DREAMING 2074
A UTOPIA CREATED BY FRENCH LUXURY

A COLLECTIVE WORK BY THE COMITÉ COLBERT
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Created in 1954, the Comité Colbert is celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2014. For this occasion, its members—78 firms from the French luxury sector and 14 cultural institutions, which have joined together through common values—wanted to follow the paths taken by their visionary creators with an incursion into 2074.

Confident in the power of the imagination to model reality, the Comité Colbert has chosen to dream 2074. Thus, throughout 2013, it conducted The Utopia Factory through which each firm first expressed its dream in the form of a short text, an image and five words. This material, both rich and inventive, was then shaped through ten workshops giving rise to a collective utopia incarnating the overall vision of French luxury. Optimistic, borne by powerful, shared values, the *noven-tique* luxury utopia, the industry of *rêver-vrai*, places the human being at the heart of its dream. It derives nourishment from paradoxes to assert both the values
of sharing and the vital importance of aesthetic emotion for each individual. It creates bonds between beings and, through transmission, with future generations.

In order to contaminate society with the radiant optimism of this utopia, the Comité Colbert has conceived a collective work that it is making available to everyone. This work is the fruit of a unique collaboration, rich with the visions of the firms that make up the Comité Colbert, in the form of a narrative given to them by six science fiction authors, the sound resonance created by a musician and the poetic inventions of a linguist.

It is this work, created by 200 hands, which we invite you to read, to listen to, to enjoy...
In 2074, time does not stand still any more than during any other period. Over the past 40 years, everything has gone very fast, and shows no signs of slowing. The world has seen the sublime or disastrous parameters of human life deploy. Technique is leading the race; from the Greek, the word was translated into Latin as *ars*, *artis*, our ART. This transformation from technique into aesthetic creation has been reversed today and certain techniques, particularly those of life, pleasure, happiness, have become artistic, as a result of a very ancient practice, crafts. The craft, which has been found again, rejuvenated, empowered, innovative, utopist, universal, has caught up with art, and even surpassed it, because the arts have been compromised, starting in the 20th century, by speculation and financial bubbles. This admirable know-how stands out against the hold of the massive, the monotone, the day-to-day, promoted by industrialization and the concentration of the major media, which have so worn down the human being.
A symbol of freedom, an instrument of fulfilment, a vehicle for generosity, once reserved for minorities, LUXURY has spread over the surface of our small solar planet (we now know of millions of exoplanets), this planet which is starting to perceive the universe, the beyond, and to explore part of the solar system, while the substance of all things reveals its minuscule miracles. New matter appears, with nanotechniques\(^1\), molecules for health, for pleasure, for a life that lasts longer and is more in tune with both oneself and the other.

The keywords of luxury no longer confine the spaces reserved for well-being. Quite the contrary. They express emotion and sensitivity, open space and sustainability with all the force of the momentary, requirement and respect, knowledge and action for the happiness of all. Almost three centuries ago, a young French revolutionary said that happiness was a “new idea in Europe”. Today, it has become a central idea in the world, as we approach the 22nd century of the Common Era.

In 2074, despite the doomsayers, Europe is still beautiful and creative, and France is more than ever a source of joy for the entire planet. The biblical formula of divine creation, “let there be light”, by way of

\(^1\) I reserve the word *technology* for the study, the science of techniques.
a Latin paronym, can add the ambitious “fiat lux” of superior know-how to the “fiat lux” of beliefs. In fact, luxury is an active “light” (lux), an aurora. The human sky has moved from the dark thunderheads of misfortune to the promising “cloud” of digital exchanges. These luminous values are added to those carried by the veritable Latin etymology, created with exuberant energy—that of sap in the springtime—and unpredictability, the sign of creativity.

Despite human folly, the “global village” foreseen by the prophet McLuhan is finally acquiring a structure and growing humanized. It requires the light of luxury, and its values, which are generosity, emotion, surprise, inventiveness, stimulating paradox and, according to a great, yet pessimistic poet from days gone by, “calm and sensual pleasure”.

In 2074, the major powers of our small planetary world—China, the United States, Brazil, Canada, Argentina, Japan, Russia and a Europe that is finally united—have been joined by numerous states in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific, in a universal demand for well-being and happiness. Human needs and desires have cast down borders. The planet has entered a “post-history” period as different from past history as that period was unlike pre-history. It required a peaceful, a “quiet” revolution, to use an old expression coined by Francophones in Québec.

Given a network of human contacts that is both
planetary and immediate, the rigid, stifling opposition of the ego and difference is finally losing ground. Individual well-being and personal pleasure can spread and share. Rimbaud’s “I is another” gives way to “every other is me”. In this perspective, luxury has become a major instrument. It has become both the tip of modernity and the recourse to heritage values threatened or lost through the crushing action of mediocrity, banality and carelessness. This neoluxury establishes a new harmony between the sensations born from matter and immaterial wealth, between physical conditions and needs and those of the mind, between the real and the dream, between truth and beauty, returning to the ancient vision of Socrates and Plato.

Among its powers, luxury creates MEANING. In the world of signs, in the Babel of languages, it joins forces with the arts, with poetry and culture, to promote a universal humanism. However, in each language, ways of speaking, words, have appeared to express its essence and its birth, to transmit its powers.

In 2074, languages continue to evolve. The evolution of French, the preferred language of luxury, along with all those languages that express this universal activity, has maintained and even enhanced its prestige. Its grammar has been simplified somewhat and finding its subtleties, those exalted by writers and poets in the past, has become a veritable luxury. Yet, the writers of today have not abandoned the language. The
pronunciation of the language has been enriched; the regional “accents” of France and those of the various French-speaking regions around the world—Europe, America, Africa, the Levant, the Pacific, etc.—have added new colours and music to the dull, monotone manner of speech used in France at the beginning of this century.

Let us look at the glossary, at the words we use to classify the things of the world and clarify our ideas. A study was made of the words of luxury 63 years ago and the results were preserved: terms such as beauty, creation, elegance, emotion, or even light, dream, seduction, are still used just as frequently. Only exception, exclusivity and, to a lesser extent, rarity, which were mentioned at that time, no longer enjoy the same pertinence in terms of luxury. Luxury has become generalized, has spread and is shared; in a word, it has been humanized at the level of the species and, as always, without trivializing matters, by means of a brilliant paradox. Quantity has, finally, fallen in step with extreme quality.

These new French words include a few anglicisms, American for the most part, in an effort to “sound chic”, as a result of an archaic conception of luxury. I will not mention them now just as in the same way that, in the past, I ignored the use of “know-how” and “melting pot” in French, feeling that savoir-faire and métissage express as much and are more valid in terms of
pronunciation and writing. This Franglais adds nothing to the concept of luxury. Other languages, moreover, are available to contribute their own music and distinct concepts; it is impossible to translate the Italian word *morbidezza* and the Arabic *aljamal*, while being as important as our *luxe*, is culturally distinct. It is Latin and Greek, living sources for the French language, as is also the case of the Romance languages and even English, that have provided new ways of talking, with elements of French itself. Thus, combining the ideas of magic and luxury, certain luxury products are now described as *imagique*. For all that, they are not imaginary but concrete, while evoking the immaterial. Moreover, we speak of a craft as *immatérialiste* although it uses materials that have been renewed through physicochemistry; the savoir-faire of luxury may be referred to as *immaterial*, just as a certain branch of 20th literature was “surrealistic”. This savoir-faire is thus *neomaterial*.

We had recourse to the ancient vocabulary of beauty, with the Greek *kallos*, the Latin terms *pulcher* and *formosus* (which the Spanish language transformed into *hermoso*). With respect to the Latin *decorus* which described beauty created by human action, it had already given French the words *décoration* and *décorum*. Although the Latin *pulcher* did not succeed in French, while scholars did make attempts to refer to “pulchritude”, a perfect Latinism, it is undoubtedly for
reasons of euphonia; *pulchre* is not suitable. On the other hand, there is nothing remarkable about referring to something as *formose*; in the past, the Portuguese called the Island of Taiwan, Formosa.

Among the new compound words formed in French, we will retain the sensitive state of pleasure caused by the luxurious, the *bel-être*, which has nothing to do with bellâtre (“dandy”) and which describes the feeling of aesthetic fullness, the supreme luxury of an existence “in beauty”. Another compound word, less paradoxical than it seems, is *rêver-vrai*, a state only luxury artisans know how to create.

In order to evoke the essential notions of both authenticity and beauty, a brand has registered the adjective *beauthentique* and the noun *beauthenticité*. These portmanteau words are not used in general language, unlike another such word that gives the spatial idea of “ubiquity” a planetary dimension, which corresponds to the relatively recent evolution of the idea of luxury; this word is *orbiquité*, from the Latin *orbs, orbis* “the orb, the orbit (of the planet)”. In fact, it is not so much the aesthetic character of authenticity that catches our attention but that of inventiveness, creativity (this is how the use of the adjective *noventique* spread).

With regard to the investment of space and time by luxury, with the creative paradox of the individual values of proximity associated with those of earthly
globalization, we were able to speak of the *proximondial* (“proxiglobal”), or even *intimondial* (“intiglobal”), character of luxury. Another paradox resides in the association of the immediacy of sensations with the durability of luxury work: the luxury, the pleasure it procures are now *instéternel*.

However, the word factory occasionally breaks down, both today in 2074 as well as in the past. This occurs, even for necessary concepts, such as that of the “sixth sense”, which may require the development of the luxurious: we hesitate to say that a luxury artisan or his inspiration is *sextisensible*.

Next to the adjective *luxueux*, which has been in use in French since the second half of the 18th century, while avoiding the forms that could have evoked lechery, we can talk about something that is *luxien*, an adjective for which the feminine form, *luxienne*, resembles the name *Lucienne*, evoking light, or use creations such as *luxifères* (“luxiferous”), *luxigènes* (“luxigenic”) or *luxiphores* (luxiforic), although the two latter were rejected by the Académie française since they combine Greek elements with the Latin *luxus*. However, specific forms of the luxury domain have been given very comprehensible designations, and, as a result, we speak of *périluxe* (“periluxury”), *interluxe* (“interluxury”) and *intraluxe* (“intraluxury”). However, we could be criticized with respect to *paraluxe* (“paraluxury”), which is to luxury what paramedical is to medical. As for the
expression “de luxe”, since the English language has been using it, admittedly somewhat indiscriminately, it has lost its value to a certain extent. On the other hand, the word *luxe* remains common in the figurative, where it can be used along with luxuriance: “a luxuriance of metaphors, colours, rare sensations…” and people continue to use it.

All of this vocabulary, which interferes occasionally with that of the leading-edge technologies, the digital, multimedia, molecular domains, genetics, cuisine, or even space, is gradually making its way into French-language dictionaries, whereas it has occasionally already passed into current usage on the other side of the Atlantic or across the Pacific.

In any case, an abundant catalogue, in dictionaries in a French format or derived from the Greek and Latin components that are familiar to numerous languages, is available to express the various aspects of luxury: to each his own!

**Alain Rey**
“Each human being wants to be moved by a story that touches him.
The only element that changes is the means for doing that.”

Aristotle

“Но что Вы делаете?”

Oleg Sarenkov realized that they were kidnapping his wife. The businessman dropped the bottle, which shattered upon hitting the floor. The French wine, a great vintage, painted a scarlet furrow, like an inflected lifeline, a future imposed on the billionaire, a man who had always been the master of his own destiny.

Sarenkov hesitated by his vehicle. His neighbourhood, an up-scale residential complex reserved for Saint Petersburg’s wealthiest, prohibited all locomotion but walking. One benefit, among others, for which he paid a considerable sum. But never more than today. One hundred meters. One hundred meters to cover to reach his wife. He started to run.
His eyes captured every little image, lids fluttering in time with instinct, relayed immediately, in calm, digital mode, by the icon recorder implant. Over the next few days, the scene would play over and over again in his mind.

Sixty meters.

Three strangers. Two hired men in grey suits stood on either side of his wife. Heavy build, graceful movements, possibly former Spetznaz. They obeyed a tall man, short, jade black hair, perfectly tailored suit, square face with delicate features. Sarenkov noticed all these details as he approached.

“Оставьте мою супруга в покое!”

They were taking Alyona, the love of his life since well before the success, the wealth, the charitable works and all those hours at the office that kept them from one another. Today, Sarenkov had cancelled his business meetings and dismissed the body guards his wife could no longer stand. They were supposed to celebrate their wedding anniversary.

Thirty meters.

Pain tore through him, forcing him to slow. A stitch in his side, breathless, heart pounding, the billionaire was out of shape. No, not now, not today. What had happened to the young Oleg who, at the age of 20, had worked the markets? That boy whose honest face and devastating smile had seduced Alyona? His voice rang out from the past, urging him on: Faster! You’ve done
this before. Show this city that scorned you in your youth that you can conquer it all over again. No, forget what I just said and think only of your wife.

Something was wrong. An absurd remark inasmuch as Sarenkov found himself in the middle of a tragedy, but which made sense considering his wife’s behaviour. She was perfectly calm. No one was forcing her into the autoplane parked there, defying all authorities. The vehicle rose 30 meters straight up and headed south.

For the first time in a very long while, Oleg Sarenkov did not know what to do, torn between rage and dejection. He slowed, stopped. The man in the elegant suit was watching him. The billionaire said nothing, letting his egosphere trigger the alarms. First, they would try to contact his wife’s sphere, without success. The Security official services would not respond either. Suddenly, Sarenkov stepped back, overwhelmed by the neural discharge. Not painful, but unpleasant. His transmissions were diverted, then looped back to him by the egosphere of the man with the black hair. The man who walked over to him, gracefully, in complete control.

“Mr. Sarenkov.”

It was not a question. The man was speaking Russian through a translation system, with a very slight accent, possibly French.

He said, “You should read this.”

The transparent screen appeared directly in front of the billionaire. Alyona’s face appeared.
“Oleg, listen to me. I mean really listen to me, like you used to. Obey without question, do not attempt to understand. What this man is going to ask you to do is my anniversary gift. Probably the most important one in our lives. I love you. Don’t ever forget that.”

The image disintegrated into a cloud of pixels. Sarenkov held back a sob, weeping was not his habit, then nodded in submission, for the first time in his life.

The man nodded in turn and gently said, “Mr. Sarenkov. You’re going to go home now. You need to choose three objects. After that, we’re going to blow your house up.”

“My house? But it’s worth a fortune!”

“Money can be replaced. Happiness is priceless. You’re doing business.”

“And which objects?”

“The ones that are most important to you, to you as a couple, I mean.”

“What if I choose wrong?”

“You’ll never see your wife again.”

Sarenkov’s arm shot out with a cross punch. The man blocked it effortlessly and, with a movement as smooth as molasses, turned his arm to look at his watch.

“You have 15 minutes, Mr. Sarenkov. Don’t waste your time. You’ve ruined enough to date.”

The billionaire pulled away violently and headed back up the alley that led to his home. The door opened
as it recognized his digital footprints: records of patents filed in his name, magazine subscriptions, membership cards for the principal clubs in the industry, contracts signed by him, including the one for the house. The man with the black hair followed him, without encountering the slightest resistance on the part of the anti-intrusion portal.

Ignoring the long hallways, Sarenkov hurried to the living room. Splendid, decorated entirely to relay that effect, it held no interest for him.

Three objects.

The billionaire could buy anything, except something that had a value other than a financial one. Something unique, paradoxical, of no value except to the person it is given to.

A sentimental value.

Just then, Sarenkov disappeared, making way for Oleg. As if under the effect of a passion that had been dormant for far too long, almost a young man again, he raced up the stairs and burst into their bedroom. There, on Alyona’s night table, next to a handful of scorned jewellery, stood the small, ceramic dancer with the chipped face. He had bought it for her with his first real pay cheque. Oleg picked it up gently and placed it in his pocket.

“Eight minutes Mr. Sar…”

“Who are you?”

The man started to smile.
“I can help re-awaken your happiness. Maybe even enhance it.”

Oleg strode out of the room and stood stock still in the corridor that ran around the floor. He looked every which way before heading down. Metal spiders with bulbous backs spread over the lower floor, climbing up the walls or hunkering down under the furniture. One of the grey-suited hired men seemed to be coordinating their movements. Mobile bombs, Oleg realized. They were spreading out to ensure a maximum effect. The man with the black hair was not bluffing.

Oleg felt perspiration trickle down his spine. He rushed over to his daughter’s room, which had long since been transformed into a guest room where no one ever slept. Natalya, my sweetheart, my beloved, Oleg thought. Why did we fight? No, why didn’t I want you to live your life? Where are you now, my beautiful actress?

Oleg fell to his knees, tears streaming down his face, making no effort to dry them. The house sensors picked up his distress. The house system made a rapid medical scan. At the end of the examination, it emitted a buzz, like a mechanical question that Oleg would have simply ignored in ordinary times. He realized that, at that very moment, only the machines were concerned for him. They will be all the company you have if you don’t do what you have to do.

“How could I have been so blind, so stupid?”
The man’s hand squeezed his shoulder affectionately.

“Only three more minutes.”

Oleg stood up, picked up the black and white photo of Natalya, with its old-fashioned leather frame, and spoke to the man.

“That’s fine. We have all the time we need to get out.”

“And the third object?”

Oleg pointed at his left ring finger, with its simple, tarnished copper wedding band.

“I just have to polish it.”

“I think you’re right, sir.”

They left the house and walked to the street. Then, the man with the black hair used a remote device to set off the explosives that had been placed at the base of the walls. The house collapsed in on itself, followed by a blast, the murmur of their future existence. The few rare bits of debris fell within its perimeter, causing no harm to the neighbourhood. A professional job.

“All that’s left is to see if you’ve made the right choices.”

Oleg was invited to bend over a metal suitcase. The interior was padded with polymer foam, in which three compartments had been carved. The little ceramic dancer and the framed photo fit perfectly in two of them.

“I’m keeping my ring!”
“Your wife hoped you would say that.”
Oleg Sarenkov nodded.
“Fine, in your very particular manner, you’ve made me realize the essential. I imagine I should thank you?”
“There’s no obligation.”
“That’s true. My wife is waiting for me somewhere in the world.”
“These three objects will help you in your search.”
“How?”
“I can’t tell you, sir. But your wife was most positive.”
“In that case, all I have to do is find her.”
“Find yourself, sir. I hope you both find yourselves.”

The TransEurop Express sped at more than 1,000 km/hour under low pressure, propelled by a magnetic field. Comfortably ensconced in business class, Paul Gilson was reviewing the situation. The mission had gone without a hitch and, even deducting the sums he had to hand over to local resources, the credit in his account was impressive. Once again, he had helped someone find new meaning for their life. And now, Oleg Sarenkov was solely responsible for making the possibility a reality. Yet, Paul would track him through the series of trails littered with the puzzles he had concocted for him with Alyona’s assistance. A sort of labyrinth shaped by impressions and feelings, which
Oleg would have to give the best of himself to solve. “Happiness is a luxury that is earned,” thought Paul. All too often, people are not prepared for it; someone has to guide them or at the very least watch over them. A matter of ethics and, above all, pragmatism. A satisfied client recommends your services.

Paul Gilson wanted to move on to something else. He needed to unwind.

“Would you like a drink?”

The stewardess who addressed him was a perfect example of the retro model: sky blue suit, cap perched jauntily on her thick blond hair, even a smile that said TWA.

“Two cognacs, please.”

One to toss back, the other to savour, as his father liked to say. He had passed away too early and Paul had few memories of him; the crow black hair he had inherited, the scent of his after shave, the texture of his worn leather coat and a few phrases made for a meagre bouquet. He would occasionally throw one into the blend without even changing it. Paul had always refused recourse to memorial delusions, what he scornfully referred to as cosmetic memories. Real memories are fake by nature, no point in adding to them.

“Your order sir. Can I turn this on for you?”

The stewardess was preparing to turn on the energy diffusor. In this way, the sensors on the suit worn by the passenger could charge the various objects in his
possession. Paul cast a bored glance at his screen and decided he would not touch it for the rest of his trip.

“No, thank you.”

The stewardess hesitated, before continuing, with an embarrassed smile. “You’re going to find this completely ridiculous, even out of place, but I have the impression we’ve met…”

“People often say that to me, but I don’t think so.”

The young woman smiled at him again, before returning to the cabin. Paul was not surprised that she thought she knew him. He generated a sense of déjà-vu in almost everyone. By adapting to the person, without recourse to technology, Paul created an impression of familiarity, the fleeting conviction that they had met somewhere. People like him, who were capable of donning potential personalities, were called “normopaths”. Paul preferred to view himself as a human chameleon. His ability—he would never have spoken of it as a gift—counted for a great deal in his professional success.

It was time to relax. Paul tilted his chair back and downed his first cognac before reprogramming his egosphere. It immediately toggled all aspects of his social super-ego into sleep mode, authorizing only a vague awareness of well-being. The first bars of Something for Sophia Loren, composed almost a century earlier by Simon Fisher-Turner, spread through his cortex. He only listened to classics, something Lakshmi teased him about all the time. It was strange though that his
assistant had not made an appearance following the Saint Petersburg business. She was probably already tracking Oleg Sarenkov.

Unable to relax, Paul switched back to conscious mode and decided to go and get a bite to eat. He finished his second glass as he headed to the restaurant car, where a single client dined. When he was close enough to recognize him, Paul jumped in surprise.

Victor Segal was sitting alone at a table in the rear. If the WHO president was on the train, thought Paul, that meant that the identities of all the passengers, originals and avatars, had been scanned as a security measure. Moreover, certain members of the personnel assigned to the TransEurop Express had to be body guards.

Massive, average height, clean cut iron grey hair, Victor Segal was wearing a monochrome grey suit and turtleneck. A severe look alleviated by the Homer Simpson watch on his wrist, a Miyota mechanism for Citizen, a collector’s edition from the last century. The drawing on the watch showed an x-ray of Homer’s head, blue on a black background, his tiny brain floating in his skull. According to rumour, Segal viewed it as a reminder to be humble, that the weight of responsibility should be accompanied by a necessary modesty. Anyone could make a mistake, even the WHO president. Having the watch constantly in sight served as a shield for him.

Paul sat down at a table, astonished that he had
been allowed to approach. He picked up the menu; its sensors would immediately analyse his state of health before suggesting the meal of the day. Paul opted for a Japanese Francillon salad, created by Alexandre Dumas, accompanied by a glass of Reine d’Ambre 58. For his part, the President was picking in his clockwork container at some refined concoction that he did not truly seem to appreciate. Probably his mind was too busy for him to savour the moment.

Victor Segal was one of the most influential men in the world. President of the WHO, his mandate renewed repeatedly since his first appointment, he was responsible for all of the problems caused by the Pandemic. The disease had been eradicated, but legions of consequences arose each day. Displaced populations had to be cared for, housed and fed, the children born after the crisis had to be monitored and much, much more. By force of circumstances, the WHO had taken on a role that largely exceeded the field of medicine. Segal and his organization intervened in virtually every field as advisors, asserting a wisdom and lifestyle. The world was all the better for it.

Paul stared at Segal for a long time, exercising his abilities as a normopath, a force of habit. The WHO president did not react. Out of the corner of his eye, Paul noted a particularly muscular waiter who was starting to look nervous. He quickly finished off his dinner and returned to his car.
When he arrived at the Gare Centrale, Paul rushed into the crowd, slaloming between workers, tourists and maintenance robots on his way to the exit. A clear blue sky, unusual for the season, convinced him not to take a taxi. He took one of the elevated pedestrian lanes that passed over the Chinese sector of Paris, toward the periphery.

The classic urbanism of Baron Hausmann, a Cartesian beauty, now accommodated strategic additions, combinations and relocations replacing uprightness and rigor. Topography like a go game board that divided the city into territories. Although the intersections remained, it came at the price of a continuous redefinition authorizing captures, a harmonic balance between living stones and dead ones. Paris remained the capital of the world, standing at the heart of the Empire.

Paul strolled about, his mind wandering. Such a Parisian attitude. As it did every morning, his egosphere sent him an extract from the *I Ching* and an aphorism taken from Pascal’s *Pensées*. The two philosophies blended harmoniously, a reflection of the merging of the East and the West embodied in this part of the capital. At this moment, Paul’s mental architecture and the external environment were in step. When he was two blocks from his home, he stepped into a boutique operated by the *Long March* chain to order
a green tea to take out, which was served to him in an insulated cup stamped with Mao’s portrait. Then he slowly headed over to the Sheung Tower.

The dynamic looking building, 50 storeys tall, was completely covered with anodized aluminium casing. Its peripheral stabilizers provided exo-compensation for the vertical load in order to reduce the quantities of concrete and steel in the principal mass. A miracle of balance in a neo-classical style, created by Hermione Dulac for the firm Asian Overseas.

Paul walked under the arch and entered an atrium. Overhead walkways lit up an immense glass canopy. Walking along an artificial lake covered with water lilies and chrysanthemums, he headed toward the elevation, which recognized him and carried him to his destination. During his trip up, Paul glanced at the shopping aisles, while consulting his email. Nothing that couldn’t wait.

He occupied a duplex with a panoramic view on the 39th floor, which served as both an apartment and office. The unit had been laid out around a central core from which hallways radiated out toward the private areas, a conference room, and a meditation room. The space could be re-arranged with modular panels that controlled the light.

Paul entered the living room, which had been decorated entirely in indigo batik, to the sound of Marden Hills’ Cadaquez, the programme of the day. The sound
of chimes and the scent of incense were Lakshmi’s touch, not necessarily to Paul’s taste.

“Hey there, John Hamm!”

A fan of archeoTV, his assistant enjoyed calling him by the names of former actors who she thought he resembled.

Her skin was entirely blue. Paul raised an eyebrow.

“You didn’t exactly skimp on the Dermachrome.”

“Don’t forget, I’m named after a Goddess whose principal virtue is Beauty. Nothing happens by chance, Paul.”

Lakshmi was wearing a frilly vest that hid almost nothing of her colourful skin, covered with interface tattoos, and vintage combat pants, a creation by Nina Larsen perennially fashionable since 2024. She had difficulty moving about, dragging her leg which was burdened with a repair exoskeleton.

“Still not recovered from your Air Skate accident?”

“That’s observant…”

“Is it healing?”

“Yep, but it sure itches.”

Two years earlier, Paul had taken the young woman on as part of a partnership with Young Associates, a global organization that oversaw the future of the younger generations. He’d never regretted it. Not only did Lakshmi excel in her position as a programmartist, but she was also a Neutral, totally impermeable to the influence of others. While Paul Gilson acted on the
perceptions of others, their feelings, the young woman could not allow her defensive body to be convinced. He had had to tame her, much like the fox in the *Little Prince*. When he was with her, Paul let himself go. They were perfect complements.

“News?”

“Oleg Sarenkov is going full tilt.”

“Did he find the order for the objects?”

“Sort of. The problem is he’s still reacting like a businessman.”

Lakshmi turned on her screen and handed it to Paul. Instead of typing a report on the recent developments, the programmartist had drawn a sort of story-board. It showed Sarenkov examining the dancer statuette before heading for a neighbourhood in Saint Petersburg. Unfortunately, the shop where he had purchased the figurine had been replaced by a fitness centre. With a few strokes, Lakshmi had rendered the millionaire’s disarray.

“Our friend has to get rid of a few bad habits,” Paul said, as he turned the screen off. “It’s not the purchase, but the nature of the object that’s important.”

When she was young, Alyona had dreamed of becoming a ballerina. Life had had other plans for her. Oleg had offered her the figurine, promising her that he would take her to the greatest operas in the world. A promise he kept, each time between two dozen business meetings, his mind elsewhere. Alyona had said
nothing, settling for the momentary happiness. But the day Oleg had opposed their daughter’s wishes to become an actress, Alyona had broken the statuette. Glued carefully back together, the porcelain pieces still show the trace of a crack, a reminder of their damaged love.

“I’m going to take a nap,” Paul said. “When I wake up I don’t want to smell incense.”

“You shouldn’t upset the goddess of Fortune.”

“Weren’t you the goddess of Beauty just a while back?”

“I’m a complicated girl.”

Paul disconnected his egosphere before sinking into sleep.

“Are you sure?”

Paul felt a bit disoriented since Lakshmi had just wakened him.

She nodded her head and said, “I’m scanning the incoming data. The security code is official.”

Victor Segal wanted to speak with him. Paul had to think fast.

“He was on the train yesterday. This can’t be a coincidence.”

“Segal has certainly heard about your talent.”

“And today, the WHO president has not come over in person because he doesn’t want to be influenced.”
“So, he has something to ask you.”
“A service he expects me to refuse.”
“What should I do?”
“Give me a minute and authorize reception.”

Paul checked his appearance. Not fantastic, but it would have to do. He stood in front of the steel ring, measuring about a meter in diameter, bolted to the floor. Segal’s image appeared, floating above a holograph receiver.

“Mr. Gilson…”

Paul said nothing, content to observe. Segal turned toward Lakshmi and greeted her with a nod. The young woman glanced at Paul and said, “Can I offer you some tea, Mr. President?”

Segal smiled immediately. Before understanding.

“Well played, young lady. It is true that any absurd phrase would have done the job.”

Even the best holograms showed defects, such as a slight delay in reaction time. It was the result of a lack of fluidity in the evaluation-decision-action chain. Victor Segal had reacted instantly, by reflex. Or perhaps he had simulated this spontaneous reaction. In any case, the WHO head standing before them was no simple fake, a bearer of expressions and programmed phrases, constantly required to recalculate his attitudes and expressions, but the veritable model, displayed in real time.

“Since I’ve been outed, Mr. Gilson, it’s your turn now to unveil. What is a Fourteenth?”
He certainly knew that. Segal simply wanted to hear and observe him. Paul decided to play along.

The expression dates back to 20th-century Germany. The 1920s, Weimar Republic. Are you familiar with it?”

Segal gave a nonchalant wave of his hand.

“I must have caught something, one day, on the History network.”

Good point for him, he had a sense of humour.

“At that time, certain people, men and women, would wait at home to be called, wearing evening dress. When they were called, the Fourteenth would attend a meal with thirteen guests, in order to divert misfortune.”

“Interesting. An intruder by invitation, so to speak. And how does this apply to you and your colleagues?”

“The goal of our profession is to re-establish happiness. Occasionally even make it bloom for the first time.”

Victor Segal nodded.

“It is true that everyone wants to be happy. Yet each individual has his own definition of what that is.”

“That’s why we need specialists who are capable of providing specific solutions to problems that are every bit as specific.”

“Happiness is ephemeral, Mr. Gilson. At most, we enjoy just a few moments of happiness.”
“Which means the Fourteenth are guaranteed future work.”
Segal laughed freely, appreciative.
“Don’t you think your last remark is just a tad cynical?”
“More realistic than anything, Mr. President. You understand that.”
The WHO president suddenly turned serious.
“In fact, one thing you and I have in common is that we don’t settle for illusions.”
Lakshmi was following the conversation while recording it. In this way, she was analysing changes in the President’s heart beat and respiration in real time He was perfectly calm.
“Mr. Gilson, how do you do it, in concrete terms?”
“Meaning?”
“Medicine has taught me that any subject presents a particular collection of symptoms. Every case is unique and, as a result, requires the development of a particular treatment.”
Paul nodded.
“The comparison is accurate. Likewise, I propose a tailor-made service, down to the last detail.”
“For you, what does understanding a client mean?”
“Determining how to act, how far to go to make a deal.”
“And when something doesn’t go as planned?”
“I have to anticipate things, make changes. I’m very good at improvising.”

Victor Segal remained silent for a long moment, floating over the holographic ring like a genie over his lamp. Then he said, “You’re not the only Fourteenth. Why should I choose you?”

Paul spread his arms, as if calling on the world to stand witness.

“I have no idea why you contacted me. How can I answer you?”

Segal avoided the question.

“I’ve heard about a certain Henry David Walden...”

Paul gave a half-hearted smile.

“Walden turned mystic. He felt that happiness was merely the sum of experiences. Suddenly he decided to stop intervening. That was his way.”

“I see. Nabila Saber?”

“Very competent, but for the past two years she’s been working exclusively for the Israeli embassy in Tehran.”

Segal was about to suggest another name when Paul interrupted, “Don’t look any further. I’m the best.”

He wasn’t boasting, merely stating a fact. The WHO President nodded.

“That’s what I’ve heard and I got a look at you on the train.”

“You didn’t seem receptive...”

“Let’s just say that my functions have taught me to
be deceptive. You’re a normopath, aren’t you? A late side effect of the Pandemic. We know of others, such as this young lady who seems to be perfectly neutral.”

The comment, which seemed harmless, marked the end of the first round. The President’s memory implant immediately released its defences, allowing Lakshmi to search through its data. There was nothing he did not know about Paul and his associate.

Victor Segal attacked: “Do you know Gorgeia Akos?”

“It’s hard not to. A benefactor of humanity, much like Einstein was a great scholar and Mozart an immense musician.”

Lakshmi glared at him.

“She’s much more than that,” Segal continued. “Without her, during the decades that followed the Pandemic, humanity would have lost hope.”

“Agreed. So?”

“Gorgeia Akos is sinking into darkness. Humanity must pay its debt. It’s our turn to help her.”

“You have to do it.”

Lakshmi was standing in front of him, hands on her hips, as he was preparing to consult Gorgeia Akos’ medical file. The data floated in the air between Paul and his assistant, like a veil separating two interpretations of reality. Lakshmi wanted him to accept Segal’s
proposal out of a moral duty. A matter of common sense made him hesitate.

“Akos is famous worldwide. If I take this job, my name will inevitably come up. Now, you know as much as I do how much our profession depends on a certain amount of confidentiality. I will no longer be able to rely on the effect of surprise with my clients. It would be unfortunate if this contract were to be my last.”

The young woman sighed, her breath momentarily ruffling the data curtain as the breeze ripples the surface of water.

“When everything was going badly, Gorgeia Akos gave people much more than was necessary. She enabled them to rêver-vrai, to attain what had become inaccessible, to find the strength and desire to live within themselves.”

