the testimony of her ancestors was a privilege. Surrounded by possessions that made her life easy and comfortable, Marie raised her children in abundance, her daily life must have been pleasant. Three children, it was enormous... Did she see the danger for her offspring and future generations? Had she taken advantage of the earth's resources with impunity? Did she feel free to make her own life choices for herself and her family? And she, Kirah, what would she have done in her place? Would she have made the same choices? Would she have been a prisoner of the customs of her contemporaries? Perhaps she too would have spent lavishly, taking advantage of resources without worrying about tomorrow? Today it was difficult to imagine the conditions in which Marie lived, so much had the land changed. From the inheritance transpired the opulence of the objects, of the environment, of the social life. Her ancestor must have eaten life like a nice juicy mango. It wasn't fair to her daughter, who couldn't enjoy it all anymore. But there was no point in being jealous. Marie had to enjoy it and good for her, but would she have done so if she had known that she was condemning her offspring? Perhaps not? You can't go back in time and turn back the clock with a wave of your magic wand. It was now up to Kirah to make the right choices for future generations. And maybe it was written that Mary would laugh, Kirah would cry, and what she wanted was for Mahai's daughter to laugh one day in turn. While her mind was lost in the limbo of the past, her legs had led her to the front of her house. Mahai was playing happily with her friend and Rahain was breaking cockles for dinner, lulled by the laughter and teasing of the girls. In one look Rahain understood that everything had not gone as his companion would

have liked and did not ask any questions. Had she met someone, had she seen her apprentice? Did she confide in him her problems, her daily life? How to apprehend the situation, should he be frank with Kirah and confide his dismay or should he continue to bend his back? Kirah's sensitivity made her uncompromising with herself as well as with others. - Not all the protectors have made their decision, we'll have to wait" - "what a pity, maybe there won't be any for a long time" answered Rahain falsely interested in his professional problems. "I hope that we will hold a council soon. But getting the consent of the people will not be easy no matter what the final verdict is." "Yes I agree with you, not everyone is going to be satisfied. The great tolerance of the protectors is not understood by all. " Rahain resumed, wanting to make his companion understand that there could be consequences for his family. "We must not forget that the victim is a young girl" he added. Kirah glanced at the two children who were laughing not far from them and returned to Rahain who had understood her look. "This is not the time to have this discussion" Rahain understood him well and went back to his task. Kirah, while looking at Mahai and her friend, thought of another girl just a little older than them, who must have lost her smile and the desire to entertain herself. Her life was damaged forever and no amount of repairing could change what had happened. The past is irreversible.

Chapter 4

Kirah got up tired, the wind had been violent that night and had prevented her from resting. As the day appeared, the gusts had disappeared. She was lying there, without feeling the weight of the earth's attraction on her shoulders. The familiar noises she could hear told her that Rahain and Mahai were working above her. The warmth of her bed, the calmness, the familiar noises, encouraged her to stay there, motionless, lying down, waiting... waiting for the earth to turn, all alone, without her. Not to see anybody, not to answer any question, not to think about anything, the tiredness was stronger than her. She didn't have the courage to go back to the agora to check if the last three protectors had reported... she would ask Rahain to go in her place, and she would go tonight. This resolution gave her the courage to get up and she joined the rest of the family. "Good morning my source" said Rahain tenderly to his companion, who did not look at all in her mood. "Hello" she forced herself to answer kindly. Rahain was used to Kirah's bad mood in the morning. "Did you sleep badly?" Kirah put her hair back in order and dipped her hands into a jar of dried lavender, rosemary and thyme leaves and rubbed them on her face as if they were water, hoping that the scents would wake her up for good. "You're awfully pretty like you are every day," he said, kissing her on the cheek and smelling the southern herbs in passing. "You are nice and you would be even more if you would go to the agora in my place this morning, and tonight it will be my turn" she added without bluntness. Rahain was not enthusiastic with the idea to make the chores of his companion, but in front of her pretty face marked by tiredness, he abdicated. "Okay, but don't forget that today we are medinade". "Oh no, I had forgotten..." his shoulders slumped suddenly... "but at the same time it will do me good to cook, it will take my mind off things" she said. Rahain had left her a tray of almonds, honey and dates, this contribution of sugar and sweetness would give her energy. Mahai came to kiss her mother and hug her, just

to let her know that she was there too. "You want one?" kirah offered her a date but the girl declined her offer as she had already had breakfast with her father a moment earlier. "You are not going to join your friend Cassie? I am not going to take care of the medinade right away. "No, I'll have time to see her then, we could look at the inheritance if you don't mind. At the foot of the bed Kirah already felt burdened by her role of mother and teacher but she didn't want to be unpleasant either in front of the enthusiasm of her offspring " As soon as I finish this snack, if you want " she said kindly but Mahai had already rushed towards the stairs. "As for me, I'm leaving for the agora right now, I'll be back as soon as possible to help you" Rahain said. I'll be back as soon as I can to help you" he said. "Alright, I'll take the remaining fruit that might rot" "You're right, I'll see you later" Rahain had already put on his hood, which didn't make his sentence very audible. Mahai arrived at the same time with the precious album that she held at arm's length to avoid untimely rubbing, she had understood the importance of the object. Mahai wanted so much to have three brothers, to be able to play together all the time, to share passions, ideas, hugs or fights... to live together under the same roof. She loved having them back, they seemed to be so happy, their life was just a series of joyful moments. Those days looked like they were easy to live with. Mahai imagined that she was there too... The child kept these thoughts to herself, her mother would not have understood that she was so frivolous and unconscious. "They could use it so young?" asked Mahai, pointing to a red convertible that the children occupied, arms raised to the sky, and screaming their joy at being on board. Kirah was still munching on a date and had her mouth full: "No, only from the eighteenth year onwards could you get a license to drive a vehicle." "Then why are they so happy?" "Well, I guess their father was going to take them for a ride. The wind was whipping in their faces, the scenery was whipping by, and they were probably getting noticed by pedestrians or other motorists..." Kirah unrolled the imaginary film of life in the 21st century. "It must have been exhilarating, that feeling of freedom. But could they really go wherever they wanted?" "Yes, where they wanted, but they consumed oil for that, our ancestors were very dependent on energy in general and consumed too much of it. They were also looking for speed in transport, information, communication, agriculture and economy. It was always necessary to make money faster and more. But everything has its limits, like the car goes too fast and ends up against a wall or like the fickle child who cannot carry a heavy stone. Men have lost control of this permanent search for speed and have not known how to anticipate the limits that should not be crossed"... Mahai didn't listen to her mother anymore, she was driving a red convertible car, going like the wind, through the countryside, nothing could stop her... her mother was not a great adventurer... she was afraid of everything, she didn't understand anything... " Mahai are you listening to me?" "yes yes of course" she said as she leaned over the album. "Mamou, did you see that?" Kirah pointed to a turbaned man perched on a camel or rather a dromedary "this animal has a really funny look" she said mockingly, "we kept his DNA? "Yes, surely," replied Kirah. "Is it necessary to have such an ugly animal? "We don't have to decide who should live and who shouldn't live based on their looks. And don't you think it would be nice to cross the city on the back of a dromedary without effort and with a height that allows you to see the world differently. Surely the fossilers would love to have an animal as ugly as it is but as useful." Mahai didn't see the animal in the same way anymore, and was already imagining a world full of dromedaries, she would call his "hunchback" and she would walk everywhere with him

without fatigue, maybe we could even make him run with Cassie... it would be magical. And all of a sudden her mother stopped the magic: "We'll close the inheritance if you don't mind, we're going to get ready for the medinade, your father should be here any minute..." Mahai was disappointed but had a lot of images in her head where camels were competing with red convertibles.... On a daily basis, the assembly, composed of about twenty people, shared their mid-day meal, the most important one, in the central square of the neighborhood. There was a large wooden table with benches. A pergola with tarpaulins on the sides was necessary to enjoy the medinade without hoods. A fireplace was installed at the end to cook food. The center of the square, which could have been occupied by a fountain as in the past, was nothing more or less than a canteen, not very aesthetic but very practical. The hoods were a very pragmatic and unartistic community, much to the chagrin of kirah who would have liked to be surrounded by a little more fantasy. Only the young workers in the recycling field were beginning to free their minds to turn to more imaginative forms. Once the city has some comfort and security for its inhabitants, the young minds can then turn to creation and beauty. Whereas before, the survival and perpetuation of the species took precedence over futility. Kirah believed that beauty was as vital to the human being as water or air. Without beauty, man closes his heart. As soon as she left their house, Kirah saw Rahain coming from the other side of the square. Near the table, familiar figures were already there, Rahain made a discreet sign of the head to the attention of Kirah who understood at once that the moment had not come yet. The protector rejoiced at the sight of her neighbors, guarantors of simple moments to share, and realized that she had forgotten her morning fatigue. Her daughter was no stranger to this state, their little tête à tête had been profitable. Mahai had already joined her friend Cassie, who was with Kamel, Taji's grandson, who was also present. Kirah regretted that her father was not there anymore, they would have gotten along wonderfully with Mahai, she would have loved to listen to his stories. Kamel was younger than his friends in the neighborhood who sometimes made him feel like a baby, which annoyed the boy. His parents, Raca and Neon, were working and would arrive later; each one did according to his or her imperatives, but in the end everyone would come to share their meal. As usual, Taji was in deep discussion with Barone, the matriarch of the neighborhood. Barone commanded the respect of the entire community and liked to tease Taji, who was two years younger than her and 48 years old. The couple was not really a couple, but those long years of neighborhood bonding had made them a legitimate, complicit old couple. Neither of them wanted to take the first step of a more intimate relationship at the risk of losing their beautiful friendship, their respective companions having left some time ago. Kirah told herself that this was an ideal relationship for her when life is heading towards the end. The ritual of public greetings was not tactile, no kissing, no handshaking, the designation by the first name was enough. Contact could carry epidemics, dangerous within a micro-community. Rahain had joined Zayar, Cassie's father and the companion of Alise, her best friend, who was absent for the moment. Zayar was a homebody like Rahain. The two acolytes were very similar, both physically and spiritually. Often mistaken for brothers, always together, very supportive, their moods became identical. She hoped that Alise wouldn't stand in their way because she wanted to talk to him about her decision. She was used to telling her everything and liked to read in her friend's eyes her understanding or her questioning. Kirah placed some of the prickly pear and dragon fruit she had left at the end of

the table. Barone was already at work, kneading the tapalapa as he did every day. It was customary for her to be in charge, but she did it willingly and would not have let anyone else take her place. Her millet cakes were delicious, surely the best in the whole city. Kirah suspected that she added a little honey to them, which gave them a subtle taste. Taji, for his part, was already busy preparing the fire. It is true that this had been his professional field and he was still very proud of it. His son had taken over, which gave him another source of pride. Working in the crotton business was not very popular but it was necessary. The idea of harvesting and drying human excrement for redistribution and use as fuel was horrible! But here in this neighborhood, Taji and Neon, his working son, were respected and loved by all, because they got their hands dirty for the whole community with a smile, and that was worth all the water in the world. "Good morning Kirah," Taji started; "good morning Taji, Barone, you are already in action, you were not bothered by the wind last night? Fortunately it is calmer this morning. "Kirah, you know us, the wind we do not hear it anymore, we do not hear much to say " answered Barone, we felt his smile to his intonation of voice. "I see you are in form, I have only to hold me well" answered Kirah who had understood well that they were making fun of her. That's it girl, be careful," said Taji, "Barone may be deaf but she's not lacking in strength, she scares me when I see her kneading the cakes like that. "Taji, if you've never seen a tapalapa fly, I think this moment is not far from arriving, you cheeky boy." They were bickering as children would have done, who were wisely playing marbles, a little further away, on the sandy ground of the square. Kirah began to take inventory of the food that the other families had left there on their way to their respective jobs, for the attention of those who would be preparing the medinade. There was a huge bunch of rosemary, a big bunch of yams and a tiny bunch of carrots, red onions; sliced agave and aloe vera leaves a perfect salad... Kirah liked to cook and elaborate dishes by combining ingredients in an original way to brighten up the eyes or the taste buds. The diet was not very varied and was based on sorghum, millet, agave, yam, cassava and of course the capuchins were entomophagous. Some tribes were completely vegetarian, but the intake of animal protein was still necessary for the human constitution. This did not bother Kirah or anyone she knew. Everyone had their own preferences, but few would go easy on hunger. In any case, just as blood no longer flowed to punish the offender, blood no longer flowed to feed. Kirah had a slight preference for the small fried cricket, crispy with a slight taste of hazelnut. She was going to ask Rahain and Zayar to go and get some from the nearest farm. The two men were drinking a glass of dolo in the most relaxed way. A big bunch of rosemary gave her an idea: she was going to fry some branches of the same size, dry them, she would proceed in the same way with the locusts and then she would stick them to the rosemary thanks to agave syrup, which would give "skewers of grilled locusts with rosemary slightly sweetened with agave", her mouth was watering. Taji had already obtained a good brazier, she was going to cook the yams and the carrots which would make an excellent consistent puree but which required a little long cooking. No more good smells from the wood fire, the smoke gave off a slightly acidic smell that was not necessarily pleasant, but which was easy to deal with. Well, her menu was progressing but she had no one to discuss with: the men had gone to the crickets, the children had been playing marbles since the beginning without getting bored or angry and the elders were spying on each other, without losing a crumb, of what the other was doing. The moment when Barone would bake her patties would be the

climax of their verbal jousting, but for the moment she was making halva, which went perfectly with the patties. This gave Kirah an idea, she too would use the sesame seeds to enhance the taste of her mashed potatoes: she would form balls of mashed potatoes between her hands and then roll them in the sesame seeds. Finally it was nice to be alone with her manual tasks, it was relaxing, she didn't think about anything. Taji watched her fire like a child, but her grandson didn't need much attention. He was a wise and attentive child like Mahai, while Cassie was like her mother, outgoing, dynamic and bubbling with energy. She would certainly take over Alise's business. She had a job that was considered top-notch among the community, she was a tabib, the one who heals. Healing others was her life, she worked a lot, day and night. She also made herbal teas, potions and other ointments to relieve her patients. The medicinal plants were supplied to her by Eden. The hoods had several tabibs throughout the city, but Alise had a good reputation that made her a little more in demand than some. Cassie would have a good master trainer and Kirah was looking forward to that. Mahai's apprenticeship would be trickier because there was no recipe for becoming a protector. The secret lay in the ability to let her hypersensitivity speak for itself while controlling it completely so as not to make any errors in judgment or advice, for that was what everyone expected of her. Her first working tool was meditation. As her daughter would soon be entering her twelfth year, she would have to begin her initiation if she wanted to practice this profession, which was Kirah's dearest wish. Finally, Rahain and Zayar returned with their arms full of two wooden crates. "But you have brought too much," Kirah exclaimed. "No, in fact there is only one box of crickets but this morning there was an outbreak of flies and as you know, this breeding is difficult to control so we thought we would smoke them today and eat them tomorrow." "Okay that's a good idea and that way tomorrow we might not have to relight the fireplace, as soon as the roots are cooked you can take care of crushing them, I'll take care of those bugs" she said, putting her money where her mouth was. "Okay, no problem, we'll take care of the yams and carrots. Did you see that Hector left us a few amphorae of dolo this morning? " Yes, yes, I also saw that you had already tasted both " she said on a tone of reproach " you want some, it is very good and you seem to be hot " said Zayar to be forgiven for not having offered him before " thank you but perhaps it will be necessary to offer some to Barone and Taji and then it is necessary to leave some to those who will arrive too " she said worried " Do not worry, there is enough to roll under the table, my source ". he said while smiling. Hector, companion of Barone's daughter Sonia, worked at the dolo brewery. They were a nice young couple with no children at the moment. Barone had had his daughter rather late, absorbed as she had been by her job as Moktar. Sonia had naturally taken over his suite. Moktar was a function with responsibility within Eden. Sonia, had to collaborate with the monks in the decisions of plantations, the rotation of the grounds, the regeneration of the gasolines, the vegetable and animal symbiosis as well as the exploitation and the monitoring of the source. The Moktar had a brilliant status and Barone still had it. She hoped that her daughter would give her a worthy heir so that the lineage would continue and she was not jumping for joy at the idea of helping to raise a future small brewer. "Children, come and help me make the kebabs," said the Protector. "Hooray, we're coming..." they all cried out in unison "we'll be able to taste it, please..." "I'll show you, you take a sprig of rosemary, you dip it in the syrup, not too long, you don't need too much, then you dip it in the bowl of fried crickets and there, you'll see

they'll stick by themselves. You'll lay the skewers out flat, to dry." Kirah preceded her words with gestures to show the children what she expected of them. She was very educational and everyone listened to her attentively, and then also a little in order to get a skewer. All the tasks were taking shape in front of her eyes, Kirah was going to take a break and drink a cup of dolo. It was good, she said to herself while tasting it, maybe a little too bitter for the taste of some, she also liked the Octli which was a little sweeter. "It's too thick!" exclaimed Taji. "How can you have an opinion on this, you don't know anything about tapalapa" Barone grumbled. "I don't know anything about it, you've got a lot of nerve, forty-eight years I've been eating pancakes and I don't know anything about it..." Ah bravo... "Forty-eight years old, what's that? You are still a little caterpillar" retorted the matriarch "Admire the butterfly in action and especially shut up, you are distracting me" "Oh well, you have to concentrate to make pancakes now..." Barone did not answer, she was afraid that her cake would end up burning and then her acolyte would have had reason to laugh at her. Her forehead glowed over the heat of the fireplace. Kirah handed a glass to each of them to calm the spirits "Thank you Kirah, fortunately you are here, Taji is supposed to help me but he only thinks of distracting me " " But my dear, distracting you is a great pleasure... " he said with a tone full of tenderness. Zayar and Rahain were crushing the roots and talking in low voices, heads down, with great complicity. Kirah was almost jealous of this, for she saw little of her friend Alise and it pained her. The children were working hard and moving quickly when Guillauma and Talia arrived. Guillauma was protective like Kirah and was initiating her 15 year old daughter Talia. Guillauma was wearing a very light orange ash, she must have been on her way to the agora. She had a light step and was not a good-looking person, she was even very common. On the other hand, her daughter Talia was already taller than her and walked with a more decisive step, head high. She had more of her father's physical characteristics. Talia was, admittedly, a bit arrogant, but her parents were not at all. Her father Malik was a ditch digger, which was dangerous but not so rewarding, and was not jealous at all because he had the same apprentice as his girlfriend, but on a purely professional level. Indeed, Guillauma favored Lee-Roy, who himself worked with Malik in the same recycling workshop. The arrangement seemed to be cordial, although some could not help but think that it would not last as long as the wind. Talia said hello to the elders with a little too much deference and walked over to the younger ones whom she was already looking down on. Guillauma didn't pay much attention to the two house-men, but maybe Talia had something to hold on to... and joined the group of three that was Kirah, Taji and Barone. "Would you like a kettledrum?" asked Kirah immediately. "I'd love one, I need to relax" replied Guillauma slightly out of breath. "Are you in trouble?" "No not strictly speaking, but there is still a ribbon missing, I just want to get it over with" "It may not be the end right away..." insinuated Kirah, "Are you afraid of the end?" "It's mostly that I have a lot of nightmares, she's the same age as Talia, it could have been her, you understand" "I see and how does Malik react?" "Malik... you know how men are, there are few things that affect them, as long as it doesn't concern his daughter, he doesn't care..." "If you ask me, it's mostly a way to protect yourself from your own fear, and we, we have to protect everyone from these fears. It concerns us all, anyway..." Kirah tried to reassure her without necessarily succeeding. "What good things have you prepared for us today?" asked Guillauma to change the subject. "Look for yourself, how well the children have worked. As he discovered the skewers that

were beginning to pile up, Guillauma was ecstatic: "Beautiful! I can have one!" she said as if she were one of the children. "Just one, then," replied Kamel, who had become the adult, "you have to leave some for the others. "This child is a stream of his own," said Guillauma, which made Taji proud as a beetle. "Can I help you, Kirah?" asked Guillauma. "Well, we still have to make the salad, the vegetables should be cold by now, you can take them, I thought of toasting some sesame seeds and nuts to sprinkle on the salad" "excellent idea, I'll take care of it, ah they are cooked as I like, still a little crunchy, the elders might not like it..." "Kirah began to arrange the dishes in the center of the large table, the fruits, the pots of spices were next to the patties that Barone continued to cook patiently one by one on the fire. The skewers were finished "bravo and thank you children, here take a skewer each you have earned". "Rahain, Zayar, you add goma-sio to the mashed potato and you will form balls that you will have to roll in the toasted sesame that I put next to you, extra thanks. The two men complied without asking any questions, the chef had been very clear...Kirah had a natural gift for leadership and organization that she only exercised with her family or friends... The table was beginning to look enticing and she wondered if the other medinads were as gracious. Guests from other neighborhoods were rare, and conversely Kirah had rarely been invited to other medinades, so comparisons were difficult. With that, Neon entered the square, which would have been idyllic, bathed in the shade of an old alder tree or enlivened by the sound of water from a fountain adorned with magnificent sculpted lions. He was one of those who got up the earliest. The heat of the zenith increasing the odors, it was preferable for a crotter to start his rounds early in the morning. Neon, unlike his father Taji, was not proud of his job and did not want his son Kamel to take up this profession. It was a job that was not well liked and not well considered by everyone, Neon being the first. Kamel was not made for this profession, in fact nobody could be made for it, but Kamel even less, too delicate in his gestures and in his head, like his mother. He encouraged his son to follow the voice of Raca who officiated at the Conservatory, even if he could not have a position of responsibility it would be better for him. "Ah my son, did you work well today?" said Taji cheerfully. "Yes father, I remind you that I'm not 7 years old anymore, I know my job, you know" he answered a little brutally. "I know that, son, don't get angry" Taji sheepishly did not mean any harm. Neon took off his hood and let appear tired features and dark hollows under his eyes testified to his discouragement. "Kamel, my son has come to kiss me, how was your morning?" as the child jumped into his arms he showed him the skewers, "look what we have done" "Very good, it looks appetizing, I'm starving even chewing shoba all morning. "Would you like some dolo?" asked Kirah while handing him a full tumbler "gladly Kirah, you're a sweetheart" he said while taking the offered tumbler. "Well then, calm down alabaster", Rahain falsely played the jealous companion while toasting with his friend. If Neon thought he was devalued by his work, the house-men were not well regarded either; and although young, he already had rough hands, reddish, dry cheeks and overly muscular, disproportionate arms, not to mention a back that was starting to curve. Toasting with his friend, a smile emerging on his lips, he let himself go to the friendship and the comforting warmth of the medinade, when Sonia joined the small group. She too had an early start in the morning. Guidelines and advice for the proper management of Eden were paramount and could not wait. Sonia came to say hello to her mother who was still sleeping when she left for work. Sonia's slim figure stood out next to her mother's stoutness. Barone didn't

make a fuss about her daughter's position as Moktar, but she would have preferred that she choose a more prominent man than Hector. She considered him a man of no stature, self-effacing, never making himself noticed, he was not very remarkable... Sonia landed heavily on the bench in the first place just in front of her. At the end of her strength, she didn't want to stay standing and talk, that's what she had done all morning... The monks did not always agree with her decisions and Sonia was not fooled, some did not like her. She was not lacking in authority, she was full of vitality and had a strong character, inherited from her mother, but sometimes it was difficult to get everyone to agree. Barone handed her a tumbler without waiting for her opinion on her thirst, which drew a saving smile from her, without any further comment. Barone knew his old job well and knew that it wasn't easy every day. Having less and less work, Malik joined them soon enough, embracing Talia and Guillauma, obviously happy to see everyone again. Lee-Roy, on the other hand, did not share this medinade, but that of his cohabitation area. The various workshops and housing units were closer to the fence at the edge of the city, while the buildings occupied by families with children were more in the center. The young adults were more comfortable with the wind nuisance and preferred to be on the fringe of the established families. Finally, Malik may have been accommodating, but he also wanted to preserve the unity of his family and friends. Hungry from hard physical labor, even with shoba, a good natural appetite suppressant, Malik admired the dishes on the table. It was at this moment that a cry was heard at the other end of the square. "Hello medina", it was the entire Alma family, who was making its entrance. They were all dressed in red silk cendal, all the hoods of the city knew this atypical family, always dressed up, as if every day, they had a family or neighborhood event. As usual, Hissa was with them, although she was not a blood member of this family and did not work with them. She was an apprentice in an entomoculture near Alma's silkworm farm. Hissa was quite pretty, but her small size did not reflect her age. She was 17 years old, old enough to take up a career, and she had chosen insect farming, which her parents had not liked. They had not wanted to house her, nor to feed her in her conditions. But this was without counting on the big heart of Alma who adopted her in her house. Hissa looked like a 14 year old and Alma was as generous in form as she was in character. She could have held any hood at arm's length, literally and figuratively. Alma was the owner of the only magnanerie in the city. The hoods were dressed daily in recycled fabrics, but everyone owned at least one silk tunic that was worn for a birth presentation or the departure of a loved one. Alma had a son Will, also 17 years old, stocky and short-legged like his father, whose look and activity he took after. Will and his father Lencho were more involved in the processing of the silk thread, while Alma preferred to take care of the worms, which were very fragile by nature. This breeding required a great deal of attention to detail. The group blended in with the medinade without difficulty. Hissa had joined the group of children without taking her eyes off Will, who had gone to the group of men. No one was unaware of the young woman's crush on the matron's son. "How beautiful he is" she said to herself "does he have an initiator? He has the right to do so, but it's not the family way, his mother has no apprentice, she won't encourage him to do so... " Indeed Alma did not have much time for this, then she worked in the family and finally it was not her state of mind. Alma was neither frivolous nor imaginative, all she was interested in was the well-being of her worms. All of this gave Hissa hope that Will would be able to declare his love for her and become her

companion without first learning. Will hardly showed his feelings if he had any for the girl and was more concerned with conversations between buddies or men. The guests were seated around the table, according to the arrivals, a dolo in the hand for the most part. Each one had taken place according to his affinities. The same generations and sexes were grouped together, more than the families themselves. Conversations were fueled by the diverse fields of expertise of each. Since the world was created, men ate together more willingly and women did the same on their side, is it by mimicry? It's a question of mimicry... or maybe it's just social conventions? Or is an identical gender easier to understand... so would it be laziness or interest? Kirah didn't know everything about humanity, it would always hold mysteries. Kirah got up to take the goma-sio that had been left near the fireplace, still a little glowing. She had already drunk 3 timbales and they began to make their effect on her organism, it was not necessary that they delay too much to eat. Standing up, she took the opportunity to have a look at the assembly: Hector, Sonia's companion, Raca, Neon's companion and her friend Alise, who was often the last one, were still missing. As she passed by the group of children she heard talk of a camel, which made her smile, her daughter must have fueled the conversation with what she had seen on the inheritance. She realized that she had completely forgotten her red ribbon worries. Kirah was about to ask Rahain and Zayar to lower the tarps to really start the medinade when Raca and Hector appeared, together, from the east alley. This didn't make sense to Hector, whose brewery was to the west. They walked side by side with a natural familiarity. The whole assembly noticed them, especially Neon, who did not seem to be pleased by the scene. Before he met Sonia, Hector was Raca's apprentice and everyone around the table knew it. Neon, already embittered by his work, did not look kindly on the rapprochement of the two former lovers. Taji greeted her daughter-in-law with exaggeration and when she took off her hood, her cheeks were bright red. She hastened to add that she had met Hector by chance on the way, although everyone knew that they were not working in the same direction. Kamel got up to throw himself into his mother's arms. What Neon didn't see was that Raca only had love for her family and that while Hector might be interested, she was not. The warm reunion of mother and son relaxed Neon, who resumed his discussion with Zayar. Here and there one could hear the guests raving about the dishes presented with taste by Kirah; the two elders had settled at the end of the table after having finished their respective tasks, their gestures betraying their complicity. The tarpaulins were closed and the medinade began. No one mentioned the business that occupied Kirah and Guillauma, as well as the entire community. Will, Alma's son, was the same age as the young man who was to be tried, and as Kirah watched him, she thought that only his stature was adult, his facial features were still juvenile and his smile insecure. Moreover, Will knew the young man, but had not approached Kirah to find out more or to say anything to him. Talia who was sitting next to him, from the same generation, did not know the victim and it was better for Guillauma. Actions and reactions are often influenced by our feelings. But is it good to control them? Doesn't the reality of the emotion exist only at the moment it is revealed? Wouldn't living well in society kill the expression of personal feelings? The questions and ideas were jostling in her head, she forgot to eat, she was elsewhere. Cooking all morning had spoiled her appetite and then she had drunk too much, so she discreetly withdrew. She had not seen Alise, she would perhaps not see her today.

Chapter 5

Muffled voices came to her, far away, as if filtered through several hoods... They were calling her back, looking for her... But where was she? Her senses began to awaken, it was as if she had slept, without having rested. The connection with the world around her was blurred... Gradually she recognized her room, the rock was oppressive, above her head. If suddenly the ceiling collapsed, she would be crushed. Her room would then become her tomb... Her sleep would be final. Those voices... only those voices could bring her back to life. Rahain... Mahai... How long had she been down there? Her last memories... ah, yes, she was in the medinade, something had disturbed her... she had left... and had come to take refuge there to meditate... but where had she really gone? Everything seemed to be a blur, as if caught in a whirlpool. Clinging to the voices, she had to follow them if she did not want to get lost. Kirah was panting. Her senses, her body, her mind belonged to this polluted, sterile, hostile land. She had to join the voices and survive... "Did you eat a little bit?" worried Rahain when he saw her appear. "Yes of course, everything ended well?" Kirah didn't want to talk about how she felt, she herself didn't know what kind of mood she was in. "I think Neon and Raca will have a little explanation, it seems to me that Hector did not arrive by the right alley, right?" added Rahain. "Ah well you think, I did not notice." she lied still a little oppressed by his difficult awakening, why was she in solidarity with Hector? "Anyway, it's none of our business," she closed. "You're absolutely right, how do you feel?" Kirah noted that Rahain was really caring and in a good mood. "I'm on my way to the Agora, I want to know if we start the debates tomorrow." "I have to help Zayar to finish tidying up the medinade, Mahai looks a bit tired, do you want to stay here?" asked Rahain "Is everything okay Mahai?" worried his mother. "Everything is fine, but the noise of the medinade has made me a little tired, I want to stay here for a while..." replied Mahai. In reality, the young and fragile organisms had difficulty staying exposed to the outside gases for very long. "Did Alise come to eat something after all?" "Yes, but quickly, I think she had some medicine to prepare at home. "Well, fine, maybe I'll stop by on my way back. Kirah walked away with the firm belief that the ribbons would be gathered and that once the collegial decision was made, everything would be over. She nodded briefly to the figures she met. There was no question of stopping and talking, indeed the shadows were beginning to lengthen, the day was on the decline. So she arrived too quickly, out of breath. The totem that displayed the ribbons was almost all red... 9,10,11,12,13, they were finally all there. She huffed and puffed and wanted to shout her relief. The way back would be lighter, she thought. Among the hoods, blood crimes no longer existed. Nor did blood flow for punishment. Man was no longer gorged on animal protein. Survival in this hostile environment was exhausting and power was exercised by women. All these factors made them a peaceful people. But there was a lack of entertainment and the slightest social event, the slightest misdemeanor became the center of interest, fueled conversations and could unleash passions. It didn't matter what the final decision was, it would have consequences and reactions anyway. Silencing feelings was always a bad thing, and getting people to understand the validity of the verdict would not be easy. She would have to be very clear in the morning. The shadows were becoming more and more persistent. The hoods were turning into spectres. By instinct, Kirah's heart rate