Paul agreed. While the WHO had been taking care of material difficulties, Akos had been responsible for the inner distress. An artist, she had dealt with the problem from an aesthetic angle initially. Since sadness had been blanketing the earth for several decades, it had to be dissipated. Not in one fell swoop, which would have been impossible, but through small interventions, perfectly controllable happenings, each generating a field of hope. The sum of the interactions would eventually overcome the calamity.

All alone at the outset then relayed by thousands of imitators, Gorgeia Akos had bombarded the ini-
tial situation with subtle projectiles. Optimistic graffiti at a street corner, a message displayed in the sky, occasionally even a single word relayed through the inter-subjectivity of the egospheres, her actions had caused turbulence at the very heart of the misfortune. Each man or women who recovered hope became a magnet for joy, capable of influencing those close to them. Not to mention the children whose infectious happiness effectively negated the Pandemic. While misery isolated men, Gorgeia Akos managed to draw them together. She gave substance to two words: initiative and generosity, two facets of a diamond shining at the heart of the world.

“Lakshmi, I know all that.”

“Yes, but I want you to feel it.”

Paul saw his assistant’s hand reach through the data cloud and come to rest over his heart. Embarrassed, he launched the programme to open the medical file.

Gorgeia Akos, 62 years old. In perfect health until, two years ago, she stopped being able to distinguish colours overnight. Humanity’s benefactor was immediately taken under the wing of the WHO. Electroretinogram, tomography and numerous other tests had detected nothing. The best ophthalmologists and neurologists had immediately discussed her case, initially considering a malfunction of the V4 areas, where colour is generated, a loss of cell integrity, even simple hereditary retinal dystrophy. But no damage was
detected, while the patient complained of violent migraines and insomnia. The medical aristocracy had to give up on finding a diagnosis. Gorgeia Akos suffered from achromatopsia, possibly a side effect of the Pandemic as found in the generations born after the onset of the disease, such as Paul’s normopathy or Lakshmi’s neutrality.

“Do you get it? The woman who gave her colours to the world now sees it in black and white.”

Paul turned to his assistant, who seemed sincerely upset.

“What do you want me to do?”

Lakshmi stepped back as if shocked. She remained silent for a long moment, before asking, “Paul, what is the best job you’ve ever done?”

“You know full well.”

A few months earlier, a young girl had stopped him in the corridor of his building to ask for help.

“A paper book, with faded illustrations. That’s what she offered you and yet you accepted.”

“That child gave me everything she had to obtain my services. No client had ever done that before. And it wasn’t a matter of money.”

“So, what then, Paul?”

“A challenge.”

“Something you’re always looking for, sometimes to the point of obsession. That’s how you do things.”
“What I do know is that Gorgeia Akos didn’t act any differently.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, big guy.”

“Seriously, goddess? Well spare me all that claptrap about love being the only true value and the need to develop one’s internal wealth.”

Since this conversation was going nowhere, there was no point in prolonging it. Paul left the private area to go to the professional space. He entered the meditation room to receive Segal’s final data, namely information about the works produced by Akos over the last six months.

But first, he had to clear his mind. Controlling his respiration, Paul unplugged his connections to the world one by one, leaving only his pure ego.

“Now!”

At the signal, Lakshmi released the immersion flux. Thousands of nanodrones surged from the mushrabeyeh lattice work, filling the room with the buzzing. The swarm whirled around Paul without touching him, each component calculating trajectory, distance and direction. Paul found himself in the middle of augmented reality, saturated with impressions that surrounded him full circle. He walked in a moving exhibit gallery, with snakelike twists and turns. His loops held him captive, forcing him to plunge into a collection of canvasses entitled Orthochromatics. Childish drawings made under the influence of Clonazepam; strokes tor-
tured by cocaine; hatching by Ritalin; the cold, clinical anatomy of Trazodone; overprints under Dilaudid; crystal meth pointillism; aggressive collages produced by morphine; perception dismembered by PCP and mysticism impoverished by Xanax.

Searching desperately to find the lost impressions of her art through drugs, Gorgeia Akos was destroying herself. Paul felt her unhappiness like a whiplash and his heart pounded. As he collapsed, Lakshmi immediately turned on the ventilation, blowing the nanodrones back. She rushed into the room.

Paul reached out his arm, palm up, as if trying to keep her at bay.

“It’s nothing, just a nose bleed.”

Lakshmi glimpsed something shiny at her feet. She bent down to pick up the tiny robot. Looking carefully at his head, she noticed the WHO Lab stamp.

The young woman decided to step onto the balcony to release it. On her way out of the meditation room, she stopped on the threshold and said, without turning back, “You wanted a challenge? Well you’ve got one.”

Paul reserved a seat on the Mass Transit Railway, for Istanbul. During the trip, isolated from the other passengers by a confidentiality programme, he analysed Gorgeia Akos’ situation. Anyone who had accomplished even one quarter of what she had done would
have probably felt that she had done enough for one lifetime. But not Akos. The artist continued to work for the well-being of humankind, irradiating joy while hiding her own unhappiness. No one knew what had happened to her. Respecting her wishes, the WHO was watching.

Paul started the recording of Orthochromatics. He played it over and over in a corner of his standby memory, which gave him an opportunity to fine tune his approach. Akos was a fighter. Given her strong personality, combined with the courage she had so openly displayed, self-destruction was not an option for her. No more than she could allow herself to slip into morbid romanticism. The artist had probably used the various drugs in an attempt at creative self-medication, which had failed.

Paul jumped when Lakshmi broke into his chain of reasoning. The programmartist wanted to talk to him about black and white vision.

“I did what you asked me to.”
“You got Segal?”
“Not him, but one of his assistants. You have to ask Gorgeia Akos if she sees a sharp contrast or different varieties of grey.
“Why?”
“Because your intuition is right. Some people who suffer from achromatopsia can distinguish nuances. Sometimes even one colour, but that’s rare. Only if it
is associated with a thing, or someone, that provokes a profound effect.”

“With respect to personal experience?”

“That’s right, Paul.”

“Good work. I’ll contact you after the interview.”

“One last thing. I have news about Oleg Sarenkov.”

“And?”

“Everything is going fine. He realized that each object is not a puzzle, but a burgeoning happiness.”

All objects have meaning. A gift, given to celebrate an event or on the spur of the moment; a letter found in a drawer that recalls our adolescence; the things a loved one leaves behind when they pass on. The value of objects is manyfold. It surprises us the first time, then constantly brings back joy or sadness throughout our life. We sow them like pebbles, along the narrow road that leads to ourselves.

“Sarenkov found his wife?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“Everything is fine. He just has to convince his daughter.”

Gorgeia Akos lived in Bulvari, on the site of an old textile market, in a small apartment in a building destined for a creative collective, a perfect example of architexture as Carlos Vargas conceived of it in
2037. In his battle against inequality, the Brazilian eco-builder had sought to bring together both social strata and the materials used—a fusion of individual and collective lives, vegetation associated with Teflon, each element serving to enrich the whole. The building was designed to be seen from both near and far. The façade, arranged tiers, was covered with a bamboo trellis, where plants grew, in a wild, organic manner. Vines stretching from one balcony to another limited the notion of private terraces for the benefit of the community feeling. Paul noted a miniature model of the building. A bird house. A tradition of Turkish Islam intended to provide a home for the emissaries of paradise.

He walked into the inner yard, decorated with a ceramic fresco of roses and peacocks. Children ran in all directions, chasing one another around the well, almost knocking over the trestle that held the imaret, the collective kitchen. That’s where he found Akos.

Tall, slim, athletic, she wore workman’s pants and a pullover that left her well-muscled arms bare. As he approached, he noticed her face with its chiselled features, topped by a bun held in place with a clothespin. She saw him and gave him a smile that revealed everything, except what it expressed.

Paul imagined her as a child, running in sandals through the streets of a village in Peloponnese; as a young girl, an attentive student at the Académie des Beaux-Arts; a woman, dedicated to her moral and aes-
thetic craft. At each age, she radiated. There are any number of beautiful women in the world, thought Paul, but only one Gorgeia Akos.

“Since you’re there, make yourself useful!”

She addressed him sharply. Paul joined her behind the mobile canteen. Even before he introduced himself, she placed a ladle in his right hand.

“Don’t be stingy with the portions!”

Those who lived in the building, along with their neighbours, squeezed in around the canteen. A joyful agitation flowed through the line, yet everything took place in an orderly manner; elderly people and children were given priority. Paul served them meatballs in yogurt, accompanied by rice. Red pepper, dried mint, oregano, an explosion of scents made his head spin. Gorgeia Akos inhaled the aromas deeply.

“One of the few rare pleasures that remains to me.”

“I…”

“I know who you are. Victor Segal warned me about your arrival. An absurd initiative. Once we’ve finished here, you’ll come with me to my place and I’ll give you ten minutes, just because I promised Victor. After that, you’ll leave.”

Akos lived on the second level, in an apartment that overlooked the yard.

“Please come in.”
The visitor froze as he stepped over the threshold. The artist’s private space was entirely white and black. Paul immediately understood that this was not an aesthetic option, but a choice motivated by anger and distress. The painters had furiously used their rollers to cover over surfaces that were once colourful, furniture, bookshelves, and even objects, particularly authentic paper books.

Akos gauged his reaction and said, “Isn’t it said that the objects always end up blending into the décor?”

All without care for the finish, in the raw state that the normopath immediately analysed.

“A sensory experience, intended not for yourself but for those who come here. So that they can share your condition.”

The artist’s face grew dark.

“Not bad. Can I offer you a drink?”

Gorgeia Akos headed over to a table burdened with bottles of alcohol and E-cig bowls. A multiplication of flavours, as in the case of the odours earlier, Paul realized.

“No, thank you.”

“As you wish.”

Paul attempted a scan, which came up empty. Akos had no egosphere. She addressed him, “So, you experience no emotions?”

“Not exactly. I can make others feel their own emotions as if they come from me.”
“What do you feel right now?”
Paul concentrated. Pale flesh, dull sky, desert sea. Disgust at the sight. There was no point telling her.
Gorgeia Akos nodded.
“I see that you understand. Painting a fruit basket, Mr. Gilson, the most elementary exercise assigned to the apprentice. I can no longer do that.”
Paul recalled Lakshmi’s message.
“Never any colour?”
Akos shrugged.
“Occasionally I dream in grey.”
Paul turned on his screen and brought up a colour chart.
“Can you indicate the differences in tone for me?”
The artist did so without making a single mistake.
“I know colours, Mr. Gilson, “But I don’t feel them anymore.”
“And if I…”
“Remembering them is painful. Please stop this.”
Paul erased the screen. He then noted a few rare coloured splashes at the back of the room. The artist caught his glance.
“Coral. According to mythology it came from the blood of the gorgon, which is Gorgeia in Greek. Coral lives in a colony. All of the elements that make it up are interdependent and live in perfect symbiosis with the environment.”
The individual in resonance with the universal, Paul realized, what people refer to as the proximondial.

“You offered this union to humanity.”

“Did you know, Mr. Gilson, that when coral dies it fades and turns white? My works created a peace that I have been deprived of. Perhaps that was the price to be paid.”

“Can you do it?”

Paul was standing behind Lakshmi. Without taking her eyes from the screen, the programmartist replied, “Basically, you’re asking me to transform a metaphor into reality?”

“It would be the same thing as for a jewel.”

Lakshmi finally agreed to look at him.

“In a jewel, there’s at least one pure element. The stone. Here, we have to rely on thousands of variables.”

“Nothing is perfectly pure. It’s the look that confers authentic purity.”

“Stop talking like a Brahman. It doesn’t suit you.”

Paul watched as she plunged back into her analytical programme. She was using a non-linear intelligence system, to reproduce the organic coral module intended to proliferate.

“You didn’t answer me.”

“Theoretically, it’s possible. But I need the elements to be assembled.”
“Segal will send them to us.”

The WHO President was prepared to provide all of the assistance possible, but confidentiality posed a problem. Medical privilege is as much a patient right as a foundation of individual freedom. Paul had insisted, until Segal gave his approval, on a single condition: all those involved had to agree. Obviously, that would take time.

Meanwhile, Lakshmi was applying the finishing touches to the colony skeleton. In the natural state, it was made up of a material called “gorgonin”, the equivalent of the solidarity which, though Akos’ action, united all members of the human species. Beyond the apparent coldness of her digital tools, the program-martist was reviving the savoir-faire of jewellers who had, since time immemorial, been working with coral.

“Fine, I can’t do anything more for the moment. How about we get a bite?”

Paul ordered a light dinner from the tower’s room service. He settled for a clear broth, eating with no real appetite. The effect of the stress, a sensation that was usually foreign to him. But this time, he was doing more than honouring a contract. This was a personal matter for Paul.

“Any news of Sarenkov?”

Lakshmi answered, her mouth full of an incredibly spicy curry, “He’s been tracked to New York. He rented
a room in a small hotel, near the High School of Music and Performing Arts.”

Where his daughter Natalya was studying the performing arts. Training she paid for by working odd jobs, like many apprentice actors her age. She was happy, or at least at peace. Paul had met her before setting everything into motion. As a precaution–and in order to obtain her permission.

“Do you think Oleg is ready to see her?” Lakshmi asked.

“If he’s afraid, he is.”

“And Natalya?”

“She misses her father, but she wants him to prove his love for her. She’s the last stone in the treasure hunt. It shouldn’t be too easy.”

Paul and his assistant remained quiet for a moment. Lakshmi finally broke the silence, “Before going to Istanbul, you weren’t convinced.”

“That’s true.”

“What changed your mind?”

*Akos’ enigmatic smile, the joy she generated around the collective kitchen.*

“The coral, in her apartment, the only presence of colour.”

“Why, since she can’t see it?”

“Perhaps the soul sees the tint of hope.”

“Your philosophy is as bland as my curry. Eat!”

At that very moment, they received the signal for
incoming data. Tens of thousands of numbers, each associated with a medical file and followed by the necessary confidentiality agreement:


A smile lit up Lakshmi’s face.

“You were right, Paul. They all answered the call!”

The digital torrent flowed on and on. The young woman delicately picked up a number with her thumb and index finger before formalizing it. Thanks to her talent, something that was merely an abstract case became an elegant purple column with biradial sym-
metry. The basic unit of coral. Lakshmi concentrated all of her attention on her work. Her hands seemed to flutter from one unit to another, the ease and sureness of the gesture which were the fruit of rigorous training at Place Vendôme. Paul observed her with the respect owed to creators whose art is second nature.

“I just have to do the same for each element. Fortunately, the tracking programme will help me. Otherwise it would take me years.”

Paul kissed her on the cheek. Lakshmi backed off, laughing.

“Don’t try to corrupt the goddess! Once the colony has been created, I have to include it in her holobiont. Any ideas?”

In other words, the environment in which the colony would spread in complete symbiosis.

Paul did, in fact, have an idea.

“Puszcza Białowieża.”

The autoplane, black and as sleek as a shark, flew over the primal forest.

A layer of HD micro-cameras covered the entire fuselage, filming the cloudy sky and projecting the images on the machine, making it virtually invisible from the ground. All in order to satisfy the strict discretion requirements imposed by the Polish and Bela-
rusian authorities responsible for the oldest forest in Europe.

Primitive, practically unchanged since pre-history, it sheltered a formidable fauna reserve that could not be disturbed at any cost. Ordinarily, flying over Białowieża was prohibited, but Oleg Sarenkov had used his influence to obtain an air corridor for Paul and his passenger for three hours’ immersion in the biosphere. While finding his wife and daughter, the Russian billionaire had returned to the true priorities in his life. He was now a man who was learning to be happy. He had decided to show his gratitude.

Gorgeia Akos sat in the passenger seat. She was dressed entirely in dark colours and wore a black scarf, and smoked glasses. “Photophobia,” she said as she boarded the craft. Since then, not a single word.

Convincing her had not been easy. Paul had not taken that risk, leaving the task to Victor Segal who had almost had to resort to emotional blackmail to obtain Gorgeia’s approval. Paul knew nothing about the details of the discussion, but was able to see the end result: his unwilling guest pretended to ignore him. Paul could have used his talent to alleviate her reticence, but he abstained. He would have found that disrespectful, although he usually used his gift without any sign of a guilty conscience. Above all, he could not risk upsetting his plan. In order for it to work, Akos had
to feel the experience he intended for her without any external influence.

“Approaching destination,” the flight assistant warned.

Paul made a few course corrections and engaged the final descent procedure. He glanced at the white elephant cuddly toy Lakshmi had placed on the control panel. The autoplane had been placed under the protection of Ganesha, the god who removes obstacles.

“Landing point locked.”

They landed in a small clearing blanketed with snow.

The forest was made of ash and birch, alders and spruce, lindens whose crowns peaked 50 meters overhead, and venerable oaks, their massive trunks covered with moss that was most often more than 400 years old. The entire scene provided a concentration of vegetation unique in the world, a compact, dark mass that stood in stark contrast with the snow-coated landscape.

Gorgeia Akos understood immediately.

“What’s your game?”

“This black forest is called Białowieża, which means ‘White Tower’ in ancient Polish.”

The artist gave a bitter laugh, while pretending to clap.

“You’ve found me a monochrome world?”

“You’ll have an opportunity to clap your hands. It’s cold outside.”
Paul activated the sun roof. Immediately, the glacial wind rushed into the passenger compartment. Surprised, Akos took a deep breath; the air slashed through her lungs. Her eyes filled with tears.

“The primeval forest, when the world was waiting for its colours.”

“Please. Mr. Gilson, don’t try to extinguish my anger. It’s all I have left.”

“Why don’t we get out?”

They stepped down from the autoplane, immediately sinking knee-deep into the snow. Despite their thermoregulated clothing, they felt the cold’s bite. A fox watched them; they saw a couple of wolves stroll by along the edge of the woods. The presence of animals seemed to calm Akos, just as Paul had planned. The forest inhabitants did not view her as a symbol they had to honour, simply a being similar to the others, even an intruder.

Confident, Akos smiled and said, “This is not my place, Mr. Gilson.”

“Not yet.”

Paul brought his screen up. Lakshmi had enhanced its capacities so that he could use the programme relays.

“Have you ever heard of Porphyry?”

“In Greek, it means the colour purple,” Akos replied. “And it’s also the name of a philosopher.”
“Right. He gave us the tree that bears his name, a sort of logical chart that serves to unite all beings.”
“I’m about to lose my patience. Where are you heading with all this, Mr. Gilson?”
“To this.”
Paul brushed his fingertips against the screen. Long, digital strings deployed into a fan before crossing and forming a web that covered the clearing. The hologram floated about 120 cm above the ground.
“What do you see?”
“Some sort of net.”
Paul triggered the second phase. Dots appeared at each intersection of the strings that formed the net, then along the entire length until they covered the entire fabric.
Gorgeia Akos smothered a sob.
“It looks… it looks like coral.”
“What colour?”
“White.”
“Look at each dot carefully.”
The artist bent down to study the unit at the base. It was composed of elements from a person’s medical file. Another, farther along, lived thousands of kilometres from the first; yet another, this one distant in time. But they were all united by Gorgeia Akos’ action of salvation.
“Each dot represents a life. Together they form a colony, in which the smallest elements co-exist in per-
fect harmony with the others. A whole in which the parts are united, humanity united by your care in the proximondial.

The programme continued on its own. It spread in all directions, adapting to the terrain, taking each tree, the slightest change in relief, into consideration, forming the holobiont. The colony included several thousand dots and the process showed no sign of stopping.

“The humanity you helped save.”

Suddenly, Gorgeia Akos almost collapsed.

“The colony…”

Paul caught her just in time.

“I see it in red.”

“What do you see? Can you describe it?”

Gorgeia hesitated, as if words failed her. Paul saw astonishment, but also acknowledgement in her eyes.

“A… a pure impression, original red, as it appears to everyone for the first time. I feel as if I’m being re-born.”

So, they had succeeded. Paul, Lakshmi, Victor Segal, and their volunteers, who had all joined in the operation to demonstrate their gratitude. Together, they had managed to re-awaken emotion in Gorgeia Akos.

The artist caressed the purple fan, which appeared to vibrate at her touch.

“I have so much to re-discover. Will you give me the courage to start all over from the beginning?”

Paul put his arm around her shoulders.
“Trust me, Gorgeia. Some stories don’t have to start with the beginning to have a happy ending.”

XAVIER MAUMÉJEAN
“Madam, you should sit down.”

Noriko Higuchi’s hand tensed on the handle of her cane, but her face showed no signs of irritation. She continued to study the horizon and the end of the road leading to the estate, while her steward folded and unfolded the screen of his cell phone.

“He’s coming,” she commented soberly.

“I don’t see him.”

“I programmed a satellite alert into my cane to detect when he crosses the border. I haven’t exactly developed mental powers.”

“Oh, I...”

“Don’t be nervous, Christian. No matter what happens you won’t leave the château. Let me enjoy this beautiful autumn weather, please.”

The steward fell silent and Noriko listened to the rustling of the last leaves, stirred by the wind blowing through the valley. The sound had acquired a new harshness, a roughness that gave the impression of
strength rather than weakness. A gust of wind lifted the white sand from the road, forcing both individuals to close their eyes. When Noriko opened her eyes again, she saw the silhouette of a young man in a navy blue suit off in the distance.

“They’ve sent us a clone,” the steward complained. “All these financial directors dress the same. Do you think they hatch them in an incubator?”

“You’ve seen too many bad movies. His predecessor knew nothing about wine and that’s why he let us be. I hope this one will be the same.”

The visitor walked quickly, nervously, and only removed his communication earpiece when he was close enough for a handshake.

“Madam President, I’m delighted to meet you. Mathis Bremer, I’ve been sent to...”

“Your trip wasn’t too difficult?”

“Not at all. I was surprised that I had to land my autoplane so far from the estate. I would have liked to fly over the vineyards.”

“It’s true, you did have to walk a good kilometre. I apologize.”

The young man reassured Noriko, “You know, I’m a Parisian born and bred and we’re renowned walkers. Vehicles are also prohibited there for safety reasons.”

“All the better. Let me introduce my steward, he’ll provide all the accounting documents you’re going to ask me for. Allow me to accompany you to the château.”
“My visit is very informal. Consider it an initial contact. I wanted to see the vineyards for myself rather than through satellite cameras or a tracking station. Not everyone is fortunate enough to visit Reine d’Ambre. My wife is jealous.”

Noriko hesitated for a moment. She took the time to examine her guest, noted the gleam of interest in his eyes, and was surprised to find herself shivering.

As they walked, Mathis Bremer continued to talk. He had offered his arm to Noriko for assistance. She had politely declined.

“So many years at the head of the estate. That’s exceptional! Your first vintage was in 2044, I believe?”

“2043.”

“Excuse me. You were so young at the time. Producing a wine of that quality at the age of 32. It marked us all.”

The President clenched her hand on her cane again, especially when hearing “at that time” from the mouth of a child who had not even been born when she had been put in charge of Reine d’Ambre. Without warning her steward, Noriko turned off toward the vineyards instead of taking the stairs that led to the château. She absolutely had to see them before speaking with her new financial manager. The plots spread over the hillside and only a few tree groves disrupted the perfection of the rows. Yet, the arrangement gave off a certain
harmony. When Noriko studied the estate, with the trimmed vines and the marked trenches, particularly during this period of the fall when the leaves were turning brown, she found herself transported into a Zen garden, rake marks on the sand surrounding an obstacle. The calm landscape comforted her.

Children’s cries drew her from her meditation. She saw four or five bustling about in the middle of the vines, a dozen meters or so ahead. Barely listening to Mathis Bremer, Noriko headed straight for the gang of children who stood around a little girl on the ground.

“What’s going on?”

“Madam, Chloé fell when she was running. She’s hurt.”

The little girl had stopped crying, but tears continued to stain her cheeks. She pulled up her dress to display her bloody knees. Noriko bent down to examine the wound and decided it was superficial.

“It’s nothing. Should I call your parents or will your friends help you home? Whichever you prefer.”

Behind her back, the steward cleared his throat, causing the woman to look at the vine to her left. Several branches had been broken as Chloé tried to catch herself and avoid losing her balance.

One of the boys grew alarmed, “We were playing hide and seek and when we found her she…”

“I realize that you didn’t do it on purpose, children.”

The President straightened up, grimacing. Then,
with the tip of her cane, she touched the broken bits of the vine. The little girl had got to her feet, and was limping, leaning on the shoulder of one of her friends. Noriko caressed her long, red hair.

“You’re not injured. Everything will be fine.”

“I wasn’t thinking. I grabbed whatever was at hand.”

“I can’t guarantee that your parents won’t scold you, however. I’ve transmitted the position of the vine to the satellite and the report is already in the coordinators’ computer. Off with you, now!”

“Yes, Madam.”

The children accompanied Chloé and the small troupe walked down the hill along the main row, heading for the houses below. Noriko watched them for a moment, smiling.

“You’re very tolerant with them,” Mathis Bremer commented, also smiling.

“The harvest is over and I let them play in the fields before work starts again.”

“It endangers the plants.”

“Our wine growers have seen worse! Our restorative resins are very effective. Unless a vine is completely uprooted, our wine has nothing to fear from a child. I intend for our employees’ families to enjoy the estate and want to stay here. It takes time to train a good picker, one who can assess the degree of noble rot on the grapes. So, believe you me, I take care of them!”
“One day, robots will be skilled enough to perform that task.”

Noriko narrowed her eyes, a gesture the steward recognized as the height of irritation for the President.

“Sir, my role is to guarantee a harvest every year, not to sit by and wait for technology to attain our level of skill.”

“Yet, without technology...”

“I believe you heard me just fine. Adélaïde’s arrival saved this estate, I know that full well. We’re no longer in the 40s. I have all the competent people I need.”

The young man swallowed with difficulty. Noriko’s response froze the smile on his face into a grimace and he appeared disoriented as he stood in the middle of the vines.

“Let’s go up to the château, if you will?” the President stated in a gentler voice. “I merely wanted to show you the vineyards, as you wished.”

Mathis Bremer nodded, still shaken. The steward’s calm face reassured him and he allowed himself to be guided toward the road that led up the hill. It was already possible to see the moist, plant surfaces of what looked less like an old castle than a vast, modern residence. The south wing, the one that looked over the acres of vines, was divided by several retractable, polarizing bay windows. Halfway up the hill, the details became clearer, revealing the complex mingling of cellular concrete, wood and old stone. The overall
effect evoked a traditional dwelling, with tower-like structures at the corners, covered with moss and creepers, and metal crenels reinforcing the modular structure of the building.

“When I read that you had renovated the residence, I never pictured anything so radical,” Mathis stated in an admiring tone.

“The original castle had no architectural or historical value and cost a fortune in upkeep. So you see, I take what I find useful from technology.”

“The building I live in is not so refined. In the early 60s, people refused to combine wood and concrete for such structures.”

“Even with the vegetation walls, I would have found it unfortunate to have nothing but glass in the middle of the landscape.”

They arrived at a small esplanade bordered with roses that led to the entrance of the château. The financial director walked over to a flower and bent down to smell it. Noriko tensed immediately.

“Amber Queen, of course!” he exclaimed. “Obviously.”

“You’re lucky. They flowered late this year, because of the poor weather. It’s rare to see one after the harvest.”

“I find their scent delicate and light. It’s a real success and perfect for your estate.”

The President pursed her lips in displeasure, barely
three seconds, and Mathis savoured his small victory. Like a boxer, once he had recovered from the blows of the previous round, he had responded in kind and was now on an equal footing with his adversary.

The person he should consider his adversary.

As they stepped out of the elevator that took them to the first floor, the President walked over to a long, black ceramic tube installed on a metal stand and bent down so that she could slip her arm into it. At the same time, she picked up a pair of earrings lying in a saucer and put them on. This was followed by a series of clicks and, when Noriko withdrew her hand, her wrist and part of her forearm wore a delicate dragon made of diamonds, silver and various precious stones. Where the mythological animal’s eye should have been, there was a small crystal bubble that allowed her skin to show through. When the President entered the sitting room, her jewel sparkled under the sun to the point of becoming blinding. She shifted her joints to make sure that her kirin was happy on her arm. Mathis Bremer seemed totally indifferent to the object, focussing on the commodes and the table in the middle of the room.

“Oh, Shin style! You’ve remained very 50s in fact.”

The young man admired the exuberant decoration on the panels of the commode, camellia blossoms made of rubies, stylized herons in synthetic ivory. He frowned, perplexed.
“That’s strange. I can’t quite figure out where it comes from. I can’t make out any moulding and the design is much cleaner than I’m used to seeing.”

Noriko gave her steward a weary glance. She felt tired before they even got down to business. The incessant chatter irritated her.

“Your predecessor thought it was a good idea to modernize the furnishings here. Based on my Japanese heritage, he decided to find artisans capable of merging Shin style and art deco. It impresses many of our guests when they stay here. I’ve grown accustomed to it.”

“Eberhard had great taste. I suspect he counts certain French cabinetmakers among his relatives. You’re a show piece in your own manner.”

“Sit down. I’ll ask Christian to get us a bottle. Would you like a specific vintage?”

Noriko’s tone was intended to be polite, but her distant look betrayed her tension. The young man seemed to ignore the change in topic.

“Why don’t you surprise me? I have a master’s degree in oenology and I’ve studied a good portion of your production. On the other hand, I’m not expert enough to identify everything that dates back before the 20s.”

The President turned to her steward.

“You heard? Choose a wine suitable for the circumstances. It’s mild out. I’m going to open up the sitting
room and make the most of the last beautiful day of autumn.”

“I understand, Madam.”

He headed back to the elevator and disappeared. Noriko sighed before turning around to join her guest. At the same time, the bay windows folded back, letting the fresh morning air into the sitting room. Without taking any particular precautions, the President grabbed a chair and pulled it toward the terrace, over to a low table. Mathis Bremer followed suit and they both sat down at the same time. In front of them, acres of vines spread throughout the valley, hiding the river bed and the villages at the bottom. Beech and ash trees decorated the landscape, breaking the monotony and matching the blue sky dotted with cotton clouds. Everything was perfectly calm, highlighted by the melodious chirping of sparrows in the estate’s chestnut trees. Except for the lines on the ground, it would have been possible to believe that the site had been abandoned by men. And yet, men had grabbed onto the land, working it, using it to the utmost.

“I don’t regret the trip!” the young man suddenly exclaimed. “I may love Paris, but I admire everything you’ve done here.”

“Mr. Bremer, I doubt that you’ve travelled this far just for tourism. Can we stop this game? I’m only half Japanese; I can handle a more direct approach.”
The financial manager smiled. His voice changed tone, growing calmer, quieter.

“We have nothing to reproach you for, Madam President. You’ve been perfect at maintaining the estate’s reputation and making Amber Queen one of the finest sweet wines in the world. Sales are excellent and we’ve noted that you’ve been able to attract the African clientele much better than your competitors. Future prospects are flourishing…”

“But the holding’s shareholders want to force me to retire.”

“You’re still young and your experience is invaluable.”

“I stand corrected: wants to find me a golden, honorific cubbyhole.”

“Don’t be cynical.”

“Allow me to tell you that the shareholders are making an error. I can provide enough business arguments to convince them. I will not let them turn me out without speaking up.”

“Oh, but no one plans to force you out, as you say. You’re going to choose to leave of your own free will.”

“What trick have you got up your sleeve?”

Bremer tilted his head and looked at Noriko crosswise.

“You tricked us first.”

The President was about to reply when the steward entered the sitting room, accompanied by a waitress.
The electric trolley the young girl operated with a remote control carried a tray with three glasses filled one quarter full. Christian carried the bottle, hiding the label with his hands.

“For a blind test, I propose you eat nothing as an accompaniment. Also, I’ve selected a light vintage as an aperitif.”

“You’re a pearl, Christian. I know that I can trust you.”

The steward smiled and placed the bottle on the sitting room table, while the waitress handed glasses to the President and Bremer. The young man held the crystal glass by the foot and examined the golden liquid through the sun’s rays. He swirled it several times and plunged his nose into the bowl. Noriko had not moved a muscle. She took care to thank the waitress and dismissed her.

“How beautiful! How rich!” Bremer exclaimed. “There are few vintages so complex. You’re spoiling me, Mr. Steward. You’re offering me the most exceptional wine!”

Christian nodded without saying a word. Noriko sat like marble. Her glass remained on the low table, within reach.

“I note ripened fruits, something close to cherry plum and apricot, a reminder of figs flowing into a touch of pear. Lingering a bit, I can even detect a spicy character, a hint of saffron.”
The financial director raised the glass to his lips and took a first sip.

“What depth! What volume! Sweet and smooth to perfection. No aggressiveness at all and yet the effect is unparalleled. A vintage as refined as this is rare, particularly in this century, but since it is one of your best harvests, the choice is limited. It’s still rather young and will bloom. I’d say 2068. A truly great year.”

He turned to the steward looking for approval, even discretely. In vain. Christian was watching the President move her arm toward her glass. At the same time, the tongue of her bejewelled dragon poked out, moving along her hand, then transforming into a needle that plunged into the liquid. Immediately, the empty eye on the jewel filled with yellow on Noriko’s skin and the appendage retracted back into its housing. The woman removed one of her earrings and placed it on the low table.

“I suppose you want to hear Adélaïde, Mr. Bremer?”

“Of course!”

The agate and silver earring emitted a sound just before a voice spoke through the microphone installed inside it.

“Great hope is incarnated in a girl with long blue hair walking barefoot beside a lake. Look at her smile, look at her dance in the grass. You see her, elusive, free, rebellious, and when she speaks to you, she applauds you. You think she’s for you, she escapes,
hides. Her off-white dress, soft and gentle, swells and clacks in the wind. You want to caress her skin, experience the satin and yet, and yet, it’s youth that blooms, promise that stands out. She does not wait for you.”

The President closed her eyes, then picked up the glass. She watched the liquid whirl then slide down the walls of the bowl in lazy drops before turning to look at the young man.

“You weren’t far off, my dear. Wine experts have fought battles over your error and you’re not the first to confuse two vintages. People more cautious than you would have evoked a twin vintage, as have existed in the history of Reine d’Ambre. However, I think it’s a 2067.”