increased, her stride became faster, as if faced with a threat. But in this peaceful village there was no threat, everyone knew their neighbor and trusted him completely. Passing the corner of an alleyway, her eyes were drawn to a specter she recognized, who was talking with a woman. His height, his shoulders, the position of his body, it was indeed him. It was not the chance, it was a sign, Kirah let herself carry by this sign with happiness. "Good evening Cole" she said in his back. He did not startle, she was disappointed, she wanted to surprise him as a teenager would have done. " Good evening Kirah, what a surprise! What are you doing here? " " You do not introduce me your friend? `` she said with a point of jealousy without wanting it " If of course, Mila, Kirah, Kirah, Mila " he said while accompanying his words of gestures of presentation. After a few banalities, the girl hastened to take her leave. "Did I scare her? " No we were finished " " About? " " It doesn't matter, how are you Kirah? " " I've just come back from the agora, we'll meet tomorrow " " That means that we won't see each other for a few days... " "Yes, for a while it will be difficult" "Then come over here". He suddenly grabbed her arm as if she was about to be run over by a huge imaginary vehicle coming down the street at high speed. That softness, which she had lost with Rahain, was a real gift, and maybe that was what she was looking for in their relationship... She left Cole, mortified. It was darker than she expected when she arrived at her neighborhood square. Rahain must have been waiting for her. A small feeling of guilt tingled in her stomach. She didn't want to hurt Rahain. When she crossed the threshold, Mahai greeted her with a smile, but Rahain did not. "You're back quite late" "yes I got caught, I should have left earlier to the agora." "Did you meet someone? "No" I should have said yes, she thought too late "I went to say hello to Alise" she hastened to lie while taking off her hat. Rahain did not answer. He had just returned from his friends' house and knew very well that Kirah was lying, she had not seen Alise. He suspected that she had been to see her young lover, had she been to the agora, she could also lie to him for that. "The ribbons are gathered, tomorrow morning I was leaving early" She sat down next to her daughter to cuddle her. She needed tenderness to pull herself together and Rahain's attitude was so hard and cold. With Mahai she could let her body feelings out without fear... But with Rahain... tenderness was weakness. Kirah was not weak, she was hypersensitive, it was not the same thing. But Rahain's testosterone was incompatible with this sensitivity, he would never fully understand her. Tomorrow would be a great day, she didn't care about Rahain's mood. She would be focused on her work, no matter what Mister, as they used to be called... Mahai willingly lent her head to her mother's caresses and took the opportunity to ask her to look through the album that was already on the table. Nostalgia transformed her mother's gaze and it fascinated her. Nostalgia comes with age and Kirah was getting older, but she was more beautiful than ever, especially in Mahai's eyes, who idolized her. Mahai thought that in the twilight of her life, she would remember those magical moments shared with her mother. She turned the pages with a certain habit now and immediately recognized the three faces, first as infants, then as children and finally as juveniles. Their vacation spot seemed visibly the same. The numbers on the cakes and gift items were getting bigger and bigger. As teenagers and then young adults in a few pages, they had enjoyed trips, parties, sports, zoo, many friends and animals... Their lives were colorful and cheerful. Neither Mahai nor Kirah said a word. They were absorbing the life that came out of the yellowed album. These children had grown up as fast as the pages turned. Had they had time to savor each picture, then each page of their lives? Their smiles were

present in every picture, it was insulting. From now on, children could no longer show their smiles or their bodies on the sunny beaches. Hooded from head to toe, the ghosts blended in with the dust that the wind kept blowing away. Mahai did not recognize any object, vehicle, house, furniture, clothing, everything was foreign to him. His environment was furnished exclusively with recycled objects. The gravediggers went further and further away, taking more and more risks to bring back a smaller and smaller booty, then recycled, bartered, and reinvented a use for the recovered pieces. These children lived in the new and shiny while the children of the hoods knew only the craft of wear and tear. Kirah waited patiently for a question from the girl, but nothing came, so she took the lead, "What does everything you see inspire in you, girl?" "I don't know if I should be happy for them or sad for us." "Maybe a little of both, right?" "Yes, that's it, I'm happy and sad at the same time, how is that possible?" "I think it's normal, heritage reflects life in general, it can be happy or sad at the same time or in turn. These photos send us back to a past, and we live in the reflection of this past. We need to project ourselves into our reflection so that once again children can play outside with their skin in the sun." "How can you be so confident in the future? I have trouble imagining a future world of color, of softness, of freedom of movement..." she said with an unsightly crease on her forehead. Kirah was uncomfortable, her daughter absolutely had to keep hope, but she couldn't lie to her either. "We all know that the road will be long and difficult but our perseverance will inevitably bear fruit one day" "I admire your courage and determination, but there is a lot of Corn and not much at last" "I see that you have a sense of language, it's important for a protector to be well understood." "I would rather have your convictions." "Patience, patience, as you grow your mind will be fed with other information and other feelings that will sharpen your convictions, which will allow you to continue the struggle." "I hope so, mamou" These doubts frightened Kirah, but it was still better for her daughter to express them than to keep them buried. Mahai stopped at the portrait of a smiling woman with a straw in her mouth, her eyes glowing with happiness. "Is she our ancestor?" "Yes, there are only very few pictures of her, because she had to proudly take pictures of her children, before they grew up and left home." clarified Kirah who was not unhappy to change the subject. Mahai looked at the photo and at her mother's face in turn. "She was different, I don't recognize much of her in us, a vague air perhaps..." "You know several centuries separate us, genetic mixing changes the physical characteristics but somewhere in our genes, there is a tiny part that comes from her and that's what's important. She was purer than us, who are GMOs. But if we weren't genetically modified organisms, we just might not be here talking. The purity and authenticity of our species would have cost us losing our planet completely." "Ah yes, that's because of Magdalena." "Her rise and rise did not happen in a day, but when her ideas were understood, recognized and touched the hearts of men, humanity not only gained its survival, it also gained a new people. For us women, there is a before and an after. Men had already had Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mandela, the Dallai Lama to enlighten them. But when Magda's light illuminated the world, the earth was on the verge of chaos. That is why we must not lose hope. When we believe that everything is going wrong, that it cannot be worse, a being can be born and carry within him the solutions to save what can be saved. The child that has just been born carries the hope of tomorrow's solutions, to brighten the future that we had thought so dark." "You convinced me, mamou, you are right, everything is possible." " Hum,

Hum " interposed Rahain who had remained silent until then. "I don't want to interrupt you, but I think it's time for a big girl to get some rest. Tomorrow the sun will rise again and she will have to open her eyes to this hot world again." Both women smiled happily at Rahain, who had made an effort to be discreet during their talk and formulaic in interrupting them. "You're right, dad, I'll be right down," she said as she stood up to be true to what she had just said. She also went downstairs with the heritage clutched to her, gave each of her parents a kiss and told herself that she was lucky. "Yes, and I will join you soon enough," she said. "Have you noticed how much our daughter has grown lately?" she said softly to Rahain, as the latter had disappeared, swallowed by the bowels of the earth. "Yes," he replied, "I admit it scares me a little, but you can't stop children from growing up and reacting to the world in which they will build their lives." Kirah wanted to educate her daughter gently, not to rush her to accept; but her daughter was eager for knowledge, too greedy. The couple stood there in the room, far from each other, with the only presence between them being the void left by the teenager. Sadness had taken possession of Rahain's eyes, which moved Kirah when she realized it. She then came to snuggle against him while keeping a certain stiffness in her gestures and her body. She didn't want to give him false hopes of getting closer, only she was going to have to go away for a while and neither Rahain nor Kirah would have any intimacy during this period, it was a bit like a compensation or a false farewell. She did not know in what state of mind she would return, nor what would result from this forced separation. As for Rahain, he wanted to tighten his embrace, to show his attachment even more so that his beloved would not forget his arms. That she missed him, even a little, was his greatest hope; only he knew deep down that she preferred her young apprentice and that his arms would not change the feelings of his companion. The bitterness had passed the barrier of the skin, went up the veins, gained the arteries and would end up flooding his heart.

Chapter 6

It was not the light, completely absent in the room, it was not the sound of birds, long gone, it was not the deafening traffic, unknown in these alleys, that woke Kirah, it was the brave Neon, always faithful to his morning work collecting his offerings to make the crotton. The dawn must have been still weak, like Kirah who had slept very little, excited as she was the day before, by the prospect of starting the debates with the other protectors. She embraced Rahain on her right, who was serene, his eyes still closed, and her daughter who was a little apart, on her left near the wall. Her relaxed face betrayed a total carefree attitude. She put on her orange ashtray with great precaution by soft and silent gestures; she really wanted to avoid waking the two sleepers. She went up on tiptoe and turned around, to look one last time at the occupants of the house, whom she had not woken up after all, before disappearing into the ceiling. While tasting some dates, she checked a bag, which she had already prepared the day before containing some personal effects, knowing that she would not return. When she crossed the threshold of her house, Kirah felt worried. She knew that Rahain would provide for her daughter's every need while she was away, but she couldn't help but be concerned, her maternal instinct no doubt. When her gaze wandered to the deserted square, which only yesterday was full of life, she saw Guillauma who was also

preparing to leave. "Hey, Guill, are you waiting for me?" Kirah did not shout, the relative silence of the city allowed her to call out to her friend without raising her voice. "How are you feeling?" asked Kirah hoping her friend's thoughts would be more positive than her own. "It always pains me to leave my family for several days without news." "Okay, then there are two of us" "I think there are even thirteen of us in this case." "Yes, you're right, our work doesn't look bad from the outside, but it does have some unpleasant sides". "The advantage is that we can support each other when we are all together. "That's true." The two friends were in the prime of their lives and both had an apprentice, whom they were also neglecting for a few days, but neither of them mentioned it, even though when they thought of their families, their apprentice was one of them. Guillauma's ash was slightly pinker and less dark than Kirah's, this ceremonial attire accentuated their feminine forms. They were no longer fifteen years old but their bodies, having suffered only one pregnancy, were still very appetizing. A cramp deep in her belly reminded Kirah of the body imprint her fleeting embrace with Cole had left on her. Their carnal and unbridled relation gave him well-being, even at a distance. Her heart became light and her mind clearer. Did Cole feel the same way? She didn't regret the moments she'd spent with him the night before; they made her feel stronger for the long, arduous task ahead. She didn't need the gloom and doom that had come between her and Rahain. Besides, was he going to miss her a little? She was not very sure of it, he would spend soft days with his friend Zayar with for only concern to look after the houses and the children, what risks! she thought ironically. She found herself dreaming and hoping... feeling so effective and positive because of Cole. Denying this relationship was unimaginable. And at the same time, the lack of communication and the continuing estrangement with Rahain made her feel sad and dark. Did she have to make a decision? Letting this situation fester was certainly not the answer. Life forces you to make choices, but what is the right one? Mahai would be very sad to be away from her father, even if only for a short time. She had better not be mistaken in her feelings, after all, it might have been just a bad period between her and Rahain. Maybe we should try to save this union first? The streets were cool and completely deserted at this time of the morning and they had not crossed Neon, nor any of his colleagues. The shadows, still very present, went soon to lengthen to leave the place to the blinding rays. The temperature made the walk pleasant, the two accomplices did not hurry and enjoyed this quiet atmosphere, without any other comment. They had compatible characters and their silence was not at all heavy, on the contrary it confirmed that they understood each other very well. At the sight of the big stone building, which was going to welcome them, Kirah still felt very proud to belong to this profession and honored to serve the city. But at the same time her responsibilities did not suffer any mistake and at the first misstep they could crush her as this colossal house would do if it collapsed. Soon the huge doors would be closed and the agora would disappear behind white silk drapes, as if the agora was also covered with a hood, thus signifying to the population the closed door. When the white cloths were removed, the inhabitants would understand that all the decisions had been taken. Each time she climbed the steps she was filled with joy as if a protective hand was above her saying: go ahead, you are on the right path. They then found themselves in the enclosure itself, where enormous columns carved in ancient times carried the building effortlessly. The columns also had a reassuring side, seeing them support all this weight for an eternity, assailed by the harassing wind. They confirmed

that the hooded people could only be up to the task despite their precarious living conditions. Kirah could see in the half-light some orange silhouettes in the distance who were gathering. Guillaume, still walking beside her in the greatest silence, took off his hood. Kirah imitated him. The tension was beginning to mount. Maybe she would have preferred to lie down between Rahain and Mahai... She was beginning to regret her departure. Her eyes were drawn to the ceiling as usual, she liked to look at it. It was a huge moucharabieh accepting light in some places and not in others, thus projecting on the floor dark and light spots. The reflection of the flames of the central fire also projected shadows on the walls. This moving play of lights transformed the eleven protectors, already present, into a massive tiger, with a colorful coat, ranging from orange to brown to yellowish, moving among the tall grass of the savannah. Lurking in the semi-darkness, was he ready to pounce or was he just circling? Was he threatening or just suspicious? A shiver ran through Kirah's body, was the sight of the feline a bad omen or was it just the cool morning air in the room that made her body react? Kirah wore a calm exterior as great as the fire that burned inside. This tiger did not scare her. She walked with a sure step, wanting to give the wild animal the impression that she was strong and invincible, even if it wasn't quite true. The bite of stage fright in the pit of her stomach took pleasure in reminding her. She hated injustice. It was the first foundation of her soul, she had been designed, manufactured, around that concept. Her sensibility came from there and was nourished by it. Injustice, a word that doesn't need to be defined or justified, a bomb in itself. Deep down, Kirah was a "guerrilla", a true revolutionary. And just as one foments a guerrilla war, she incubated her ideas in the inferno of her convictions, all she had to do was convince six other protectors. Mothers with male offspring should be easier to convince, those with female offspring would be much tougher if not unshakeable. The choice of the youngest protectors, who had not yet given birth, would then perhaps be decisive in the final verdict, which in itself was an extreme. Young women without children could decide the future of children who were only a few years younger than they were. She had to help these inexperienced votes. In any case, this tiger would not be easy to tame, and this fact was obvious to her as she approached the assembly. "Welcome to you, my dear protectors," said Léondra to Guillaume and Kirah. Both bowed their heads in response. Léondra was the oldest of the protectors. She welcomed the younger ones and guided them to the path of wisdom. She was considered by all to be the spiritual leader of the 13, although in the texts no patroness had a superior role over the others, yet her charisma was universally accepted. As Kirah scanned the audience, she quickly realized that no one was missing. Fear still clenched her stomach. Her emotionality was not always a good thing, she would have preferred to be stronger to face her fellow humans without apprehension. She enjoyed meeting some faces, which made her smile, as much as others made her look away. She didn't appreciate pretentious young women who put their social status too much in front of them, it led to a scale of value that often belittled hoods who really didn't need a superior judgment. After all, she understood very well that youth does not have enough distance to understand everything about life and human nature, but still, their role was too important to leave it in the hands of novices. The movement of the bodies and the hands of each one extirpated him from his thoughts. The circle formed around the central fire, the thirteen holding hands as children do in a farandole. And then, as their bodies warmed, their voices began to rise in unison: "As the water no longer flows from the

fountains...the blood will not flow from our veins. Blood will not flow, so tears will not flow." The languid melody made the hairs on their arms stand on end. In one gesture they held their palms up to the sky. "As the sky is always clear... my mind will turn to the light, and clear will remain my mind" The oath had to be slow and dictated with one voice while looking up to the sky. "As the earth feeds life... the earth feeds my judgment, so my judgment will feed life" They lowered their chins to the ground. The moment was solemn, each of the 13 took the measure of these words. They had to remember them and apply them well, that was their role. A silence of lead fell, soon broken by Léondra. The circle remained intact and the hands sealed: "We are all gathered here today, at the end of the forty days, to determine the future of Yvanoé and Xéna. We must judge this situation properly, we must punish Yvanoé and not harm Xéna, I remind you that blood only feeds men, it does not feed the earth or life. Our mind must remain clear, we must be fair to Xena as well as to Yvanoé. I must also go around to know if any of you, will have too close a connection with the victim or with the executioner, I ask you for a true and solemn answer." "Guillauma do you have any connection with the victim or the executioner?" "No I swear" answered Guillauma in a calm and head down manner... Each of them took the oath. "...And I swear too", proclaimed Léondra and the session was opened. "I remind you of the facts: we are here to deliberate on the fate of Yvanoé, 16 years old, who committed sexual touching of Xena against her will and to provide for Xena, now 15 years old, who demands justice. This young man having recognized the facts, his guilt does not emit any doubt. Yvanoé served his forty days sentence in Eden under the obligation of silence and isolation. At our request he participated in the hardest and most ungrateful chores, which he did without any form of complaint according to the report that I was sent. Tomorrow the two teenagers will be heard, today we will be in camera. I know that alone, within your respective families and in meditation, you have all reflected and perhaps made a decision. We are going to put all these reflections together so that our judgment will be as adequate as possible. It is not a question of wanting to destroy one being at the expense of the other, but rather to inscribe our decision in the philosophy of our society. We must also make sure that the population is in phase with our choices. And to begin with, I propose that we sit down around the hearth and eat some sweets." In one motion the thirteen tried their hand around the comforting flames. Numerous trays abounded with dried and shelled fruits such as dates and nuts from Eden, and hot herbal teas gave off a good herbaceous smell. The monks would provide for them throughout the proceedings. Perhaps this sugar intake could soften hearts and judgments, but in the meantime it was a treat for the body. Who would get to the heart of the matter? Kirah looked around at the thirteen... Who would start? An old one surely. The glow of the flames was reflected on faces that were tense and concerned about the issue that Léondra had recalled. Perhaps Rocellie would be the first to intervene. She was about the same age as Léondra, and like her, was the mother of a daughter, aged about twenty, who had recently become a mother in her turn, which made them the only two grandmothers in the audience! It was a privilege that would only last a few years, it was necessary to take advantage of these years of passing the baton. But Rocellie was restoring herself and did not necessarily seem to want to give her opinion first. Two camps were going to confront each other, those who wanted to punish Yvanoé severely, perhaps by excluding him permanently, and those who would have mercy. The hoods did not own a prison. The

detention centers had become useless, too few people had actions against society, more money in circulation, more overcrowding, more violence. Very rarely an accident happened. But today it was a bit more serious. Usually the protectors intervened in disagreements between neighbors or in family disagreements, but nothing vital. Kirah had never had to judge such an injury. There was something of the order of the bestial origin of man and that disturbed a lot this people, led by women, who had no other choice than to raise their spirit and their conscience to the world. This civilization was based on "doing good at all costs" to have the right or the possibility to survive. Anyone who violated this precept was seen as an outcast. No matter what the thirteen decided, Yvanoé was already and would remain cursed. Kirah did not dare to start, and she was not the only one. She watched as they leaned towards each other, their body postures betraying their friendships or their enmities. Fara and Linéa in particular were whispering conspiratorially, slumped over each other. It was no secret that Kirah didn't like those two young girls who didn't know anything and who took the liberty of having an opinion on everything and everyone. They were also very or too coquettish. Obviously their respective ashtrays were brand new. The bright colors betrayed it. In Kirah's eyes this was really not necessary, certainly it was an event for the whole community but still, no reason to shine. Kirah thought that their vocation, both of them, was based only on the fact of being noticed. What futility and narrow-mindedness, which was incompatible with their function. Moreover, they seemed to be discussing their new outfits at this very moment, a scandal! If it were up to Kirah, these two young women would not have attended these discussions, let alone participated in them. Riquel, who was the same age as them, was wiser and more reserved, perhaps even a little too self-effacing, but if it was a way of meditating on her thoughts, then it was a good step for her age. Riquel's mother had been a great protector, loved and respected, her daughter could take her path, who knows? Riquel didn't have any children yet, like Fara and Linéa, but Kirah knew that she was having a serious affair with a charming and well-balanced boy, all of which boded well for her future. Kirah hoped that her daughter Mahai would also take a comfortable and safe path, and saw in Riquel the future of her own daughter. Her spindly body and still youthful face reminded her of her physically. Kirah's mind wandered from the agora to wonder if her daughter was up or still struggling with sleep. Mahai stretched, she felt she had slept well, and immediately remembered that her mother would be away that day. But no matter, Mahai was naturally positive, nothing would tarnish this day. She would do her best to help her father and go see her friend Cassie as she did every day. She lifted her plaid as her gaze fell on the estate. Her father was going about his morning business upstairs, she wouldn't disturb him, there was no reason why she couldn't take a look around and she wasn't doing anything wrong. She joined her thoughts to her gesture and took hold of the old fossilized album. The pages she had already looked at with her mother did not interest her anymore, she passed them and then noticed a series of photos taken inside a house. The 3 children, who had grown up again, were posing with smiles as always but with sleepy faces, in front of a tree adorned with multicolored and glittering decorations. Their arms were loaded with gifts, all around the tree boxes of different sizes and colors competed with mountains of torn gift papers thrown on the ground. This profusion of toys and various objects, brand new, was shocking. Mahai definitely did not understand his ancestors well. This consumption had had such long term consequences on her life. She was jealous and angry, she too was a child, she

too had the right to have a new bike, a new guitar, a new little brother. Life was unfair. Mahai's eyes became misty. That beautiful green tree pointing its star proudly to the sky was the very symbol of injustice. She could never admire such a jewel of nature, never touch its prickly leaves, never smell its scent, never enjoy the gifts hidden between its branches. Religious practices had fallen into disuse, the successive economic crises having helped the process. Mahai was no longer there, she was in a forest of green fir trees, covering the arid and infertile soil of her planet. But this false escape plunged her into a negative melancholy that ravaged her. Fortunately, her father, coming down the stairs at wolf's pace believing his daughter to be asleep, drew her out of her torpor. He immediately saw the trouble on his daughter's face, which was not usually there at such an early hour, and it was when he saw the inheritance sitting on her lap that he understood the cause of this commotion." Mahai, you shouldn't look at the heirloom without one of us being there to answer your questions or to give you clarification about images that may be shocking." he said, placing a kiss on her forehead. "Yeah, dad, I think you're right." Mahai was making an effort to regain his composure and his father's tender kiss had warmed his heart. "Do you want to talk about it, daughter?" he said more tenderly after her admonition. The girl immediately closed the page she had admired a few moments earlier. "No, no thank you, Dad, another time maybe" her trouble was obviously still present and she did not want her father to find her weak, just in front of photos. "As you like, maybe, should we share a breakfast together now, what do you say?" Mahai jumped up and down from the bed. "Right away, I'm starving" she said enthusiastically. She went up the stairs 4 by 4, unaware of a possible fall. Her father did not say anything, as he saw that she was in good spirits. Rahain didn't have much of an appetite that morning. After a frugal snack, during which he had devoured with his eyes his daughter, who was gobbling everything on the table. He grabbed the hairbrush and started to brush his hair, which was as blonde as wheat, as they used to say. When the spring wind made the immense fields quiver, filled with swollen ears of nourishing gluten. The brush passed and passed again between the golden threads until it created furrows that undulated under the father's caress. Mahai never tired of this ritual and never interrupted his father, who stopped when his chores reminded him of his duty. "Would you like to accompany me to the border, to take a walk to the ditch diggers, just to have a look, to see if I could find something, which could be useful to me?" asked Rahain while tying the mat that would disappear under the hood a little later. "I'd like to go see Cassie first, but yes, why not" answered the young girl. "Alright I'll get some things ready and then when you come back we'll leave." Mahai was already adorning herself with her hood and was ready to go out to the square to join her friend. She turned to her father, she would have liked to tell him how much she loved him but only "thank you for the breakfast, dad, see you later" came out of her mouth. "You're welcome my daughter, it was my pleasure, see you later" he said while raising his head, with a smile, but only the blinding light of the day could have answered him, the child had evaporated.

CHAPTER 7

Léondra spoke again: "A round of the table is necessary to know the fruit of your individual reflections, Rocellie I invite you to begin." "I thank you my friend, and well for my part, the exclusion of Yvanoé is necessary. He no longer has a place among his people. We are a

peaceful people. We respect, above all, the life and the integrity of all, in particular of the women, source of life as well as the water, the earth and the oxygen. The whole assembly had its eyes riveted on Rocellie... her words touched every heart. Nadia, who was nodding her head, felt ready to communicate her opinion. With a very nice physique, Nadia was quite small, thin almost skinny. She was mischievous and had fun with everything. Despite her own daughter's 15 years, she looked like a teenager herself. But at this moment, her face was serious, her small, half-closed black eyes showed great concentration, and her expression was free of futility. "I agree with you, no one has the right to touch the innocence of a young girl who has never had any experience, forcing her consent is a serious offense. Our sentence must be exemplary and without mercy. We have not had to judge a case of this gravity for a long time. Unfortunately, the bestial behavior of the male gender must still be dissuaded. The males can no longer act as they did in the old days, when they thought they could do anything. I'm all for exclusion outside the walls." Nadia was getting carried away in front of her audience, "oh" came from those who did not agree. Nadia had to regain her composure, her emotion had overwhelmed her. Kirah noticed a red pimple on her deceptively youthful face, and concluded that she was probably in the early stages of her menstrual cycle, which could lead to mood swings that were hard to control. In a few days she would be in better health. On the other hand, the ostentatious nods of her neighbor made no secret of her agreement. Their friendship was long and unambiguous. Living in the same neighborhood and both having a daughter of roughly the same age, their agreement was perfect. Kali was more in line with the current beauty criteria, dark skin, black eyes and long curly hair. Her particularity was her smile, her wide and regular mouth let appear a dazzling white teeth, which captivated all the eyes. But Mazine could not help but intervene: "Come on, how can you be so vehement? I remind you that these are 15 and 16 year old children, that's still young. Inexperience and clumsiness are more at stake than cruelty and malice." Mazine spoke with wisdom and calm. Perhaps she had observed some of her own son's behavior, which might have given her some insight into the present situation. Zenia, who was on the opposite side of the circle from Mazine, seemed to agree, giving her a slight smile. Zenia also had a young son, a lovely, lively baby boy who could have violent reflexes. His mother was very attentive to his behavior and tried to teach him the difference between right and wrong. Not all children were the same and some understood the concepts very quickly and very early while others required more attention so that they did not stray from the right path. Gentleness and patience were required in such cases, for gentleness begets gentleness. Kirah wondered if Yvanoé had benefited from this benevolent education for her future. She doubted it. It was common knowledge that his parents had kicked him out of the family home at the age of twelve and that he had been living with a roommate ever since. He had probably not received the same attention as the son of Mazine and Zénie. They could easily relate to his unhappy childhood. "I hope, Mazine, that you agree with all of us, Yvanoé must be excluded, he has no place among the hoods, we must remain faithful to our precepts. As far as I am concerned, I wish that he be banished from our city and that he be sent to Kokazia far from Xena and far from all the other women of the city. We must exercise our power firmly to discourage those who would repeat these inappropriate actions." Luce's determination was chilling and surprising for the mother of a little boy. This was how she felt, and it had to be respected. Luce was not very jovial by nature. Her long and straight hair

framing an angular and not very expressive face, accentuated the impression of coldness which she gave off. Her son's education must have been quite strict. Some in the audience squirmed, no one dared to answer her, unless... "Sending him to Kokazia may not be such a good idea, he will have contact with other women there," intervened Noëm, who had remained discreet until then. "We won't have any control over his actions and we would be responsible if something happened, don't you think Luce?" Certainly " she answered dryly " I pronounce myself in favor of a reclusion for life within Eden, in the silence. The past forty days have gone well and he will have no contact with any woman from our community or any other. Noëm was a little wisp of a woman made of curves: from her bouncy cheeks, to her generous breasts, through her teasing hips. Even her character only wanted to round the angles, it was obvious, but this point of view was not to everyone's taste. "Ah yes, yes, the word is dropped in favor, you are right Noëm you would make him a beautiful favor, bravo for the sanction, bravo! The debates were starting to get seriously animated and it was not to Kirah's displeasure. It was necessary that the tensions evacuate in a first time so that in a second time the reflection would succeed. "Let's go, let's go, ladies" Léondra wanted to calm down Nadia who was throwing a black look at Noëm. "It is true that the reclusion within Eden is one of the possibilities. Each one of us can express herself freely, it's obvious that we don't all agree, we have to be courteous and listen to each other, please" Nadia took her side, pouted and bowed her head. "I think we have our share of responsibility in this unfortunate matter" Zenia wanted to elevate the proceedings. "We knew about Yvanoé's family problems, we took care of him at the beginning of his estrangement from his family, but in the end we may not have done all we could, and that's a shame. It is a failure for us and for our whole society, unable as we are, to properly support a child in need..." Zenie's cheeks were redder than her ashy. Her hands were shaking as much as her voice. She felt really guilty towards Yvanoé. "We must keep a low profile and also question ourselves on our failures" she concluded. "We understand your objection, but this problem will be studied, debated and acted upon later. This aspect should not be the basis of justice in this case" Rocellie scanned each of the twelve protectors to confirm that their attitude would also be put on the spot. "Having already spoken with Yvanoé several times, I can confirm that he suffered from the lack of love of his family unit, his mother in particular wanted to give birth to a girl and never accepted this blow of fate, as she said. This rejection is dramatic, but despite this, Yvanoé was in body and mind and had a free will like everyone else. And you know, Zénie, that it is up to us to do good or evil and thus to suffer the consequences as well as to reap the rewards. The matriarch wanted the assent of Zénie as well as the other protectors, and perhaps even more so of the young ones like Fara or Linéa. But it was Riquel who spoke with compassion: "Certainly Yvanoé is sane, but the cruel way in which he was raised must have had consequences on his behavior today. We all know that the violence of the elders only led to violence. Even animals would turn on their owners when they were abusive. It was difficult to put a stop to this. If Yvanoé had been given all the love he deserved, perhaps he would not have behaved badly in Xena's presence." Riquel had been raised in a good family, pampered and intellectually well cared for. She had also become a beautiful person, well integrated, but she was not haughty for all that. On the contrary, her sensitivity allowed her to easily put herself in the place of people much less favored than her, it was all to her credit. Kirah, who could not remain insensitive, felt solidarity with her words

full of good sense. "We can easily imagine that if Yvanoé had been born in a loving family, he would not have denigrated women. His mother never knew how to be tender with him and ended up chasing him away when he was independent enough. This was certainly a terrible ordeal for this little boy, because deep down he must have loved his mother anyway. From then on, he didn't trust adults, no one, he couldn't turn to a family or to friends who could adopt him, he must have felt very lonely, abandoned and he shut himself up. Perhaps on the day of the tragedy he simply wanted to get closer to a loving human being, but his lack of experience of love made him surely clumsy and Xena was mistaken about his intentions. "The whole assembly was captivated, it seemed as if Kirah had already experienced this herself, and she took advantage of the attentive audience to continue her speech. "But in this case we must not forget Xena, so sensitive and tender, she is the one who must be repaired in the first place. On the other hand, we must also be delicate towards the community, which is often inclined to demand revenge without thinking too much about the consequences. We must put our sensitivity to work for all the hoods, the two actors as well as all the spectators." Kirah was well aware that this little lesson was much needed for the younger ones, but that it would not do much to advance the debate, and had the immediate consequence of inflicting silence. "Guillauma, you look pensive, would you like to share your thoughts with us" Léondra had noticed that the young woman was in retreat. Guillauma was quietly squirming and playing with the folds of her tunic. "I think banishment outside the ramparts is too harsh, violent for a young boy and inhumane, which would demean all of us protectors as well as all hoods. Seclusion within Eden is too sweet even with the imposed silence; I don't know anyone who wouldn't enjoy the proximity of clear water, nourishing earth and pure oxygen. The hoods would not understand why we would be so lenient to the perpetrator of such a serious crime. Kirah was green with envy, her friend spoke well... no finally, she was very proud of her. "So what do you propose guillauma?" Léondra invited her to reveal herself a little more. "Well we should send a message to Kokazia to find out their conditions for sending Yvanoé to their community." "That's an idea, but won't they think we're weak protectors, unable to solve our problems, and in the end we have only one solution: get rid of them?" asked Fara suddenly. "The strength of our micro-societies is based on mutual support, even if our contacts are rare. There is no weakness in asking for help. We can also suggest an exchange and take care of one of their troublemakers, this has happened in the past" explained Léondra "So from one problem less, we will inherit another, perhaps even worse than this one" Fara got angry "The total change of community, family and friends can change an individual who has problems in his own city." clarified Léondra "Or not" Fara was cheeky and irreverent towards Léondra who didn't allow herself to be destabilized. "It's true that there are no guarantees, but in our city there are hoods from these exchanges and they have never repeated the problems they had elsewhere. Our role is to follow them for years so that this does not happen. At the beginning, they don't have much contact with the population, because everyone is naturally suspicious of a foreigner. It is up to him to prove himself, with our help, he must integrate to be accepted without ambiguity. It takes time, but it works. "But you mean there are former criminals among the hoods!" cut Fara, distraught. "Yes, and I'm sure you never realized it" Léondra did not take offense and remained calm. No I admit it, but it scares me, how come we don't know about it? And can we trust all the hoods?" "We don't give this information to the hoods otherwise the fear prevents the