This time, the steward smiled and turned the bottle next to him to reveal the label. Noriko was not mistaken. Mathis Bremer opened his mouth, said nothing, and took another sip. The President took a sip as well, after putting her earring back on. She appreciated the texture of her wine and its coolness while enjoying the landscape. The sun irrigated her vines, even after the harvests, and the clouds sparkled. Drinking made her more sensitive to the details, to the impalpable harmony…

“It’s miraculous! Bremer stated abruptly. “The Artificial Intelligence is enough for you to determine such a subtle vintage? I...”
“My glass empties / contemplating / this beautiful autumn day.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ryôkan Taigu, a 19th-century poet.”

“Ah.”

Make the most of the moment, of this morning that is drawing to an end, and of the sweetness that spreads over the soil as in yourself, don’t let a financial director ruin this instant. Can he understand the zazen while drinking a sweet wine?

“I acknowledge that you have done a remarkable job overcoming your handicap, Madam President. Nevertheless, you still hid the fact from us that you lost your sense of smell in your autoplane accident five years ago.”

The meditation had just been broken; Noriko would not achieve Buddhist satori today. On the other hand, she had never hoped to find it in the wine.

“And I continue to produce excellent vintages. Would you like to taste a 2071?”

“We’ve had to keep your handicap a secret. The day it comes out...”

“The wine is enough. It’s more important than me or my lies. Trust it.”

“The risk is too great. The Reine D’Ambre reputation has taken several centuries to build. A single error could sweep everything away.”

Noriko drank another sip and put her glass down.
“Tell that to someone else. I maintained this estate on my own, after the Pandemic when the best cellar masters had either disappeared or been monopolized by the big Bordeaux families for their châteaux. If I hadn’t decided to use an Artificial Intelligence as a technical director, we would have lost a dozen harvests at least! The holding was more than pleased to find the daughter of the best sommelier in the world to attract an Asian clientele. I’m familiar with image.”

Mathis Bremer stiffened. The President’s tirade was putting him on the defensive. He had not expected such virulence.

“The clientele is changing, Madam. The Stellenbosch region in South Africa is rivalling some of our Bordeaux and we have good hopes in Kenya. I fully expect to see an African among the top sommeliers in less than five years.”

“So, come back when you’ve got him.”

“You understand me full well. I’ve been sent to ensure the transition, until such time as we find that rare pearl. We’re not suicidal, you know. Your father was a Courselle, my mother was a Tesseron, that will reassure everyone about the quality of our heritage.”

“You have no experience. You’re a financier.”

Bremer pointed at the dragon on Noriko’s arm and said, “Experience is found in the memory of all the cellar masters contained in Adélaïde’s databases. Rest assured. I won’t break the line. All you have to do is
publicly give up the estate and nothing will change. I’ll keep your wine growers, your steward, if that’s what worries you.”

“I won’t agree. Your shareholders are mocking my work.”

“You mocked them by claiming that your accident had had no aftereffects. You deprived them of a rather elegant means of replacing you without scandal. Madam President, you have no choice. You will resign and accept your sinecure.”

Noriko flushed.

“Never. I reject such an absurd decision. I’m not handicapped, I know my land better than anyone else and I am not old enough to be put out to retirement. Ten, 20 even 30 years will not be enough for me to completely understand this wine. I haven’t wearied of it!”

The financial director finished his wine and ran his tongue over his lips before setting the glass down on the table. He stood up, buttoned his jacket, without hiding his satisfaction.

“Madam President, you told me yourself, the wine is more important than you. Reine d’Ambre existed before your arrival and it will survive your departure. Don’t place your pride above these acres of land you like to watch. I understand that you find it hard to give up your life’s work, but leave without bitterness. Be worthy of your vintages!”
“I won’t accompany you, Mr. Bremer, you know the way out.”

The young man nodded abruptly and left. When he had left, Christian sat down in the vacant chair and picked up the third glass left by the waitress. He tasted the wine as Noriko brooded, counting the tiles on the terrace.

“Truly marvellous,” he commented. “It’s a spring wine, in fact.”

“Christian, do you think I should give up?”

“Do you want the advice of a friend or that of an employee of the holding that pays that Mr. Bremer?”

The President laughed dryly and said, “Come on. Each year is an unparalleled surprise for me. What can they offer me in return? I may have lost my sense of smell, but not my love for this land. I’m still overcome with emotion when I see the noble rot take over the first grapes. The shareholders can’t understand that magic. Only our clients can.”

“Can I say something?”

“Of course!”

“Why is that child making an appearance now? What is the board afraid of?”

A gust of wind shook the leaves on the chestnut trees as Noriko sought answers to those questions.

Night was falling on this March evening and the President appeared to be strolling among the vines. She
was carrying a bag across her shoulder and the clinking of the contents seemed to indicate that it held at least one bottle. The full moon cast gloomy plant shadows on the soil. Like quartered skeletons, the vines looked impoverished and fragile.

Noriko walked around the grove of ash trees and stopped. She started to unbutton her heavy jacket and opened it. The air was mild for the season. Reassured by the absence of wind, the woman removed her coat, folded it, then placed it on the ground to serve as a cushion on which she could sit cross-legged. From the bag, she took out a large square of dark fabric, finely decorated with silver threads, and placed it on the ground. Next came the bottle, although Noriko kept it close to her thigh to prevent it from falling. Finally, with ceremonious precaution, the President used both hands to take out the sakazuki, a green porcelain cup about 10 centimetres tall, and placed it in the middle of the cloth.

From the distance, people could barely make out the silhouette of the woman in the middle of the fields. No one accompanied her in this ritual, which she insisted on performing every year. Once, the weather had been so terrible that a drone had deployed a canvas above her head as she officiated. In her eyes, this moment was essential. All the more so this year. Since the fall and her meeting with Bremer, the pressure to bring about her resignation had not diminished and even the
merchants were expecting her to leave. Clients had noticed the rumours, demonstrating the effectiveness of the holding’s marketing department when it came to preparing the public for just that event. The vice was tightening, without providing a satisfactory exit.

Noriko did not want to leave the Reine d’Ambre estate. She could not picture herself moving to Paris and living in Japan would be like going into exile. They had asked her to keep her mother’s name, which was better known internationally, but all of her roots tied her to her father’s country. Her work had earned her recognition. Each vintage affirmed her legitimacy and no family of wine growers, whether from Bordeaux or the depths of Champagne, doubted her abilities. She had been accepted and no one made fun of her folkloric rituals. The President needed them to feel whole, just as the vine spreads out two arms when emerging from the soil.

The light of the full moon was so intense that the vine suddenly appeared to sparkle. Drops had formed from the scars of the February pruning, growing larger and larger as they flowed down the wood. The sap was rising, announcing a new cycle, a miracle that Noriko had come to celebrate. She poured a little wine into the sakazuki and pulled up the right sleeve of her shirt, revealing the diamond dragon on her hand. Adélaïde seemed to be sleeping under the nocturnal star. A slight contraction of her thumb sufficed wake the Artificial
Intelligence. Immediately, the skin under the jewel quivered, indicating that the sublime jewel was perfectly adjusted. The network of claws and subcutaneous wires communicated with the chip installed in the gem-covered support. The machine—oddly enough, Noriko found it difficult to use that term—adjusted to the slightest change in conductivity, both thermal and electrical, and interpreted the signals.

It had taken ten years for a language, something that surpassed simple utility, to develop out of this coexistence. The complexity of the harvest, the interaction with meteorological constraints, could not all be turned into equations. The President wanted the Artificial Intelligence to feel the wine, to measure the effect and integrate it in her analyses. The cellar masters that preceded her drew this knowledge from their heritage and used it unconsciously. Noriko wanted this lineage to continue and to be expressed other than in the form of archives stored in databases.

The kirin’s tongue deployed and lapped at the wine in the cup, taking in enough to fill the eye. Shortly after that, the earring chimed and Adélaïde’s voice echoed in Noriko’s brain.

“It’s a very tall tree, long, majestic, reigning over the hill, like a shepherd watching new sprouts shiver in the morning. It’s a slow wind, the spray of foam lost on the beach sweeping over the feet of a child who runs off. Listen to the bird soaring over the mountain flank,
wings barely flapping, and yet the air vibrates around it, enveloping it and carrying it. Wrap yourself up, curl up, share.”

The earring fell silent. The President picked up the cup and raised the wine to her mouth to drink a few sips. Gently, she stretched her arms out in front of her, lowering her head, as if offering the sakazuki to an invisible guest and remained in that position for 30 long seconds. Then, Noriko stood up and, with a single hand, removed the cloth square, tipping over the cup and spilling what remained of the wine onto the sandy soil. The liquid turned dark before disappearing.

A Japanese person would see nothing traditional in this ceremony, nothing comparable to rituals dedicated to saké, but Noriko did not perform this rite to respect the Shinto gods. She wanted to honour the land, to thank it for everything that it had done since she had arrived at the estate. It was normal for her to give it a little of the spirit that was born from the grapes produced here.

“Adélaïde,” the President said out loud, “I don’t want to leave. My place is here and I still have so much to learn. You enabled me to overcome my handicap; what will remain of me without you? I’m self-centred, but we’ve learned to tame one another and grow together. Each vintage is the fruit of our cooperation. I still need you.”

No response. The Artificial Intelligence had vocal
modules for communication, but they were used most often to interpret reports, not for conversation. Adélaïde had no language other than that of the wine.

“I’m wrong,” Noriko suddenly exclaimed. “What we built was not reserved for me. I was just an intermediary. I gave you my emotions and entrusted them to you so that you could grow, so that you could learn and now... (she turned her head to the moon) and now, show us just how generous you can be, Adélaïde.”

The President started to laugh, a deep laugh, full of sap, sap that was rising.

Noriko Higuchi’s face was radiant as she stood in front of the heavy wooden door of the underground cellar used to age barrels. She fiddled with her key chain as she waited for Christian and Mathis Bremer to walk down the stairs.

“It was a good, rainy spring,” she announced, cheerfully. “I’m sure you appreciated the fact that we picked you up in an electric car. It’s not as comfortable as an autoplane. I’m sorry about that.”

“I see your wine growers are hard at work.”

“They’re getting rid of the parasite sprouts. Suckering always encourages effervescence. That’s why we were able to use one of the vehicles to make a detour to pick you up.”

“Thank you. I must admit, your email last week sur-
prised me. I wasn’t expecting an invitation like this after our meeting last October.”

“I needed time to digest the news, Mr. Bremer.”

The financial director stepped onto the concrete floor and, after shaking the President’s hand, started to open his black leather briefcase.

The woman stopped him, saying, “I know that you’ve prepared documents, but I asked our steward to re-draft everything in keeping with my recommendations. Do you have your e-pen?”

Mathis Bremer frowned, looking concerned and wary.

“You said nothing.”

“Rest assured, I fully intend to resign. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? I just want to make sure that the estate will be protected after my departure. I prefer to write the clauses concerning my employees and their families. I know them all.”

“You should have sent me the document before I came here. The Board won’t be thrilled if I sign without asking their opinion.”

“That’s why I asked if you had your e-pen. Christian transmitted the documents as soon as you arrived. I expect your legal advisors are consulting them at this very moment. You know, my cellar masters are very fastidious. They can go on for days and days. Be happy that I spared you that! Let’s go in!”

Noriko selected a large cast iron key and inserted it
in the rustic lock on the door. The mechanism creaked. When she pushed, it resisted then gave way softly.

“That scent...” Bremer said, stunned.

The President detected no sign of derision in the young man’s words. She recalled the first time she had entered the room and the fragrance that floated there. There was nothing heavy, nothing heady about the fumes that escaped from the barrels, as if the essence of the wine had been sprayed in this immense cellar with its thick, black, stone pillars. A perfume, of course, but not one that would ever settle to be locked in a flask. How could this sensation be shared? How could this fragility, which was only experienced in this sumptuous room, be transmitted?

Once he grew used to this olfactory mystery, Bremer glanced at the painting hanging at the back of the cellar, 30 meters ahead of him. It was a portrait that could have been described as impressionist, if it had not gleamed under the soft light of the lamps. The young man took a few steps and understood. Each dab of paint was in fact a glass capsule containing wine. The shades had been arranged to suggest black hair, honey-coloured skin, even the whites of the eyes. The overall image was that of a woman who still looked young, with a discrete smile. A sort of Asian Mona Lisa.

“You look like her.”

“My mother.”
“The famous Hanae Higuchi!”

“The original photo was taken two years before she died. I asked Gorgeia Akos and a glazier to make this portrait using all of the vintages they wanted. She would have loved the idea, it was so like her.”

“2035 was a terrible year. The epidemic spared no continent. Your mother was 45 years old, if I’m not mistaken.”

Noriko looked at the work of art, barely listening to the young man’s words. She walked down the few steps that led to the barrels aligned in the cellar and stood in the middle of them, speaking in a loud voice, “Wines like ours age and change colour, Mr. Bremer. Every time, I step through this door, I note a difference, as subtle as a wrinkle on my face. I will be long gone and my mother will continue to age. The vintages preserve her and perpetuate her memory while allowing her to continue to change. There is no more wonderful challenge in our trade!”

“I believe you madam.”

The President nodded and pointed with her left hand, indicating the direction the financial director was to take. An alcove had been built in the wall to house a table and comfortable chairs. Several carafes waited for them, but it was the Queen that caught Mathis’ attention.

Spotlights, carefully positioned, highlighted the reflections of the glass body, making the amber inside
shine. The features of the face were harmonious, unreal, with honey-coloured cheeks and mahogany lips. The olive green eyes sparkled, easing the impression that one was looking at a robot. The Queen raised an arm to greet Bremer and invite him to join her. A delicate crown had been drawn on the top of her head and the white enamel bustier she wore was the only piece of clothing on the machine. Her movements were supple, smooth and, except for the colour, somewhere between gold and orange, a human being would have been mistaken at a first glance.

“Come and taste this harvest with me,” said a smooth voice, with just a few metallic accents.

The financial director turned to Noriko who replied to his unasked questions, “It’s a module for our guests. We put on a bit of theatre which they enjoy. The presence of an artificial intelligence intrigues them and they imagine a robot, not a jewel. I don’t have the heart to disappoint them.”

“I’m no tourist.”

“You’ll understand when you read the contract. Don’t worry, Adélaïde is not programmed to interact verbally with us. She follows routines. Sit down. We’ve come here to assess the wine produced this fall.”

“You want to teach me? I’m very flattered by this honour.”

Christian helped Noriko into her chair and gave her a signature book containing a dozen sheets of paper.
The woman caressed the soft materials, like a blind person deciphers Braille. In a digital era, printed documents maintained their solemn aspect and were reserved for specific purposes, such as notarized deeds. Illuminations decorated each page, providing the proof of authenticity used by the electronic copies in the event of conflicts.

“I will not take part in the decision, Mr. Bremer. I’m here as an observer and I will respect my successor’s choice.”

“What? You’re resigning now? Without any transition period?”

“Read the contract. It will make things clearer.”

The young man grabbed the pages from her hands. His eyes grew as round as saucers as he read the first paragraph. He looked at Noriko, at the robot, then back at the contract. The more pages he turned, the more he frowned, legs pumping nervously.

“So, this is your decision? You’re aware of the consequences, aren’t you?”

“You thought you would become the new President of Reine d’Ambre. I understand your disappointment.”

“You’re giving the estate to Adélaïde! A machine!”

“An Artificial Intelligence. Let’s be precise. My only concern is continuity. You’re right. I’m nothing to the wine and I regret the pride I showed last fall.”

“The Board will never agree to this!”

“What does your pen say?”
Mathis Bremer plunged his hand into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a slim ebony cylinder, streaked with sparkling fibres. He turned the central band, which sizzled before releasing a metallic feather. Noriko tapped on the table.

“You see. Someone in the Marketing department quickly understood how to take advantage of this option. Adélaïde is a major investment for the holding. Setting her aside for the benefit of a single individual, even a remarkable one, was out of the question. I merely confirmed a trend.”

“Wine is a human creation!”

“Not exactly. It’s a combination of things. Reine d’Ambre is not the result of an assembly, but of picking grapes infected with Botrytis. Adélaïde monitors the weather, looks ahead and directs the teams of grape-pickers before confirming the decisions made by our cellar masters.”

“You’ve broken with the past.”

“Quite the opposite. In order to achieve the results, the Artificial Intelligence digs through our archives and bases her decisions on our ancestors’ experience. The Board confirms the possibility I offer it to determine the vintage. That’s why you sought to set me aside, isn’t it?”

The financial director furrowed his eyebrows and gave her a cunning smile. He appreciated the President’s intelligence.
“How did you guess?”

“Why require a transition now when there are no concerns with respect to my wine? You weren’t afraid about rumours on my behalf, our holding masters internet communication and controls the information about me thoroughly. Plus, why send a financial director to convince me if it wasn’t a matter of money and fear that I would do the same thing as in 2056?”

“We read Adélaïde’s reports during the harvests and the weather was every bit as bad as during that bleak year. Too much rain, not enough sun, a poor harvest.”

“At that time, I had decided that we could not produce a vintage worthy of our name.”

“3 million lost.”

“And the following year was a success.”

“But you had not lost your sense of smell. How could you expect us to trust you? The figures are not obvious. A vintage is still highly possible despite the harvest conditions. If you have doubts, with your handicap, you will play things safe and sell it all to a merchant without our name. Can you claim otherwise?”

The President glanced at Christian, who was still standing behind her, but the steward remained impassive. When she had announced her decision, he had not opposed it, which did not necessarily mean he agreed with it. Noriko hoped she wasn’t betraying him; he had served the estate so well and had provided so much support when she had had to recruit
the pickers and train them. Everything depended on a gamble, a risk.

“So, everything is going fine. I hand the reins over to our Adélaïde. You would have done the same thing in my place. Nevertheless, I’m a good sport and I’ve prepared glasses for us to taste the 2073. You’ll give us your opinion and then listen to the AI’s. First, you have to sign.”

The financial director hesitated, rolling his pen between his fingers.

“You haven’t modified the machine?”

“I’m no computer expert and all of the modifications are noted in a log that your legal advisors had to consult before unlocking your signature. Adélaïde has no secrets to hide.”

Taking a deep breath, Mathis Bremer initialled the pages and signed the last one, transmitting the information to all of the digital versions of the document. Noriko used her own e-pen and concluded the agreement. At that very moment, she stopped being the President of Reine d’Ambre. Since she was in the underground cellar, under stone arches, no nostalgia swept over her, just a sense of the fleeting nature of things. You could dedicate 30 years of your life to a passion and see it all come to an end at the bottom of a page, without feeling sad.

“Madam Higuchi?” Bremer asked. “Are you all right?”
“Yes. At my age, I have just realized what mono no aware means. It was time. Taste the wine, please.”

The young man stopped talking and poured the content of one carafe into a glass with a long, straight neck.

“Deep amber colour, a perfume of candied fruit, mingled with almond and marmalade, very concentrated.”

He raised the liquid to his lips, closed his eyes, then sighed as if relieved. He spit the wine into a bowl and satisfaction lit up his face.

“It’s long in the mouth, with a taste of honey and a spot of iodine. Not the most exceptional wine the firm has produced, but completely remarkable. Your pickers and your growers performed miracles despite the frightful weather conditions.”

“Wait for Adélaïde’s verdict.”

Christian had poured the wine into the glass himself and adjusted the robot’s gripper so that it could raise the container to its lips. A tube poked out from its mouth and collected a few millilitres. Ten seconds later, the voice echoed throughout the cellar.

“It’s a narrow building, lost in the city, walls cracked and bent. You barely see it if you walk quickly, yet it grows red. Rustic aesthetics of this mass that presents itself to you. You walk around it, appreciate the calmness, the roundness and at the end perceive disarray. Why stretch so high into the sky?”

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Noriko settled into her chair without glancing at the financial director.

“So?” he asked

“You didn’t listen?”

“You developed that language with Adélaïde. I don’t understand a word of it. I have no sublime jewel to translate her words.”

“You didn’t listen.”

The Amber Queen turned her head to Bremer and hurled, “There will be no 2073 vintage. It does not satisfy the criteria.”

“What criteria?” the young man said indignantly.

The Artificial Intelligence fell silent, unable to answer a question that did not fit within the framework of her communication routines.

“Madam Higuchi, admit it, you tampered with the machine.”

Noriko raised her right sleeve, exposing her bare arm.

“It’s her decision, her choice, based on centuries of experience. It’s the expression of her freedom and neither you nor I can force her. By signing that paper, we offered her the responsibility, as would be the case for any human appointed to this position.”

“She doesn’t talk!”

“The wine can be experienced in silence.”

This time, the financial director did not hide his ineffectualness. Head held in his hands, he muttered
meaningless words over and over. Overcome with pity, Noriko bent over him and murmured, “I have an idea that will save your balance sheets. Don’t despair.”

“You never once stopped manipulating me! I should have refused to sign before tasting the wine, but you staged such a scenario that I could only accept. Now that was a plan!”

“Can you stop talking once in a while? You’re tiresome. Of course, you won’t sell bottles of the new vintage this year. And that’s regrettable. But, imagine all the other bottles we will sell if you just listen to me.”

“OK.”

“When you drink our wine, the experience belongs to you, it is unique to you, and yet, how sad you would feel if you could not share it with guests at a dinner. That’s the paradox of wine. What I propose is that we surmount it, surpass it. Design a bottle that, once empty, reveals a message composed of the phrases Adélaïde utters when she samples the wine. It will not replace the flavour, of course, but you will be able to transmit the emotion you experienced to your guests, whether you have a sublime jewel or not. They will participate in the pleasure you experienced and will understand it intimately and not only after being trained in oenology. Your clients will compare experiences, choose the ones they prefer, talk, grow curious. All of our vintages will be sought out and people will create a new means for appreciating Reine d’Ambre.
No other wine will benefit from this characteristic since it is based entirely on an Artificial Intelligence.”

The young man was shaken by this revelation and he raised his eyebrows, as his mind immediately grappled with all of the new possibilities.

“The spirit of the wine for all, in fact.”

Noriko laughed quietly and Bremer smiled in return. Only the amber robot remained silent, like marble.

After the financial director left, Christian and Noriko stayed behind in the underground cellar. The Steward tasted the nameless wine and pouted.

“It still isn’t bad.”

“It won’t evolve. The image was clear in that respect: an abandoned building, useless, a ruin. Of course, it’s not terrible and that’s why Bremer made a mistake. It’s not enough to grasp the complexity of a wine; you also have to be able to evaluate its future, its transformation over time. Our Artificial Intelligence manages to do that better than an inexperienced young man.”

“You took a big risk. Adélaïde has never given advice; she could have adapted to the needs of a financial director and satisfied his expectations.”

“I trusted her when I lost my sense of smell. I was not about to fail at the last minute. Besides, if we don’t want to take risks, why would we want to produce exceptional wines? There would be no merit in that.”

Christian agreed. The former President of the estate
suddenly felt anguish overwhelm her. She twisted her hands, much to the steward’s concern.

“And now? Where’s my place? I no longer have a role to play. I’m just one more memory in this long history.

“Oh, you’ll continue to be Adélaïde’s partner since she’ll need your emotions for years to come. She knows the wine and you understand those who drink it. Solitude will not please her. Don’t worry.”

“Perhaps one day she won’t want me anymore. She’ll feel that she understands everything. Who knows the capacities of an Artificial Intelligence?”

Silence settled over the cellar, as heavy as the perplexity that troubled the two humans. The robot opened her mouth and a calm voice spoke once again.

“Thus perhaps at 80 my art may improve greatly; at 90 it may reach real depth, and at 100 it may become divinely inspired. At 110 every dot and every stroke may be as if living. I hope all good men of great age will feel that what I have said is not absurd.”

Watching as the Steward frowned with a lack of understanding, Noriko merely replied, “Hokusai. Post-face to the 100 views of Mount Fuji, written when the artist was 75 years old.”

Olivier Paquet
Facets

“I believe that when we reveal everything like that, we no longer desire anything.”

Coco Chanel, 1969

“Being tasteful means keeping no secrets, showing all your facets.”

Lune Guénon, 2069

Matthew’s index finger brushed against the back of his head, touched the square of smooth skin in the brown hair. The operation had taken place a few days earlier. The advertisement told the truth: into the operating room in the morning, out at night. The idea that doctors had inserted organic microchips in his brain occasionally made him feel a little unsettled, causing an unconscious shiver. The sleeves on his jacket would change colour then, taking on new patterns. The emo-fabric truly was a second skin. During the first few hours, Matthew had been unable to keep himself from
constantly checking the variations in the intelligent fabric, but now he managed to ignore the ongoing changes in his clothing.

The young man took a deep breath, then lifted his head. The dozens of elevators created a joyous aerial ballet under the sparkling arch. The dizzying height of the glass colossus, with its spider-like decks, was over-bearing. At some places, the lights diffracted, casting rainbows on the marble floor. The Guénon corporate slogan was engraved on the long counter to the left: “Transparency and emotions: moving toward the other.”

For a second, Matthew stood stock still, a stone in the midst of the flow of employees heading quickly toward the elevators or the immaculate doors. Joining Guénon was an opportunity he had been unable to refuse. For three years, he had worked as the Communications Officer at Améthyste, a traditional fashion house which had been declining for several years. Guénon, on the other hand, had exploded over the past five years, solely as a result of its marketing of emofabric, which had contaminated an entire segment of the Parisian population. Hundreds of thousands of copies sold, exports abroad, the start of a global phenomenon. Once he had placed his electronic signature on the contract, Guénon had immediately sent him a message offering him a choice of several appointments to make the transition to emofabric. Joining the firm meant absorbing its culture, adopting its model.
He collected his thoughts and tapped on the screen rolled around his forearm. His egosphere appeared in his field of vision, superimposed over Guénon’s lobby. Purchasing the new Universe lenses, the latest fashion innovation, was also part of the integration process. He used the bracelet that functioned as a tactile interface and the information appeared directly on his irises.

Three notifications, two calls during his absence.

He swept away the few ads displayed in the lower right corner, then read the latest message from Guénon.

Matthew Lindley
Appointment at 4:00 pm
Astrocyte elevator, 14th floor, Ms. Bellefort’s office

The young man read the few lines several times, then placed his finger on the name. Ms. Bellefort’s profile was displayed before his eyes, the human stream racing toward the elevators in the background.

Tinia Bellefort
Gender: Female
Born: Paris, France
Date of birth: January 13, 2038 (36 years old)
Position: Communications Director, Guénon
Relationship status: Married to Nam Nguyen

He had been unaware that he would be meeting the Communications Director on his very first day. That
was not part of the programme. As he faced the prospect, stress washed over him, painting ochre spots on his pale green clothing. He scrolled through more information about this woman, looking for reassurance, trying to create the vague sensation that he was in control of the situation. Photos streamed by: a little girl, shots of Malaysian beaches, a family reunion. Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder, and whirled about. A young woman smiled at him compassionately, pearly white teeth contrasting sharply with her ebony skin. Her profile immediately replaced Tinia Bellefort’s.

Danisa Mugabe
Gender: Female
Born: Harare, Zimbabwe
Date of birth: January 13, 2049 (25 years old)
Position: Marketing Officer
Relationship status: Single

“New here, aren’t you?”
“It’s that obvious?” he asked, taken aback.
“Ochre, the colour of anxiety. Good luck.”

She set off immediately and disappeared into one of the lateral staircases. Matthew took a few seconds to calm his pounding heart. The slightest emotional fluctuation was visible to others. He had to get used to it.

The young man pushed aside the fleeting apparition
that he could not help but associate with the word ‘single’ in the profile and rushed into the elevator topped with the Astrocyte bas-relief.

The glass cage rose in the air and, as he gained altitude, Paris stretched out beneath his feet. The zinc and slate roofs blazed under the sun, setting fire to the diaphanous buildings that stretched up to the pale sky. Down below, the thick crowd swarmed in the streets, forming long, broken, multi-coloured ribbons. Since the prohibition of vehicles in the capital, asphalt had been replaced with cobblestone or vegetation.

The elevator stopped, then uttered a liberating ‘ting’. Matthew found himself in a vast corridor branching out into a series of offices. Behind the soundproofed glass, silhouettes moved, spun and combined. An automatic door opened on a man carrying armloads of boards displaying a dozen charcoal clothing designs. He was speaking out loud, not to himself, but to someone nearby.

“I have the new models. I’ll bring them to you right away. No, they weren’t designed by Lune but, you realize, we have to launch the new collection despite everything.”

Matthew felt out of place in this hive of bustling people. Stepping aside to let a procession of young people parade past, he noticed the brain diagrams decorating the walls. He stopped in front of a black and white cross-section with two zones shown in red. The
The amygdala stores all memories, particularly emotional trauma. It is also closely connected to the stimuli that inspire fear. Next to it, several triangular patterns intermingled, along with different shades of red, ranging from scarlet to ruby. The decor on this floor clearly reflected the personality of Lune Guénon, the first neuroscientist to become a fashion designer.

Matthew opened an old message to access the building’s plan and noted the way to the Communications Director’s office. He stopped in front of a bay window. Ms. Bellefort’s office was completely transparent, from the floor to the ceiling, and contained a vast glass table holding several screens. The woman, in her thirties, was ensconced in a bubble chair, filled with air, and her lips moved as she massaged her temples. Matthew immediately sent a message indicating his presence, then deactivated the Universe lenses from his bracelet, so as not to be disturbed by notifications. A few seconds later, Ms. Bellefort looked up at him with hazel eyes, then touched her bracelet before getting up from her egg-shaped chair, which shifted up slightly. The young man swallowed and then glanced at his suit, still ochre and now decorated with concentric circles. The glass door opened and Ms. Bellefort reached out a hand, fingernails decorated with tiny precious gems.

“You must be Matthew Lindley. Excuse me for a moment.”

She tapped on her bracelet then said out loud, “Yes,
it is imperative for the lab to keep this project completely confidential. No information must be released by Universe. Yes, yes...”

She turned back and he had time to look at her pale pink pant suit. Several patterns started at waist level, changing mother of pearl oblong spheres, which created an illusion of a belt similar to a moving snake. From reading the guide, he knew that pink indicated excitement. But, in the space of a second, Ms. Bellefort’s soft face grew hard and the pant suit turned grey.

“What do you mean, he’s not available immediately? Have him contact me.”

The woman shook her head, brown curls swinging, then finally turned to Matthew.

“Please, sit down.”

He settled into the closest bubble chair and leaned against the comfy back, suddenly feeling safe and protected by the cocoon of air. Pleasant scents wafted up to his nostrils: mandarin, maybe a touch of lavender. The director sat down opposite him, her fleshy lips curving upward in a welcoming smile. Gradually, pink replaced the grey.

“You’re very anxious, aren’t you? How long have you had the emofabric?”

“Three days,” he replied.

“I see, it’s quite recent. I do admit that I find it hard to remember what my life was like before this technology. But, really, you don’t have any reason to worry.”
“It’s just...”
He closed his mouth, not knowing whether or not he should share his opinion about such a sensitive matter.
“Go on,” she encouraged him.
“It doesn’t matter to me if people know how old I am, what work I do, or what I ate yesterday. But sitting in front of someone who can know what I feel is, well, it’s unsettling.’
“It is at the beginning but, trust me, it’s the key to authentic interactions. Do you know where the word emotion comes from?”
He shook his head, feeling shame at his ignorance well up. He should have left Universe on so he could do research. The concentric circles on his clothing transformed into wavy lines and the ochre shifted to emerald green.
“It comes from the old French word motion, which means ‘movement’, which in turn was borrowed from the Latin motio. Emotions are internal movements, physiological responses to stimuli intended to drive us away from danger or to encourage us to seek rewards. Emotions are constantly being generated, although we’re not aware of this. Seeing what the person you’re speaking with feels means being able to take that into account, adapt. Live together better.”
Matthew could not help but study the Bordeaux red halo that appeared in the area of the director’s solar plexus, then grew luminous. The woman lowered her
head in turn to admire the phenomena and declared, “Emofabric is the work of Lune Guénon. That prodigious woman has brought fashion and technology together. She permitted the fusion of the sciences, esthetics and desire.”

As she said those words, the light grew more intense.

“As I said in the video interview,” said Matthew, “My knowledge of neuroscience is, unfortunately, very limited. I hope that won’t be a stumbling block for this position.”

Ms. Bellefort crossed her legs with cat-like grace.

“That’s not a problem as such. You’ll learn the basic notions in order to understand the firm’s issues.”

He inhaled the scents emitted by the bubble chair deeply, then asked, “Perhaps you could explain these basic notions in a few words?”

“A curious individual who prefers words over search engines,” she said, smiling. “That’s a good start.”

She pressed a protuberance on the bubble chair and a cavity opened, holding a glass of cool water. After drinking a mouthful, she continued, “The brain is a territory that still contains many secrets. Yet incredible progress was made with respect to mapping it following the Pandemic. We can now target the exact zones and neurons that are used in its internal workings.”

“Which was brought about by the invention of Nautys,” Matthew said.
“Exactly. Up to now, the researchers kept running into technological limitations since the sensors used to record cerebral activity were clumsy. In order to capture the maximum amount of signals emitted by the brain, you have to be in direct contact with the central nervous system. Yet, that feat was impossible using non-invasive measurement systems, such as electrodes placed on an individual’s head. In the past, most of the sensors used were not biocompatible and that triggered rejection. Lune Guénon developed organic chips in 2062. These sensors for capturing brain activity are completely compatible with the central nervous system.”

Matthew re-activated his bracelet to take a few notes.

The director continued, “These chips, which are just a few microns thick, are made of supple and resistant cellophane. A true accomplishment.”

“Yes, the organichips,” Matthew said. “I’ve heard about them. They revolutionized the scientific world. But now, excuse my curiosity, I find it hard to understand... Why did Ms. Guénon decide to found a fashion firm?”

Ms. Bellefort looked at him sharply.

“Her invention spread quickly through medical circles but, to be truthful, all of her research was the result of a more secret passion. Lune has always tried to understand how feelings work. She cherished
the dream of living in a world in which interactions between individuals were sincere, in which each person could brandish their own inner life. At the same time, she drew on a regular basis, with a clear preference for watercolours. One day, while painting, she came up with the idea of using her chips in clothing on which emotions would be displayed in real time. That gave rise to emofabric in 2069. After an obligatory test phase, the first model was marketed two years ago. At the outset people were reticent about undergoing surgery to enter into symbiosis with a piece of clothing. Then, gradually, the concept spread through all layers of society.”

In the Parisian luxury ecosystem, emofabric rapidly swept away traditional suits, Matthew thought, attracting a completely new clientele and driving firms such as Améthyste under. The word traitor flitted through his mind. When he had announced his resignation to Armand, the latter’s reaction had been undecipherable, and a neutral expression accompanied his words, “It’s your life, your choices”. At that moment, Matthew would have liked a little indication as to what the man who had trained him felt.

He chased the memory, which was threatening to turn into shame, away and said, “Lune Guénon must be a fascinating individual.”

“You’ll have an opportunity to meet her this evening.”
“So soon?”
Tinia Bellefort uttered a small crystal laugh.
“You weren’t recruited by chance, Mr. Lindley. Let’s just say that Lune Guénon is going through a difficult phase...”
She left her sentence unfinished and shades of ochre appeared on her shoulders. Matthew remained silent. He was completely thrown off his stride by the turn the conversation had taken.
“She wanted to recruit different types,” the Communications director continued. “To inject people in the firm who do not come from the neuroscience sector. Your experience at Améthyste caught her eye. As the Communications Officer, your role will be to cast a new look on our practices and help us ensure that they are better accepted.”
Just as the anxiety was starting to disappear, Matthew saw it re-appear on his synthetic fabric. This mission seemed too broad, too important for his meager experience.
“I assure you that everything will go well,” she said. “Just be yourself, with your baggage, with your past. Nothing else interests Lune Guénon.”

The Paris sky is never ever truly black. No, sometimes it’s red, always starless. The artificial lights eclipse the stars suspended over our heads, erasing what could bring us back, for a brief moment, to the
fleeting nature of our existences. By choosing to establish my office at the very top of the building, to build this glass sphere that overlooks the company’s rooftops, I hope to be able to draw a little closer to the heavens. Even if there are no stars, there is always the moon, the blind eye that obsessed me to the point I took it for my name. For a moment, I study the crescent hanging on the monochrome backdrop, then lower my eyes to the roofs. For this evening’s reception, the grass covered surface has been decorated with candles. When it came to the candles, the Internal Communications team decided to return to older style atmospheres. An arbour covered with bioluminescent climbing plants hangs overhead.

Bit by bit, the employees arrive, move about among the tables. From my bay window, I can see the colour variations of their attire. They gather around trays covered with drinks, reach out their glasses and their plates. The roof transforms into an ocean with variable shades reflecting the fleeting emotions of their encounters. I turn away from the show and go back to my desk. Several synthetic fabrics wait patiently on the circular table that stands in the middle of the room. I run my fingers over the smooth, soft surface of the fibers intermingled with receivers that transform the signals received into colours and patterns.

The problem is that I would like more. I would like relief, transformations in the very fabric itself. Several
external laboratories are currently working on the concept, but the prototypes are far from conclusive. With a deep sigh, I walk over to the corner mirror, face my reflection. Time continues its work, inexorably. Parentheses have formed around my lips. I correct them quickly with a cream. Under my fingers the product penetrates, instantaneously covering my skin, smoothing the irregularities, unifying the shade. Today, only our digital profile shows one’s true age. The physical modifications are not the worst since they can always be corrected, camouflaged. The worst is the storm that has slipped into my eyes, a tenacious storm despite the passing days. That extinguished light, in the depths of my pupils, is as flagrant as my dress, which has remained obstinately black for some time now, the fabric a moonless night.

And, as I polish my mask with a final caress of my index finger, an obvious thought crosses my mind.

I’ve lost my fire.
That’s the truth.

I’m looking for a way to improve the emofabric, going deeper into beauty, but I don’t even know if the result will suit me. Since the craze generated by my invention, the company has grown from seven employees to 99. The clothing made from intelligent fabric takes a long time to craft. The waiting lists are immense and the stores are permanently out of stock. The rarer an object becomes, the more consumers rush
for it. Demand far outweighs supply, while the organichioms have continued to improve over the months. The rendering of emotions has been refined. Each piece of clothing mirrors the wearer’s personality, becomes an artistic construction, a demand for its own personal mythology. This skin worn over the skin is a space where the individual can reinvent himself, a permanently, constantly renewed beauty. A way of telling one’s story. That’s what the people who own emo-fabric want. It allows them to be unique, to proclaim their differences while receiving intimate information from others to take into consideration.

Five years ago, my obsession had been to switch from neuroscience to fashion. To become a real creator. That’s the title I’ve acquired, that the professionals brandish, but I feel like an impostor. How can I be a creator when others are now creating themselves? I’ve given people a key, a place where they can write and re-write themselves, which no longer needs an external person. I transmitted the desire to others and, in doing so, I lost that feeling myself, I dried up.

I’m still a scientist.

But not a real artist.

I live in the permanent nostalgia of a time, a precious time five years ago, when I created emofabric. Everything fell into line very suddenly. The neurosciences and beauty, intertwined like a mandala. I grabbed that idea, the idea of making a material capa-
ble of transcribing all of the fluctuations generated by the various networks discovered in the structure of the brain become a reality. I plunged into the project until I lost myself. I was happy, profoundly happy, even though I had become an inaccessible island for some. I don’t know what drove me to work and keep on working without any guarantee that emofabric would ever see the light of day, without knowing whether I would be thanked, covered with compliments or cast aside and insulted. If I had had this clothing at that time, I don’t know what range of colours would have transcribed the mood in which I bathed. As I gave it life, I was filled with a sense of euphoria. No, it was stronger than that. Ecstasy, ékstasis, ‘transport’ in Greek. Creating emofabric had put me in a state of mind that transported me away from my daily life. I was both a stranger to myself and yet fully… me. Everything was more intense, more orderly as well. Without a doubt, this was the elsewhere that some people seek to find in drugs, alcohol, or any other molecule that artificially disturbs the neurotransmitters. But I... I was pleased to have attained it solely through the internal capacity of my brain.

When the idea of emofabric collided with my life, it was an epiphany, an absolute moment.

And then my creation reached term, it slipped through my fingers, and could now be found on hundreds of thousands of individuals. Since then, I’ve
been groping around in the dark, over and over, to find that state once again, to invent something new. I’m no longer even capable of sketching models. A cruel irony: my own dress reminds me each day that inspiration has fled from me.

I had a treasure and I lost it.

The message that appears in the corner of my field of vision draws me from my introspection.

Anniversary reception: Guénon, 5 years!
On the roof.

I chase the message away with a flick of my finger, then say out loud, “Lights out.”

The room is plunged into darkness. After locking the door, I walk down the lateral stairs to the roofs. The evening coolness bites my cheeks and hands for a moment, then I reach the grassy area, dominated by the arbour, arches releasing a pleasant warmth. The climbing plants wrap around the iron arms, spreading their sparkling leaves. My latest purchase to date: the bioluminescent vine captures the heat released by the structure. I barely step into the room and I feel all eyes riveted on me. My dress is still black, of course, as if I were screaming at the world, “Don’t come close!”

I settle on a bench, away from the crowd. A waiter hands me a glass of champagne and I savour the sparkling bubbles absorbing the fever that flashes across the rooftops. The orchestra ensconced on a stage plays
its first number. The flute trills, quickly joined by the muffled sigh of a French horn and then the vibrant sounds of the strings. I observe this multi-coloured field, this parade of skirts, shirts, suits and hairstyles. I designed each cut, assigned each emotion to a pattern and a colour. Yet, when the emofabric fits to skins it becomes something else; it develops its own freedom and generates combinations I would never have suspected.

To my left, a man and a woman are talking in hushed tones.

“Where did that new pattern come from?” he asks. “It wasn’t there yesterday.”

“Oh, a disagreement,” she replies. “Aden got me so angry… The maroon has finally gone—I really didn’t like that colour—but these curves appeared and have stayed. I guess the moment was more important than I thought.”

I look into my glass of champagne. Most often, emotions are fleeting and occur in response to thoughts, activities or the interactions of the day. They serve as indicators, triggering a behaviour that is adapted to the situation. On the other hand, moods are persistent and can last for days, even months. These longer-lasting states are engraved on the fabric as geometric shapes. The six-pointed stars on my top remind me about when this film of sadness first covered me. They blossomed when I lost all desire, all inspiration.
Several notifications pollute my visual field. Messages from people at the reception, a few meters from me, asking for permission to speak with me. I ignore them all, except for the request from Tinia Bellefort.

“Can I introduce someone to you?”
I grant her request through my bracelet.

The Communications Director walks over with her aerial gait. Well, well, she’s traded her backless dress for a shimmering pant suit, one of the latest models, not even my design. A young man in his 20s stands patiently behind her, an androgynous kitten with undisciplined brown hair, light eyes above a hooked nose that gives him character. Tinia points at the newcomer.

“Matthew Lindley, this is the renowned Lune Guénon.”

The young man nods timidly. His pants and vest, with braces, stubbornly remains ochre, with the exception of a few arabesques on the sleeves. I figure he’s dying from anxiety.

“Why are you in such a state?”

Tinia looks at him, eyes brimming with excuses. The young man remains undaunted, replying to me in a soft, warm voice, “I’ve just joined Guénon and my transition to emofabric is very recent.”

He contains a sense of refinement I’ve rarely encountered in men of his age. I check his profile immediately.
Matthew Lindley
Gender: Male
Born: London, Great Britain
Date of birth: January 13, 2048 (26 years old)
Position: Communications Assistant, Guénon
Relationship status: Single

Curious, I call up more information about his career history. The letters appear on his real face, as he remains mute, not daring to interrupt me.

Previous employment: Communications Officer at Améthyste

The memories come back to me: I’d tagged him a few months earlier in the list given to me by the Human Resources Director. He comes from a traditional fashion firm, which I had researched several times.

I cut the connection and return to the pair. Tinia is also plunged in a world that only she can see, almond eyes moving in the void. After a few moments, she returns to us.

“Lune, I’ll leave you with Matthew. He has a few questions to ask you for our exclusive interview.”

She taps him compassionately on the shoulder, provoking a sudden surge of cheery red, the shade of desire. Tinia pivots on her heels and heads for a group that calls out to her. I ask the young man to sit next to
me, on the wicker bench that cracks deliciously under our weight. He clears his throat, consults his invisible notes frantically. I wait patiently, a tad amused.

“This is my first day,” he declares, as an introduction. “Ms. Bellefort has assigned me to ask you a few simple questions that will be broadcast by video tomorrow.”

He turns on the micro-camera in his bracelet, then points it in my direction. I stare at the green diode and paste an affable expression on my face—a pointless lie.

“Ms. Guénon, the company that bears your famous name is celebrating its fifth anniversary today. What is your assessment of its situation?”

Needless to say, it was Tinia who prepared this insipid interview. Given my current state of mind, she would never dare bring the burning issues up on the carpet.

“Five years,” I say emphatically. “It seems to me like it was just yesterday, and yet an eternity. I’m very proud that emofabric has been such a success.”

“What do you think of Sanri, which has just launched a line of intelligent clothing based on your concept?”

I was wrong. Tinia doesn’t plan to spare me completely.

“I’m not afraid of competition,” I reply. “The concept can be used by other firms, but the quality of the emofabric is impossible to match. As Coco
Chanel said, I don’t believe in copies, I do believe in imitation.”

Matthew frowns slightly.

“Looking in the rear-view mirror is never a bad thing,” he adds. “What that woman said during her time is still valid today. The models marketed by Sanri only restore four emotions, whereas emofabric can now provide 36, and that’s only the beginning. We’re still progressing in terms of subtlety.”

The ochre of his jacket gradually switches to opalescent blue. This young man has finally managed to overcome his apprehension and audacity makes a timid appearance.

“In your opinion,” he continues, “How does emofabric contribute to the reconstruction of our world? How does it help people be... better?”

A smile teases at my lips; a few white spirals wind over my black skirt.

“The best thing would be to show you.”

I motion him to aim the camera at the pair in full tête-à-tête a few metres away. Even if we can’t hear what they’re saying, it’s enough to merely look at their clothing. The woman’s fur dress is ash white with curves around the collar. The young man’s suit is changing to a very bright orange.

“You simply have to be attentive to your environment. What are those two people feeling?”

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The young man taps on his bracelet. I place my hand on his to stop him.

“No point checking. It would be a good idea for you to learn all this by heart. The white is serenity, but it’s still imprinted with grey tints, revealing a remnant of deception. That sustained orange is contempt.”

I leave my hand on the young man’s wrist. I suddenly realize that it has been two years since I have touched another’s skin. I break the contact quickly, out of fear that my disarray can be read.

“Look,” I say.

The minutes pass. The couple continues their discussion.

After a moment, Matthew says, “I don’t see anything.”

I raise an authoritative finger.

“There! Now!”

Gradually, the orange of the suit brightens, wanders into a pale yellow, then turns the same white as the woman’s dress. A rapid mutation, sudden harmony between two beings. I release a sigh of satisfaction.

“Mirror neurons at work. They’re my favourites.”

“Perhaps you could explain their exact role to us?” he says, pointing the camera at me once again.

“They were discovered at the end of the last century. Certain neurons fire both when we act and when we see someone else act. We unconsciously imitate the actions of others and we share their experiences, to a certain
extent. These neurons also work in the feeling register: when we see someone express an emotion, the cerebral areas associated with the experience of that emotion are activated. Sharing is written in our cells.”

I place my chin on my palm and watched the couple dressed in white, as they continue to discuss under the light of the plants that entwine around the arbour. Matthew hesitates. No doubt, he no longer knows whether he wants to continue filming or not.

“For me, that’s the major scientific revolution of the 21st century,” she continues. “Mirror neurons make no distinction between our behaviour and that of others. They allow us to walk in the shoes of others for a moment, to be them. This discovery provides an explanation for one of the first definitions of empathy, the fact of being able to feel what another feels. The emofabric has made something we do unconsciously concrete. It’s impossible to make an error in interpretation. From the moment we learn the colour and pattern code, we know what another person is experiencing, we receive a clear message. We can create stronger connections with others. Accept their oscillations, their imperfections, which become sublimated, completely.

White spirals attack my dark skirt.

“Emofabric is my utopia. A utopia that combines understanding and beauty.”

I stop there and the camera light turns off. Matthew remains thoughtful. His jacket, now amber, envelopes
his shoulders. The colour of optimism. To my great surprise, the spirals on my skirt take on his hue. We smile at the same time.

“What I won’t say on this video,” I add, in a serious tone, “Is that while my utopia is developing I, however, am no longer able to create anything. At this moment, I’m thinking a lot about the modesty of the 20th century. We’ve become accustomed to this total transparency, but things were not always like this. I’m trying to find inspiration in the past. That’s why I wanted to recruit people from other firms that are more, let’s say, traditional. I need to move to a new position.”

Matthew nods thoughtfully. He’s no longer afraid. I feel that my words have filled him, that I have contaminated him with my person.

“I have an idea,” he says. “I know the director at Améthyste. Come and visit their workshop. It will be a very exotic experience that will allow you to pursue your reflection about the past.”

I look down at the spirals that are continuing to make inroads on the black fabric. It has been so long since anything like this has happened. I look into the young assistant’s eyes. His reserve with respect to the emofabric is refreshing. He is different from all the firm’s employees, both audacious, yet very restrained. He reminds me that, despite everything, my firm is still a universe that is closed in on itself, with its own
codes, its own habits, which have become standards. He comes from somewhere else.

“I agree.”

The sky was veiled in clouds; a recent downpour had just cooled the hot summer air. Lune Guénon lifted her nose toward the façade of ornamental flowers, a massive building snuggled between vertiginous towers. The windows were hidden by curtains and there was no way of knowing what went on behind the haussmannian wall, cracks here and there streaked with grass and primrose. Just opposite it, the lapping of the Seine lulled the passersby who loitered on floating platforms.

Matthew transmitted a request through Universe and the heavy wooden door opened with a click, revealing a very familiar, pale face. As always, Armand Deferre wore his wide pants, leaving his movements free. He had the vigorous torso of an obstinate worker, powerful arms ending in strangely delicate hands. The prying, small, black eyes met those of the neuroscientist, artificially violet.

“Come in,” he said.

Inside, the gold and red carpeted staircase winds around a marble column. In the vast hall, fabric flows from a dozen crates. Three young women race down the stairs, arms laden with strips of silk.

“Thank you again for agreeing to this exceptional visit, Armand,” Matthew said. “Lune Guénon is…”
“I know who she is,” the fashion designer replied rapidly.

His chiseled face turned toward the woman. He looked her up and down, lingering over the form-fitting ebony black dress dotted with white spirals.

“I’ve heard a lot about your firm,” Lune declared, politely.

“And I yours, although I don’t support its philosophy.”

That sentence cast a chill over the meeting. Armand Deferre looked at Matthew with a glance as sharp as flint, eyes searching, trying to find out if he were enjoying his position with the competition. At that moment, the young man cursed himself for wearing emofabric, as the green of shame washed over him like a tsunami.

“This way,” he said, pointing at the stairs.

The trio walked up a floor, to a vast space filled with clacking wooden doors. In every nook and cranny, hanging fabric muffled their footsteps, desks were buried under mountains of fabric, looms were operated by skillful fingers. To the left, pieces of pinned fabric poured from the gaping jaws of safes.

“Welcome to Améthyste,” proclaimed Armand Deferre, “A fashion design firm in business for 63 years now.”

He guided them to a large table covered with a rainbow of fabric. The pure snow white of a fur coat, a dress embellished with fine feathers, even a cape
embroidered with lace. Matthew was accustomed to such treasures. As a child, he had wandered about this building numerous times. Yet, for the first time in his life, the beauty of this clothing struck him. Was that because he had already traveled so far from the Améthyste universe?

To his right, Lune Guénon was studying this heap, a mysterious expression tattooed on her face. The black of her dress had yielded to a sustained purple. Matthew did a quick search on Universe and text scrolled over his field of vision.

Pink: Excitement  
Black: Sadness  
Blue: Audacity  
Green: Shame  
Purple: Pleasure  
Mauve: Delight

He turned back to Lune Guénon, intrigued.  
“I imagine we’re not allowed to touch,” she said, cautiously.  
Armand’s thick eyebrows frowned.  
“Of course you can touch. What’s the point otherwise?”  
He muttered soundlessly under his breath, but Lune seemed not to even notice. She reached toward a dress with sequins that shone like suns, then caressed a bun-
dle of embroideries laid out on an oak mannequin. Her dress suddenly turned a delicate, almost shimmering mauve.

Delight.

As if struck by lightning, the creator walked over to a horizontal bar where the completed items hung. For that moment she no longer seemed to see the employees hustling and bustling to the left and right, or to hear the voices that rang out from time to time. Her entire attention was focussed on the hanging rainbow. She pushed aside the suits, placed the palm of her hand on a jacket with a V-neck, collar embellished with silver fur. She ran her fingers through the delicate hairs.

“This is incredible!”

The assistant did not have time to open his mouth. Lune grabbed his hand, inviting him to touch this marvel in turn. He felt a ticking on his skin, the subtle softness produced by hundreds of hours of work.

“And this!”

Matthew brushed his fingertips against an ample top, created from silk so fine it seemed to be liquid. Then he ran his hand over several long, triangular skirts, with a satin grain, in all hues of ecru.

Lune abandoned the hanging clothes and headed over to a display of uncut fabrics, arranged close to the sketches. At that moment, Matthew felt she looked young, her cheeks rosy, her expression reflecting the delight printed on her emofabric. She touched
everything, over and over, in this chapel built to worship savoir-faire, refinement and material. It was as if her hands were suddenly ravenous for contact, filled with an imperious need to feel.

He was witnessing a wild chiasmus: the woman who wanted emotion to create the aesthetic had just experienced how the aesthetic creates emotion.

When Lune turned back to him, eyes moist, she murmured, “I’ve been so stupid. I forgot.”

Armand Deferre walked away, to give them a little privacy, making the most of the time to answer questions for several seamstresses.

“Touch,” Lune added. “And yet, I studied that during my programme! We have about 20 tactile receptors that react to stimuli.”

She spread her arms wide, as if to embrace the room. “This!” she said. “It’s as beautiful to the eye as to the touch. This... this is art.”

Matthew did not know how to respond, dumb-founded as this woman, the founder of a fashion empire, re-discovered something that was so familiar to him.

There was no black left on her dress.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

When Armand Deferre suggested they continue their visit in the archives room, she had regained some of her composure, even though her dress had become a maelstrom of entwined colours. The tall, rather narrow room
housed a succession of vertiginous cabinets. Several boxes lay open on a shaky table. Sewn strips of long feathers overflowed everywhere; diamond shards ran wild on abandoned belts.

Lune Guénon sat down on a chair and placed her palms on her knees, like an intimidated child. Matthew wanted to join her, but Armand Deferre placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Let her be. Art must be experienced alone.”

An embarrassing silence enveloped them. The young man looked for the right words, a way to bring up his resignation again. But Armand spoke first, “You were right to bring Lune Guénon to me.”

“Really? I was afraid you might get your boxers in a bunch, but I figured it might be interesting...”

“Get my boxers in a bunch,” he said. “And how! Like fabric, we get creased out of shape and then we smooth things out, don’t we?”

Matthew rolled his eyes, amused. His uncle always brought everything back to fabrics.

Finally.

It’s there, on my desk. My latest prototype: artextile.

All my attention is focussed on the large, rectangular box of lacquered leather. The result of several months of reflection, work, collaboration with the laboratory and with Améthyste. An enormous sigh wells up in my chest, a sigh filled with joy, pride and apprehension.
I open the box delicately, discover the dress lying in the cushion inside. Unable to wait any longer, I lift it to my face, breathe in its scent. It’s a straight, simple cut, fitted at the waist, puffy sleeves. The emofabric is still a neutral, metallic grey since the receivers are not connected to any organichips. But it’s not this side that interests me; I’m already too familiar with it. I turn the dress inside out to reveal the traditional seam, shining with jewels sewn into the shape of Ouroboros, the dragon eating its own tail, symbol of union and renewal. The slightest crease gives the impression that the ring of gems is wavering, moving over the fabric. My hand caresses the polished stones, gentle and alive. I admire the subtlety of the work, the perfect mesh produced by Améthyste’s dressmakers. Then I place the creation back in its case and run the palm of my hand over it for a long time. The reptile’s emerald eye stares at me. I bend over the dress again, inhale its perfume and then allow myself to fall back into my bubble chair.

“Jasmine,” I say, to prolong the sensation.

The diffusers encrusted in the shell obey my desire. I inhale deeply, grab the moment, and savour it.

It’s the fullness of work well done, the happiness of renewal.

After these few instants of peace, I reactivate Universe and am bombarded with urgent messages. In the midst of the flow, one request catches my attention.
Matthew Lindley
Available for the interview?

I smile and confirm. I owe him this.
I heard the noise of footsteps in the lateral stairs, followed by a discrete scratching.
Matthew is waiting outside the door. Even though he has grown more confident, his timidity always prevents him from erupting into the lives of others without first being asked. It’s a behaviour I appreciate.
“Open.”
The glass moves to the side to let him in. Amber dominates his suit today. We have no need to say anything. He knows what he has to do. I invite him to take a seat on the bubble chair opposite me. He turns on his bracelet camera before aiming it at me.
“Ms. Guénon,” he says, “Today, you are going to give us an exclusive on the new, revolutionary product launched by your company: artextile.”
Inhale.
Exhale.
It’s time.
“More than revolutionary,” I say. “It’s noventique, a reconciliation of the avant-garde and the heritage. You see, these past few months have been a time rich in reflection. The emofabric is spreading farther and farther, modifying our habits and our connection with our emotions. I talked about utopia in my last interview, the
utopia of transparency. At that time, I saw a clear opposition between the material and the immaterial, transparency and opacity. I’ve reconsidered. I want to propose an alternative to emofabric.”

I open the box again and brandish the prototype dress. “Artextile is reversible clothing. It provides for the marriage of technology and aesthetic emotion. You can choose the side you want to wear, for the day or for the next ten minutes. You can choose between read or unread, or between transparent or opaque, depending on your desire at any particular moment. You can design your clothing as a material that unites you or as a barrier between you and the world.”

“To create artextile, you joined forces with the renowned fashion firm Améthyste.”

“Exactly. Améthyste has been in business for more than 63 years, six decades of accumulated experience, a veritable treasure trove of savoir-faire. With artextile, I wanted to destroy the dichotomy between the material and the immaterial. To give people a choice between the sensual pleasure of touching a beautiful piece of clothing, admiring the way in which it is made, the perfection of its cut, and the pleasure provided by technology. We can unite these paradoxes, unite the traditional and the modern. Artextile is the proof.”

The diode blinks off and Matthew nods at me solemnly. “Will that work?” I asked.
“It’s perfect. I’ll edit it and send it to Universe, with maximum visibility. Expect a tidal wave of reactions.”

I hunker down into the protective cocoon of my bubble chair then watch Matthew as he stares at moving dots in the void while typing on his bracelet. This man has totally upset the way I do things. A chance encounter, crossed paths, a fertile collision.

My hand reaches out to the surface of the traditional side of the prototype dress. We read all the time. The messages encrusted on our retinas, the expressions on the faces of people we talk with or even the colours generated by their clothing. But we also read with our hands, hands that run over material, that experiment with texture. We are all readers, people who decipher and translate signs. For years, I read the body of my ex-husband, I read myself, I read everything that surrounds me. In order to understand.

Emofabric lets us tell our stories; traditional clothing lets us read a story. Both will remain art, unsettling us, disturbing us.

I believe that’s all I was waiting for, to be surprised, to be pushed from my lair. I re-tailored my creation to give it more facets.

And I will continue to reach out to the other so that I can re-read the world.

To re-read so that the fire always comes back.

Samantha Bailly
A MUSICAL SHORT STORY
BY ROQUE RIVAS

Future Mirages

5’
From his window on the top floor, he watches them walk around the Vendôme Column, hands fluttering in time with a passionate discussion. On a corner of the oak desk, behind him, a cup of smoky Russian tea slowly grows cold.

On the other side of the room, a cello plays Bach’s Suite No. 1 in G major.

“I’d hoped to have a bit more time,” he murmurs to himself. “Time… our most precious jewel, the one we forget to shine. You should be with me, sweetheart.”

The discrete intercom connected to his egosphere announces that his son has arrived.

“Alone? (He listens to the response, then shakes his head.) I’m going to ask you a favour, Anita. Step out of the shop and catch the young man in black leather who is about to cross the street. Tell him that I’d like to see him as well. Make sure to tell him that this is not an order, just a request. When he gets here, send them both, my son and the young man, in to me.”
He turns around slowly, running his hand along the old copper telescope with its cracked lens. He has made his office a place beyond time, entirely dedicated to memory. The amber light that plays on the polished metal reminds him of wines savoured long ago, as a couple.

Above the telescope hangs an oil portrait of a woman still young, green eyes flecked with gold. He doesn’t need to look to know she’s there.

“I’ve made my mind up, Dad!”

“I know. (Their embrace was brief and intense, as always.) Thank you, Mark, for coming with him.”

He reaches his hand out to the young athlete, dressed in black from head to toe, and tries to catch his eye. The few rare times they’ve met, Mark has impressed him with his maturity and thoroughness. But he has always sensed an inability in him to open up, as if he has chosen to wrap himself in a mantle of silence as opaque as his egosphere. For the time being, Alexandre seems to be reconciled to this, but he detects an inkling of frustration that his son is finding harder and harder to hide.

“I saw you arrive together and I thought it would be a good idea if you both came in. Mark, what I have to say concerns you as well.”
“I don’t see why. (The tone is not aggressive, just curious.) I’m leaving at the end of the month for the La Haye astronaut training centre, while I wait for a mission to come up. Alexandre will come with me. We’ve just made our decision.”

“I’m sorry,” said Alexandre. “I know that you wanted to train me to take over after you. I started. You know how passionate I am about jewellery. And then I met Mark...”

The way he looks at the other young man hides none of his feelings. *I looked at you like that,* the old man thinks. *And I’d start all over again if only I could.*

“Tea?” he murmurs as he heads over to the intercom. “Or something stronger? (He presses on the button and requests a new pot of tea and mineral water.) I’m only asking for an hour or two of your time, so I can tell you a story and offer you a gift. An old man’s whim.”

“You’re not that old,” Alexandre protests, smiling. “Tell that to my joints!”

He goes to get the old, leather-bound family album and the three men gather around the desk. The thick pages crackle under his fingers as he turns them reverently, pausing over the yellowed photos. He has never wanted to digitize them. Their value comes from their fragility as well as the past they embody. They are images brought back from bygone days, fragments of petrified time in which he has often travelled in his mind’s eye.
“My story starts at the beginning of the 20th century. Victor, my great-great-great-great-grandfather was the youngest son in the family. Since he was not the heir, he could do what he wanted with his life. (He lingers over a daguerreotype of a young man with a severe expression and a thick handlebar moustache.) He travelled a great deal: Turkey, the Silk Road, Asia. We owe him for some of the most beautiful sapphires in our inheritance. An inheritance he partially squandered with his mistresses, but that’s another story.”

“An interesting character,” Mark says politely.

“You’ll see just how interesting he was. In 1908, he was travelling up and down the Siberian steppes north of Tunguska looking for mammoth ivory. He was in the process of negotiating with an Evenki tribe around a sod fire when he heard a terrifying noise. The earth shook; an orange light filled the sky. It took them hours to calm the horses and round up the caribou that had scattered over the tundra. The tribe shaman almost lost his mind when the night sky started to sparkle. The shadows on the snow were blood red. No one slept that night.

“The next day, my ancestor decided to go and see the site. The epicentre was two days’ walk to the east, up the Podkamennaya River. The landscape had been turned upside down. He saw several craters of different sizes in the forest. In all directions, thousands upon thousands of trees lay on the ground, like pieces in a
game of pick-up sticks. Near the centre of the impact, the trunks had been reduced to pulp, with the exception of a few stumps that stood out against the sky. The silence was deafening. The Evenki guide refused to go any closer. Even the clouds of mosquitoes seemed to have deserted the place.

“He drew what he saw. Later, a Russian expedition took photos. I saw them somewhere. But the descriptions in his travel log are enough to provide an idea of the devastation.”

He slowly closes the album with its old-fashioned binding and holds it to his chest for a moment, striving to ignore the pain stabbing through his kidneys.

“To hear the rest, you’ll have to accompany me to the underground vaults. This is your first time, isn’t it, Mark?”

“We don’t know each other well, Sir.”

“Please, call me Janus. When I was a child, I spent my time with my nose in the old dusty books in the family library or dreaming about improbable futures. That name has stuck to me since then.”

They stroll through the showroom on the ground floor where holograms of jewellery dance above white, lacquered pedestals on either side of the vast counter. Spidery necklaces, entwined rings, bracelets are suspended in the armoured glass showcase, as if weight-
less. Guests simply have to approach them to learn all about the history and characteristics of each stone. They can stretch their hand out over the projector and the virtual image of the jewel will be transplanted onto their skin or look in the virtual mirror and don sparkling fragments that keep pace with the movement of their eyes. A couple is walking among the showcases, guided by Anita. She gives Alexandre a warm smile. He returns it in kind and blows her a kiss.

No one will disturb them.

A spiral staircase made of wood and steel winds down to the basement level. At the end of the corridor, stone and brick arches open into a circular room with several doors. Some are armoured, while others are simply closed. Janus stops in front of one of them and takes out a security key, hanging on a chain from his belt.

“Do you remember when you were little, Alexandre?” he asks as he unlocks the door. “Your mother would let you hide in the archives while we pretended you were lost. You never damaged anything.”

“I must have set off the alarm once or twice,” Alexandre protests.

“Five times,” his father says with a smile. “But who’s counting?”

Mark looks around, curious. After the hallway, papered with old images of 20th-century stars wearing Janus creations, the room they have entered looks like
a wine cellar in which the bottles have been replaced by ledgers. In the four corners of the ceiling, smoke detectors blink, next to a row of spotlights.

“Give me a hand,” Janus asks. “Move that shelf (he points at the wall opposite the door) and place the books on the reading table.”

Behind the shelf, there is a tiny safe no taller than a hand. Janus places his index finger on the fingerprint recognition pad and the door opens silently. He takes out a jewellery box carved from caribou antlers and inlaid with polished stones. He places it on the pile of ledgers and motions them to approach.

Shoulder to shoulder, Mark and Alexandre bend over the box. Their fingers entwine for a moment and Janus smiles, with a burst of pride. *We only had one child, my love, but he has your eyes and your passion.*

“You look so much like your mother!” he says, caressing the box cover that unlocks with a click.

“My ancestor was a stubborn man. (The partially opened chest has not yet revealed its secrets and Janus has returned to his tale, hip leaning against the table.) He explored the epicentre of the explosion for close to four days, despite the increasing nervousness of his guide, who was terrified of the residual lights that
streaked across the sky each night. He had no idea what had caused it, of course.”

“The Tunguska meteorite,” murmurs Mark. “He saw it fall. That’s amazing!”

“I can show you his notebook, if you want. He’s the reason I’ve been collecting telescopes since I was little. The asteroid exploded well before touching the ground and the debris that was not burned up in the atmosphere was scattered over an immense area. Your ancestor hung on despite everything. The last day, he found a fragment barely larger than a nut, incrusted like a bullet in the shredded trunk of a tree. A shard of the meteorite that had caused the explosion. It remained in our family until I inherited it.”

He took a velvet bag, folded in on itself and closed with a simple leather tie, from the box. Alexandre’s Nautys blinks against his wrist, reporting an incoming communication. He toggles it into mute mode, with an irritated gesture. His father has managed to fascinate the impassive Mark. This is a moment worth savouring.

The old man empties the bag into the palm of his hand and spreads the black velvet out on the table. Then he turns on the overhead lights before placing the items in his hand on the velvet.

A sparkling river appears.
He gives each of the young men a jeweller’s loupe and lets them play with the shards. He has no need to. He knows every defect in each stone, he knows how they feel; he has even polished some for test purposes.