integration from taking place normally. We always remain vigilant towards these individuals who can sometimes become true friends." Léondra did her best to reassure the younger children, who were upset by these revelations. Rocellie and Léondra exchanged a close look that went unnoticed. Léondra announced that the debates were closed for the day, a good meal and some rest would help the bodies and minds. The new information also had to be digested by the young protectors. Kirah glanced up at the ceiling, the sun was well past the Zenith. By now, Rahain and Mahai were certainly helping to tidy up at the medinade, she too was getting hungry. Discussions were well underway, perhaps she would soon return to her people. "What do you want to do with that piece of soft plastic, dad?" the voice of Mahai was very faint. The wind whistled as it passed between the panels of the ramparts and those of the ceiling, which at the edge of the city were almost joined together. The wind was roaring, displeased that it could not run freely through the city. The ceiling was lower than in the rest of the city, so that the wind would not blow as hard. The alleys, lined with various craft shops, were very narrow and winding. Unrecognizable debris littered the ground. Passers-by often bumped into the girl who was not at the same height as the adults. The border area, as it was called, was dark, noisy, dirty and frightening for a sensitive child. Mahai had a firm grip on her father's hand and would not let go. On the other hand, for Rahain it was the cave of Ali Baba, without the thieves, he let his creative imagination wander. The shapes and materials inspired him, his eye was attracted by what he could modify, associate or dissociate. His mind was freed from daily constraints and his creativity made him light and free. The small shops were friendly, and people talked loudly and without reserve. Rahain had his habits here and knew most of the ditchdiggers, some of whom had become friends over time. This dusty atmosphere pleased him. This aspect of his personality did not please Kirah very much, who would have preferred him to be more sophisticated, more precious, while he only aspired to tinker. Rahain knew that his companion's apprentice worked in one of the workshops, but he didn't know him. Perhaps he had already had dealings with him, but not knowing him, he could not have had the slightest reaction. His sensitivity was unpredictable and much greater than his partner or those around him would have thought. He was hiding to cry, but he was crying anyway. "I want to surprise your mother for her return. I'm going to build a sort of resting hammock and attach it to the wall, up in the left-hand corner, she'll enjoy the light from the door but won't be bothered by the wind." "Good idea, dad, I should think about getting her a present too. She'll probably need some cheering up after all her trials." "Yes, why not, I could help you if you want," is a project that unites the two companions. "Well if you spot something you like, let me know" "I hear you" Mahai almost shouted and his hand was sweaty. "Are you scared, Mahai?" Rahain worried as he felt the girl's hand slip. "No, no, of course not," she lied, "but the path made me hot." Rahain was satisfied with this explanation without conviction. He refocused on his research to finalize his project. He would trade what he needed for a remaining mango and a jar of honey he had left over. With Kirah away, he would need less food for the week. He had made sure to drop off his donations for the medinade before leaving and had informed Barone and Taji that he would not be able to help them that day. He hoped to finish early enough to join his friends and neighbors to share the medinade. "We're going to go see a friend, Jeff, he might have what I need, you'll see he's very nice, and his shop is close by" he said to Mahai in order to reassure her. Indeed, as soon as they passed the first turn, her father called the

owner of the next store. Jeff must have been the same age as his father, he only wore, like all the other craftsmen, a mouth mask of a somewhat dubious color. His long dreadlocks were tied in a palm tree above his head, which gave him a little eccentric and pleasant side. "Rahain how are you my friend?" "Good, I present to you my beloved daughter, Mahai." "Nice to meet you young lady, how did you manage to get such a beautiful girl? She is much more beautiful than you," he teased, "she looks just like her mother, that's all," he laughed and lovingly stroked the child's head. "What can I do for you? What brings you to the edge today?" Rahain smiled at his friend and Mahai relaxed at the compliment. The two men disappeared into the back of the store while Mahai was left to her own devices to look through all the odds and ends that were scattered around the shop. When her gaze was drawn to an object...in the middle of a mess of rusty, plasticised, fossilized objects from another time, piled up here and there, a small object completely worn out by time, still a little red with a logo representing a fabulous animal, in the mythical sense, because for Mahai all animals were mythical and fabulous. Only the edges could be distinguished... a rearing horse... maybe. Mahai immediately thought of his mother's neck, a pendant, it was a wonderful idea, the polishing of the object gave it a precious look. It had survived the storms, the desolation, the abandonment to arrive today in the hollow of her hands. A shiver ran through her, this witness of the ancient richness of the nourishing earth disturbed her more than she wanted. Her mind went back to the heritage. The revolt in her heart was rumbling. How could they? How could they? The misery around her only fueled this feeling of helplessness and revolt. "So you found something?" her father's intervention at her back startled her. "Oh I frightened you, excuse me" "no, no it is nothing" Mahai resumed holding the object to his father. "Yes, it's an old car key, it was used to start the car, and in this case it's a key to a very expensive car that was meant for very rich people, maybe Jeff will accept to trade it for a little, what do you want to do with it, tell me?" "I don't know, I thought of a pendant" "beautiful, I'll go and see with Jeff, wait a minute..." Mahai was happy to have been well inspired, now she only wanted one thing, to get the key, she could already see it around her mother's neck, shining like a jewel. Her smile and her happy face would fill Mahai with joy. She only wanted to hold the little object close to her. Her father was late and she was getting impatient, but anyway her mother wouldn't be home tonight, so she had time after all. Finally her father reappeared with his little cart full of equipment. "Let's go little girl, it's ok, hold your treasure" he said and handed her the key, Mahai was ecstatic. Her friend Cassie would surely be jealous when she saw her find. The way back seemed very short to her so much she was on a small cloud. Her feet didn't touch the ground anymore... she was literally flying, despite her father's concerns; he kept asking her to slow down. She didn't even feel the lack of oxygen. The medinade was coming to an end when they arrived at the square. They were exhausted and starving. They both rushed to the food without much ado to greet the usual small group. No one took offense and everyone understood that they had to eat before asking any questions.

CHAPTER 8

"Many of you know my companion Armando, but not all. Those of you who have had the pleasure of meeting him will not deny my words." Léondra swept the assembly with her eyes. Its determination to ally the greatest number did not make any doubt. Its wrinkles gave

him a certain advantage... "Armando is strong and sturdy, helpful and faithful. His calmness is reassuring. His complexion is caramel, his bushy eyebrows hide a soft and benevolent look... And what about his little accent, cracking." The love that Léondra had for her companion transpired from her words. "His hands were shaped by years of hard work as a fossilizer. It's a thankless and demanding job, but he still does it with passion. When he returns from a long and exhausting mission abroad, he shares his findings with me. Armando always keeps the hope of finding a fossil that could improve the daily life of everyone or of seeing signs of climatic improvement that would allow us to hope for a brighter future for our children... He is like that eternal optimist and generous... it is not unpleasant in these difficult times... I wouldn't consider for a second sharing my life with another." For a better theatrical effect, Léondra made a pose, not a sound disturbed the moment, time was suspended at the lips of the protector. "You are probably wondering why I am talking about my companion... well, a long time ago I met him under particular conditions. He came from Kokazia, he was young and spirited, unstable and lonely. I was also young and I was just beginning my training as a protector. It was then that I was entrusted with a task for which I did not feel ready at all. At first I refused, but my mentor at the time did not see it that way. Perhaps she saw qualities in me that I did not; but I, at the age of 18, was terrified. It was my duty and serving the city is an honor, so I did it, reluctantly, I must admit today. Léondra looked sharply at Fara and Linéa. "And yes that young delinquent became the father of my daughter and the grandfather of our grandson." Her words sounded like a Japanese gong. "I couldn't have dreamed of a better companion and yet the first moments of our meeting were marked by fear and sleepless nights... so I understand perfectly your fears and reticence but they are only based on the fear of the unknown. Ignorance makes us fall back on what we know best, our customs, our habits and our convictions. But strangers are not monsters. Human beings have always dreamed of meeting beings from the farthest reaches of the universe and they are afraid of their neighbor who does not have the same skin color or who does not speak the same language... if we decide to entrust Yvanoé to the people of Kokazia, he will be treated as a human being who has lost the notion of good and evil, certainly, but not as a monster. He will be re-educated by a protective colleague and then integrated thanks to a job. In spite of this treatment which seems enviable, he will suffer all his life from the distance of his community of origin. He will remain prisoner all his life of the nostalgia of his roots. They will always seem to him more pleasant and more beautiful than the customs of the people who will have finally adopted him. Roots are deeply rooted in the human being, it is not a subject to be taken lightly..." The arguments were so full of experience that they could not bear any objection. "As for thinking that we have former delinquents in the heart of our city, well yes, it's true, but 10-20-30 years later these foreigners have turned into honest citizens, actors of their destiny. Everyone can make mistakes, assume their faults but also choose to forgive. Armando earned the forgiveness of his society through the good deeds he did here; he earned the forgiveness of his victims through the way he took care of his family. You will think that I am preaching a little too fervently because I am directly involved, and you will not be wrong... All this is to make you understand that from the outside the situation looks shocking; while from the inside there is nothing shocking." Léondra had finished emptying her bag, her features were drawn. To expose herself had tired her but at the same time she had hit the nail on the head: the faces, in front of her, were

decomposed. Léondra was so upright and generous, her word could not be challenged. And yet a small voice rose, full of respect and shyness. It was Nadia... what a surprise, she who had been so vehement before, she was translucent and obviously took courage to be able to make a sound. "Tell us Leondra, do you know for what crimes at that time your future companion was sentenced to Kokazia?" After searching where the question came from, the protectors looked at Nadia without benevolence. "As I told you the hoods are not informed, but the protector in charge of the unknown, neither, only the main protector is. She monitors the evolution of the integration and judges alone according to what she knows, if the disclosure is necessary or not; in this case I was never informed of his past. The one who was to become my companion never felt the need to open up about his past, perhaps his pride prevented him from doing so at the time. For my part, I think that he left the memory of his setbacks to Kokazia. If he had wanted to confide in me, I would have welcomed his confidences with great pleasure, but I respected his choice of silence. To tell you the truth, I never considered that there was an unmentionable secret between us. I put myself in his shoes and concluded that he was afraid that my view of him would change and that I would judge him. That I would no longer see him as he really is but in relation to what he had done in another life, elsewhere... In the end, what counts is that he was able to take advantage of his second chance by doing good around him. In Kokazia he left his youthful mistakes, for which he was judged. Do I have the right to judge him again here and now, no I don't think so, and nobody has the right to do so. When we have judged Yvanoé, if we choose exile, would the protectors of Kokazia have the right to judge him again? Surely not, this judgment belongs to us alone, doesn't it... " So there, who will dare to say anything else, the words were disturbing. Glances were exchanged as if each one was waiting for another question; but no more questions came. Mahai was groggy from her trip to the ramparts, her meal wolfed down, she only wanted to go to sleep. But already Cassie was literally jumping on her to tell her about her findings. She took out against her heart the small fossilized key. This object had crossed the ages to find itself today in the hollow of her hand. At the time it was brand new, it was already a quality object, otherwise it would not have survived the weather and time. The fossilizer had removed the rust so that it would be a little more presentable, this little car key "of nothing at all" would soon be a pendant. This commonplace everyday object would become noble, exotic and would enhance the neck of the one who would wear it... Cassie was jealous, not of the object, but of the relationship between Mahai and her mother. Cassie was jealous, not of the object, but of the relationship between Mahai and her mother. Her mother was never around, of course she introduced her to the making of potions and other ointments, but these moments were too rare for her taste and her mother was too absorbed in her task, she didn't see that her daughter was growing up... Mahai liked Cassie, but now her feelings were overpowered by fatigue. She wanted to return to the solitude of her room, she wanted to dream, to immerse herself in the heritage, why not, and fall into a restful sleep. She thus began to bawl noisily several times to make pass the message to her friend. Cassie understood very quickly that she had to let her friend rest, Mahai withdrew with an uneasy smile on her lips. Arriving at her home, she threw herself on her parents' bed, finally alone, turning over on her back, her gaze was lost in the ceiling, in the hollows, the folds and the shadows of the rock. The glow of the day that came from the opening was enough for her to rest. Immobile she waited. She was waiting for her mind to

work or to stop working. She longed to grow up, to do what she wanted and everything she wanted, to have a lover. Then she would be free of her actions, her movements, her thoughts... She would be the greatest protector of all. She would be respected, she would be consulted even from other cities. Her lover would be tall but not too tall, slim but with broad shoulders, a handsome and benevolent face, night-colored hair, long, soft and fine hands. He would be gentle, kind and cuddly with her as if she were a fragile little thing that needed to be protected.... Mahai had gone to the land of dreams to join her prince charming... The dormitory was vast and not very intimate. The beds were facing each other, 7 beds on one side and 6 on the other, as if to underline that even if 2 camps could oppose each other, finally only one of them could make the vote. The protectors preferred to vote unanimously but sometimes this was not possible. Kirah lay on her back and admired the ceiling. This day had seemed to last forever. Guillauma and she had passed the doors of the agora only this morning, it was incredible. Restful sleep eluded her, her brain was still working at full speed. "Are you asleep?" a faint voice pulled Kirah from her torpor, she only swiveled her head in the direction of the sound. "No, not yet, Guillauma," she smiled apologetically. She did not want to disturb her. Neither she, nor anyone else for that matter, she did not talk much with others, by shyness, by complex, by inferiority, difficult to say. She did not like to make noise. "What do you think of Léondra's speech, do you think she convinced many of us?". "I think Leondra is a great protector, and her speech proves it, if only she didn't need that to prove it. But I'm afraid her story with Armando is atypical. Not all young offenders have such a bright and respectful future. This may even be an exception. Her words are filled with passion, love, and sincerity. She is very convincing. But we must keep our heads, it is only the first day, other opinions have not yet been expressed and other passions may be unleashed. It was a long, rich and exhausting day. Kirah did not want to be too direct with her friend, but she wanted to be quiet. "You are right my friend, what bothers here is the lack of privacy. I always have the impression that my actions are spied on, dissected. That even my eyes can betray me. "I think, Guillauma, that this promiscuity and this apparent pressure are intended and necessary. We must be able to face our sisters with our heads held high, because outside of these protective walls, passions will also run high when we announce our decision, we will have to face those who wish for a more inhumane revenge... Our inner sensibility must be stronger than the outer pressures and so our judgment will not be altered... Even so, I concede to you, that it is not so easy to apply." "Don't worry my friend, just the fact of having you near me and being able to dialogue with you in all sincerity and friendship already warms my heart. Your strength gives me courage. "We live in difficult moments, we have to support each other, when one of us feels lost" answered Kirah by giving him the hand. Lassitude marked both their faces and the friends agreed to let themselves sink into sleep. The temperature had dropped slightly with the decline of the sun. Coldness surrounded the thirteen frail and sensitive bodies lined up in the dark dormitory.