“The original stone was about this size... (He spreads his thumb and index finger.) It was a nebular diamond, the largest I’ve ever seen. Almost of no value for jewellery making given its impurities, but fascinating all the same. My ancestor wanted to mount an expedition to go and search for others, but his older brother was killed in the trenches and Russia experienced its share of revolutions, He never went back.

“Hold one of the shards up to the light and look through it. See how its particular crystalline structure makes it slightly milky? When you examine it under the loupe, you can make out an entire web of impurities. That’s the stone’s signature.”

After they had spent enough time admiring the stones, the old man picked up the fragments and placed them back in the pouch, then into the box, then into the safe before carefully closing the door to the room.

“Thank you for that marvellous story,” Mark declared, after they returned to the ground floor.

“Oh, it’s not over,” Janus said, smiling. “Can I take you to lunch at my favourite restaurant just next door? Afterwards, we’ll make a change in scenery and take a leap forward about a century and a half.”
The lovers exchange a glance filled with meaning. Then they accept the invitation as one.

The private room in which they have been seated is decorated with Japanese-style frescoes, recently restored. Two crystal lamps light the table covered with flowers, making the tulip glasses arranged in threes in front of each plate sparkle. Fragrant appetizers are aligned on a dish shaped like a lyre. Janus forces himself not to touch them. In any case, for a few months already, he has really had no appetite.

When he consults the menu, most of the dishes disappear from the list, obliterated by the medical monitor built into his Nautys. Even though he expected it, the effect is particularly depressing. He selects a salad at random, while the two young people reach an agreement as to the flavours they want to share. The first wine is a very light white, almost colourless. The fragrance is enough to plunge him into a past he has never really left.

“This is where I asked your mother to marry me,” he says, putting down his glass. “In the large room downstairs.”

“She refused, of course.”

Alexandre looks up, surprised. Even Mark remains still for a moment, a lobster soufflé frozen on his lips.
Janus reaches into his pocket and his fingers play with the smooth, cold ring. He took it off more than 20 years ago and he wonders if he will have the strength to put it back on.

“I don’t know what you remember about her, Alexandre,” he murmurs, with a faraway look. “Mark, I probably won’t succeed at getting you to know her, but I’ll try. Claire was a botanist, very beautiful, she never thought in a predictable manner and she was a permanent source of inspiration for all those around her. I courted her for months, accomplishing nothing more than getting her into my bed. Everything else eluded me.”

“I had just finished my apprenticeship as a gem cutter. The new cutting techniques using ultrasound micro-disks fascinated me, as did the new crystal-fibre based materials that freed us from the need for visible mounts. The possibilities were infinite. We could design flexible jewellery that fit against the curves of a wrist by reacting to the heat, all on its own. I had already designed my first pieces. There was talk of me taking over from my grandfather when the time came. The Pandemic did not spare our family and I was the only survivor of my generation. But that wasn’t the principal reason. It was the existence I chose.

“I couldn’t imagine living my life without Claire. So, I did something absurd. I took our ancestor’s nebular diamond and I cut it into two slices three millimetres
thick, selecting my cutting plan so that the impurities would be distributed equally among the two pieces. Once polished, I placed one over each eye and I looked at the sky. I felt as if I had imprisoned the Milky Way.

“Then from each slice, I carved a ring.”

Slowly, he takes his hand from his pocket and stretches it out before him. The light from the chandelier makes the diamond on his finger sparkle. The reflections flutter over the carafes and the silverware, like a swarm of falling stars.

“You must have struggled over the facets,” Alexandre murmurs, bending over the table. “I thought this type of diamond was very fragile?”

“I had to be creative, but that was a period when I had no doubts at all. (His lip curls for a moment.) I practiced on the other shards. I broke a lot of them, but I managed to perfect my technique. Then, armed with my courage and my rings, I invited Claire to dinner, in this very restaurant.

“This was an important place for our family. My father brought me here for the first time for my 20th birthday. I toasted the year of my birth with a wine the colour of time. It embodied the gold of parchment, of honey that has trapped a piece of the previous summer. Each sip was sweeter than the previous one, until the acidity suddenly swept everything out of its way. I wanted Claire to share that with me. And everything else as well.”
The sommelier pours him a dry red wine to accompany his salad. The chef, who knew him well, had scattered chips of parmesan over the lettuce leaves, followed by a fine line of flavoured vinegar. The scent alone would satisfy him, if his memories had not already done so.

“I waited for dessert and I took her hand, promising her a surprise. She closed her eyes. The ring slipped onto her finger perfectly. My declaration, on the other hand...”

He smiles, with a hint of melancholy.

“Try to picture the scene, children: a large, old-fashioned restaurant, dishes dating back before the Pandemic, crystal glasses cut with an exemplary purity. You can’t imagine how far the master glaziers pushed their obsession with detail. We sat at a small table in a corner, close to a sideboard, and no one was paying any attention to us until Claire suddenly leapt up, tipping over her chair.”

All around them, the conversations stop abruptly. Hands firmly placed on her hips, Claire stares at me, too furious to speak. I caught her by surprise and she detests that, or else she felt that I was trying to trap her. A few of the diners stare at us, but I pay them no attention. I am about to lose her.
As I reach my hand out to her, I strike a crystal glass that had remained empty from the start of the meal. It wobbles under my hand and I grab it...

The diamond resonates with the crystal.

The vibration that arises evokes the pulsing of a star. Everything I feel, the score of my emotions, is amplified by the glass. The other guests’ glasses start to sing in unison. The carafes standing on the sideboard form a powerful choir that causes Claire to hesitate and then holds her.

When the vibration fades, I strike the glass again so that she knows what I feel. The music rings out once more, poignant, intimate. Her ring reacts in symbiosis with mine. Words have become useless.

I stand up slowly and we face each other for a long moment, enveloped in a feeling from within. Around us, the conversations have died. Even though no one but us can hear the vibration running through us, everyone there can see the magic at work.

Her hand and mine seek one another.

“We were married a few months later,” Janus concludes, as he finishes his glass. “You were born three years later and she died in a botanical expedition to Borneo when you had barely started walking.

“Before she passed away, she helped me discover
Barcelona and Gaudí. She had also designed the three orchid brooches and the vine necklace we still sell. We shared everything, dreamed of everything. When her body was finally repatriated, I removed the ring from her finger—it no longer adhered to her skin—and placed it in the chest along with my own. I never put it back on until today.”

He removes it without regret, plunges his hand in his pocket and removes its twin. When they touch, the two circles vibrate gently in the palm of his hand.

“These diamonds were not born on Earth, but in the heart of a star, just before it exploded. They heard the song of the galaxies, when the universe was still young. They’re yours now,” he says as he holds them over the table. “They might help you reconsider your decision. I’m going to explain why.”

They returned to the boutique, walking under the rain, lost in their thoughts. The streets of Paris are bathed in shadows, peopled with silhouettes, blurred by the drops, heels slipping on the cobblestone. From the office window, Place Vendôme, covered with puddles, shines like a stranded medusa. Janus would like to take his time, to find the precise slowness of cutting gems, but young people have their own pace, as frenetic as the pulsing of the Nautys they never remove.
He calls up a file that he has been patiently preparing for years. When Mark catches sight of the animated logo displayed on the back wall, he jumps. ESA, the European Space Agency. Just below: Project Nebular Diamonds.

“With Claire’s agreement, I decided to share our secret with a crystallographer I knew to be discrete. I discovered that I was not the only one interested in nebular diamonds. Governments had been studying them for years. Their properties are astonishing. The internal structure is defective and those defects are what make them unique. Each shard that is detached from the original block remains in contact with the others, the cracks communicate among themselves. Almost empathically.”

“Like Mom and you?” Alexandre murmurs.

He nods, his throat tight, then rushes on, “The armed forces want to use them to make a new type of transmitter/receiver, compact and undetectable. A microcrystal weighing one or two carats would be ideal, as long as they master their specific cutting plans and micro-plane the surfaces. (He smiles briefly.) It’s a field in which jewellers still have a head start over the weapons industry. And, like all military types, they have missed the point.”

The image changes quickly. The electronic diagram is hidden behind a security warning that refuses to disappear. Janus shrugs and turns off the projection.
“The rest is just paperwork. Thirty years ago, I financed a scientific expedition to the site of the meteorite explosion, to gather more debris. When we reached the impact zone, all of the trees had been cut down and burned a century earlier and the craters had been filled. The Russian army had trampled the sector and nothing was left.

“But meteorites like the one that hit Tunguska can be found in the solar system. Right where you’re planning to go, Mark, if your training produces the desired results. And, believe me, I hope from the bottom of my heart that it does.”

Unconsciously, he caresses the telescope and plays with the adjusting wheel, as jammed as his own kidneys.

“Even if we don’t have the means to finance our own space expedition, we aren’t completely lacking in resources or contacts. We have garnered various sponsors from among our most faithful clients, and I have initiated a partnership with the ESA. They’re using one of our patents for the invisible mount for the tiles that cover their shuttles. I’ve also used orbital radio telescopes to explore the asteroid belt looking for specific spectroscopic signatures, in particular an infrared band located at 21 microns. I didn’t explain why, of course, but I suppose they’ll eventually figure things out. We still have some time left, but not as much as I would have hoped.”
“They found something?” Mark asks, frowning. “I haven’t heard a thing and I’m all ears.”

“Their contract included a confidentiality agreement. They’ve identified a potential candidate between Mars and Jupiter, and possibly another in the Kuiper Belt. It would seem that they’re both within our reach. I didn’t want to go any further (he grimaces), their rates are truly astronomical.”

Mark smiles and Alexandre bursts out laughing. *You have your mother’s laugh, son.*

“So, someone has to go and take a look,” he concludes. “Harpoon the white whale, prepare to tow it back. Make a long and terribly complex trip back to Earth’s orbit. But the ESA people have confirmed that it is feasible. Mark, would you be up for the expedition?”

He raises his hand to check the expected outburst of objections.

“I’m talking about a mission in three years, at least. There are still an infinite number of details to be ironed out and I will need Alexandre to help me, if he agrees. Most of the work can be done remotely, but he will have to spend some time with me so I can teach him the secrets of cutting impure stones. We have to exalt their defects without weakening them. That’s as difficult and marvellous as raising a child.

“There will be no written records, no manuals the military can use. Just the memory of our hands. But
if we manage to bring back a pure diamond asteroid to orbit, imagine what that would mean. For my part, we’re used to counting in carats; a kilo is almost impossible to imagine when it comes to precious stones. But I’m talking about tens of thousands of tons. Enough to carve a jewel for every human being who wants one.”

He looks out the window, watching them leave, their fingers entwined. They’re walking slower than when they first arrived. From where he stands, he cannot see if they are wearing their rings. He simply hopes they are.

He has no idea how much longer he will be able to enjoy his son. His most recent tests were not good and, in any case, he started dying bit by bit 20 years ago. He has not resigned himself, that’s not his style. He has positioned each stone in his dream, patiently, like the master craftsmen in his workshop, so that it will not disappear along with him.

“Good luck to the pair of you,” he murmurs while wiping his eyes. “The rings I carved cannot choose the right person for you, but they will help you share what you feel for one another.”

Before closing the curtains, he glances one last time at the grey sky, clouds starting to dissipate. The rain has stopped, the mid-afternoon light tints the roof-tops.
The infinity of space, which must one day be tamed, stretches as far as the mind can see. As he closes his eyes, he hears Claire’s voice murmur in his ear.

*If our entire species could vibrate in unison, who knows how far we will be heard?*

**Jean-Claude Dunyach**
A Corner of Her Mind

“I love it! Tado, you’ve worked wonders yet again!” exclaims Enid Shon, from her chair.

“Your opinion warms the cockles of my heart, as always, Enid.”

The presentation winds up on the final notes of Rameau’s *Danse des Sauvages*. The reviewer’s selection was displayed on the main screen. The screen of the Nautys strapped onto her wrist projects it in different colours, through a series of complex and personal data. The historic Savage company purse, the Nato, created especially for the woman by Tado’s father, Nicholas, in the early 2030s, stands between the pair.

The old woman wears a ruby red tie and a matching head band that holds her white hair. Opposite her, Tado Savage has the elegant posture of men who are concerned with their appearance and sure of their choices. His short, straight hair makes him look young, softening his businessman’s face. Those who have known the
firm for a long time see the bright blond locks of his mother, who has been dead for 20 years now.

Enid waves away the tray displaying the latest version of the famous Nato, embellished with delicate tone on tone topstitching. Then she gives a few instructions to her Nautys.

“I’m disconnecting my holographic projection now. I’ve transmitted enough comments and images for it to work alone. What I have to say to you needs no translation, nothing superfluous. Tado… I’ve known your forever, more specifically since you grew old enough to have an acceptable conversation.”

“I believe I was 25 the first time we really met,” Tado interjects.

“That’s what I’m saying. I knew your father before you and your grandfather a bit. I met Alx at a time when she wasn’t even a Seconde d’atelier in the workshop. I remember the evening when the first collection dedicated to your mother, who was a very young woman at the time, was launched. An incredible celebration.”

“I’m familiar with the archives.”

“Misleading images. The Nautys hadn’t even been invented yet. We only had a few images… But the rest, Tado! The ambiance… The perfumes… And that permanent whirlpool… that stirring… I can’t even begin to tell you about it. You had to experience it. To make matters short… I’m your most loyal client and if this
doesn’t come dangerously close to revealing my age, I’d even say your historic client.”

“In fact,” Tado says, seeing where the old lady is planning to go.

“I will continue to defend you, on all of the channels I use. But I won’t hide my concern from you.”

“Thank you, Enid. We’ll always stand out for our savoir-faire and our creativity,” Tado replies, laconically.

He immediately curses himself for using the same wording that Han, his assistant, had used on him that very morning. But Enid Shon is not Han. Her response bursts out, cutting, derisive.

“You’ve never made the difference, Tado. You are the difference.”

“Nice wording.”

“It’s my trade,” the elderly woman adds, with a wink. “Listen carefully. When your father marketed monoform leather, we were all captivated. It was revolutionary! As crazy and marvellous as the mimetic pelts shed by Surya Yemaya de Matha’s chimeras! Such new materials! There were so many possibilities for creation… Leather that could take the shape we wanted, moulded or blown, like glass, without a single seam!”

“Do you think the topstitching is a mistake?”

“Your topstitching will disturb the world of haute couture next week,” Enid lashes out. “And the week after that something else will catch our attention. Don’t
play that game with me. The official announcement will be made any minute now… Kaadji will destroy your market and transform your creations into banal, obsolete objects. Do you have a way out of this situation? A way to reinvent yourself?”

Enid’s mismatched eyes, her best feature, pierce through him. Tado slumps.

“No. Alx is dying. And all her knowledge with her.”

“So, let me be perfectly straight with you. You’re in deep shit.”

“I’m glad that you disconnected your holographic projection at this very moment.”

Enid laughs, sincerely.

“Don’t kid yourself Tado. We care for you,” she added in a well-meaning tone.

Tado thanks her but, despite her comforting words, he is unable to loosen the knot that has hampered his breathing for two days.

The bee that had hesitated to climb on the young man, timid and intrigued, finally flies to its hive. Zadig watches it dart off.

Then, with a quick gesture, he grabs it between two fingers.

“I’m no longer concerned about your reflexes,” says Halbeth Lound, behind him.

The neurosurgeon sits down close to him, on the
camp bed he had taken out of his tent and placed between the horizon and them. Zadig releases the bee, which falls at his feet, buzzing sporadically.

“She stung you,” Professor Lound says, sending some data to her Nautys.

“I know,” Zadig replies. “She was lost.”

“And you crushed her?”

A dose of cream oozes out of the small container hidden on the side of the box. Docilely, Zadig raises his right hand, index finger up.

“The others went home a while ago. She was isolated from the group.”

Halbeth seems to think. Her blond eyebrows form an arch under a wrinkle that barely reveals her 35 years.

“That’s surprising, coming from you… You’re the last person I would have imagined exterminating a creature for being marginal.”

“Because that’s what I am?”

“Exactly.”

He gives her one of those impenetrable looks which has become his stock in trade, despite himself. Behind Zadig’s eyes, a world stretches out, regulated, pulsed, filtered by Mnémosyne, the application chip that establishes the nervous connections in his brain.

“Bees are genetically programmed to follow the movement of the hive and respond to orders. Doubly programmed if you consider the fact that their hive is equipped with the system that enables us to give
instructions to the Queen. That bee had escaped from two sets of controls.”

“And, so, if we apply your interesting theory to humans...”

“Someone should have crushed me a long time ago,” Zadig replies, coldly. “But Mnémoseyne has done its job. I can’t escape from that control. I can live within the Hive, even if it still considers me an aberration.”

Halbeth knows that better than anyone. For five years, she has been assigned as Zadig’s personal physician. She knows each detail in his medical file. She knows that he was born without a memory, without any faculty for communication and with a hypersensitivity that is considered a social handicap. Several operations, plus a chip containing an artificial intelligence implanted in his brain and connected to his Nautys have enabled him to acquire the language and, above all, the long-term memory he lacked. She also knows that no emotions are attached to his memories. When he recalls the past, the events pass through the cold filter of Mnémoseyne without summoning any of his senses, despite the fact that he is solely emotion and reaction the rest of the time. Cold images that parade through his brain, giving him nothing more than an intellectual perspective of his own past.

Her patient interests her all the more since Zadig is the only man in the world to have benefitted from this
medical technology. The salary was attractive, but the subject was even more so.

“You asked me to come here,” she says suddenly, as she sees him getting lost in his contemplation of the setting sun.

“I did. My research has progressed to the point where I must leave New Africa. Do you want to see?”

“With pleasure.”

With an elastic step, he heads over to an earthenware mould and breaks it cautiously, drawing out a leather bubble.

“The wax has been taken in by the leather and completely impregnated it.”

“And the perfume remained?”

Zadig does not respond, absorbed by the leather bubble he spins on the tip of one finger, like a ball. Halbeth watches it as well, captivated. It’s a perfect sphere, without any seams or defects. Before working for Zadig, she had no idea of the mastery required to create synthetic, monoform leather, similar to glass in the molten stage, and as supple as skin, once cooled.

The leather bubble spins, spins at a wild speed. Zadig brings it so close to his nose that he could make it fall.

“Do you know what a masterpiece is, Halbeth?” Zadig says suddenly. “It’s a work of outstanding artistry, the work that confirms mastery of an art. A master is also the head, but not in the sense of one who gives orders... Very ironic in my case, isn’t it?”
Halbeth nods silently. Zadig’s confidences are rare. “It took me several years to master this gesture,” he murmurs. “What the craftsman does is perform a gesture. This synthetic leather finally smells like leather from days gone by. I have set the gesture.”

He emphasized the word gesture, three times, hammering his discourse home. “It’s complete then?” Halbeth says. “Not quite. I still don’t know how to set the perfume itself.”

“What do you mean?” “The leather is impregnated, but the perfume eventually evaporates. It doesn’t last. That’s why I have to return to Paris. I have to find the answers.”

“From whom?”

Zadig gives her that cryptic smile that occasionally makes her lose all control. “From the Queen of the Hive,” he says catching the leather bubble in both hands.

Standing outside the hospital room door, Tado sends a data request to the nursing centre, with the slide of a finger, efficient yet nervous.

His scarf hangs negligently over his suit. The current fashion trend is for colourful ties, as Enid took pains to tell him. Tado hates ties. He has never been able to tolerate anything around his neck, in any manner whatsoever. So he authorized himself, this morning,
to ignore the current trend. It’s a way of starting the grieving process.

“But she isn’t dead yet,” his own voice says in his mind.

He barely listens to his Nautys which informs him, with artificial precautions, that Alx’ condition is stable. He savours the irony of the adjective. Stable. The hesitation before the big fall. The desperate stop, in the middle of the frantic race, just before the plunge into the abyss.

Through the open door, all he sees is the aged body, dying, lying on the hospital bed. A body so frail that the ergonomic mattress is unable to draw it into its soft cocoon.

“She must be suffering.”

He walks over to her with his light, elegant, practised step and observes her. Alx’ face seems peaceful. The wrinkles of expression are downed in the wrinkles of age. Her few rare eyelashes are still black, but her kinky hair has turned almost completely white.

He suddenly feels like rebelling. He doesn’t want to see her old and bed-ridden. He detests the spectacle of her motionless hands on the mattress, her superb hands, now covered with light spots, which he had always observed caressing leather or placed on her cheeks with their perfect bone structure, whenever she was thinking.

He abhors the machinery that keeps her alive, stings
planted all over this body which he has always seen in movement, a dancer’s body, a living, vibrant body.

He recalls the first time they met, in the old Savage reception hall, one New Year’s Eve. All of his father’s associates were there. The evening had just started; the conversations were lively, voices carried up toward the gigantic ceiling lit by a single chandelier, elegant tentacles woven in tendrils, which he kept admiring, wondering when he would be able to hang from it.

His mother was still alive; she was wearing a striking white fur dress. Tado, wearing white and bluish grey, was leaning against the arm of a chair, the only child among all the adults.

Then Alx entered the room. He could not confirm that the conversations stopped, that all the faces turned in a single movement toward the woman in the prime of her life, with her fine features, her haughty, light tunic highlighting the changing skin, an astonishing dark brown that her multiple ethnicities had bequeathed her.

The women had responded, as women often do, with their breathing. They all seemed to be out of breath. All of them, even his magnificent mother who had nevertheless looked at the newcomer with benevolent eyes, sliding toward her, hands outstretched. He had only been six and did not understand at the time. It had taken all of the knowledge acquired as an adult man to analyse, over the years, the held breath of the
female guests, then the quiet overflow of gentleness and seduction.

They wanted to tame her. To tame the rival.

“That’s her? The new artisan?” someone murmured behind him.

He paid no attention to the answer. All of the guests, men and women alike, responded at the same time. The room buzzed, as a chorus. It was her. Alx…

He sets his memories aside all at once and looks again at the old, apathetic body. His mother’s body was laid to rest a long time ago, as was probably the case for most of the other guests that evening. He never had much interest in obituaries.

“I thought I’d find you here,” Han’s voice announces.

The young man remains close to the door and is waiting for Tado to turn around, which he does infinitely slowly, clearly indicating that he is not pleased with the interruption.

“Where else would you want me to be?” he replies, without any animosity in his voice.

Han clears his throat.

“Would you prefer for us to go back upstairs?”

Tado shakes his head. He has no desire to bump into the last Board members. He needs to think, not to put up with the silent anguish of others. His own is more than enough.

With a finger, he submits a request to the Nursing
station. The response is immediate and the automatic blinds in the room open onto an urban landscape.

Without thinking, he tries to loosen the tie he had refused to put on that very morning. His fingers pause over his throat and measure the rapid beating of his heart. He was right to deactivate the cardiac alarm on his Nautys.

His assistant stares at the body plunged in a coma.

“What’s your problem, Han?” he reassures the man. “She can’t hear us. And even if she could... ever since the day she became première d’atelier, we’ve never hidden anything from her. If anyone has to know about our situation, it would be her. And, who knows...”

Han nods. Tado notices that he is wearing a double lilac tie. He recalls, with amusement, how the young man, weighted down by diplomas, competent yet still inexperienced, convinced him, three years earlier, with his discrete avant-gardism and his perfect mastery of trends. And he admires, despite himself, the flexibility that enables Han to put up with the obstacles that Tado is unable to bear himself, with smiling rigor.

“You disconnected the info channel on your Nautys,” Hans accuses. “The news was confirmed five minutes ago. Kaadji officially submitted the patent for Form-Tech which, except for a few details, is similar to ours. They can now produce the equivalent of monoform leather.
“Already,” Tado murmurs. “And what about the workshops? What’s happening there?”
“The associates are worried. The creative team has sent me a good hundred reactions.”
“To be expected,” Tado continues. “And the Premier d’atelier? What is he saying?”
“Manech has asked if there is any news. If you… if she…”
“If she has managed to give us the information we need to make sure our synthetic leather has a chance of developing in the direction we want to take it?” Tado says, his stomach in knots. “Please excuse me, Han. For the first time in my life, I’ve lost confidence. With Kaadji destabilizing the market... and now this patent... Just when Alx is leaving us. I think you know how much this loss means to me.”
He refrained from saying “for our company”. He hates himself at this very moment. But he is unable to dissociate her from Savage. Perhaps because she never did that herself. Savage was her family, her work, her passion. Her fulfilment.
“We will never get back on our feet,” he adds. “In a month, the market will be saturated with monoform leather bags, equivalent in quality to ours.”
“The creation will always make the difference,” Han repeats.
“We don’t make the difference,” Tado lashes out.
“What our models lack is the scent of leather. And the solution is there, somewhere in her brain.”

They turn toward the comatose body.

“Her Nautys indicates brain activity,” Han suggests.

“Perhaps...”

Tado sighs.

“Just images with no connection. Like transcripts of... it doesn’t matter... connect to it if you want to, Han. Obviously, I’m not forcing you. But maybe you’ll see something that I’ve missed. You always see what I miss, in fact.”

Han smiles modestly then slides the liquid protection from his Nautys. The device quivers against Tado’s skin, as he receives the silent order transmitted to him by the young man’s brain. The mind of the sleeping woman reacts immediately. There is no filter, no confidentiality alert. The protected room guarantees total discretion.

Tado’s Nautys informs him that a share request has been formulated. The images drawn from Alx’ mind appear between the men and the hospital bed.

“Always the same thing! Her bees!”

The humming hives of the upper floor, in the garden below, linden and chestnut trees. Dozens of hives housing thousands of busy bees in honeycombs. The familiar buzzing that fills the hospital room and, more diffuse, almost sugary, the perfume from the linden tree flowers and the scent of honey. Her bees. Her whim.
“This isn’t information, just the last images of an old, dying woman who is looking for reassurance.”

Bitterly, he looks away from the insects, the brilliant green grass, the soothing warmth of the familiar landscape of their garden. The buzzing has been reduced by the Nautys, so as not to distress those who would hear it. Yet, it fills the room, flowing from the millions of transmitters embedded in the wall.

“Wait! There’s something else!” Han suddenly exclaims.

The scene is displayed from another angle. Hans’ Nautys pilots the shot changes in the virtual décor, in 3D, that the woman’s brain generates over and over.

“They’re heading for the tree!”

The bees have formed a continuous, organized line that is flying straight for the flowering linden tree. The virtual camera follows them, with a wide movement.

“There’s a man...”

The field narrows, the camera makes a sharp turn behind the battalion of feverish bees. There is, in fact, a man, chest bare, leaning against the linden trunk, watching the insects head for him, without moving.

A brown beard covers his face, which is framed with mid-length brown curls. He does not blink when the bees stop to cover him, like a living, moving coat, swarming up his neck where a vein pulses, its blue hue accentuated by the pallor of his skin, heading for his mouth where a few insects settle.
Tado smiles.
“Christ? Well, I guess that’s fitting from someone who is about to die,” he utters.
Concentrated, Han zooms in on the man’s face.
“But...” Tado starts to say.
Suddenly, the swarm takes off, in a sudden and perfectly synchronized movement.
The mask falls.
Tado stops still.
“That’s not Christ,” he murmurs.
Han observes the man, who seems to stare at them with the same, intrigued and intense look, as he reaches his hands out to them.
“Far from it,” Tado adds, in an almost confused rumble.
“Who is it?”
Then he freezes. Tado’s Nautys disconnects him abruptly. He has the time to notice a few signals, a violent emotion. The buzzing of the bees dies suddenly.
The look Tado gives the comatose woman is both miserable and furious.
“It’s my brother Zadig,” he says before abruptly leaving the room.

The dusty red accentuates the shadows and dust in front of Zadig. Under his buttocks, he feels the plated mat with its tight knots and the hard soil beneath that.
“Do you think it will be possible to operate on me again before I leave for Paris?” Zadig asks.

“So it’s true,” Halbeth sighs. “Why do you want this new surgery?”

“I don’t have enough time. Once I’m there, I’ll need to enhance my skills tenfold to transmit my gesture to Alx and receive hers. Mnémosyne would be capable of serving as a vector, if we free up a little memory. And the current chip is far too limited for what I want to do.”

“Are you the neurosurgeon? And who is Alx?”

“The Queen of the Hive. The one who raised me, partially. And who sent me here to learn the lost wax technique, while prohibiting me from making any contact before I had succeeded.”

“That’s a little harsh,” murmured Halbeth. “A little spartan.”

“Alx’ teaching methods are a little hard to understand for someone who has been raised in a more traditional framework. So? Do you think you can move the operation up?”

“Zadig, I think you should wait a little while before considering it. You know full well what Mnémosyne is doing to your brain. You may well activate the process and destroy yourself. Let me get some advice...”

“If you’re worried about complications during the trip, then don’t,” Zadig interrupts, as if he had not
heard her warnings. “I’m perfectly capable of bearing them.”

“I still don’t understand your urgency,” Halbeth mutters.

“See for yourself.”

Zadig bends over his Nautys. The complex network of pictograms and equations supports the journalist’s joyful voice.

“Kaadji has officially announced the approval of his patent. Let me remind you that Savage was the only one to possess the technology and technique needed to create and market the renowned synthetic monoform leather, made available to its clients by Nicholas Savage himself. The material developed by Kaadji will be called Forma-Tech and the brand will soon offer its clients...”

He cuts off the transmission.

“So, do you think you can move up the operation?” he repeats, impassive.

“It’s a little more complicated than you imagine,” Halbeth Lound sighs.

“I’m a being without imagination,” Zadig replies. His smile is free of irony.

A deep murmur rises from the ovens, reassuring and intimate.

The dance can start. They are no longer the artisans Tado knows by name. They are bodies moving in har-
mony with the material and among themselves. One catches the rod; the other is already prepared to soar. They slide, some slipping in behind others, knees bending, reaching out their arms, then holding back. The stems collide on a regular basis, with a light tinkling, a rhythmic interruption in the monotony of the ovens.

Tado is always amazed, despite the years, despite the hours spent observing, by this choreography, subtle differences engraved over time each time a new craftsperson is trained. The artisans’ dance has a tribal, pagan, hypnotic echo. It resonates in him, as it does in all those who watch it. He would not be surprised to learn that his pulse shifts, heart beating in time with the strange music of the workshop.

Perfect arrhythmia. A surprising harmony. The joining of dozens of individuals to create a single ballet, with a single goal.

The final element arches and raises the rod. The molten ball appears. Immediately, two of the dancers come to support the pipe. The first one blows.

The breath will mingle with that of the aeration. No one will hear it. An observer would have to look, under the finely wrought shift where the sensors drink in the man’s sweat, the chest that rises, the shoulders that spread. When he finally breathes, Tado holds his own breath.

The molten ball expands, growing lighter. The two helpers, motionless, look like kneeling statues. The bag
forms gently. Manech, the premier d’atelier, caresses it, with his index finger, at the site where it was born, gently detaching it.

Almost regretfully. His body relaxes. His shoulders relax.

Through the material, the newly formed leather, Tado sees the light pierce the skin, transform the bag into a lantern, for a brief moment, in the dark red of the ovens. A small light in the shadows.

“This latest model is interesting,” says Han, who stood forgotten behind Tado.

“I firmly believe that the next trend will be topstitching,” Tado says emphatically, in a monotone, repeating what he had told the Creation Committee, two days earlier. “What a paradox. Seams on a material that no longer needs to be sewn. A consolidation. The paradox created by the alliance of background and shape. A legendary bag.”

“ Legendary,” Han repeats, nodding.

“And it will be copied immediately, transformed, altered by Kaadjí thanks to his synthetic leather patent. Wonderful.”

“Do you think we should have used a mould, instead of blowing it?”

“I think we should have prayed,” Tado replies ironically. “We should have prayed. For a miracle.”
Zadig is lying on the red, dry earth. Around him, the bees buzz. Some have travelled far, heading for the greenhouses filled with angelica. From his dusty bed, Zadig reprograms an order in his Nautys. A splash of white light indicates that the hive has received his request, that the Queen is transmitting the new coordinates to her workers. Immediately, a swarm dashes off, toward another greenhouse, to the west.

He listens as their flight fades. For as long as the Mnemosyne can remember, there have always been bees.

In the past, they terrified him. He’s pleased that he no longer experiences that emotion. It is, in any case, terribly obsolete.

He thinks about his brother’s message, already stored in a corner of his artificial memory, although he just received it a few moments earlier.

The message was clear. Even though it was no doubt dictated to a secretary, adorned with the distant tone of essential information, Zadig recognized Tado.

He doesn’t know what he feels. She’s going to die.

Advanced coma, no communication possible.

He heard the blade falling, slicing through Alx’ life and their future at the same time. The Savage scentless leather will resemble any other leather, created by Kaadji or all the others who will rush head first into his wake.

“If you didn’t succeed, how will I be able to?” Alx?” he murmurs, summoning her memory.
The image of a bee takes form through Mnemosyne. Then another... then yet another...

He had never set foot in the lower garden, Alx’ absolute territory, before his catalepsy. He sees her again, bending over him, honey-coloured eyes looking deeply into his. Between them, the wax has almost melted, but neither of them pays any heed.

“You’ve almost got the movement. You just have to work on it. Learn the lost wax technique where it comes from, in New Africa. I can’t do it. I need you to learn the craftsman’s turn of hand on your own. It’s not good to have a single teacher. We’ll double our chances of finding it. Savage is a hive; each member has his own role. Once you’ve mastered the craft, you’ll come back to us. You’ll pass it on in turn. Look at the bee, Zadig, see how hard she works. But she is nothing without the others. Nothing without her hive. Always come back to the place where you belong.”

Zadig listens to Alx’ voice in his memory, without blinking, lying between the hives.

She continues, her voice melodious, and the scent of honey mixes with that of the wax between them.

“For my part, I may have found the means to fix the perfume and other things we have talked about. When you’re there, don’t forget that every story hides another, larger one. Remember Princess Eugénie’s armrest. The perfume is memory. That’s been our secret, yours and mine, since you were a little boy.”
Zadig feels Mnémonosyne weakening under the flood of memories. With a word he puts it on standby and once again observes the busy work at the hive, buzzing filling his ears.

“The movement... The perfume... the movement... the perfume...”

The idea picks its way among the artificial connections in his brain, through Mnémonosyne, comes to a halt in his left lobe and explodes into a thousand colours.

He stands up, thunderstruck.

“Princess Eugénie! The perfume! The perfume is memory! Alx’ motion!”

Quivering, he connects his Nautys to Professor Lound’s device. Halbeth’s appears immediately, looking attentive.

“You’ll definitely have to operate on me again.”

“I’m listening. But I may well refuse, you know.”

“Wait until you’ve heard what I have to tell you. Do you know the exact story, Halbeth? My precise story? It all started with Princess Eugénie’s armrest...” he says, lying back down, hands behind his head.

“We’ve received a response from your brother,” says the voice of his secretary, with her most professional intonation. “He sent a list of items to be prepared for his arrival.”

Tado cuts the contact, without commenting. He does not have the courage to hide anything at all, ten min-
utes before a series of meetings which will, without any doubt, result in discrete harassment on the part of the main media channels.

“That’s just like Zadig,” he grumbles. “He comes back after being gone for ten years and sends a shopping list.”

His eyes grow wide as he watches the list of items scrolling by.

A home operating room with a resuscitation antenna.
An unknown leather mould, built to very precise specifications. Several artisans requisitioned.
An acre of angelica planted in the upper garden.
A vivarium.
Princess Eugénie’s armrest.
The relic stored in the chest on the upper floor, their father’s sacred object...

“The prodigal son comes home!” Tado says out loud. “It’s as if you were expecting a miracle, poor idiot...”

He bursts out laughing, then holds his head in his hands.

“Your hand?” Halbeth asks.
Zadig raises it, wiggles his fingers. Everything is fine. Behind the window of the TransContinent, he sees the grey sea. He pushes back a sensation that he recognizes easily. He has always hated flying over water, and
detests crossing it, even at a slow speed. The Trans-Continent is a structure that has been made slight by its transparent material. No reinforcement. No fixed link.

Automatically, his brain starts to produce colourful ideas, to draw him from his anxiety.

Transparent leather, capable of imprisoning the seas, as it imprisons him at this very moment. Infinite water bubbles, depth changing to hide and unmask what is most precious to everyone.

Halbeth is far from these considerations and interrupts him.

“It’s an enormous sacrifice, Zadig. It will never be the same as it was before. Your hand, that is. You know that.”

“I do.”

She understands then, as she listens to his heavy breathing, that he is fighting against an emotion, a fleeting feeling.

“How do you feel about returning home?” she says, with good intentions.

“I’ll recognize the place,” her patient replies.

At the end of the tunnel, the upper floor awaits. Alx waits for him.

Tado leaves the room, and exhales as if wanting to evacuate all of the air from his lungs in a single stroke.

“It’s all clear,” Han murmurs at his side, dumbfounded. It’s all straightforward. Two days of meetings to
reach this point... The shareholders were crystal clear, as if such clarity could be achieved through discourse filled with halftones, perfectly polished and duly filtered through their respective Nautys. All that had to be said was said. They have two days before everything collapses. It wasn’t even a threat. Just a prediction.

Without a word, Han and Tado take the corridor that leads to their offices and, farther off, to Tado’s private apartment.

An impressive number of palettes and sterile crates have been stored in front of the door. The two men enter the vestibule, which is in turn cluttered with a container bearing the logo of a shipping company.

Tado stops in his tracks. His brother is there, standing in front of him, skin tanned by the New African sun, brown and tall, the complete opposite of himself. Zadig gives him a smile, almost normal, one he must consider socially acceptable. Tado attempts to smile back, but his mouth tenses in a grimace.

He tells himself that he should speak first. Zadig probably does not know what to say. Zadig never knows what to say in this type of situation.

He wavers, moreover, shifting from one foot to the other, imperceptibly at a first glance, like he used to do when he was a child, and stares at Tado, with moving, undecipherable eyes. Next to him stands a young woman, with a serious expression, ill at ease, and discrete. Tado’s Nautys transmits her ID sheet, as it was
completed at the reception desk: Professor Halbeth Lound. Neurosurgeon. Private practice. Then he turns to look once again at his brother.

“I see you’ve been offered the treasure chest!” Tado utters, immediately cursing himself.

The armrest is located exactly halfway between them standing on a fine glass tray, under a bell cover.

“So,” Tado continues. “You come back after ten years because you decided you couldn’t live without Princess Eugénie’s armrest?”

“You’re the one I wanted to see,” his brother replies. Tado forces himself not to turn away. Behind him, Han is fussing discretely around the bar…

“Well, you’ve seen me. And since you have no emotional memory, I suppose that we can avoid any effusive signs of tenderness.”

Zadig’s Nautys emits a brief signal.

“Please...” murmurs the young woman standing next to Zadig. “Your brother’s condition is still unstable.

‘Really?’ says Tado, voice dripping with irony. “My brother, unstable?”

“I came back to help, Tado,” Zadig states.

“How?”

“I’ve found the way to give the leather its perfume.”

This time, Tado is the one who opens his mouth, without making a sound. Zadig’s Nautys emits another signal, more calming this time.

“I should feel relieved,” Tado thinks.
But, just the opposite, he feels a wild wave of rage wash over him, an old rage, one that has never healed, that he manages to control before saying, through clenched teeth, “Yes. Well, that’s obvious. You come back and save us. What’s the connection with that... that relic?”

“It’s where everything started. But I can’t tell you that now. I have to see Alx. Right away.”

Han glances at Tado who nods. He no longer knows what he feels. He no longer knows what to think. He simply nods.

“That’s it? Bees’ wax?” Tado mutters, incredulous. Zadig and he are standing before the door to Alx’ room.

“Bees wax that contains a synthetic musk based on angelica perfume. By modelling the leather in this wax mould, the perfume penetrates the materials.

“Why didn’t anyone think of this before?”

“We needed to dig deeply into ancient techniques, in the roots of New Africa. We needed to be brilliant, ingenious, respectful. To be perfectly conscious of man and the soil. We needed to be Alx.”

“You’re not the one who discovered it?”

“No. It was her, from the very beginning. She was the one that sent me there, when she felt it was time to pass on the torch.”

“And it’s ready?”
“Not quite. I lack the means for setting the perfume.”
“Oh,” murmurs Tado. “It was almost too good to be true. You see, Alx is in a coma and has left no notes about her work.”
“There are other means of communicating,” Zadig muttered, asking for the door to be opened.

Tado immediately felt excluded. More than anyone else in the world, he respects this intimacy between Zadig and Alx, the bond that no one ever really understood but that all accepted. He stands in a corner of the room, leaning against a chair, eyes wide open, breath held.

Zadig walks gently, with his feline grace, to the bed. He kneels next to it. He stares at Alx, places his hand over hers, activates the Nautys.

Images race by. The lower garden. The bees. The hives hunkered over themselves, the linden tree, the chestnut tree. The Christ-like Zadig of the previous day has disappeared or, at least, is no longer visible from this angle.

Tado tries to hold back a sudden sense of nausea. He can no longer bear them, these bees, even if they represent his only means of rescue.

“It’s useless,” he thinks, to the point of disgust.” She’s in a loop. These are just the final images of a dying old woman.”
He watches Zadig caress Alx’ forearm, with a gentleness close to devotion. The connection established between their two devices prevents him from hearing what his brother is saying to her, but the silent conversation seems to fill the room. Bit by bit, the bees grow calm and, in a single movement, enter their hives. Evening falls over the transparent screen stretching between them. Zadig stands up, without interrupting the contact. He is not smiling, not weeping. His face is calm.

When Zadig removes his hand, Tado sees, in his palm, the tiny shell of a medical sensor, carapace bulging. A small bioplastic scarab with synthetic skin, like those that collect the olfactory fingerprints of patients. Its feet had wandered over the artisan’s inert arm.

The oven has been installed in the middle of the second workshop. From the top of the catwalk, Tado supervises the operation. His lenses zoom from one corner of the workshop to another. Zadig navigates smoothly among them. He gives the impression that he never left the upper floor. The wax cast was made from a subtle mixture of synthetic metal and glass. Under the watchful eye of the artisans, he receives a ball of molten monoform leather. With surgical delicacy, a pipe injects a thick liquid in fits and spurts.

Time stretches, in keeping with and at the cost of infinitely precise gestures, with a loving slowness. Tado does not hear the words Zadig murmurs to Manech.
When the first bag is removed from the wax cast and passed from hand to hand, he sees the concentrated masks slip from the artisans’ faces. They congratulate one another with their eyes, reserved. Finally, Zadig waves at Tado in joy.

They have succeeded.

“That’s strange,” Han suddenly says, whose face had been covered with a deep relief a few seconds earlier. “Your brother... wasn’t he the one that took the bag from its shell...”

“How’s that str...” Tado started to say.

He freezes, before continuing, in a whisper that barely holds back a surge of profound anguish, “That’s an honour reserved for the premier d’atelier.”

He orders his Nautys to zoom in on his brother.

“That’s the operation that requires the greatest sensitivity,” he adds, uselessly. “And it’s true that, despite all Manech’s talent, only my bother masters this technique, since he invented it.”

“Tado?” says Han, who has given his device the same order. “Look at his hand!”

Zadig’s hand hangs at his side. Tado cries out at the same time as Manech, when he realizes that the young man’s fingers are dipped in the bath of burning wax needed for the next casting and his brother continues to smile, insensitive to the pain.

“What were you thinking?” Tado shrieks.
“You’ve pounded at my eardrums enough times that you can put up with me doing you the same favour once!” Tado shouts. “Professor Lound! Tell me why you agreed to desensitize one of your patient’s hands, when you know that his nervous system operates below the stability thresholds!”
“I did as he asked me to,” Halbeth replies, irritated by the tone of the man standing before her.
“I’m solely responsible,” Zadig announces.
“Don’t you use that word with me! You don’t know what responsibility is!”
“Well you do have to admit that I got us out of a jam,” Zadig replies. “What did you want me to do? If my hand had still had all of its nerve endings, I would have suffered agonies when I dipped it into the wax.”
“Are you telling me that you deliberately plunged you hand into that crucible?”
“Not the second time. That was an accident. Listen, Tado, I know how much I get on your nerves. I don’t need to be able to feel anything, to realize that. It’s enough for me to see the expression on your face in each of my memories. But it was the only solution. Alx wanted me to learn the technique to continue her research. It was one of our projects. What she wanted to pass on to me, so that I could pass it on to others.”
“Your secret projects, like when you were ten years old?”
“Our real projects. We couldn’t talk to you about them. Alx was afraid to disappoint you. You’re so perfect. Others aren’t entitled to make mistakes. Particularly not me, since I already was one, Tado. You were never able to put up with that. You had to feel guilty for 20 years before you finally let me go to do what I was made to do.”

He speaks in a voice devoid of passion. Each sentence falls like an unbearable truth. But Tado never gives up without a battle.

“Feel guilty? For what?” he utters, bitterly. “For having managed everything over the years? For staying away from the secrets you weren’t ready to share? For being the administrator, the guard, the non-creative person who was too normal? The one who made everyone happy. Where were you, Zadig, when Dad died? I was with him until the end. Have you ever thought about that?”

“No, I wasn’t there. Yes, I’ve thought about it often. I was there when Mom died. Remember? I never recovered from that.”

“She didn’t either.”

Zadig does not understand this type of humour. He stares at his brother with foggy eyes.

“Do you remember what Dad used to say sometimes? My sons, one a Savage heart, the other a savage heart.”

“He was just showing his sense of humour. His tenderness as well.”
“Yes, he did laugh each time. But imagine... my memories are devoid of all emotion. And it wasn’t really all that funny, after all. Do you know why? He had no doubt that you were the Savage heart. The perfect son.”

“Am I supposed to feel guilty for that as well? Get on with it since you’ve decided to get it off your chest. Hit me with your morale.”

“You’re the one who makes yourself feel guilty, Tado. I never held anything against you. It wasn’t your fault. I was sick. It could have happened to anyone.”

Tado stares at him for a long time.

“What are you talking about?”

Zadig says nothing, but tilts his chin, pointing at the armrest under the glass bell cover.

“Princess Eugénie’s arm rest,” Tado says, his voice flat.

The image suddenly evokes a place for him, along with the scent, the heat, the noise of the crowd, the scratchy red of a theatre chair, the hushed environment of a museum. The scent of dust and roses...

His chest, caught in a vise, grows so painful that he wavers on his feet, slightly, like Zadig, from one foot to the other...

A slight clack announces the surge of memories, as Zadig’s Nautys connects to the sharing screen, which turns on immediately.

Tado does not prevent his own Nautys from accepting his brother’s request.
He appears first, a blond adolescent, slight, just out of childhood. Their father is behind him, hands crossed behind his back, frowning. Nicholas Savage has the bohemian elegance that throws off the most scathing critics, a trait he would transmit to his younger son. His wild hair, brown like Zadig’s, gives him a romantic look that adds a touch of gentleness to his chiselled face.

“Don’t grouse. What we’re about to see is exceptional. Isn’t it Alx?”

Alx enters the field of vision, wearing a shoulder bag, from which she takes a stylus and draws an invisible shape in front of her, which her Nautys immediately gobbles up.

An adult Tado recognizes Nato, their first synthetic leather creation, hanging from the artisan’s delicate shoulder. She holds Zadig, just nine years old, by the hand.

“They’ve going to open the theatre for us. Just for us. Do you understand what that means, boys?” their father asks. “This is an exceptional event. Just for us. And do you know what that is?”

“Princess Eugénie’s armrest,” Tado answers with a smile. “Heard about it thousands of times.”

The image stops. The adult Tado instructs his Nautys to fast forward in time.

They are there, all four of them. Tado, Zadig, their father and Alx, standing around the glass bell. The
curator places a cautious hand on the control. The bell lifts. Tado and Zadig see their father’s eyes shine with emotion.

“Touching is prohibited. Tado, come here and inhale. They have to keep it enclosed; it would lose its scent. For a long time, people thought it was a legend. But it’s true. Can you smell it, Tado? The armrest retained Princess Eugénie’s perfume. Close your eyes. Can you imagine it? It’s summer, an evening at Fontainebleau. The performance is about to start. The Princess puts her arm on it. Her skin touches the velvet, just as it has a hundred times before. The perfume caresses the fabric and joins with it. It stays there for centuries. Imagine, Tado, if we could recreate that moment, see what she saw, hear what she heard, simply by inhaling this perfume? All the memories we have are contained in odours, perfumes. Perfume is memory.”

“And me?” Zadig suddenly says, standing on tiptoe.

At the time, he still had not mastered language and had difficulty articulating.

The adult Tado recognizes his very particular tone.

“I don’t want to see that!” he says.

The Nautys cuts the connection.

They look at one another. Zadig nods.

“When you told me that it was enough to smell Mom’s perfume to remember her, I understood that I would never experience emotion related to memory. I would never feel anything for Mom again. All those
moments were lost for me. My mother would never be anything more than a cold face, words without taste or colour. I knew just how precious that was, Tado.”

“You had your cataleptic crisis, the one that almost killed you, just after that.”

“And I recovered,” Zadig retorts. “With that desire. To share all these memories, these emotions. Imagine, Tado, that we can fulfil Dad’s vision. We can offer our clients the possibility of recreating a memory, any memory, by re-experiencing the emotion that built it… It would be more than exceptional! Alx was the only one who listened to me, the only one who kept an eye on me. She saved my life. All on my own, I would have followed a perfectly illusory destiny. She was the only one skilled enough to put me on the right path.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Tado admits. “Everyone, except for you, has memories and emotions based on scents. Where’s the exceptional part?”

“Everyone can remember their past, but not that of others!”

“The Rio Biomedical Convention would never accept this,” Halbeth states.

“Let me explain,” Zadig interrupts, jubilant.

Alx’ features flit over his face, in his smile for a moment. Tado sits down and listens.

They are alone now. Tado does not recall the last time he was alone with his younger brother. Without a
doubt when they were children. He realizes that he has scrupulously avoided any intimate contact with Zadig, from a certain time on.

“I don’t quite understand what you did,” says Tado. “Exhuming people’s memories from their scents, integrating them in our bags, giving them the possibility of returning to them, when they want to… A memory within reach… That’s not a creation, Zadig, it’s an invention.”

“Scientists have proven that the perception of odours is essentially linked to our chromosomes and nervous system. Don’t you ever watch the science channels?”

“Not when I can avoid it. Did you really place you hand in a cast of molten wax?”

“I didn’t feel anything. I already told you that. The wax was impregnated with Alx’ scent. My chip did the rest.”

“You let your skin soak in the perfume, like leather does.”

“Skin and leather,” Zadig hums. “Mnémosyne integrated Alx’ perfume and memories in my brain. They are part of me now! They included her last action, setting the perfume. Now that I’ve lost my hand, it may be the only gesture I will ever be able to reproduce.”

“The operation must be possible.”

“It wouldn’t be the same thing. They’ll fix me up. I don’t want to become that pain in the neck that every-
one in the workshop puts up with and excuses because he was brilliant once and is the boss’ brother.”

“What are you going to do, then?”

Tado’s tone is tinged with sadness.

“I’m going to complete the transmission, make sure that the patent passes,” says Zadig.

“And then?”

“Mnémosyne is unstable. From one day to the next I might lose everything. Even as it is now, my memories are only partial. But at least they resemble the memories of others. They were in my head. I will only have images projected on a screen. Nothing more in my brain. Just me with me. Can you imagine that? So, yes, I’m going to leave. Halbeth will help me stay on course, for the time that’s needed.”

“But why?”

“To live!” Zadig retorts, with a laugh. “I’m going to fill my head, my heart with everything that there is to see in this world. I’m going to pack Mnémosyne with so many images, sounds, odours that it will beg for mercy. I will dance on all of the lands in the world and will fill my mind with all the perfumes of creation!”

“Your savage heart...”

“My Savage heart!”

Zadig remains silent for a moment, head lowered. Then he raises his fleeting eyes to look at his brother.

“Don’t ask me to stay, Tado. Don’t ask me to watch her die. Don’t ask me to live with the cold memory of
her death, until the day of final forgetting. Like I did with Mom.”

They remain silent. Behind the muffled silence of the room, they seem to hear the quiet buzzing of bees at work and, farther off, as an echo, the perpetual and regular hum of the ovens.

“But you will come back?” Tado’s Nautys asks in the silence.

The modesty of the tone lit the brown and greyish blue message. A black screen, an irrepressible anguish, cuts through the space between them.

“Always,” his brother replies.

Enid Shon makes no attempt to hide her marvel behind her small, teasing tone.

“We were...” she murmurs to Tado. “How is this possible? How did you perform this miracle? I saw everything again. It was all there! I even felt what I experienced when I saw your collection!”

“Technological wizardry.”

A word immediately appears, written on his sharing glasses.

Imagique.

The first word in the article Enid is already working on, compiling her impressions and the images sent to her Nautys in preparation for the upcoming brainstorming.
For an hour, Tado and she shared the evening on which the first Nato was launched, the result of an archaic past, using organic chips and their Nautys which filled their minds with images and sounds as Enid’s perfume, the old and rich perfume of her memories, instilled her emotions from that evening, in keeping with the beating of her heart.

“It was breathtaking,” Enid adds. “The emotions as well.”

“I knew that you liked our creations,” Tado adds, suddenly serious. “But not to what extent. Thank you for being up for the game. It was completely experimental.”

“The game?” the elderly woman exclaims. “You know full well what you’ve just invented. You were looking for a way to give the leather a scent and you gave intelligence to the perfume! When Luce Guénon hears about this... I imagine you’re already working on some advanced technology.”

“Work is underway. Today, we can have simple emotions. We have to address the brain directly for the complex ones. No doubt using organic chips more complex than those used by fashion.”

Enid stands up and caresses the new Nato, her personal, enriched Nato, which no other person will be able to possess since the scent was collected directly from her skin.

“I like the idea that everything is still imperfect...
perpetually evolving,” she announces, frowning in thought. “I like the idea that what lasts is inscribed in a unique object, that we can keep our entire life a precious memory. Managing to share anyone’s memories through a perfume… You’re a genius, Tado.”

“A vector, at the very most,” Tado states, with a grimace.

“Don’t be so modest. We’re not talking communication or even haute couture anymore. We’re going to create the most breath-taking communication campaign anyone has seen in 20 years! Come! Come and take part in world-breaking history!”

“After you, my dear!” Tado says with a smile and an elegant bow.

The elderly woman indicates with a wave of her hand that the brainstorming has started.

He sits down close to her and takes her hand in his. She feels cold, although the Nautys assures him that her heart is still beating, albeit weakly.

He does what his father did for his mother, and what he himself did for his father. He talks, leaning over the old woman, hoping that he will not lose his words, that she will hear him.

He talks to her for a long time, lying next to her, his mouth next to her ear. Finally, he remains there, stretched out.

No doubt, hours pass. Time no longer has any hold.
He listens to the beating of her heart slow, ever so gently.

Then Alx’ Nautys emits an unusual sound. No warning signal, no message. A slight shift that causes him to turn his head toward the transparent screen.

Eyes brimming with tears, he sees the lower garden. The linden and chestnut trees. The hives.

He sees a man and a woman lying on the eternally brilliant grass. At their side, the fragile silhouette of an adolescent leaning against the chestnut tree. In front of them a brown child, hopping from one foot to the other, stretches out his arms, like wings, and lets the bees come to him.

“So that’s what you wanted to offer Savage, Alx,” Tado murmurs, his lips against Alx’ ear. “That’s what you, what Zadig and you, wanted to offer humanity. A great sharing...”

Then white spots cover the grass, under the feet of his brother as a child. White spots with delicate petals. In the thousands. Angelica blossoms.

On each of them, a bee gathers nectar, hardworking and gracious.

Humming, they suddenly proliferate. One bee for each flower, one flower for each bee, far from the family that observes their progress, without moving.

He feels Alx’ spirit waver, her heart gently stop, no more than a painful hum under her emaciated chest.

Around them, lost on this cold and sad hospital
bed, like on a life raft, everything is grassy green and flowery white, ocean blue and dusty red. The garden stretches, beyond the glass walls, the buildings, the streets, running over the earth, crossing oceans, billions and billions of angelica flowers budding and blooming, up to the dry, red soil.

And the buzzing of the bees fills the space, to infinity.

Anne Fakhouri
The buzz of her earring wakes her. Surya leaps from under her sheets like a dolphin in the ocean. Even though she knows it’s not true, it feels as if the alarm pierces her ear drums. Her heart races, acid reflux burns her throat and the Nautys on her wrist displays her blood pressure in red. Her adrenaline level is far too high.

Breathe in, breathe out. The old routine helps her regain control. The march of decades since the Pandemic has exhausted her pain, but alerts announcing catastrophes still make her shiver. And the AI would never wake her unless there was an absolute emergency.

“House? What’s happening?”

“Diane is calling. The signals aren’t clear. Probable capture.”

“The drones?”

“In the zone in two minutes.”

She rushes out of the bed, jumps into the clothes she
wore the day before, and loses her temper when her bare foot strikes the heavy tray, abandoned with the remnants of her dinner. The telescreen turns on.

“Satellite reception, Surya! An image of the attacker.”

The potbellied shape of a boat appears, dancing on the black background of waves, topped in white.

A slider! Surya would have preferred a trawler or any other type of fishing boat. At least they know what to expect. Brute strength, the risk of death. This predator might well be even more harmful.

The biosensory fabric of her rainbow tunic tightens around her, diffusing its soothing properties. Calmed, Surya heads over to the mooring bay of the aquatic house where the launch is parked, ready to cast off. She slips into the small vehicle with its gold-streaked blue fuselage. The AI has taken control and guides it, using both satellite data and information from the drones. Making an effort to catch her breath, Surya grabs the Glock and some incapacitating bullets.

“The slider is leaving,” the AI announces.

“The drones’ report?”

“It was a stealth unit, no registration. Diane gave them a hard time. They’re still dragging the net.”

“Did you transmit the ultimatum?”

“Yes. ‘Release the chimera or we won’t be the only ones on your trail.’”

Surya nods. It would astonish her if a stealth ship
would want to rub shoulders with the coast guard. She massages her itching forehead with her fingertips, surprised to find she’s perspiring, despite the mint, cypress and sage microcapsules released by her clothing to cool her. Irritated, she notes that her hands are every bit as damp and once again forces herself to take deep, calming breaths. How many times have you reduced me to this state, she thinks at Diane. She loves all of her chimeras but willingly admits that she feels a particular attachment for this one, less because she is one of the elders than for her independence, her untamed character, her tenderness and her sulks.

“Target!” declares the AI. “We’ve got them on visual. The star is faster. Put on the NVG, you should see them.”

Surya places the goggles on her nose. Immediately, the amplification allows her to make out the other boat, where two silhouettes are busy, bent over the back.

“It looks as if they’re unhooking the net,” she comments.

“Confirmed by the drones.”

Just as she is about to turn on the head light, a usual intimidation manoeuvre, Surya stops herself. The kidnapping attempt is over. No point in throwing the retreating attackers into a panic. They might race off out of fear of being filmed, and risk injuring or killing Diane.

Below, the two silhouettes stand up and Surya
tenses. Let them maintain the same speed, let there be no whirlpool effect. Eyes wide open behind the night vision goggles, she sees the net where the sparkling oblong shape of the chimera turns on itself and even starts to sink. Dammit! And what if Diane has lost consciousness? But the shapeless mass stirs and rises to the surface.

The AI understands the danger. Diane has surely been exhausted by her battle and the slider is already out of sight. She approaches the launch. Surya bends over the gunwale. In the mesh of the net, the creature, moon illuminating its glittering coat, winks with a contrite air. Surya leaps into the turbulent water to release her.

“Tomorrow, dear Idunn,” the president had said to her. “At the reception our firm has organized to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. At the head office, in Paris. You’ll travel first class on the 4 pm BGV. The ticket has been recorded in your Nautys. When you arrive, you’ll have a suite at the Céphée. We hope you’ll make yourself presentable.”

Noting Idunn’s turmoil, she added, “We’ve opened a line of credit for you for this trip. You’ll purchase what you need on the trimaran. The shops there are excellent.”
After notifying the Christiana Institute in Oslo that she would be postponing her weekly visit to her daughter, Idunn had hoped to be able to tell her colleagues about her departure, and was greatly vexed to realize that her lab manager had already informed them. Yet, after all, that was preferable. She had just enough time to pick up a few personal items, before heading off to the port at Bergen to catch the trimaran that would take her to Boulogne, in France.

And now, comfortably ensconced in her cabin in front of an assortment of delicate sweet and salty titbits, a glass of Reine d’Ambre in her hand, she continued to wonder: Why me? What does this woman want with me?

Oh! What does it matter after all! Make the most of this unexpected break.

She hunkered down into the comfy cushions, appreciating once again the extraordinary stability of the BGV, even today as the sea heaved. The surface ailerons that enabled the trimaran to coast over the water performed their job perfectly and the two floaters reduced the rolling to next to nothing. Idunn had the impression she could feel the buoyancy of the air between the wave-breaker hull and the floaters. She frequently had opportunities to go out on the sea with friends who owned a hydrofoil and when the craft took off the sensation of skimming over the waves made her feel tipsy.
Kicking off her boots, she stretched out in front of the panoramic window. She intended to savour the luxury of her cabin. Each time she had the opportunity, she chose the BGV over the train, which was faster, but she had only ever offered herself the pleasures, already considerable, of tourist class. The nectar of the *Reine d’Ambre* carpeted her palate with shards of ripe fruits. She attempted to recall the teachings of her wine merchant grandfather and identify the tastes: apricot and citrus fruit... mandarin orange? She concentrated. The wine echoed and fanned out over her palate like a peacock’s tail, the finish leaving hints of saffron and even liquorice in her mouth. She never tired of looking at the gold of its reflections spinning in the light of her crystal glass. She sighed contentedly.

Overcome with fatigue, she fell asleep. She woke with a start, throat dry, eyes blinking, in the dark. The lighting in the cabin adjusted when she woke. It increased significantly as soon as she sat up on her elbow. The large mirror reflected the unbecoming image of a traveller in a wrinkled shantung suit.

*9 pm? I have to find something to wear without embarrassing myself when I arrive at the Céphée.*

When she had discovered the line of credit Proteûs had opened for her on her Nautys she had abandoned any idea of changing her clothes. She would have
enough to buy a complete wardrobe and the craziest add-ons.

She rushed over to the shopping gallery on the BGV. Captive for the 17 hours the crossing took, while they did not always enjoy any respite in their daily lives, “fashion hunters” had access to the best boutiques. Idunn moved from aisle to aisle, caressed by the incessant babble of the targeted ads in the shop windows, and finally chose a store that bore the Alexandre brand logo. She had long admired the creations of this audacious fashion firm. Proteûs had offered her the opportunity to make a dream she had considered impossible come true.

She had left her Nautys unlocked and, as soon as she set foot inside the boutique, the chime of the local AI informed her that it had interfaced with her ID. A salesclerk approached, face neutral. Idunn could not help thinking that the woman would have been more cheerful if her client were dressed better, or at least had a more dazzling egosphere. A brief tensing of her stomach reminded her that she did not fit in such places. Then she remembered her line of credit and her confidence returned.

“I’m looking for a suit and a very nice dress for a reception tomorrow evening.”

Amused, she noted the roundness of the girl’s eyes, then how, every time a double of Idunn appeared in 3D with a new model, the price was displayed immediately.
“After thinking it over,” she joked, “I can’t make up my mind. They’re all so pretty! For the suits, I’ll choose two. The blue with the long jacket, I think? It’s a perfect match for my eyes. Add the white silk blouse and this baroque necklace and the ensemble will be perfect. I’ll also take the black one with the fitted corset. With the pants that hug the waist and legs. What a look! The dress is easier. I want this little masterpiece.”

She pointed at an extraordinary brocade sheath with a bodice with lace openwork, embroidered with pearls and sequins.

“Excellent choice,” the salesclerk agreed, looking overjoyed.

She must have checked Idunn’s bank coordinates discretely.

“No problems with delivering my items?”

“Yikes!” the young woman panicked. “You want all three items when you leave the BGV? That’s impossible, you know. You can have the blue suit once you’ve passed under our 3D arch, but the black suit and the dress will be delivered to you later.”

“Tomorrow, 6 pm, Paris, the Céphée? Otherwise I’ll cancel my order.”

“One moment, please.”

The girl subvocalized. Her Nautys turned on; figures appeared, scrolling rapidly. A face replaced them. A concerned looking man who spoke without Idunn being able to hear him.
“It’s all right,” concluded the salesclerk. “We’ll assign a team to it.”

When Idunn left the boutique, divinely clothed in her blue suit, she felt as if she were floating, in time with the trimaran. She only ever dressed in a hurry and always settled for the ready-to-wear 3D arches, thinking it was impossible that she would ever wear clothing that had been tailored just for her. Teetering on the latest style of gilded buskins, she played in front of the large mirror in her cabin for a long time, posing in the coordinating underwear she had purchased, while caressing the monoform leather, ever so soft, of her new Savage purse. Finally, after scrubbing off the bioskin that preserved her face from any form of exterior assault and would soon start to desquamate, she sprayed on a new layer of elastic cells and slid between the sensosheets on her bunk, shivering in delight as their thousands of nanocapsules delivered dream agents over her naked skin.

In the morning, a bit groggy, she arrived at the Loop station, to take the electromagnetic train that would whisk her to Paris at more than 1,100 km/h in its pressurized tube. She stared a moment, without seeing the images of Lee Sang-suk’s latest blockbuster playing over and over on the walls of the capsule, then she put on her enhanced glasses and activated the filter func-
tion. Inside the white noise of her protective bubble, rocked by the tiny roll of the magnetic field, she woke from her trance. *You’ve been bought, girl, and you don’t even know why.* Suddenly chilled, she curled up in foetal position.

Surya was absolutely furious. As if the events of the previous evening were not enough, the wind had intensified all day. At 8 on the Beaufort scale, as the sea was covered with foam and Meteosat announced a storm with wind forces of 10 to 11, Surya had covered her ears with her hands. Despite its stabilizers and floating anchors, her flower house bellowed and danced beneath her feet. She had made up her mind to find shelter for her tribe. The pragmatic AI had already called in the chimeras, moved the house closer to the shore and started to retract the submerged dome that served as both access and keel.

There was no need to go far for shelter. Surya did not dwell in the Gulf of Lion by chance. Since the water had risen and all of the drowned railway tracks had been moved, Narbonne once again had a port. Of course, the one-meter elevation and the trenchwork had not made it deep enough to welcome boats with large drafts, but since they had been re-designed and
expanded, the channels that had been opened by sub-
merging the dune ridges enabled smaller ships, such as the aquatic house, to cross through the Ayrolle and La Sèche sea ponds to reach the Bages lagoon. Well moored, boats without tall structures could make their way there without too much risk to sit out a storm.

Despite the 10,000-odd hectares the lagoon covered, Surya hated taking refuge there. The chimera adored it, on the other hand, because it was packed with sea breams, sole, bass, mullets and, above all, the eels found only there. Unfortunately, the fishermen bristled at their infernal raids and the indemnities distributed in bulk to buy peace did nothing to improve the moods of men tested by the rising water.

Surya listened to the complaints and tried to keep a smile on her face. She knew that the flooding had improved the hydraulic exchanges between the lagoon and the sea. Even the shellfish farmers had seen their harvests increase. And now that the sea ponds were draining through the carefully maintained channels, the sediment build-up was on the decline and eutrophica-
tion would soon be nothing but a memory. The lagoons were once again filling with life.

Yet again, Surya had agreed to hear an elderly man who complained that, apparently, the flower house had inadvertently carried off his net. She realized that her temporary neighbours might just well be jealous of her.
Of course, they had received comfortable compensation for the simple destruction of the sheds where they stored their tools. But her wealth must seem outrageous to them. Aware that she had to maintain excellent relations with her neighbours, she held back her grimaces. The peace of her chimeras depended on it.

After she had drowned him in almost a half-litre of Fée Verte, the latest fashion in absinthe, the importunate man allowed her to accompany him home.... not before receiving his payment, though. She had put up with almost one hour of his vitriol, exasperated by the expression of so much bitterness in her respect despite the fact that she contributed to maintaining the channels and keeping the local biotope in good condition.