Chapter 9

As soon as she woke up, Kirah immediately closed her eyes. She was not yet available to the surrounding community. To run away, to join her daughter, her home, her lover... this is what

she wanted... but... it was only a dream. Her senses were listening to the slightest movement near her... Nothing... so her body relaxed as if the night was not over... When Mahai's eyes opened, no sound reached her. Her father must not have been there. She was going to enjoy the joyfulness. Her body had no weight and her mind was empty. Her eyes met the heritage, always faithful to its place of choice. A weak ray of light illuminated the alcove, was it a call? Was it a call? Was he looking for company? Without having premeditated his gesture, Mahai directed his arm towards the offering. The legacy was both familiar and strange, a source of intense and unexpected emotions. The old grimoire was becoming fragile and handling it perilous. It was incredible to think that one day it had been new and that the person who had filed those photos with care and love was his ancestor. His name had disappeared, forgotten from generation to generation. Only this object, this fossil, reminded us of the presence on earth of this family, of their way of life, of their daily life, of places and fairy landscapes. The grimoire did not contain a collection of magic formulas, but the pictorial relics of a world so different from Mahai's that one would have thought they were the work of a mad artist immersed in an imaginary world where everything was opulence and profusion; a wacky and burlesque world populated by creatures with unusual habits. As a child, Mahai could only interpret the collection in this way; his mother's explanations were interesting, but too pragmatic. Mahai only wanted one thing: to dream of another life, of a better world. She was happy today, but she hoped for so much more in the future, for herself, for her lover, for her future child... The thirteen found themselves hand in hand around the fire in the central room that had already heard their first debates the day before. Kirah thought that she had eaten her lunch mechanically without paying the slightest attention to her surroundings. Yet now she realized that the faces around her were marked by a night spent in anguish.... "As the water does not flow from the fountains, the blood will not flow from our veins. The blood does not flow, so the tears will not flow from our eyes..." Kirah spoke like a robot, or a ghost, without thinking about what she was saying, yet these words were so important. Then her body followed the movements imposed by these two neighbors, palms up and heads down "As the sky is always clear, my mind will turn to the light and clear will remain my mind." Who could have written this oath expressing a complicated situation with simple sentences. Still following her neighbors, her eyes redirected to the sky, palms towards the ground "As the earth feeds life, the earth feeds my judgment, so my judgment will feed life", What could Mahai be doing, was she even out of sleep, not sure, she liked to get up late... Léondra made a simple sign to indicate to everyone to sit comfortably on the straw mattresses surrounding the central fire. The advantage of this circular position was that everyone could see all twelve at a glance and at the same time no one could hide when she spoke. Each one took responsibility for herself by confiding in the group. Mounted on its big skinny legs, an ostrich, its massive body playing with a car door handle as if it were an ear of corn. A bear as black as its eyes, perched on the roof of an old abandoned building, looks down on the curious with their lenses; on the contrary, the calm and placid rhinoceros does not seem to be a threat to anyone despite its deformed horn and its imposing weight. A whole family of lions lounges in the shade of the trees as peacefully as a flock of sheep trying to escape the summer heat. Mahai was on a virtual visit to the zoo with his grandparents. The photographer had obviously taken great pleasure in immortalizing these animals. The pictures were swarming, each one more extravagant than the other, in

front of Mahai's eyes. These marvelous animals had lived one day on earth. Of course, she imagined them in a completely different landscape, exuberant with the variety of immense trees and ferns pointing their serrated leaves towards the sky. Huge multicolored flowers colonizing the ground and offering their nectar to bees and hummingbirds. Zebras could finally use their camouflage stripes in the middle of this colorful picture. The wildebeest, on the other hand, would hide their ugly heads so as not to be a source of mockery. The peacocks and other parrots, as for them, would strut in this singular jungle without any threat of jaguar or hungry boa. Mahai, perched on the back of the familiar giraffe, would have an enviable vantage point to observe these scenes teeming with life. She would be the queen of this lost world. No more laws of nature, eat or be eaten, she would impose her own law, harmony, without fear of the other, without the need for survival. No more barriers, no more enclosures, life in total freedom but also the freedom to do good and to respect one's neighbor, however different he may be. A series of photos of a group of pink flamingos, particularly successful, made the girl come back. Their graceful flight, just above the surface of the fishy swamp with the tips of their legs brushing the water, competes with their shimmering color. From a distance the group of pink birds looks like a field of flowers from which the occasional petal is lifted by the warm wind of the trade winds. Mahai's soul also escaped with them to unknown lands where life is fertile with color and form. The paintings of the mad painter, the sorcerer, followed one another without giving Mahai's brain a break. The enormity of the animal photographed afterwards left her speechless. And why not? Sitting comfortably on the back of a docile elephant, she travels through this wild fauna, which is not a wild fauna. She dominates the animal kingdom, she dominates the lowly earthly world. And why shouldn't the dairy cows, recognizable by their pretty black and white coat, be able to live in peace in this oasis of greenery. The purebreds would compete with the jaguars, to see who would finally be the fastest on earth. The friendly tigress could come to the aid of the fawn that lost its mother and protect it from the cold. And what about the conciliatory goat offering her milk willingly to the cubs that have been orphaned by a stroke of fate. Mahai had no notion of the wild or the domestic, of endangered animals on a constantly growing list, of animals raised and exploited in appalling conditions to feed man, of forests ravaged by the hand of man, of oceans containing more plastics and other hydrocarbons than marine animals swimming freely. Mahai was transported to a magical world that suffered no ills, that was healthy and pure like her. She had the hope that one day this idyllic world would come back to life on her beloved land. Leaving the inheritance behind, she lay down on her stomach, completely lost in her extrapolations as a pre-teen girl. Seeing her future child freed from his hood, playing with a mischievous cub or a pink piglet as a playmate on a carpet of green and fat grass. What Mahai didn't know was that this friendship between the species could not be a law. It didn't matter to her... the animals lived through the little girl's imagination, flying, swimming, in the open air without constraint, all part of a natural balance newly reinvented by her. The migrations, the seasons came back with the wind, announcing the regenerating rains, the cold or the waves, as well as the productivity of nature... "nothing is true...the wind is dry... the earth is dry... and one day your heart will be dry too... nananinanere... The animals are trapped in the test tubes... nananinanere..." "shut up.... My heart is filled with the love of my parents and friends and one day these animals will come back to life...", Mahai suddenly stood up and ran upstairs to

join her father, as if she had a threatening beast on her tail. With good humour, Rocellie invited the 13 to meditate for a moment and to communicate their feelings freely; only the embarrassment was palpable. Rocellie was a middle-aged woman with a still relatively round face and small dark eyes: the ideal mother-in-law, very pleasant and with a heart for others. She wanted to help her friend who had given so much of herself the day before. It was Nadia who broke the silence to the great surprise of Kirah who didn't like her very much, under her false airs of young girl, Kirah suspected her of being without faith nor law and of lacking altruism, but she was protective and finally perhaps echoed the feelings of a part of the population... "Leondra, I understood yesterday the feeling that animated you towards your companion, but let me express some doubts, which I think are well founded. Nadia was not at all voluble as usual but rather full of deference. "Your companion, thanks to your generosity, your perseverance and your love, has chosen to take the path of goodness. But we have the right to ask ourselves which path Yvanoé will take?" Her circular gaze was deceptively compassionate, and she drove the point home. "And will the protector who will be in charge of this individual be as reliable as you?" The defiance was clearly on display this time. "What if his natural inclinations are stronger and he re-offends? Do we really want to take on that responsibility? How would a failure to integrate into Kokazia be perceived? All my life as a woman, I will wonder if I made the right choice in letting the tiger out of the bag. I don't trust this sentencing system, the risks are great and our reputation is at stake." Here we go. Her real motivation is what the people of Kokazia will think of us and her, thought kirah. "To be rehabilitated, to find a job, to make new friends, maybe even a family, is this doing justice to Xena, no I don't think so. Of course, she will be relieved not to meet him anymore, but we are offering Yvanoé the adventure, and Xena will have to stay at the crime scene... " Léondra didn't even have time to answer when Nadia resumed: "I'm not only going to criticize this system, but I'm going to submit you another possible sanction, which I know will not be to everyone's taste, but which has the merit of reconciling several aspects of this delicate matter. The castration... " She couldn't go any further, all the protectors started to react, they had remained quite wise until now, but now, a hubbub of comments, surprise and irritation prevented Nadia from pushing her point of view further. Léondra had to intervene to calm everyone down. "Please, Nadia, continue, we are all intrigued by your proposal" "Thank you, Leondra" she said humbly, taking a breath. "Particular circumstances have pushed men to their limits. The planetary overpopulation pushed us to transform our constitution and we became, all of us GMO. Did we have a choice, no... It is our responsibility to take exemplary measures, to do justice to Xena, to protect the female gender and not to reject our problems on another population which did not ask anything. I know that this implies that this young man, if he changes fundamentally, will not be able to have descendants and that this decision is irreversible. But sometimes the right decisions can hurt..." Nadia was referring to the fact that the genetic transformation of women made more than one suffer psychologically, despite the number of years that separated us from this decision. The silence had settled down, the brains in turmoil were trying to see where was the flaw of an implacable reasoning. "And I will go even further, if Yvanoé accepts this solution of his own free will, he will be able to restore his image within our society, he will no longer be considered as an outcast but as a courageous person who has a sense of responsibility and who, by his choice, protects his community. And let's not forget that we

will also strengthen our dominant position in front of a male fringe that remains virulent against the supremacy of women. Basically we will silence our detractors and scare them at the same time." So there it smells the political manipulation where I don't know, thought Kirah, Nadia got a little inflamed and therefore a little exposed. Would she apply for a position to the right of Léondra? It's true that Rocellie only has this position because of her age. She only follows her friend, here we have shocking and concrete proposals, Nadia is gaining points... Kirah didn't know whether to be afraid or to applaud... Castration was a practice that in the past was used a lot against animals that proliferated and became threatening for the survival of other species or simply threatening for the well being of men. Was Yvanoé a pest? For the women perhaps, but he was so young he could still change. The agitation, generated by these words, incited Léondra to order a pause. Groups were forming to discuss together the merits of Nadia's proposal. Guillauma approached Kirah with concern. "What do you think? It's attractive, but it's also shocking, isn't it?" "That's why it's clever of Nadia, she'll be able to know who is for and who is against her project, she divided the assembly, and you know that to divide is to rule better..." "You think she has ambitions?" asked Guillauma incredulous ... "I don't think so, I'm sure. Indeed she had crystallized the attention of all on her, she was radiant, she was whirling in the middle of her sisters to satisfy their curiosity about this thesis. But Kirah thought that her hour of glory had not arrived yet, she had not said her last word... Nadia's lack of humility was her weak point... she would use it when the time came, but now it was better to stay back and let her drink the full cup... As for the measure proposed by her colleague, because it had to be called that, she had a twinge in the pit of her stomach at the physical idea of castration. If Cole had to undergo such a mutilation, it would be terrible. Their wild carnal relations would be affected... The prospect sent a chill down her spine... it went to the heart of masculinity... Beyond certain well-founded divergences, it was necessary to recognize that the man and the woman were complementary and that finally the woman also needed the man to live. But this admission was not very popular and it was better to keep this feeling secret. Cole's caresses were sorely missed by Kirah who would have snuck out for a few hours to find herself snuggled up in his warm arms... A simple note on the top table informed Mahai that his father would be gone for a while, he had to help out a friend to whom he was indebted. Mahai hoped it wasn't the debt from the pendant she had chosen the day before. Her father was physically strong and she found that many took advantage of that, and then he was also too kind and didn't know how to say no, even if he didn't have time, he would go out of his way, to help anyway. Damn, Mahai was angry with herself for getting up so late, she would have liked to have a little chat with him. She had a frugal breakfast before going out to see if her friend Cassie was in the square or at her house. She wanted to carve animals in the rock, there is no lack of rock for that, more paper certainly, but rocks to carve there is only to bend down to pick them up ... Past the shock, the idea of castration was making its way. The arguments made sense and satisfied many critics, but was it a measure worthy of the sensitivity of the protectors, that was the dilemma that the decision raised. Kirah had also noticed that some of them, very sensitive, did not share the enthusiasm of Nadia and her friends. Was it possible to gain humanity by taking a measure that was once adopted for animals? Was the earth so sick that it drove men crazy? Humanity had to take such unnatural measures that it was now denatured. The red line had been crossed. Considering the castration of a man,

could finally be understood and accepted despite an exacerbated sensitivity. Women no longer had a choice and had to exercise their power fully in order not to fall back into the old ways. Perhaps it was necessary to eradicate the evil at the root, or rather it was necessary to cut the branches of the sick tree so that it would survive in its entirety? The thirteen were to reform the circle of discussion but one could feel the fear in the eyes and in the hearts... what was in store for us next? Kirah was on the lookout, we had to be very careful and expect everything. But against all odds Nadia lowered her head and didn't want to put oil on the fire. Too bad Kirah will have to wait to fight with her. The blinding white light made the young blue eyes squint, the place was not completely deserted, the two elders often met there to discuss before the medinade ceremony. But apart from their presence the place was livid, no trees, no flowers, no stray dogs or lazy cats, nothing, emptiness, sand and wind. His gaze instinctively went towards his friend's house, nothing could betray the presence of the latter, no half-open window letting float thin and light curtains or a source of light coming from a masterly tassel chandelier, nothing... life was fleeing. Then her mind, like an automatic self-defense system, conjured up a huge hippo crossing the square with its heavy, nonchalant step. This vision brought a smile to the child's face and he let himself be guided in this imaginary safari, the fierce gazelles were following closely, but in the shadow of a cave entrance a panther was lying in wait, scanning with its beautiful feline eyes the slightest movement of the herd... when the grouped flight of pigeons distracted the flight of the frightened zebras... It was the moment that a pretty little cat chose to rub against Mahai's bare legs, she felt the brushing of its fur against her rare and fine blond hairs. She would have so much liked to have a simple little companion to caress, to hug, to see playing with a light ray. "But we took everything from you, nananinanere... you can't even play with a cat, nananinanere....". "Stop, go away, ugly voice, I can't hear you, I'm not listening to you anymore. Mahai put his hands to his ears, what was happening to him, what was that voice, what was it. And her mother was not there to explain or to reassure her, nor was her father... Mahai was starting to panic, her heart was racing and her hands were clammy, she was frantically looking at the square... terribly empty... "Empty as your brain, nananinaner..." "I'm going crazy, I see imaginary animals, I hear voices in my head,... quickly we must go to the adults, the little voice will be silent. His steps accompanied his thought with the hope that this remedy works... "Your father is gone, he had to do something. He warned us, you can stay with us if you want" Barone's voice was warm and reassuring. Mahai's head swiveled in the direction of her friend's home. "And no, Cassie isn't here either, she followed her mother early this morning; she's old enough to start her apprenticeship, just like you. Mahai was overwhelmed, she was really alone. Barone understood the child's distress and came to take her by the shoulders. You're not alone, we're here, aren't we Taji?" "For sure, and there's no shortage of work, come with us, Kamel will be awake soon and keep you company." "Take a bite of Halva first, it will cheer you up right away." Barone must have been a caring mother and she must have been looking forward to being a grandmother... Mahai gave a warm smile to her adoptive grandparents... "You know, my mother was also very busy with her responsibilities as Moktar, I didn't see her often, but at the same time I was very proud of her. It is an honor to serve the community. It implies constraints but it is for the good of all, I would not have dreamed of a better job, my life has been beautiful..." Barone's eyes were gone. This confidence made Mahai perplexed, she didn't ask for so much, was she so proud

to become a protector one day... not sure. Accepting her mother's judgement first, then the community's, she was not very happy about it. Was she really strong enough to take over? Mahai had doubts about her ability to meet everyone's demands. And while Cassie had her mother's trust, she didn't quite have it. Lately, her mother had kept her away from her thoughts, from her problems that were troubling her. If she had confidence in her, wouldn't she have confided in her torments? No, she preferred to remain secret and distant. Mahai was hypersensitive and what affected her family touched her directly in the heart, perhaps they weren't completely aware of it... Barone watched the young girl from the corner of his eye, focused on her new culinary task. Having a little girl like this would be nothing but happiness: Mahai was pleasant, well-behaved, endearing, she had no worries about her future. Did her mother know how lucky she was to have such a qualitative heiress, not sure... Barone saw her imaginary granddaughter close to her, giving her all her love, and passing on all her knowledge. At the same time, she realized that Mahai had a deeply sad face, which broke her heart. It looked like a little bird that had fallen out of its nest, completely distraught and desperate. Barone only wanted to take the chick under her wing to protect it from this cold and hostile world and at the same time she wondered how such a despair could have been nestled in the heart of such a tender and fragile girl, because her fragility was not in doubt in the eyes of Barone who had the experience of her contemporaries... Zenie swallowed her saliva with difficulty, she was searching deep inside for the strength to speak up, in front of her colleagues who were in a way also her adversaries. She had a few friends though, Mazine, whose eyes she met, Noël, who also had a boy the same age as hers. They had in common a sensitivity which did not feed on popularity, they preferred to pass unnoticed and to make their task with rigour and competence. Of the three, she was perhaps the most courageous and felt it her duty to make their voices heard. Nadia was an upstart and her attitude and ideas were not at all in line with her way of seeing and experiencing the world. Raising the conscience of the protectors was paramount and deciding with foresight was her doctrine, no place for sensationalism and shocking directives. Someone had to put Nadia in her place... and yet she wasn't the type to go out of her mind at all. She swallowed her saliva, a bowl of dolo would have been useful at that very moment for Zenia... So she intervened sincerely: "Ladies protectors, I think our emotions are getting out of hand, we must keep a cool head. Shouldn't we show a little compassion, considering Yvanoé's age. His youth does not excuse everything, but it would not be extraordinary that in this case the clumsiness played a dominating role. And afterwards passions were unleashed for fear of a return to barbaric practices belonging to the past... You will agree that the results of our education system are positive, even if in this rare case we can only note that we may not be able to eradicate certain violent impulses. But aren't we exaggerating when we radically propose a castration, isn't this another form of violence? Violence against violence never leads to anything good and our planetary history has proven this to us many times..." Zénie was making points, little by little she was refocusing the debate to another level, without raising her voice or getting angry. Kirah was touched and obviously she wasn't the only one... if her reasoning stayed there, Léondra's proposal would certainly be adopted. "Nevertheless I agree with Nadia... I don't think that exiling Yvanoé to Kokazia is a viable solution. Not seeing the problem anymore does not solve it. To make these people bear our responsibilities would not be very glorious for our people." So now everyone was puzzled...

but what was she getting at? Kirah was on the defensive by instinct. This little lady seemed completely harmless though. A face with soft and fine lines, a discreet but charming smile and what to say about her soft and brown hair that made more than one jealous, the whole giving a feeling of accessibility and openness to others. "Also we must not forget the responsibility of her parents as well as ours as educators... how could we make an individual, radical and inhumane decision with all these shared responsibilities..." good question thought Kirah. "I'm not going to offer you a quick fix or a sensational solution," Zenia boldly turned to Nadia, the implication was quite clear. "I think that hard work is a sanction that cannot be criticized. Working under the patronage of our most prominent workers, like Paula, Victorine, Neon the son of Taji or with one of the fossilers like Armando for example, should largely calm his physical ardor. As these hard jobs are done outside the city or at very unsocial hours, there is little chance that Xena will be in contact with this individual. Moreover, the physical constraints being very difficult, his punishment will be all the more exercised. The traditional method of punishment by work could comfort and a fringe of the population and a fringe of the protectors, but it was not for all that a very original and very seductive proposal in terms of modernity; Zenia would she make followers? Not sure... But she courageously continued her idea to the end: "Finally, a close supervision on our part could silence the dissatisfied and our responsibility would be taken in the repair of our mistake. As for Yvanoé's parents, an awareness is necessary and sanctions are also necessary..." Zénie was looking around the audience and in front of these inexpressive and reserved faces she felt alone with herself and with her speech. It was as if she had tried to convince the void. Nobody was speaking, she felt like jumping into a mouse hole and disappearing... Mahai was no longer listening to the hubbub produced by Barone and Taji. While kneading the tapalapa, she wondered if the solitude of the day would be there forever... The animals were no more. One day her parents would no longer be there to help her, to love her, she was already sad about it. The awareness of this future loneliness suddenly frightened her. The ones we love, just like the beautiful things, nature, animals, clean air and clear water, should not disappear... "Nananinanere... everything eventually fades away... nananinanere" "Shut up, the sun will keep rising for someone" "Are you so sure? nananinanere" I have to find a way to silence that voice... "But I have no intention of leaving, nanani, I'm comfortable here, warm in your head, nananere..." "lalala, lala, lala, I can't hear you anymore, lalala, lala, lala,..." "You can still sing, I'm still here, nanani, nananere..." " lalala, lala, lala,..."