Obviously, she couldn’t exactly boast about that. Everyone knew the reason for her aid. Even if the lateral petals of her flower house stood on hydraulic jacks, the principal hull of her craft was still eight meters wide. There was no way she could slip from the sea into the lagoons in a sliver of water cluttered with algae! As for the quality of that water, the health of her chimeras depended on it.

With its petals once again horizontal, the flower house pulled against its anchors without any excessive bobbing. Surya verified the sensors on the submerged dome, which was once again deployed. Everything was
in order. She slipped into her diving suit. This time, the chimeras would not go out without their mistress.

PROTEÛS: 2024 – 2074, excellence at the service of all, read the flamboyant banner. A brightley adorned major-domo had discreetly checked her ID. Idunn looked at him without being able to hold back a hiccup of surprise as she saw him write her name, with a golden quill, in an extravagantly luxurious paper guest book! No one wrote with quills anymore! The man wore silk blue mitts that matched his suit and left the tips of his fingers, with their star-covered nails, free. Idunn noticed that she had been holding her breath as the letters took form on the page, and she started breathing again.

She let out an embarrassed laugh when the major-domo raised his eyes to look at her, surprised that she was still there, and she slipped away. Her heart was pounding. Earlier, at the Céphée, she had admired herself in the mirrors. A real princess, she puffed up. The dress had been delivered on time, a miracle of perfection inside its satin box, and the seamstress that accompanied it had applauded enthusiastically. It was as if the sheath had been sewn on Idunn’s body. No adjustments needed.
However, now that the young woman was walking through the bioluminescent trees on the roof of the building humming with the invited crowd, reality washed over her. The guests wore the latest works by designer Baba Urban, the changing emofabric of Lune Guénon and the sumptuous chimeric outfits from the Proteûs studios. An insidious voice murmured in Idunn’s ear: this godsend vanishes when the clock strikes twelve, Cinderella! Poor idiot! You don’t know anyone and you don’t even know why the hell you’re here! Distress tied her stomach in knots.

“Damn, what an apparition! So early in the evening? I didn’t think I’d had so much to drink already!”

A man had stopped dead ahead of her. Arms spread, as if in adoration, while his brown eyes, sparkling with irony, contradicted his attitude.

“Allow me, madam, to touch that perfect skin, so I can make sure it’s not hiding a ghost.”

Comforted by the light tone, Idunn burst out laughing and offered him her hand. He clasped it with his fingertips, bowing gracefully.

“Divine human, you’ve found your servant for the evening. I live to obey your every command.”

“Well, for starters, could you introduce me to our hostess?”

“You want to leave me so soon? What would you say to making the most of me, *for starters*?”
He smiled, playful and charming, as he handed her a glass filled with glistening gold.

“No that would be improper. I must take care of my duties first. But you shouldn’t lose me.”

“No doubt, if Karen doesn’t kidnap you for the rest of the evening. She’s very possessive!”

“I’ll resist her. Now, take me to her.”

He grasped her elbow and guided her from group to group, avoiding the tiresome interlopers who attempted to intercept them, like an experienced escort, until they finally found the president, decorated with a thousand flames in a fabulous chimera skin that seemed to have captured the adamantine sparkle of crystal. She was talking with men whose sombre expressions and neutral egospheres betrayed the festive setting.

“You recognize her, I imagine. I’ll leave you. Madam Elysium and I have had a falling out. And you’ll get along fine without any help. Come back soon! I’ll keep my eye out for you.”

Panicked, Idunn turned back to the man. He’d vanished. Idiot! You don’t even know his name.

She took one step forward, then two back, tempted to flee, but the small clique had noticed her and one of its members bent to murmur something in his hostess’ ear. Karen Elysium turned to look at Idunn, and she walked over as her guest remained frozen to the floor.

“Dear Idunn, I’m so happy to see you! The vids don’t do you justice at all. You’re ravishing. Follow
me, you’re about to learn why I invited you to join me here this evening.”

She dragged Idunn along in her wake, walking quickly, preceded by a man and two women who parted the guests ahead of them like the bow of a ship. Idunn finally realized, based on their size and attitude of authority, as well as their nondescript suits, that they were no doubt body guards. This was confirmed when the group reached a belvedere and the president and Idunn walked down the three steps into it while the three others remained above.

Very much at ease, the president walked ahead and looked over the edge. Resting her elbows on the parapet, which was open today given the lack of wind, she contemplated the exceptional view of Paris. Idunn noted the bright shades of the lilacs and wisteria that surrounded them, a sign of the purity of the atmosphere. Since the 50s, following the prohibition of civilian traffic in most major cities in Europe, where only mass transit, bicycle paths and electric taxis were authorized, the leaden cover of urban pollution had disappeared. The greening of walls, terraces and roofs, the use of solar paints and wind towers, the army of microbots responsible for eliminating any substance that would alter the ecosystem as soon as it appears, the effectiveness of the arcologies, these immense, self-sufficient buildings and, of course the drastic control of factories, all now equipped with recording devices, had proven their worth.
“I’m crazy about this building,” the president sighed, her nostrils quivering as if overwhelmed by the heady scents of the flowers. “I’d hate to lose it. Proteûs has done so much to instil ecological architecture throughout the world. ‘Change life’ was our slogan, after the pandemic.”

Idunn frowned. She was familiar with the refrain. The multi had promoted a responsible habitat and caused an explosion in the spaces reserved for comfort and beauty. In order to win the battle, it had invested all of its efforts during the decisive years. Idunn had been too young at the time; planetary history acknowledged this commitment as well as that of the many major stakeholders around the globe who had taken up the idea of a more equitable world, enabling it to become reality. Idunn had no reason to doubt, yet she would have preferred more discretion about these feats.

“Why would you lose the building?” she asked, incredulous.

Karen Elysium took her by the hand and drew her under an arbour, covered with modified leaves that tinkled in the air, their subtle choirmaster. Two lyre-back chairs covered with chimera pelts were waiting for them next to a table on which vermeil, crystal and porcelain paraded over a raw linen tablecloth embroidered with pearl silk.

“I’ll be honest with you, Idunn,” the president said once they had taken their seats. “Proteûs is struggling.
We held the monopoly for mimetic skins for a long time. We had the patents. When people copied us, we won the lawsuits. And, in any case, our competitors never managed to even get anywhere close to the delicateness, the resistance and the beauty of our pieces. Today, that’s all over. They’ve found a way to create their own chimeras using different means. And they’ve taken out their own patents. We’re struggling, Idunn. With the departure of our major asset, four years ago, even our best clients are leaving us… and we know that they’re being offered much lower prices elsewhere. This is obviously dumping on the market and quite unfair since our competitors are in the midst of the investment phase and they’re selling at a loss, but if they force us to close up shop, they’ll win in the short run.”

Idunn’s amazement must have shown on her face since the president stretched a sparkling hand over the table to tap her on the hand.

“Rest assured, my dear, we’re not quite in desperate straits and we’ve counting on you to save the day.”

“Me?” the biologist said, voice filled with panic. “I’m just a minor laboratory assistant. A nobody!”

“Nobody? Really? Most people would find your credentials impressive. But we’re not here to discuss your skills in molecular biology. After all, you work for us. And the director of Proteûs Genetics keeps us informed about the progress of your research.”
“So, you know that...”

“Do you know Surya Yemaya da Matha?” the president interrupted her, taking out a bottle with a wine cooler.

She filled their glasses with the golden liquid and lifted hers, closing her eyes and inhaling the scent as if the world outside had ceased to exist.

Idunn imitated her, neglecting to reply. A Tokaji Aszú! The label, clearly visible, displayed the exceptional richness and concentration of its sugars, six puttonyos, and its provenance, Oremus, the oldest and most renowned vintage of the name. Karen Elysium raised her crystal hanap to her lips, drank a sip of the nectar, and picked up one of the little canapés that were waiting for her on the table. Idunn followed her example. She was dying of hunger.

A marvellous soufflé woven through with lobster meat and the flesh of candied apricot melted on her tongue and she had to struggle to keep from throwing herself on the plate. She returned to her glass, its heady scents of plums, spices and nuts giving her a giddy pleasure.

“You did a practicum in her Roscoff laboratory, when you were 24 years old,” the president continued.

“Just three months. To see how she used embryonic stem cells and transgenesis. I didn’t have much time to get to know her. The turnaround was terrible and trainees went in and out through a revolving door.”
“You don’t know who that woman is, do you? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not insulting your intelligence. Everyone knows that Surya Yemaya da Matha is the unparalleled creator of mimetic chimeras. Likewise, many people know that her parents’ deaths during the Pandemic marked her childhood, even if they don’t know that her parents were not killed by the disease but during a riot. Surya’s father was a biologist as well. He headed a very important laboratory in New Delhi. The crowd lynched him. Everyone was looking for scapegoats in 2030. The archive images are terrible. You can see the mother die trying to protect her husband, their villa burst into flames and it’s possible to believe that if the child had been there she would have succumbed as well. Her parents had sent her to Africa, to her Yoruba grandmother. As soon as the Pandemic started, while it was still rare in Bénin, Célestine da Matha cautiously withdrew to her ancestral home, along the shore of the Ouémé River, outside Porto Novo. They remained there until the end of the epidemic and they survived.”

“She spent seven years out of school?”

“Go back over your history lessons, dear. There were no longer any dead zones in Africa at that time. Any child with a connection could take classes free in the Net. How could the continent have developed with such lightning speed otherwise?”

Idunn looked down. She hated the woman’s condescending tone, though she probably deserved it. To
hide her embarrassment as much as for provocation, she grabbed two canapés from the dish... then hesitated to just gobble them up, amazed as she was by the delicateness of their architecture. How had the chef managed to shape the miniature stag escaping from the caramelized tracery? And the wings of that swan taking flight? What miracle held them up?

“And Surya was HIP, you know.”

Tempted to groan, Idunn noticed that the president was frowning. Irritated by her lack of interest? Yet, this woman had to know that they had classified her as HIP, as well. A high intellectual potential was no protection at all when life’s complications wore you down.

“At the age of 17, she founded an oceanographic laboratory in Porto Novo,” Karen Elysium continued. “Her father’s patents gave her the means to invest. Three years later, she had filed for seven personal, major patents, including the one for the chimeras, which were not yet mimetic at that time. However, they were already the fabulous creatures we all know today, seal and saurian hybrids with marvellously silky skins. Above all, they satisfied our clients’ profound desire since it was no longer necessary to kill animals to take their hides. They shed their skins to deliver a layer that is ideally fine and supple, giving rise to the most incredible fantasies in leatherwear and couture. We recruited Surya. Our best investment. Unfortunately, Proteüs rested on its laurels over time. The firm
neglected its R&D. Now, the proof is in the pudding. We can’t do without Surya. We haven’t stopped raising chimeras, just like the competition, and we continue to obtain hides that are much more beautiful, but without the giving ceremony, without that somewhat magical choice made by creatures we have never been able to influence, we no longer collect the exceptional specimens that once made us dream. We need Surya back. And that’s where you come in.”

“Me? That’s absurd!”

“Not at all. Your background in the field of chimeras is excellent. You swim and you dive, which could be useful. Plus, you know Surya.”

“Eleven years later? How do you expect her to remember me?”

“She developed perfect recall... or something very close to it... at a very young age. We’re certain that she hasn’t forgotten you. And, in any case, the essential thing in this story is you, your admiration for this woman. Do you want to see her again?”

Idunn shrugged, although she had to admit that her excitement was growing.

“You’ll be our emissary. Surya must come back to Proteûs. Or if, as she has said over and over again, she wants nothing to do with farming and laboratory life, you must convince her to give us the secret. This knowledge cannot be lost with her. We’ve arranged everything. You’ll leave tomorrow.”
“Tomorrow. That’s impossible!”
“Why? Something’s holding you back?”

The tone had turned acid. Idunn felt her shoulders collapse. She shook her head, unable to utter another word or mention her daughter. When would she see her again? Suddenly, she hated her dependence on this woman for the work that guaranteed Thilde’s security.

“Fine. Don’t worry about your luggage. The credit line will remain open until the end of your mission. You’ll leave tomorrow because a storm has forced Surya to make herself accessible whereas her aquatic home is usually much more difficult to locate. Given her immense fortune, our friend has an entire screen of jammers. You’ll take one of the Loops from Bercy just before noon. Karl, my assistant, will pick you up at the hotel. You can leave now. Make the most of the evening, but don’t go back to your hotel too late.”

Sheltered under the carbostat envelope that deploys automatically to protect the ecosystem of the bridges as soon as wind speed exceeds Force 5, Surya is playing a wild ball game in the basin of warm water with her chimeras. Her ear clip buzzes.

“House?”
“Another visitor.”
“In this weather? Another damned fisher?”
“No. Pick up your Nautys.”
Irritated by the AI’s lack of detail, Surya frowns, administers three slaps to Sul, Dana and Cerrydwen who press in around her, trying to convince her to ignore the interruption, and swims lazily over to the edge of the basin.

As soon as she slips on her bracelet and feels the familiar tingling of her ID interface, an image appears in front of her. No, not exactly a fisher. For starters, none of them could afford the luxurious taxi barge. Plus, girls have not exactly infiltrated the corporation and they do not have the means to pay for clothes of that quality either. Finally, the face, which is not hidden behind enhanced glasses looks familiar to her. Yet, if the visitor were famous, the AI would have announced her.

“House? Zoom ahead.”
She exclaims in surprise when the close-up reveals her former trainee. A burst of emotion overwhelms her. The years have had little effect on the young woman. That athletic build... And that exuberant blond hair, those porcelain eyes with their unreal blue and white, that lush fruit mouth she once wanted to bite into. She takes a deep breath.

“Reason for the visit?”
“No details. She wants to talk with you.”
“Project my third avatar.”
She smiles at her visitor’s startled reaction when she
appears. The realism of her virtual incarnation borders on perfection and only the suddenness of the appearance indicates that her presence is fictional. Moreover, although she usually cares little for the impression she makes, this image has been created with care. She presents herself majestically, wearing a long tunic produced by Proteûs from a skin Diane had shed. The chimera had managed to capture an astonishing electric blue that enhanced her gingerbread complexion. And the aquamarines, beryls and moonstones woven in her jet-black hair seem to flow around her face.

“Ex... excuse me for disturbing you,” the young woman stammers. “I... I was hoping to...”

“What were you hoping, Ms. Idunn Andresen?”

“You remember me?”

“I remember all of my trainees,” Surya replies in a neutral tone.

She looks wary. The stabilizers on her luxury taxi compensate perfectly for the rolling of the water, yet the biologist is hopping from one foot to the other. This discomfort can mean only one thing: there is a selfish purpose behind her visit. Moreover, even though she is not wearing enhanced glasses, the AI has reported a constellation of sensors. Surya hesitates for a moment, staring at the reed beds that bend under the attacks of the wind. In the data the house is gathering, the heady scent that wafts from the girl manages to overwhelm the salty odour of the lagoon. She decides to attack.
“You’re still working for Proteûs, Idunn.”

A statement, not a question.

“Um, yes, but...”

“Everything about you bears the mark of that damned company: your Urban boots that are worth one year’s salary, the communication nanocrystals in your fluorescent outfit, and even that sublime jewel, which I could swear is recording our conversation at this very moment.”

“What?” the young woman protests.

Acting or sincere? Surya decides not to take the risk. If Karen has manipulated this silly goose, she’s even more of a danger.

“Your intentions in coming to see me aren’t good, Idunn. You’re not only wearing a constellation of sensors intended to trap me, you’re also in disguise. Everything about you is false. Even your scent. You used a perfume organ, didn’t you?”

In front of her, the young woman whose face had first paled in confusion has now turned scarlet. Surya hesitates a moment, overcome with compassion, then resolves to hammer the nail in.

“In order to use an organ, you have to be ‘awake’. Obviously, you haven’t trained as a master perfume maker. If you don’t lighten your touch when combining the amber, patchouli, oak foam, your perfume hides you instead of revealing you.”
“And what if I want to appear masked?” Idunn retorts, temper flaring.

“Oh! What a poor lie! If you hadn’t dreamt of disclosure and transparency, you would have chucked out the tools that envelop you and you would have sent the drones that are constantly flying over you packing!”

Once again, Idunn jumps. She looks up and seems to discover the two minidrones hovering above her head. If she was aware of their presence, her surprise is well played.

“Idunn,” Surya says, “I sincerely regret that Proteûs has sent you. No doubt they want to try to convince me, once again, to return to the firm’s bosom, unless they manage to kidnap one of my creatures! You tell Karen that I didn’t appreciate this latest attempt at all, which would in any event be destined for failure, in the event of capture. I thought I made myself clear on this matter.

“Believe me, Idunn, I didn’t leave my old mooring without reason. Their new anchors didn’t satisfy me at all. The old presidents understood that we cannot achieve mass production with my chimeras. But, let’s set that aside, since it’s old history now. Do you know how long my creatures and I remained loyal to Proteûs?”

“Thirty years?”

“We’ve earned our retirement, haven’t we?”

The young woman shrugs. Instead of making her
look ugly, the small grimace that pulls her lips down makes her seem almost sympathetic. It’s surprising that Karen Elysium did not select an emissary who had better control over her emotions. Deception washes over Idunn’s face as Surya clearly dismisses her.

As soon as the door to her hotel room closes, Idunn gives full vent to her anger. She has never felt so humiliated. She strides across the room and kicks the sumptuous marquetry of the perfume organ, spilling a portion of the multi-coloured almonds. Of course, this does nothing to calm her.

Idiot, how did you ever imagine you could master a tool you’ve never used?

She storms into the shower, orders the ultra-sounds without even removing her clothes, steps out ten seconds later, relieved to know that she has at least removed all the scents acquired.

A knock at the door. She opens it furiously and is stunned when she sees the man standing there.

“I called out to you as you walked through the hall. You didn’t hear me. It was as if the tempest outside were whirling about you. Shakespeare would have enlisted you!”

“You’re following my wake?” Idunn growls.
He raises an eyebrow, smiles.
“If it pleases you, we could match our solitudes this evening?”

Hands on her hips, chin upraised, she stares at him, very irritated.
“You didn’t get enough on Ms. Elysium’s rooftop? You’re following me? You have nothing better to do?”

He raises his hands in a gesture of peace.
“I’m a lawyer. Did you forget that? I’m pleading a case in Narbonne tomorrow. A very important case. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Defeated, she collapses onto the sofa in the sitting room. For a moment, she listens to the rain rattle on the bay window, tempted to invite it into the room, to let it stream over her skin, down her arms, onto her face, erasing everything.

She sighs.
“Lawyer? Yes, perhaps, Mr. whose name I don’t know.”

“Ah? It is true that you were laughing a lot when my Nautys and yours exchanged our IDs. My mind was also a little muddled because I attributed your sudden disappearance to your ethereal nature.”

He kneels on one knee and bows.
“Would you deign to have dinner with the humble mortal you so cruelly abandoned on the edge of the roof, Ms. Fairy? Erik Strand, at your service.”

Idunn grimaces. This beseeching attitude seems
excessive to her. She feels out of tune with this man’s self-assurance, his face with its strong features, the guérillero style of his jacket.

“Start by getting up. Throughout my childhood when my mother forced me to wear my cousin’s too short skirts, she’d always say, ‘being ridiculous never killed anyone’. That’s not true. Of course, lightning doesn’t strike when others make fun of you, but entire parts of you disappear, carrying your confidence with them, and they never come back.”

“Such serious words for such a lovely young lady. Who would mock you? Name the insolents, so that I can cut them down to size!”

“The age of fairy tales and legends is over. Don’t you realize that, Mr. Strand? A little revision is required. You can handle that somewhere other than in my room. I need to be alone.”

She helps him up abruptly and accompanies him to the door. He bows, courteous, a gallant man who knows not to insist when being dismissed. She nods her head as she watches him walk off, and can’t help but find that he looks like a conqueror.

Anger swells up again. She slams the door, furious that the door check holds, as it closes without a sound, then pounds the first easy chair within reach, imagining Surya and Karen Elysium one after the other.

Karen Elysium… Idunn can no longer postpone her
report on the failed meeting. Resigned, she activates the private line she was given. The president appears immediately, face neutral. She knows that the outcome of the interview was not positive. Who else owned the minidrone spies, if not Proteûs? Moreover, she appears preoccupied with another task, hands rapidly fluttering over virtual screens as Idunn’s explanations flounder. Her interest only increases when the young woman attacks her for having sent her into the fire after a hostile act.

“Steal one of her creatures? Well, Surya can hardly think we would do something like that! Apart from the fact that we’d never commit an act of that nature, Surya warned us that it would serve no purpose. These animals have always lived in captivity. Their perimeter of freedom doesn’t exceed 20 kilometres. As soon as they go beyond that distance, they start to waste away. The farther they go, the faster they wither.”

“That’s cruel,” Idunn says, indignantly.

“The chimeras have no need to get away from Surya. On the other hand, they can’t bear the captivity a kidnapper inflicts on them. Although Surya did not programme their immediate death when the distance increases, it was only in the hope of being able to recover them in time.”

“If you’ve found a way to interrupt the apoptosis process, that hope is to your advantage,” Idunn says, bitterly.
Is she imagining the sneaky gleam in the back of the President’s eyes?

“You underestimate Surya, my dear. She holds all the cards today. That’s why we’re counting on you to force her defences.”

“With your squad of drones? You thought she wouldn’t notice them? You underestimated her as well!”

“We forgot one parameter: the pounding rain that forced them to stay close to you, in the shelter of the barge. Otherwise, they would have been undetectable this late in the spring. And you would have done well not to destroy them, Idunn. These little marvels of miniaturization cost a lot more than a biologist’s annual salary.”

“Warn me, next time. I’ll avoid thoughtless gestures.”

“I’ll take that remark under consideration. Let’s move on to the rest of our programme. You must succeed, Idunn. It’s imperative. We’ve placed a great deal of hope on you, because you’re one of our best biologists and, above all, because you like the chimeras. Don’t let us down!”

Was Idunn mistaken? The icy tone, the pinched lips... Was the President saying that her job was on the line? I’m sorry, I should never have provoked you, let’s turn the page back please. Unable to articulate these words, the young biologist loses her composure. She
looks down, disgusted with herself for not even having
the courage to confront a 3D image of Karen Elysium.

“Your… drones,” she finally manages to say. “Did
they re-transmit the scene? You saw it? So, tell me
how I’m going to get the flower house to open up for
me. Do you have a way to short-circuit its security
system?”

“The chimeras and Surya use a passageway under
the house, which should be accessible to you. It was
also for your swimming skills that we recruited you. If
you enter with the chimeras or in their wake, you won’t
be detected.”

Idunn stares at her, stunned.

“You’re asking me to sneak in? That’s ridiculous!
The point is to convince this woman, isn’t it? How do
you think people usually react when someone breaks
into their home? At the best, she’ll turn me over to the
authorities. At the worst...”

“You’ll have to be persuasive. Don’t worry. As for
the courts, we have very good defence lawyers. There
will be no question of a break in. At the most, they’ll
give you a little slap on the hand. Enough discussion!
We’ve imported a very complete plan of the house into
your Nautys. Study it, get back out there and charge!”

She does not say ‘immediately’ but the look she
gives Idunn leaves no room for doubt. Even if the
storm is in full swing, the summer solstice is approach-
ing. However, darkened days end after 10 pm. There are a few hours left before nightfall.

The President’s image fades. Idunn calls up the display of the flower house without waiting and her bitterness gives way to amazement as she studies this jewel of economad architecture. As she watches the petals deploy in front of her, Idunn understands the building’s structure. The very long main hull supports, on either side of a central basin, three amphitheatre strata that open onto hanging gardens. The two articulated lateral wings on jacks house the technical infrastructures, the biomass and rainwater cistern, as well as the phytopurification and reverse osmosis recycling tanks. Hybrid solar panels cover them completely. Small, vertical windmills crown the top.

But most important of all, for Idunn, is the imposing dome that provides ballast for the house and serves as a submerged access for the chimeras. She examines it for a long time, eyebrows furrowed, doubtful. Even if she does manage to sneak in that way, how will she explain her forced entry into the house?

She advances along the edge of the rain-streaked bay window. From her perch atop La Clape, the Fairmont Narbonne provides a watery view of the lagoons and the sea. She shrugs. Now is not the time to hesitate. And, after all, this pea soup is to her advantage. She
heads over to the commercial sector of the hotel where she knows she can rent the equipment she needs for an extended dive along with the motoplane that will enable her to get as close as possible to her target, discreetly. After passing under the 3D scanner, as she waits for the technician to adjust the diving suit for her, she connects to the Christiana Institute. By way of greeting, the usual smiles and lack of comments indicate that there has been no progress. Then the connection is established with her daughter.


In front of her, the little girl signs, fingers spread, without seeming to register her mother’s virtual presence. Under the helmet that circles her head, her forehead is studded with microsensors. With a shiver, Idunn notices that they descend down her shaved neck and under the shirt collar. The distance allows her to note details that tug at her heartstrings. The creature she still views as a child has grown and will soon toggle into adolescence. The gestures that are dedicated to a seemingly hazardous space are now very confident, even if no one can decipher them.

“My little stranger,” she murmurs, before breaking contact.

The technician returns, handing her one-piece suit, a pretty greenish blue decorated with greyish-beige arabesques, adapted as requested for use in lagoon
zones. Idunn decides to put it on without waiting. It’s a featherweight, technological marvel, impermeable, respiratory microfibres ensuring such a high degree of softness and flexibility that it feels like wearing nothing at all. For the moment, Idunn leaves the hood off. She drapes the robe she brought with her over her shoulders and rushes out, relieved not to see Erik. She would have hated to pretend that she was on her way back from the pool or the training rooms.

Outside, gusts of wind greet her. She barely notices the slap of the rain, surprised to feel excitement welling up inside her. Her fingers tingle with electricity. The scent of the humus, salt and wet bark inebriates her. She straddles the motoplane, regretting the fact that she cannot hear the rumble of the historic Harley Super Glide her deceased husband used to drive. To top it all off, her vehicle detected the rain and closed its hull over her head as soon as she settled in. She drives ahead in the middle of a silent bubble.

_Bah! Hans-Georg is dead because he loved speed too much and, as for you, you will soon congratulate yourself for approaching the flower house so discreetly._

She programmes the vehicle with her Nautys’ GPS and, as soon as she lands among the reed beds, a good kilometre from her target, Idunn, short flippers on her feet, slips into the lagoon where frogs and toads, encouraged by the dark day, are conducting a raucous
serenade. She starts to crawl. She was afraid that she would not appreciate the taste of the lagoon on her face but discovers that it has a powerful flavour, salt and iodine, comparable to the taste of the oysters she loves so much. She licks her lips. It’s been a long time since she has felt so alive. Had she buried herself? Does she owe her evil boss for exhuming her from the tomb?

Just as the house, which is very close, finally looms out of the drizzle, a shape jostles Idunn, who almost cries out in terror before she realizes that she has just met a chimera. The creature seems to have stolen the glow from the moon. Glittering silver, it is as if she knows her robe is splendid and is begging for admiration, capering about in the swell.

*You should have brought a ball. They would have loved that.*

Too late for regrets. And the young woman is too close to applaud. Much too close for anything at all. Fearing that the animal’s interest will attract the attention of Surya or the house system, Idunn decides to dive right away. She has memorized the layout of the submerged dome and finds the gaping openings without having to grope about. The light from the upper floors guides her. Once again she feels contact and realizes that she has picked up an escort: the moon chimera has entered the dome, joined by one of her sisters, her coat sprinkled with shiny azure marks. The two whirl around Idunn so quickly that they seem to blaze. Fear
suddenly washes over the young woman, her death seems imminent, and she’s short of breath. Then a terrible electric jolt strikes her down, releasing her from any anguish.

She had just extracted the beautiful pods that she would set out to ferment in the water taken from the deep sea to renew her stocks of black garlic and was just finishing her weeding of the plots of fruits and vegetables on the upper levels when an unusual commotion on the side of the basin alerted Surya. What could have roused the chimeras? They were calling out, barking, jumping out onto the edge and diving back in, crazy with excitement. Surya grimaced. She thought she knew the source of their new game.

She picked up the basket in which she had placed, next to the garlic bulbs, young spinach sprouts, a large bunch of green asparagus shoots, bok choy, and small white onions and hurried down. She thought she saw an inert form in the middle of the water basin. And if she was not mistaken, the chimeras were playing with this drowned person.

She sighed when her suspicions were confirmed. She felt no compassion for the intruder, but she had no
desire to have to explain matters to the local authorities yet again. During the night, she would remove the body from the immersion dome and tow it to a point far enough from the lagoon. Although it would not prevent the investigation or the ensuing hassle, at least they would not be able to implicate her directly.

As she approached the edge and Cerrydwen, Diane and Séléné joined her, leaping all around her and whimpering, she started to shake. The tetanized body had feminine curves.

“House! Lights on in the basin.”

The spotlights turned on and suddenly there was no doubt. Surya ran her hand over her face, distraught. Then she noticed the chimeras’ game. Obviously, they were playing with the girl, yet they never let her face get submerged. Surya frowned. That seemed completely extraordinary. The chimeras defended the house like watch dogs and, until now, had viewed all of the intruders they shocked as prey, never treating them gently. Was there still hope?

Surya dove.

A few seconds later, following energetic CPR, Idunn coughed out the small amount of water she had swallowed. Surya had been unable to chase the chimeras away and they formed a hedge of interested heads, a short distance away, as a result of which the invader’s resurrection was accompanied by a shriek of terror.

Surya tried to reassure her.
“They punished you. But then they prevented you from dying.”

The naturally curious attitude of her chimeras, which had earned them a few setbacks over the years, could have accounted for their well-meaning behaviour, but they had never done anything similar before during an attempted break-in. Surya felt off balance. Did her ‘girls’ as she increasingly called them despite the fact that she knew it was just a ridiculous effect of her solitude, feel that the biologist was no threat to them?

Furious once again now that the drowning victim was out of danger, she noted the porcelain cheeks, the fluttering eyelids, the mouth white with fear, the curled position...

“I’d like to understand. What were you hoping to do? Rob me?”

The young woman shook her head in a horrified gesture of denegation.

“What then? Didn’t I make myself clear this afternoon?”

Idunn sat up and buried her face in her hands.

“The message was clear and I passed it on,” she said in a toneless voice. “The problem is that they didn’t accept it and I find myself trapped in an impasse.”

Surya jumped to her feet. She walked back and forth along the shore, taking deep breath in an effort to calm herself. The chimeras felt her agitation and accompanied her with their cries. Diane and Saga, two
of the most senior and the most empathetic, escorted her, rubbing her legs. She knelt down and laid her head between theirs. The chimeras pushed their silky soft coats against her cheek and tried to catch her eye. Surya gave in to them, aware that she was abandoning all resistance.

She stood up, anger gone.

“We’ll talk about this impasse as we eat. My stomach has reminded me what time it is. Since the chimeras didn’t kill you, you’re my guest.”

Catching the young woman by the arm, she pulled her toward the living room in the house. Idunn stumbled and Surya realized that she could not believe her good fortune. Too bad. She settled for giving the guest one of her large thermo-regulating robes, showed her where the washroom was and planted her in the middle of the room. Let her manage on her own! She was not being held prisoner and nothing that she would find by searching would be of any use to her.

Surya almost changed her mind, though, when Idunn approached the stairs where her Gelede masks and her orisha statues were displayed. Eshu in particular, seemed to fascinate her, possibly as a result of his obscene playfulness or his cowry shell necklaces. By chance, though she looked longingly at them, the girl did not dare touch them.

“Yemaya, that’s the name of the African aquatic deity, isn’t it?” she asked.
“Yes, the orisha of salt water. But for my grandmother, who gave me this name, it was above all the contraction of the Yoruba words “Yeye emo eja”. That means: “the mother whose children are like fish.” As soon as I was conceived, she saw my chimeras in a dream and she told everyone who would listen that I would reign over the living world.”

Surya smiled, nostalgic, while she remembered Mamou Célestine, who was afraid of nothing and particularly not emphasis! Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at Idunn, who was hopping from one foot to the other, and added, “And to finish with my names, since I can see that this matter is eating at you, Surya, the sun god, was a gift from my father’s Indian side. Hindu tendency. In their defence, let’s acknowledge that it is a very common name in their country.”

The familiar pinch of melancholy washed over her. Shrugging, she concentrated once again on her cooking. Cheeks burning, she got down to work, chopping, grating, sniffing, testing. Serene, as she always was when performing such tasks, she used the knife, the flame, herbs and spices and her hands flew from the work surface to the ovens.

There was no way she would use the sequencer. She no longer found going up and down the line of biobricks she took from the DNA code catalogue amusing. For far too long, she knew which gelling or extract capsules or which nano-emulsifiers to use to trick the
palates of her guests or surprise them with the most unlikely flavours. Now, she used almost exclusively products from the sea or her home gardens. Above all, she had learned to appreciate the truthfulness of the scents and their infinite variety, which was constantly renewed. However, the storm and a little shopping in Bages had allowed her to diversify her menus. This evening, she would offer Idunn the tenderness and gastronomy of milk-fed lamb, that ecological heresy of gourmet dining.

Initially, Idunn had played with her plate, rummaging around with her fork, before deciding to taste it. Then she had dug the tool back in with greater appetite, and finally devoured the parmesan tiles and the green asparagus on its bed of thyme roasted spinach. Her mouth stretched into a satisfied smile when she took on the small strips of lamb arranged in a tepee over their black garlic compote.

“This is beautiful,” she said.

Surya laughed.

A contrast in your honour. Black and soft like me… White as a new-born lamb. And just as ambiguous in both senses. I’m nowhere near as sweet and digestible as the cloves crushed for this purée. As for you, when it comes to purity, it’s been a long time since you were weaned from your mother’s breast!”

“I never nursed from anything other than plastic.”
“What bitterness! And you drank the milk of misfortune in your cradle. We know the refrain. Which gives you all the excuses you need to break into your elders’ homes?”

Idunn’s beautiful face closed up.

“I wasn’t given a choice.”

“You always have a choice!” Surya said, losing her temper. “Even if Karen threatened you, which I doubt, you could always refuse.”