Chapter 10

"Dedda!" Taji had just enough time to catch up with his grandson who was throwing himself around his neck. "Kamelito, how are you this morning?" Taji was beaming, his gray complexion was gone, his grandson was a ray of sunshine that lit up his old man's day. No one asked the elders to do men's work anymore. This saddened him a lot and plunged him into a destructive melancholy, Kamel saved his life without knowing it. Those who no longer had a place in the community work were finally pushed aside. Being the reflection, the mirror, of what was to become of the active men and women, the elderly were frightening

and it was preferable to pretend to see them. They were tolerated, but the working people had little tolerance for them. Their role was limited to taking care of the children and organizing the medinades. These two functions, which were essential to the balance of the daily life of each family and therefore of the whole community, were neither recognized nor valued. But Taji took his side, in silence, without claiming. He clung to the happiness that Kamel gave him. "Here, go and see Mahai, who is quite alone this morning..." he said, pointing to the young girl. Mahai turned her head kindly at the announcement of her name but was disheartened at the sight of her future companion. "Oh no I don't want to keep this baby, I want to see Cassie and my father, but not Kamel, not him." The teenager was dejected. "This can only happen to me... bad day..." she thought. With no other alternative, she forced herself to take the young boy under her wing. She, who aspired to see and discuss with the adults... As for Kamel, he was very happy and proud to be able to play with his big neighbor who taught him a lot of things with kindness most of the time. But the toddler was not fooled and was well aware of his scowl, he would be very small to be accepted. "Well come on, what do you want to play? Honor the youngest..." she said ironically. "I don't know what will please you..." Kamel was trying to be magnanimous so as not to offend his playmate, who seemed to be just starting to relax. Mahai settled down on the ground to play marbles without taking his eyes off the mouths of each alley that led to the square. Neon was the first one, not surprisingly, his son ran in his direction. Neon shared this enthusiasm with happiness, as did Mahai, smiling and relieved to be rid of her burden. The smell of cooking food was beginning to fill the small square. Around the fireplace, life was getting livelier with the arrival of Sonia. In front of these family pictures Mahai was getting impatient, neither her father nor her friend Cassie were approaching. The tapalapas followed one another and were superimposed to the rhythm of Barone's skilful hands, who was chatting with his daughter in a complicit way. The preparation of the meal was a real spectacle well orchestrated by the elders. Taji was in charge of the fire where a pot was singing thanks to the bubbling of the yams. Neon and Kamel were playing with attention and affection. Noise, noise, coming from an alley... ah, no, it was the whole Alma family, so dazzling in their new clothes. There was something to be jealous of... Will was proudly walking in front, a real rooster... Poor Hissa, poor because of her clothes and her position in the family, was trailing behind, as if she had heard some bad news or as if she too thought that it was a bad day... Mahai let herself be carried away by these new streams of words that integrated the music of the culinary noises. The soft melody produced by the sounds of this daily ritual should have had a lullaby effect on Mahai's young ears, but nothing could soothe, make her sleep or ease her vigilance. The curtains would soon be lowered, given the number of arrivals, much to Mahai's dismay as he panicked at the thought of no longer being able to watch the entrances to the square. When a female laughter resounded in one of the alleys. Two friendly figures emerged from the darkness. Everyone quickly recognized Hector and Raca who were obviously having a joyful conversation. This rapprochement was not to Neon's taste, nor Barone's, who did not appreciate his new son-in-law. As they approached the table, the two acolytes stopped their familiarity to join their respective companions, who welcomed them without smiling. This situation was beginning to affect the atmosphere between the adults of the medinade, but Mahai, who didn't care, waited for the absent ones with more and more irritation. The curtains fell like a knife, Mahai was blind. The guests were

eating while Mahai could not swallow a bite. She wanted to eat with her father... to watch his hands grasp a tapalapa... to see him smile after drinking a cup or two... to respond to a joke with another... to share this moment with him..., without her father the medinade was meaningless. She wanted to disappear. "What's the point of eating, nana nana nana...no desire...no need to live...nana nana..." Ah, no, not you, a real pest that voice. "I'm good company... nanananani... I'm all you have left... nananinana..." I'm going to eat a little, maybe that will silence that damn voice. "What do you think... I'm not going to give you a break...nanananani..." All of a sudden a curtain let Alise appear, "saved I am" thought Mahai. Cassie was following her closely, but even closer was Talia. She too, motherless for a few days, was following the tabib in her exercise. Alise was training her at the same time as her own daughter and obviously considered her as such. Although the two girls came to sit near Mahai, their attitude was not very open about the guests of the medinade and they continued to share their mutual ideas about this first morning, without caring in the least about their surroundings. Mahai immediately took offense. The wait had been so long that she didn't know what she wanted to say to her friend, who was still conversing with Talia. The treatments, the pathological cases, the diagnoses, the remedies, all this jargon that was unpleasant to Mahai's ears, seemed to fascinate Cassie as much as Talia, the beautiful and tall Talia. Their complicity hurt. "You're jealous... you're jealous... they're getting along well together... it's nice to see this new friendship... you're jealous..." "Shut up!" shouted Mahai. Surprised, Cassie deigned to speak to him: "What? What were you saying?" "No, no, it wasn't for you..." Too late, the red in her cheeks betrayed her clumsy words. She plunged into her plate, without adding a single word, which she was afraid to say in the wrong way. Everything in her was confused. After all, Cassie had a right to have another friend. But did she deserve to have her friend turn away from her? Was she no longer worthy of the friendship? But what had she done wrong to deserve this? Nothing; of course she wasn't interested in medicine. So how to save this friendship under these conditions. She felt as if she was watching her childhood friend, her lifelong friend, take the high-speed train to adulthood and she was leaving her standing on the platform with a rattle in her hands and a bib around her neck. Her spirits were low and her father was not coming... "All alone...you're all alone...your friend doesn't love you anymore...nana...neither does your dad..." Cassie was no longer paying any attention to Mahai and was transfixed by the interest of the taller, more mature Talia. She understood that the health of the spirits depends on the health of the bodies and therefore their respective future functions would be intimately linked. Mahai made a desperate attempt at rapprochement: "Isn't your father here, Cassie?" Cassie looked around the room and confirmed. "And neither is yours, they must still be together" "possible" "He doesn't change friends..." thought Mahai while holding back from making this well-felt reflection towards Cassie. Jealousy invaded her, the betrayal of her sincere friendship tightened her insides. It wasn't fair, she had done nothing to deserve this... She couldn't confide her pain for fear of being considered a spoiled baby. So she had to build a wall, a bulwark between her sensitive little heart and the destructive attacks coming from outside... nobody really knew her, really understood her. From now on she would face, alone, with a facade smile and would keep her feelings inside her, deep inside her, so that nobody could ever betray her again and crush her heart. With this resolution and disappointment, the girl stood up, "Where are you going Mahai? Aren't you staying with us?" asked Cassie, who

sensed her friend's confusion. She realized, all at once, that she had abandoned her best friend. "No, I'm going home, my father will probably be back soon and I prefer to wait for him at home" she answered with a tender smile. "Cassie's gaze went to Mahai's plate, which was still full. "Yes, see you later" lied Mahai who had no intention of joining her. "Anyway she doesn't need me anymore and doesn't care about my friendship, no more baby games, she's a big girl now playing with a new Big Friend." Mahai's thoughts were bitter. She was wallowing in her pain, and did not want to share it, nor to soothe it... This pain was going to accompany her, not let her go, and become her new best friend, faithful and honest... Barone followed the girl with his eyes, visibly fleeing from the medinade, shoulders down and head in, arms crossed over his budding chest, refusing any sign of affection. The excess of hormone, at this age, could explain her attitude, but to dwell on black ideas can divert from the life. The wind inflating and deflating the protective hangings, seemed to give heartbeats to the medinade. And at the same time the monster became alive and swallowed the girl, making her disappear for good. Barone, worried, promised herself to take care of this bird that had fallen from the nest. "I miss Talia" "Who are you telling? I miss Mahai too, I wonder what she is doing and if everything is okay." The two worried moms nibbled without appetite. On the one hand the heated discussions with their colleagues, on the other their family concerns, Guillauma and Kirah were living under tension. Kirah was also thinking about Cole and the temptresses who were lurking around him. His youth and beauty attracted females like sugar attracts wasps; she was so afraid of losing him. Her reason told her that it was only in the order of things and that one day, sooner or later, their liaison would end. She wouldn't replace him, he would be her last apprentice, and Cole was irreplaceable anyway... Her stomach tightened even more at the prospect, only the sweet dates could find their way into her throat... Guillauma must have been thinking about Lee-Roy or Malik, too, who knows. Confidences on this subject were delicate, Guillauma was her neighbor, colleague and friend, but she was not at all prone to gossip. Besides, Cole was part of Kirah's secret garden and had no desire to communicate her feelings to anyone... "Tell me, don't you find all the proposals rather violent, to say the least, for a people as moderate as ours?" Guillauma dropped the personal subject. "Yes, I do. Minorities always try to express themselves more loudly when the majority remains silent, we must not let ourselves be influenced too much by avant-garde ideas. I was just thinking about Léondra's first proposal. Banishment is already a very strong sanction. To lose one's roots, to be filled with nostalgia, with regrets, is not a gift in itself. We will disrupt his life, his habits. He will lose his friends at the age of adolescence. His psychological construction will be marked forever. The fact that he will never be able to return to the community where he was born and grew up will be a definitive heartbreak. It is a decision fraught with irreparable consequences. "It's true you're right Kirah, being stateless tomorrow is as hard to bear as being an outcast today. But the safety of the women of Kokazia remains in question and is a point not to be neglected." Kirah remained silent for a few moments, only to resume in a voice even lower than she was. "We could consider a hormonal implant, which would prevent any temptation. And we would leave it up to the Kokazian women to remove it when they see fit." Guillauma suspended his gesture, the date at his fingertips not knowing if it would end up being eaten or not. "This solution could satisfy many of our sisters, you should share it with them all." "Let's not rush into anything, the feelings are still raw." "But just simple and practical solutions, like this one,

would help to ease some of the troubled minds today." His gaze, accompanying his head in a circular motion, noted that clans seemed to be forming around the table. "Kirah's timid answer did not satisfy Guillauma, but she felt that it was not necessary to insist; her friend was glaring at Nadia. Guillauma had noticed the animosity between the two women. Nadia counted on Kali's support, who was in a big discussion with her, and they were joined, without much surprise, by Fara and Linéa, the youngest, the most impressionable and the most brainless in Kirah's eyes. Nevertheless, the group, thus formed of four members, could be dangerous if their influence grew. The contagion of these extremely seductive ideas had to be taken seriously and above all circumscribed quickly. On the right side of the table, Luce, for her part, had approached Léondra and Rocellie, the two matriarchal values of the assembly. Opposite them, Zénie was talking with her friend Mazine; and Noêm was listening attentively to these new comrades. Even if Zénie had not received much support during her intervention, this new proposal had to be studied with great care. Kirah could see Neon's face, he had a most unpleasant job and did not want his son Kamel to succeed him; having help with Yvanoé would relieve him but working with an outcast would not help him shine in society... Young, strong arms to work with Paula in the repair of the windmills or with Victorine in the maintenance of the solar panels was a productive idea for the company. The teenager could then restore its image, perhaps too much, for some. Armando would offer him an outside job, as hard as he wanted, while keeping a close eye on him. He could even re-educate him without looking like it, and this would be without counting on Léondra who would be in the second line to reassure everyone. Armando seemed like the best choice, and surely would not be likely to refuse. Kirah looked at her old friend, it would be a disavowal of her proposal but at the same time she would keep her face, with a leading role in this affair. So in summary, Zenie's ideas, plus Leondra's role would bring six votes against Nadia's four, and if Kirah and Guillauma, as well as Riquel who was getting closer to them, allied themselves with Zenie, an overwhelming majority would reduce Nadia's proposal to nothing... Kirah rubbed her hands together and looked forward to it. Guillauma may have been her closest friend around the table, but she preferred to keep this introspection to herself. To her left sat Riquel, Kirah liked her and this physical closeness probably revealed a more spiritual closeness. Among the young generation, Riquel was the most promising element in her eyes. She was curious to know a little about his point of view and especially his feelings about this unusual situation: "So Riquel, what do you think of the proposals that have been made so far?" The girl turned to her interrogator. "I admit that I am very perplexed, in every choice there is a good and a bad side." "That's true, but if you were forced to make a quick choice today, which solution seems fairer to you?" Riquel was embarrassed, she had put on her red ribbon, but in reality she had not come with any decision in mind, she just wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. She wouldn't tell Kirah, or her mother, of course. She was thinking about Yvanoé and Xéna, only 5 years younger than her, why had things gone wrong between them? Why had Yvanoé done this? What was Xena thinking today? It all looked like a simple youthful mistake. It was hard for her innocent eyes to condemn two young victims of perhaps simply clumsy acts... She took a deep breath to answer as if she herself had to answer for her actions: "I realize that high justice is a serious matter and that decisions must be carefully considered. The proposals made are, in my opinion, too inhumane for a teenager. Perhaps a re-education would be

more humane." Kirah understood very well the reluctance of the very young woman to be hard and without mercy, in front of acts that could be understandable. These words confirmed that Riquel would not follow Nadia's thesis. "If you were in Xena's place would you want Yvanoé's punishment to be only a psychological follow-up?" "No, I concede that..." Riquel refocused on the food, which seemed quite bland outside of her joyful meditation and without her mother by her side. She was forced to admit that a more severe punishment was needed for the victim and the population, but she would take it reluctantly. Xena was surely traumatized by this affair, covered with shame, and perhaps she should not leave her house anymore. From the traumas are born convictions, reactions, ideas that can be positive. Man builds himself with and around these constraints. Unfortunately, some people take more negative paths. Wouldn't Yvanoé's bad action be an unconscious reaction to the bad treatment his parents gave him as a child, by rejecting him? Riquel also felt that this trial, with its complexities, would sharpen her knowledge of the human being and her knowledge of herself as well. How far could her compassion go? What was she willing to accept for the good of her community? She had already understood, despite her young age, that life was full of surprises and lessons, that she had to deal with adversity and keep moving forward. In the midst of this trial she might find feelings she was not necessarily prepared for, her sensitivity would be challenged, but she was sure to gain experience, which would be beneficial for her future... The meal taken together could not be considered as a medinade, it lacked the human warmth, the laughter of the children, the jokes of the friendly neighbors, the solidarity and conviviality. After the meal, it was customary for the protectors to withdraw and get away from each other to meditate. Kirah liked this moment of pure solitude. The agora had the privilege of having a patio decorated with cacti and succulents, an oasis of greenery and color when rare flowers appeared, in the middle of a mineral, cold and hostile world. Not a leaf floated in the wind, not a branch bent, the vegetal rigidity froze this Zen garden as if time had no hold, no change, no season. For the time being, it would serve as a refuge for Kirah, who was fleeing her community. Life in an enclosed space was not her forte, she admitted to being a little antisocial for a protector, it was the last straw, but she felt that it was in her constitution, in her genes. She breathed deeply, closed her eyes, leaned against a stone that would soon warm up to her body. She was not the first one to take refuge in this precise place, the stone which supported her weight was smooth as a pebble worn by thousands of buttocks stranding there to rest. No noise, not a bird, not a fountain, lifeless vegetation. The distant sound of windmills and wind rushing through the solar panels reminded her that just a few steps away she had a small but comfortable home, where her daughter was waiting, her partner, and in another direction... there was Cole, waiting for her... she hoped with all her heart...

Chapter 11

Panic-stricken and relieved at the same time, Mahai rushed through the entrance and pressed herself against the wall. Her trembling legs couldn't support her anymore, she let herself slide against the cool wall and ended up prostrate on the ground. Her eyes closed and she made a huge effort to reason with herself: her body was no longer responding normally,

she ordered her lungs to open and bring oxygen to her brain, while at the same time instructing her to slow down her heart rate. She wanted to convince herself that in her home, safe from all the nastiness of the world, she would find inner peace. A quick glance confirmed that her father had not returned, nothing had moved since his departure for the medinade. He would probably only reappear in the evening, busy outside. Mahai was not upset about this. She felt she was old enough to be on her own and didn't need to be behind the patriarch's steps anymore. What mattered to her at the moment was the visceral distance the young teenager needed between herself and Cassie, her so-called childhood friend... Loneliness, there is only that good and true... no betrayal in solitude... Relieved and angry at the same time, relieved to be within her walls and angry at herself: how could she have been so wrong in this friendship that finally had no value in Cassie's eyes; shocked by her naivety and stupidity, disappointed by her friend's behavior; Mahai was moving in a thick fog that truncated all her perceptions. The cold wall against her back reminded her that she also had a body; the central family table seemed to send her welcoming, stable, sturdy and reliable signs. The wide, luxurious wooden board, for this interior, had been there in her grandfather's time and would be there to welcome her child when it needed to be changed. This old object, very practical and concrete, this sure value in short, inspired her confidence and respect and brought her back to the family world, warm and reassuring. Just like the inheritance that became a faithful friend of her solitude... Mahai thought. She immediately went downstairs to get it, but would consult it upstairs on the table, for once; the half-open curtain of the entrance would give her some natural light and she had little chance of being disturbed at this time of the day. No one outside of her family had consulted the relic, it wasn't really a secret but rather intimate, her mother had never forbidden her to show it, it was rather intrinsic. The grimoire was "Vidal" and put him in the heart. "He, at least, will not betray me", her thought was expressed aloud in spite of herself. The innocent colored images became comforting and hopeful, but at the same time nostalgic. Mahai had to convince herself each time that these were her ancestors. Displaying these big smiles in the sun, in the wind, in the sight of everyone, was the expression of pure freedom, her ancestors represented the last free generations, without protections, without hoods, natural, non-GMO... Freedom, elusive and primordial, using it every day without impunity, had finally disappeared: travel was more than limited, human relations restricted to their strict minimum, all movements outside the city were conditioned by the polluted elements. This trampled freedom had created their living condition. Mahai, far from her fundamentalist considerations, exulted in the freedom of Kom, whom she admired. To differentiate the three children of the siblings she had given them names she liked, they must have had them after all, and why not... she had not admitted it to her mother who would not have understood her futile step. So the biggest of the bunch would be called Kom. At the same time, the inheritance only related the childhood years of her ancestors and Mahai, pragmatic, wondered what their profession had been as adults; all the predictions of the young girl were more far-fetched than the others, she imagined them in turn, camel breeder or car driver or maybe better car builder, swimmer, skier or working in a circus, in a zoo or maybe photographer after all they seemed to have a lot of fun in front of the camera, so why not behind it. Had they been happy, surrounded, loved, had their jobs fulfilled them? These imaginary lives made her travel far more than any aircraft or virtual network, and she needed

to escape and feel that she could escape her narrow world. In a clever play of perspective, Kom held the sun in her hands, taking it like a basketball in a fake dunk. The colors of the sea and the sky literally merged and the star disappeared between the two, as if swallowed by an invisible mouth, still joined, at the limit of the two elements. Mahai had never seen a sunset and would surely never see one, only the fossilers crossed the border of the ramparts, but they could not admire the panorama, otherwise they would be blinded. Heads down they walked with difficulty in a hostile and deadly environment, swept by violent and harmful winds. On the same beach, Uris, his youngest son, was also playing with the sphere as if to project it far away with his hand, while Tao, the youngest, was finishing the day's descent by miming a masterly kick like a famous footballer of the time. The twilight mocked when she could not admire it anymore, was it funny? Mahai, perplexed, found herself on that beach at the other end of the earth, admiring this everyday and banal magic, sitting on the still warm sand and her feet refreshed by the small waves that faithfully came back to tickle her toes... She would have been free to enjoy this scene, which today remains only frozen on the film... Free to feel the iodized air of the great turquoise blue, free to feel the water escaping from her, free to enjoy a beautiful auburn native with island accents... From beauty came hope and joy, the heritage was beautiful, but all that vanished beauty troubled her feelings. She could not help but make the connection with her poor little village, which had nothing beautiful in her eyes, only the glass walls of Eden granted a vision of beauty, offered by the original nature, even if it was very controlled and monitored. Beauty had entrenched itself around the last bastion of life, as if in order to survive it too had to refocus on the essential. The human production concentrated on the survival of the species neglected, unfortunately, the beauty of art, of creation, of aestheticism. To make life more beautiful in short... What a bitter observation Mahai made, losing little by little, piece by piece her childhood innocence; after the betrayal of her friend, the betrayal of her ancestors, no, it wasn't possible... How could she, little Mahai, contribute to find the beauty, the freedom, impossible, she was not capable of it... What stone could she add to the building of her lineage, what could she offer to her ancestors? She did not feel capable of marking her time, of leaving a testimony, as the inheritance contributed to it in its way... She would be a protector and nothing more, she would assume her role with empathy and devotion, she loved her people, her village, her parents; she had the intimate conviction that she could not do more for humanity... "Ah, you finally understand that you are insignificant... nananinaner..." "You again, I didn't ask you anything" "Well, no, of course not... but I'm talking to you... nananinanere... so you're still alone..." "It's okay my father will come back" "You hope so but it's not sure... nanani... what if he doesn't..." "Nonsense, he always comes back" "Do you realize that you are answering me... nananinanere..." "I answer you so that you end up keeping silent" "You answer because you are alone, nananinana..." "Stop, I have nothing to say to you" Closing her eyes Mahai put her hands over her ears and began to sing loudly, then nothing, silence had returned. Her chest was pounding as her eyes rested on the pictures, she didn't want to admire them or understand them anymore, her stomach was churning, she was about to vomit. Since the beginning of the morning she was assailed by so violent feelings, and so contradictory, this invading voice took advantage of her weaknesses and she did not manage any more to make the part of the things; the good, the evil, the conventions and the feelings, all these upheavals weakened the tender child who was exhausted. Her limbs were weary, and further

effort was beyond her strength. She put her arms across the table to leave this prisoner and ugly world, and collapsed into a deep sleep. A pause was necessary, sitting uncomfortably between two sections of panels, Rahain observed his teammate. Equipped, not with hoods, but with hermetic masks just tinted against ultraviolet rays, the faces were then exposed. Paula was sipping the vital liquid supplied by an integrated straw. The head strongly inclined, in front of the blinding panels, in a scrutinizing movement, she saw by there only the work remaining to be carried out so that its external mission is filled. The suit protecting them from the climatic aggressions limited their movements and cancelled out all body forms. Rahain's imagination composed the cuts of Paula's body in this outfit. There was no doubt that the very essence of this hard and demanding work had transformed her female body into a robust, muscular, and somewhat masculine body; but this was not to Rahain's displeasure. She looked at her environment with defiance and was ready for anything, she was not afraid of anything. Her breasts were high and round, her hips very marked let envisage a broad and welcoming basin. Her thighs and her firm and muscular shoulders gave desire to snuggle there. Rahain was under the charm of such a phenomenon that work had forged. She was a manual like him, they had a lot to talk about, especially when it came to putting his imagination to work on repairs. At that moment for Rahain there was no doubt that their physical, psychological, emotional rapprochement was imminent. He was tired of following Kirah's recommendations, Zayar's ideas, the social conventions that prevented him from approaching a woman first, he longed for the freedom to think, to act, to love... But Paula didn't seem to need anyone and had no official companion as her childbearing years advanced. If she pushed him away, he could say goodbye to their friendship, was he really willing to take that risk. Moreover, she had never made any movement or said anything equivocal towards him, how could she do that? Rahain was delicate by nature, always listening to the needs, expectations, especially towards women, he did not want to offend Paula, but the prospect of tasting new flavors, new scents, her mouth, her skin ... The more the male which slumbered in him devoured it of the glance and the more she ignored it, the frustration of the lack of interest castrated its desires. She was always there astride an IPN, drinking the sweet and vitaminized solution provided by her diving suit and concentrated to list the works. His admirer's heart was beating wildly and his lower abdomen was heating up, his sexual urges were going to be unleashed if he didn't take control, while his hands were longing to be in the hollows of those muscular legs. Oh Paula, if you only knew... Rahain looked away and his mind, thinking of something else, Mahai, what are you doing, my little Mahai, I regret having abandoned you, not having warned you the day before, I feel bad. Paula had burst in early in the morning before the day broke, with a touch of urgency in her voice, impossible to resist. How could I say no? A discussion under these conditions was unthinkable, the wind turbines above their heads were so loud that they worked by communicating through gestures. This inaudible break was also inedible, no consistent food, the masks could not be removed without physical damage, the necessary supplies for their chore would be liquid today, and Rahain was not a fan of feeding himself as if he had no more or no teeth yet. He had a nasty feeling of being diminished in the flesh. They were also assisted to breathe and continuously anchored to the basic metal structure because if a gust of wind blew them off they could say goodbye to this world, crushed by the horizontal blades of the wind turbines. Their lives depended on their harnesses, which were connected by

carabiners to the pins sealed along the panels. He was in charge of the heaviest material while Paula, agile, repaired as quickly as possible. While sipping his magic potion, Rahain had trouble worrying about his beloved daughter, at this hour, he was convinced that she was safe in the medina surrounded by her friends who would keep her busy all day. She would not have time to be bored. His gaze returned to the female figure next to him, her large black eyes and generous mouth sending him such erotic signals that of course his thoughts became dirty again despite himself. Rahain felt his will decrease and his desire grow, it was necessary however that he fights against his impulses because it was to her to engage the approach, he was impotent. "What absurd rules... what difference does it make whether I or she is the instigator, when we both agree." And therein lies the rub, Rahain had the impression that Paula was not in the clinic to be approached by anyone, as if her heart was already taken... yet he had no knowledge of it... maybe she has a secret? His glance became more insistent and Paula felt it, so she intimated the resumption of their work of a simple movement of head simultaneously with a vertical movement of her body. And here they were, resuming the way they had abandoned some time earlier, Paula laughed against the wall, Rahain held her in extremis by the hips, their smiling masks crossed and Paula's pulpy lips drew a sincere thanks. Rahain's heart tightened as if he was fifteen years old again, his insides knotted; this day was going to be difficult for the man's body which needed solid food. Grateful, Paula went back to her task but always with the utmost seriousness. Mahai woke up with a very dry throat and her cheek stuck on a picture of Kom, all the past moments of the day came back to her memory in a continuous and intoxicating stream, the absence of her mother, her father, the medenade, the return of Cassie, everything oppressed her when she should have been relaxed by her nap. Life as a grown-up couldn't be like this; her parents seemed to be happy when they had far more responsibility than she did. Her eyes still blurred as she scanned the album in front of her; all those ancestral images no longer made her heart happy, she knew deep down that those days were completely gone and would never come back. The pessimism won her and insinuated itself in her intimate thoughts whereas her age asked only futility and lightness. The trouble that inhabited her became a heavy weight lodged in her entrails, it would be difficult to dislodge now that it was installed. It was necessary that all this remains secret and that nobody notices it. The shame, of not being up to what her mother would demand of her in the future, was rising in her; her beloved role of protector, yes finally, it was only a role to play, as one could see in any street theater; acting, lying, hiding, were good solutions to keep suspicion away. The darkness filled his lungs, his liver, his heart and all his vital organs to completely reach his whole carnal envelope. "Ah, Ah, Ah, I am here, with you, in you, nananinana... instead of you... you have no escape..." The evil one breathed an icy wind in her veins to reach the confines of her frail young body, depriving her of any alternative. She was a prisoner of her dark and noxious thoughts, never again would she laugh at life, never again would she feel the warmth and tenderness to comfort her as before. Her innocence had fled before the enemy, too powerful for her tender thoughts. Her life was tilting towards an endless pit. "You are mine, only mine... nananinana..." Mahai had neither the strength nor the will to fight the little voice, now friend or cancer. But what was going on? Mahai could no longer keep a clear mind. Everything seemed to be changed, affected by thoughts that didn't really belong to her, as if she had completely lost control of her emotions and her desires as a little girl, she

wanted to be a little girl again, to be held and cuddled, who doesn't think about tomorrow, and who has a friend to play with, to laugh and to dream... "mamou where are you? I still need you, I still need you... please... mamou". She rested her head on the inheritance, exhausted, closed her eyes, not wishing to open them again, even the power of her ancestors would not bring her back among the living. Limbo was suffocating her, life was running away... "Mahai, Mahai,... what's going on, Mahai... what's wrong? MAHAI" powerful hands were shaking her trying to bring her back, "Dad, it's you...you're here... Dad,...I don't feel well..." Rahain touched his daughter's forehead, it was burning, she had a fever. He grabbed the fragile, slight body and carried her in his muscular arms, just as one would lift a young bride through the door of her new home, but in the opposite direction. Rahain rushed out, towards the house opposite, that of the tabib, Alise. Phew, she was there. "Alise, Mahai is sick, I found her like this when I came back, do something..." in front of Rahain's stress, which had erupted in the small household without any preliminaries, Alise advised Zayar to take care of his friend in the antechamber, while she would consult the child in what served as her office. Indeed, Mahai had a fever, a lot of fever, she was dehydrated too, she was delirious, her words didn't make any sense, Cassie, close to her, worried, confirmed that the child hadn't eaten during the medinade, and maybe hadn't eaten anything all day, with such a weak organism, a virus could easily get in. She left Cassie on sick duty for a moment to reassure her father, already worried by nature. "Don't worry, it's just a little virus, if you agree I'll keep her tonight, and give her back to you tomorrow morning" Rahain was in a state, he hadn't worried about her all day, he thought she was in good shape, surrounded by her friends, and now he was learning that apart from the beginning of the medinade, nobody had seen her. She was frozen on this album of misfortune, alone and sick, while he thought only of fooling around with another woman than his mother, what a shame... He had failed in his primary duty of caring for his beloved daughter. If it turned out to be more serious than a simple virus or if the virus was too powerful and took him away, he would never recover. He was not in the mood to make these confidences to his best friends, who looked genuinely sorry for him. He agreed to abandon it once again to the expert hands of Alise not without seeing it before leaving, the night was already advanced, and Rahain was broken of tiredness. She was lying on a bed, livid, eyes closed as if to better gather her last forces, almost transparent, without any movement, lifeless, a shiver ran down his back. She is well alive, all the same... his spirit wanted to be convinced of it. He took her hand, caressed her beautiful golden hair and said nothing... If he lost her... he would die... "I am here my beautiful one, you are not alone anymore, I will take care of you. Rahain tried to reassure himself. No answer echoed his words, the child remained completely still, frozen in her distress, Rahain devastated.