“You’re rich!” Idunn exploded in return. “You’ve always been rich! You’ve never had to constantly straddle the highest wave, prove to the point of exhaustion that you were the best, the most brilliant, the most desirable, live with the incessant anguish of being downgraded.”

Surya looked at her in surprise. She did not understand this woman’s obvious suffering.

“And to avoid being downgraded, you’d do anything?”

“If you had given birth to a child whose illness makes her unique and fragile, you’d know that one would do anything to protect her. Yes, if it were possible and if it would enable me to save my daughter, I would steal everything, up to your last chimera.”

Surya shook her head, upset. What she had learned about Idunn’s history did not hold water.

“Explain this to me. I was interested in your career
at the time you gave birth. As far as I recall, the child was normal.”

“That normal little girl had just celebrated her fifth birthday when her father died before her eyes. A base jump accident. He loved taking her with him to training sessions or matches. We’d already separated. I couldn’t prevent him. Thilde saw her father get caught on the cliff, his parachute failing to open, the final impact. She hasn’t said a word since. It’s as if she died with him. And thanks to Proteûs, I can offer her an institution where I can be sure that she isn’t mistreated, isn’t unhappy.”

Surya twisted her mouth. The story came at just the right time, served up so well, that it seemed suspicious. Subvocally, she instructed the AI to verify the information. Then she asked, “What do the doctors say?”

“PDD. You know, one of those pervasive developmental disorders that can’t be pinned down. Some mentioned autism. According to them, the shock brought about a problem that wasn’t fully declared. There’s no treatment, but Karen Elysium knows a neurologist...”

“Of course,” Surya burst out, sarcastic. “At the critical times in our lives, we’re all surrounded by providential men and women.”

The AI subvocalized a response. Thilde Andresen had been a patient in Oslo for four years. An expensive, renowned institution. The information was accurate.

Idunn stood up and paced back and forth in the
room, back stiff, chin trembling with anger. The world upside down! sighed Surya. Nevertheless, the young woman’s distress touched her. She made a decision.

“You’re going to bring your daughter to me, Ms. Andresen.”

“We’re back to formalities?” the biologist barked.

Outside, the chimeras barked in return, as if they shared Idunn’s indignation. Her torturer held back a smile.

“That depends on you.”

Idunn stopped in front of her, arm outreached, vengeful index finger pointing.

“Fine, Surya Yemaya da Matha. Let’s get this clear between us. My Thilde stays out of all this. You will never see her here. No way.”

“I thought you were prepared to do everything for her? I want to see her. I was her age when my parents died and, moreover, despite what you stand for, I like you. I’m not asking you much. Take her out of her damned cocoon for two days.”

“That’s just it. It’s a cocoon that protects her. How can I risk making her worse just for your whim?”

“Decide. Your future is in your hands. If the child comes here, I might change my position with respect to the chimeras.”
Idunn chose a night flight on the Oslo-Lisbonne aerocraft to bring Thilde to Surya. Her credit line permitted that delicious comfort. In this way she protected her daughter from a succession of trains and their passengers, all of whom stared when they noticed Thilde’s strangeness. For the same reason, after an early dinner served in the cab, the pair stayed in for the rest of the trip, without ever going out on the deck to make the most of the low altitude and the nocturnal landscapes, or the spectacle of the luminescent cities during stopovers. Huddled against Thilde’s back, her chin wedged against her shaved neck, from which she had not dared remove the sensors, Idunn inhaled the child’s somewhat sour scent. How long has it been since you held her this closely? She wondered. She fell asleep, calmed. At the very least, she had won a few hours of intimacy with her daughter.

After the stopover at Bordeaux, she takes a rental autoplane to Narbonne, which enables her to continue to devote all of her attention to Thilde. Her fingers slip over the child’s silky skin, as she croons old songs in her ear. She receives no response. The little girl returns to her strange games on the institution’s tablet. Her hands sign, as if in weightlessness, cryptic. Idunn gives up and orders her Nautys to read her late emails and messages. Bursts from Proteûs. From the Queen Mother to the lackeys, she is assaulted with warnings
and advice. Idunn sighs. Soon, her fingers start to move but, unlike Thilde’s, they dance a sadly ordinary ballet. The programmed car follows the traffic corridors, docile, adapting its speed to flying over the authorized urban areas.

As soon as she reaches the *Fairmont Narbonne*, Idunn loses the confidence she had displayed earlier when facing Karen Elysium. Her sense of guilt torments her. What is she doing, preparing to hand over her daughter, a defenceless being, to those crazy selfish women? And you claim to be giving in, in order to protect her. You should have sent that damned president to do the dirty work.

She parks the vehicle and pulls her offspring out of the passenger seat, exasperated once again to see what a burden she has become. A weight in my life, a weight in my arms, she thinks, gently shaking the inert body. Does the child even see what surrounds her? The lagoons and the sea shimmering in the sun now that the storm has died? The towers of the Palais des Archevêques, in the distance, outlined above the checkerboard tiles of the old city? Does she hear the tireless seagulls shrieking in the raw blue sky? Does she smell the warm scent of resin, bark and pine needles from the Alep woods? At least the drastic change in her routine does not seem to be distressing her. Her therapists predicted a major reaction and that has not
occurred. Or not yet, anyway? Idunn decides to pick up the pace and pulls Thilde toward the hotel lobby. A man steps out at the same moment. The young woman jumps, startled. She recognizes his timeless silhouette. Beige pants floating above soft, guerillero boots, brown leather, belted vest, the man wears nothing but natural fibres and skins and gives off an impression of bel-être. Idunn thanks her lucky stars she has changed her flashy outfit for a Koji Sagara travel suit in pearl grey silk muslin.

“My goodness! I thought you had drowned!” exclaims Erik Strand.

“Impossible.”

“To drown you?”

“That you’ve crossed my path yet again.”

“Synchronicity. You lie at the heart of my thoughts. So you appear. What could be more normal for a fairy?”

Idunn would laugh along with him if Thilde’s fingers had not started their vain, yet graceful ballet. Surprised, Erik Strand watches the child sign.

“My daughter,” Idunn announces.

“Obviously! Another fairy. She no doubt inherited those green eyes from her father, but as for the rest, I feel as if I’m looking at you at that age.”

His interest once again shifted to Idunn, who could kiss him for paying so little attention to the source of her permanent torment.
“Why did you speak of drowning?”
“You went into the lagoon in the middle of a storm and didn’t come back.”
“Are you spying on me?”
“Come on, Idunn! I invited you to dinner and, when I went to pick you up, they told me that you went out two hours earlier in a diving suit. I waited for you in vain and got worried...”
“For nothing,” grumbles Idunn, finding the idea of surveillance more exasperating than reassuring.

The man nods. Solemnly? Do men always have to take on the role of guardian angels?

“Now, I know that you’re an experienced swimmer. On the other hand, three days ago, when I walked to the shores of the lagoon in the middle of the night, I heard the Draugr sobbing in the squall and, through the intermittent gaps in the curtain of rain, I saw it’s headless silhouette outlined over its halved skiff.”
“What an imagination!”
“A frequent criticism.”
“How do you know the old legends from my country?”
‘Vacations in Trondheim, when I was a child.”
This proximity reassures her. And just as much when he leaves, while apologizing, as if he felt guilty about abandoning her as soon as he found her. Not without extracting a promise from her for a future dinner.
“So, this is our little phenomena?”

Idunn watches Surya spin around Thilde and bites her lip to keep from responding. She would like to wrap her arms around her daughter and carry her off, far from any threat. Finding her lip insufficient, she catches her thumb between her teeth and gnaws and gnaws. Surya waves her fingers in front of Thilde’s eyes, snaps them, touches the child and even shakes her without obtaining any more reaction than from a rag doll. Idunn suddenly notices that she is taking off her sensors. She tries to intervene.

“Are you crazy? If the doctors left them on, it’s because they’re necessary!”

Surya pushes her aside forcibly.

“Necessary for them,” she says, while removing the recorder attached under the little girl’s tunic. “Not for her. So they won’t get any data for a little while. That won’t kill them. I’m also taking off the patches, since they serve no purpose. Shh, Idunn! Stay calm. Your daughter is not in any danger.”

They exit from the entrance bay of the house, cross through a warehouse, and reach the central zone that opens into the basin. Along the shores, roughly 30 chimeras with sparkling hides are basking in the sun, which has returned. They turn to look at the newcomers, with curiosity, and Idunn’s fear returns full force. The animals she works with in the laboratory are nothing like these diabolical creatures that almost killed her.
Her mother’s instinct orders her to move her child to shelter.

Surya interrupts her initiative and pushes her into a swing seat near the basin.

“Keep your distance,” she orders in a tone that leaves no room for discussion.

She gives a strange, wavering cry that sounds somewhat like a gasping sob. Two chimeras move away from the group and approach. They start to show an interest in Idunn. Barely recovered from her electrocution, the young woman stiffens when they place their muzzles on her knees. They yap, inflict their fishy breath on her, lift their heads, twist, and gaze lovingly at her with their immense dark eyes, pupils reduced to a vertical slit in the intense sunlight.

“They want you to pet them,” Surya warns.

“Too bad for them. I like creatures that brush their teeth,” Idunn retorts.

Surya laughs and her guest relaxes. After all, when they don’t feel that they are in danger, these animals, which have adopted the multi-coloured hues of her shirt to please her behave no differently that the ones she knows. She reaches out her hand, scratches the soft tegument on the top of their heads and finds it amusing when they hum in pleasure.

“Our turn, now!” proclaims their mistress. “Sul, Morgane, come here!”

A new sound from her throat and the chimeras aban-
don Idunn, apparently with regret. With three supple leaps, they slide over to Thilde and Surya.

Idunn watches as they stand up to their full height and start to utter a series of sounds, clicks followed by wails. Thilde signs in response.

“In response?” Idunn repeats to herself. These automatic gestures cannot have any meaning. She dreamt, when giving them a purpose. Surya has moved away, frowning, a concentrated look on her face.

Still standing on their powerful posterior fin, the chimeras stop singing and strike Thilde with the tips of the muzzles. The little girl grabs them by their necks, just as someone would do to keep from falling, but the chimeras use this to pull her to the floor where they roll over her, vocalizing in an excited tone.

Idunn rushes over, panic-stricken. Surya intercepts her. She struggles to get free. Each of these beasts is more than two meters long and weighs five to six times as much as the child.

“They’re going to crush her!”

“They won’t hurt her. Don’t you understand? For my chimeras, your daughter is not an enigma. They view her as an infinitely desirable creature.”

“They also view the fish they eat as infinitely desirable.”

“Look. Everything is fine. I’m amazed, actually. I hadn’t expected so much. Do you hear that concert?”

Dumbfounded, Idunn stops struggling. Turned
toward the trio, the chimeras along the shores have arched their backs, heads and tails off the ground, and have started to sing, as if accompanying the strange ballet their sisters are performing. Since it is a dance, the mother grows calm. Although she has no idea how they are doing it, these massive animals are winding themselves around her child without hurting her. Thilde has closed her eyelids. She lets herself be carried, caressed, stretched, passive yet peaceful. The scene is calm and beautiful. Tears well up in Idunn’s eyes.

    Surya’s voice breaks the spell.
    “She’s going to stay here a while,” she announces.
    Idunn shakes her head, incredulous.
    “Impossible! They asked me to bring her back in three days.”
    “Who decides? You or those damned doctors? And what were you looking for here? An impasse? Or your future and that of your daughter?”
    Idunn glares at her and laughs bitterly.
    “You didn’t promise anything.”
    “You’re so impatient! I’ve been cut off from everything for too long. Four years, like Thilde, did you notice that? Let’s catch our breath. I didn’t send Proteüs packing just because of the pressure they were applying to me, you know. I worked for the renewal following the Pandemic. I wanted to play a role in the utopic trend as well. I adored the exuberant energy, the formidable surge that resulted in the union of so
many countries and the blossoming of the most impoverished—no one lacks for the essentials today or, if they do, it’s accidental… And I liked to see Proteûs as one of the players in the new harmony. I liked to be a part of this large body where we took care to combine the real and the dream. Unfortunately, this world has become effervescent. Every single person is covered with sensors and it is almost impossible not to be wired with an entire array of communicating devices. I cut myself off because I could no longer stand those interfaces and those delusive shields. I aspire to the truthfulness of my chimeras and the peace of my flower house.”

“Really?” Idunn spits out. “Why do you want my daughter in that case? You’re not holding on to her because you’re dying of boredom?”

“Idunn, Idunn…” murmurs Surya wrapping her arms around her and snuggling her head into Idunn’s neck.

Surya’s skin smells of cinnamon and other troubling scents, her hair of the lilac clusters pinned to her silver headband.

Idunn shivers. She once dreamed of such a moment, 11 years earlier. But now it is time for conflict and her body stiffens.

“I want to know why my chimeras have adopted this child,” Surya whispers. “Leave us alone. Two days. It
should be enough. Give me that much time. I’ll take care of her as if I had given birth to her.”

Since putting Thilde to bed under the joint supervision of the AI and Osanyin birds, whose sparks and herbs are there to protect her against everything, Surya has been wondering. After Idunn left, she watched the little girl play and swim with the chimeras. At the start, she supervised their games, not knowing if the girl knew how to swim. It quickly became apparent that she had been taught at an early age. No doubt, she also enjoyed this pleasure at the Christiana Institute. She was perfectly at ease and her diving was impressive.

However, as soon as she had separated her from the chimeras, Surya saw her quickly withdraw. Thilde ate without appetite, automatically and, when she picked up her tablet and started to sign, Surya lost her patience and put her to bed. She was so overwhelmed with disappointment that she started asking herself questions. What if Idunn’s lack of trust in her was justified? What exactly was she hoping to do? Just because the love of a young seal she had saved in the delta of the Ouémé River had healed her pain when she was nine years old, did she expect the same thing for Thilde today? She was not autistic!
When Idunn calls from the *Fairmont Narbonne* to ask, in a tone full of confidence, if everything is all right, Surya struggles against disabusing her and when she resolves to do so, the biologist’s disenchanted reaction hurts her more than she expected. Fine, her chimeras are no neurologists, yet how is that supposed to let Proteûs off the hook? How dare this girl mock her conflict with Karen? Doesn’t she understand the nature of her bond with the chimeras?

“But that bond, you’re the one who created it!” Idunn exclaims bitterly. “You’re god for those creatures. The implants that provide for location and the remote warnings and all the protection mechanisms, that’s all you too. If their hides go bad when they’re killed, that’s your work as well.”

“No one kills them for their hides anymore,” Surya reasons. “That was the whole point. For predators to learn they would obtain nothing but rotten carcasses. Plus, the chimeras choose who they give their moulted skins to. I didn’t want that. Their whims have caused me a great many worries. Some clients have come back year after year, without getting discouraged, and without gaining a thing. I’ve never been able to influence my animals.”

“Simple animals cannot be as empathetic and clever!” says Idunn, losing her temper. “Don’t forget I’m a biologist. You must have a role.”
“After all,” Surya mocks her, “Scientist to scientist, I can confess one of my secrets to you. My chimeras not only carry the genotypes of seals, saurians and eels. I also gave them my own.”

Idunn opens her eyes wide, astonished. Surya can well imagine all the old tales that come into her mind. Prometheus, Frankenstein, Golem…

“Don’t get all bent out of shape!” the creator says in a playful tone. “I just wanted them to have something of me. Sometimes, when I crack up, I call them ‘my girls’ can you believe it?”

Surya watches Idunn attentively. She feels as if she can hear her thinking: “pharming” and its cortege of humanized animals have existed for decades and the frankenfish and other beasts used as organ banks and breast milk banks, have not made the news in ages. So, how could a few cells give the chimeras awareness?

Surya sees Idunn’s face soften, her shoulders and hands relax. Satisfied, she cuts off communication.

When she goes to bed, her eyes are burning. She misses Mamou Célestine. She would have taken out the divination board, the 16 palm nuts, beseeched Ifa. Surya falls asleep, dreaming of twisted fingers drawing symbols in the dust.

Singing wakes her. Sustained notes, high and low by turn. She recognizes the song of moulting, the song of giving. She sits up, incredulous. Impossible! Moulting
does not happen without preparation, giving does not happen without a ceremony… Unless… May Osanyin keep me!

“House, where’s Thilde?”

“Basin. With the chimeras.”

All right, Surya understands as she dresses quickly. No reason for the AI to warn her. The chimera alone chooses who will receive the cast off skin. If the recipient’s presence is required during the delivery, it is a moment of grace, free of any violence. Her guests have never risked anything during the giving.

Yet, the situation is beyond her. Accepting the fact that a ceremony is in progress, this has never happened before without her. Plus, the gifts require preparation. Even if one of the chimeras has chosen Thilde, which is a bit obvious given their behaviour that afternoon, how could the giving occur in such a sudden manner? Normally, it takes days for the beasts to cast off their exuviate.

She rushes downstairs and stops, dumbfounded when she sees the halo irradiating from the chimeras. She tries to count them. They are all there, gathered in the basin. Their hides sparkling in a fantastic display of gold and silver, mingling together to create a dome of light. They swim in circles around Thilde, appearing to carry her in triumph. The singing grows louder.

Surya shakes her head. Impossible. Totally impossible. She’s sleeping, she’s dreaming. All of her chime-
ras together, casting off their hides at the same time? Offering them, together, to a single person? Such a gift is impossible to imagine! And yet...

Throat tight, tears in her eyes, their mistress wraps her arms around herself and rocks. Below, the song and the dance accelerate and the chimeras form a wheel of light in which the individual beings become indistinct. A single body, one to which Thilde belongs. Do I still have my place there? Surya wonders. She dries her tears with an angry swipe, furious with that negative thought, while her creatures are offering her so much beauty. A beauty that she must share.


The young woman rushes to the flower house as soon as she learns who is to receive the gift. Surya refrained from admitting the entire scope of the event. She does not know if the biologist is familiar with the protocols and will realize just how far the chimeras have broken from them. In principle, lay people do not attend the ceremonies when they are not concerned by them. It is acceptable for them to be invited, however. Sometimes guests have even been selected on certain occasions.

When Idunn arrives, as if they were spreading the word and wanted to seduce her, the chimeras adopt the colourful hues of her dress. A precious shimmering spreads over the water and the light from the cressets
lit by the AI on all the terraces soon grows iridescent with the colours of the prism.

“It’s so beautiful,” Idunn sighs.

Surya pulls Idunn into her arms and feels her tremble against her body. Too much emotion? Does sensuality play a part? Surya discovers that she does not want the young woman to free herself. *Are you tired of the pleasure robots, girl? As far as lovers go, they’re not complicated.*

Idunn’s blonde curls smell of sleep and raspberry shampoo. Surya buries her smile in them, overcome with the desire of an ogress: to bite, to shear, to eat the flesh below.

“But your chimeras are all giving at the same time!” the biologist observes. “Usually, it’s one at a time, isn’t it?”

The young woman’s question freezes Surya. So, nothing can be hidden?

“Yes. I don’t understand what’s happening. Unless they’ve been waiting for this ceremony for too long. For many, it’s been years. They usually settle for the small, annual, renewal shedding.”

“Because of your isolation,” Idunn says, accusing. Surya shrugs.

“No doubt. I would have found a way to remedy it sooner or later. That must also be why the ceremony is taking place without preparation. They’re all ready to moult. But they like you, Idunn; they could have cho-
sen you, if they were so desperate. And a lot of people before you. I’m not a total hermit.”

In the basin, the melodious lines start to come apart. The chimeras have completed their round. They push the child to the edge and help her climb out. Then they join her on the shore. Stunned, the two women watch as the little girl runs among them, patting them on their spines, where the fur splits: a queen knightling her subjects. Then, she walks over to her mother. Stiff and trembling, Idunn holds tight to Surya as if wanting to disappear into her belly.

The child stops in front of her, points at the chimeras, and exclaims, in a hoarse voice, “They showed me Daddy. Do you know where he is now?”

Idunn shakes her head.

Thilde points at her heart.

“Here.”

She adds, “Neither he nor I will ever be cold again.”

“Oh! Sweetheart, sweetheart,” Idunn murmurs, finally abandoning Surya’s arms to pull her daughter to her.

Idunn runs on the sweet grass, littered with forget-me-nots, of the garden. The odour of the honey from the flowering genista carries her away. Dazzled, she
looks at the exuviates sparkling under the early morning sun, like precious remains. Prostrated around the shores, the chimeras, their skin naked, excoriated, bleeding, growl and bark and stir feebly. Casting off their coat causes a stress they will take several weeks to overcome. A single one, in the basin, who has not completed shedding yet, accepts Thilde’s weight, as the young girl rides her like a young sea goddess.

Surya joins the biologist, and gives a deep laugh, excited.

“I wasn’t wrong. Almost all of them have shed their skins!”

Idunn nods, although she has eyes only for her daughter, who seems to have completely lost her indifference to the world. Can she really be healed?

Surya follows her look and smiles.

“Stop worrying. We had breakfast together just now. She’s talking. If she ever did suffer from autism, that’s now ancient history.”

As if the little girl had heard them, she stood up on the chimera, jumped on the edge of the basin, and grabbed one of the pelts. Looking up, she shouts, “Mommy, mommy. Look!”

She drapes it over her shoulders and spins so fast that she looks like a moving rainbow. It’s as if she has become a chimera and the beasts that remain close by provide a powerful vibrato back-up. Throat tight with
emotion, Idunn wonders if she can still consider this child hers.

Surya’s voice offers a welcome diversion.

“Karen would find this show delightful. Your daughter has resolved her problem: the extreme rarity of my merchandise. She was pressuring me to multiply my chimeras. She has never admitted that their very existence is the opposite of mass production.”

Surya’s harshness puzzles Idunn. Yet she needs to know. She chooses an indirect approach.

“What am I going to tell her?”

“The damned president? What do you owe her? What do you expect from her now that Thilde is healed? Isn’t this miracle enough for you?”

“A miracle, as you say. For which I owe Karen Elysium. Without her, it would never have happened since I would never have come here.”

Surya claps her hands over her ears and looks up at the sky. A very eloquent gesture. Idunn insists.

“You hate her, don’t you? Why then? Proteûs was one of the driving forces behind progress. They’re the ones who launched the slogan ‘Change life’ after the Pandemic. They made their savoir-faire available to all. With the other master artisans, they wanted to create an ongoing outpouring of generosity, provoke the advent of rêver-vrai, stimulate happiness everywhere.”

“Karen changed the order of things. That woman is poison. Since her promotion, she has made one toxic
decision after another. She claims to be renewing her clientele through fashion shows in the large orbital hotels. Can you imagine that? The trusts are looking for their buyers in Africa now! And in Indonesia.”

“How can you sell off your production if you refuse Proteûs?”

Surya sweeps the question away with a negligent wave of her hand.

“There’s no shortage of clients. Some are prepared to kill to obtain these pelts! Come with me. I’ll make you a coffee. I roast a small vintage from Colombia myself. Nectar guaranteed.”

They have just settled in the sitting room when Surya, frowning, raises her fingers to her ear.

“House?”

She loses her composure.

“They’re landing? And you didn’t detect them? Good lord! Transmit an SOS!”

She rushes to the back of the room, and places the palm of her hand on a trivial painting. A panel in the wall turns, revealing a cupboard containing weapons and loaders, revolvers and assault rifles.

“Do you know how to shoot?” she yells at Idunn.

When the young woman, panic stricken, shakes her head, she adds, “Too bad, take this anyway.”

She throws her an HK Elektro.

“What is…?”
“We’re under attack,” Surya interrupts. “Stealth autoplanes, well equipped. Not novices. Heavily armed. I was bang on, an instant ago, when I was talking about the chimeras moulting.”

She races outside without a moment’s hesitation and Idunn suddenly remembers that Thilde had stayed outside, playing with her friends, their chattering transformed into deafening roars. She squawks in horror and races out in turn.

Two military vehicles, unmarked, have landed on the shores, one of them crushing a chimera. With heart-breaking barks, she is dying. Kneeling next to it, arms wrapped around the animal’s neck, Thilde is sobbing.

“Bastards!” Surya screams, foaming with fury.

Six attackers, Idunn counts. Plus the two drivers still at their posts. Four have already started to collect the exuviates and are filling one of the vehicles. The two others, weapons aimed, hold the owner at bay. Idunn has not even tried to raise her weapon.

All of the men’s faces are grossly deformed. The house recordings will be of no use in tracking them. Idunn suddenly notices that two of them are walking down a ramp behind the second vehicle. She shivers as she guesses their plans.

“Ms. da Matha!” one of the assailants calls out. “Please help us load two of your beasts.”

Idunn expected the giant’s request, not the civilized
tone. He terrifies her. This is no group of common thieves. Under the surface politeness, she senses a disastrous determination.

“Ms. da Matha?”

“Impossible,” Surya growls. “You should at least know that they can’t go far from here without dying. What good will their cadavers be to you?”

“Good effort, sweetheart, but all chimeras travel. And we want to examine your very particular creatures.”

“That’s just it. They are particular! They die when they travel.”

“Don’t be stupid! You transported them from Roscoff. Don’t force us to use violence with you.”

“They will never agree to climb into that coffin!”

“Our final words?”

Surya nods, enraged.

The man turns back, stretches his arm out negligently and shoots. Shot in the middle of its forehead, one of the chimeras rears up and collapses, struck down. The scent of powder and blood mingles, suffocating.

Surya’s cry of denial rings out, at the same time as Thilde’s horrified shriek. Then the child throws herself at the killer, striking him with her hands and feet. He laughs, pushes her off with a single hand, hands her to one of his acolytes who struggles to contain the little girl. She kicks out and curses at him. Terrified, Idunn
wills her daughter to be quiet even though, vaguely, deep within, she rejoices at the regained vitality.

Then the giant slaughters the partially crushed beast. “And that makes two. That one was starting to get on my nerves!”

The chimeras wail. Some roar, out of control, others bleat in panic. They shove and jostle, forcing their attackers back.

“No electrical charges?” Idunn murmurs between clenched teeth.

“No defences just after they moult,” Surya whispers in return.

Her lips have disappeared, eaten by sorrow and anger, and tears roll down her face in two parallel streaks.

“Ms. da Matha,” says the colossus who seems to be directing the operation, I hope my message was clear. Unless you prefer a different target? Like this charming child, for example? Fine. Now, you will calm these beasts and you will load two for me. I want to leave in ten minutes. I will kill one chimera for every minute you delay. And I am not joking.”

Idunn is so frightened for her daughter that she moans in relief when Surya gives in to the blackmail and walks ahead. She utters a series of modulated tones moving up and down the scale, a form of lament. When her song ends, the chimeras have quietened. The leader nods, satisfied. He then points at two of the creatures
who have not finished moulting, their fur cracked from skull to tail.

“Load those two, while you’re at it. You have three minutes left, Ms. da Matha. I stop the timer once they’re in the box.”

Impossible, Idunn says to herself. It is physically impossible for her to do that. And this guy knows it. He’s enjoying this. The very thought of a massacre pleases him.

Yet, Surya stays calm. Planted in front of the chosen chimeras, she warbles and coos and backs toward the van. Dumbfounded, Idunn watches as the beasts follow her, enter the vehicle and lie down in the cradle that has been prepared for them. She could swear that the entire operation only lasts two minutes.

“Perfect,” the man grumbles, obviously disappointed. “I see just how well you manage your livestock, Ms. da Matha. We’ll be seeing one another again. Rest assured.”

He joins his colleagues and the autoplanes take off.

As soon as their attackers leave, Surya shrieks in rage, waking the chimeras’ stress, while Idunn takes a weeping Thilde into her arms.


Surya shakes her heads, eyes wide in amazement, and grows calm as she listens to the AI’s response.
“Well. Fine you can cancel those.”

Nevertheless, Idunn notes her increased hope. She questions her.

“Osanyin keep us! I’d like to understand. Someone has come to our rescue. A private autoplane hunted them down almost as soon as they took off. Providential, isn’t it? Particularly when I learned what the local police told us: no help to reach the zone before 40 minutes! The autoplane belongs to Erik Strand, Karen Elysium’s nephew. I find the coincidence disturbing.”

“The president’s nephew?” Idunn repeats breathlessly. “He said he was a lawyer.”

“He is. That’s his official business and it’s not just a sinecure. He wins all their lawsuits. How did you meet him?”

“I keep running into that clown since Paris.”

“More and more troubling...”

Idunn chews at her lip, disgusted that she had believed the smooth talking man to be sincere, when she had been so obviously manipulated. This setback disturbs her and, when her Nautys indicates an incoming call, she accepts it without thinking.

Erik Strand’s face appears. Just by chance, Idunn always leaves her device set to limited access and the lawyer sees nothing more than a plain, virtual image of her in a pleasant but neutral frame.

“Can we talk live?” he asks. “And would Surya be willing to take part? This concerns her.”
“Why don’t you call her Nautys or her house?” Idunn grumbles.

“She changed all of her codes recently and I don’t have any of them.”

“That’s true,” Surya concedes, shrugging ironically.

She seems quite satisfied about making life difficult for the Proteûs executive. Nevertheless, she motions that she accepts the link. Idunn opens the access. The image projected by Erik Strand shows one of the vans sunk up to its roof in the lagoon, not far from the reed beds.

“I gave up chasing the other vehicle,” the man continues. “The IR scan in my autoplane indicated what it contained. I preferred to attempt to save your chimeras. They didn’t suffer from the forced landing. Neither did your looters, unfortunately. They managed to escape. The shore was close. By the time I had freed your creatures, they had disappeared.”

“Good grief!” Surya whispers.

Relief covers her cheeks with tears.

“Tell us how you could respond to an SOS so quickly for a house for which you didn’t have the codes,” Idunn asks, unable to keep the aggressiveness out of her voice.

“An SOS is launched on all frequencies,” Erik Strand says, laughing. “And Proteûs had assigned me to watch over you.”

“Watch or keep under surveillance?”
“Not everyone approved Karen’s methods, you know? The president has been disowned. Then, when the satellites betrayed the extraordinary collective moulting of your chimeras, that alerted us. We were concerned. I regret that I didn’t act quicker. Did you suffer any losses? I’m not talking about the pelts, which are priceless, of course.”

“They killed two chimeras,” Idunn sighs.

“Damn!” the man exclaims, appearing to be sincerely devastated. “We’ll launch all of our forces to try and identify those butchers. Meanwhile, Surya, we can offer you protection. Without any conditions. Please note that, in the event that you want to return to Proteûs, the president’s office will let you work as you see fit. No more interference.”

Idunn shrugs.

“Those words don’t commit you to much, Mr. Lawyer.”

“Oh, but they do!” Erik Strand corrects her in an amused tone. “The surveillance council has just met. You’re looking at the new president of Proteûs! Would you do him the honour, Idunn, of finally accepting his invitation to dinner?”

Dumbfounded, the young woman agrees.

“Surya, would you join us?”

At that very moment, with an impetuous splashing of water, two streaming chimeras leap from the basin, pull themselves onto the shore, and snort at the same
time as their fur cracks and they twist to extricate themselves from their exuviate.

Erik Strand laughs with pleasure.

“It looks like your travellers have returned. I’ll leave you. Until this evening, ladies!”

Idunn let Surya run to her beasts, hug them sobbing with joy. She restrained Thilde who wanted to take part in the reunion. She keeps her apart at the time of the bereavement procedure and sends her to play with the surviving animals. The murdered chimeras will go to the rendering pot, to nourish the house’s biomass. Her daughter may seem to have recovered her mental health, but she has already seen enough of death.

“What do you think about Erik’s proposal?” she asks Surya after they have slipped the two carcasses into the recycling system.

“That it’s a little too well timed.”

Idunn stares at her, incredulous. She cannot imagine the creator passing up this opportunity. Who would not want to make the most of an environment that is both secure and peaceful? And, above all, who would refuse to share her knowledge when the key word of the new eras has become generosity?

“What are you really afraid of?” she whispers. “You are so beautiful, so powerful, you look so determined… Yet deep inside you I sense a little girl, scared to death,
teeth chattering. Isn’t this a time for feeling reassured? To learn to trust again?”

She takes Surya in her arms and feels the large body, with its scent of algae and vanilla, trembling against her. Was she wrong to hug her? Surya frees herself. She rubs her blood splattered caftan with an automatic gesture, walks over to the basin, hesitates a moment on the edge. Then, with a resolute movement, she removes the soiled clothing, slips into the water and lets herself sink.

Idunn holds her breath. A stupid reflex; they’ve both been diving for so long… But she would breathe easier if Surya seemed less depressed.

In an enormous spray of water, Thilde, who surely believes it is all a game, jumps in, disappears and does not come back up.

All right, Idunn deduces, they’ve decided to swim to the lagoon through the dome; all I have to do is join them. Not without a moment’s hesitation, she plunges into the depths. No risk of bumping into a chimera today. Slumped on the shores, they are recuperating from the stress of their moulting.

She feels a head worm its way between her legs and almost cries out in terror. Then a hand grabs hers, she recognises Thilde’s hilarious expression and she allows herself to be carried along.

“You devils,” she grumbles to Surya when they
surface. “You scared me half to death. I hope you’ve chilled down and have come to a decision!”

Surya floats on her back, arms spread, blissful, imitated immediately by Thilde.

“Look at that sky, the quality of the blue washed by the storm, taste the salt the lagoon has left on your skin, breath in its perfume, the odour overheated by the sun, why would I want to abandon all this?”

“Why abandon it at all? You could set your own terms. Continue to live in your flower house, but close to one or more labs. And you could also make them found institutions where young autistics would have an opportunity to approach your chimeras. Who knows? Maybe it would take several sessions? But just imagine if these fabulous creatures manage to heal children. Proteûs and you would not just be calliphore! You would add caring to the extreme aesthetic emotion. Even if the rareness of the skins would still reserve them for the chosen few, their purpose would no longer be only luxury and beauty!

Surya floats, ecstatic, and the silence draws on. Idunn is starting to grow desperate just as Thilde stands up and chants a strange song:

Ymoja of the great river
Yemaya of the great sea
My beautiful lady of the water
Do you hear my appeal?
Fill my life with fruits, Yemaya

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Fulfil my desires, Ymoja
My beautiful lady of the water
Listen to my appeal!

Words spoken with assurance, the child’s hands raised in a gesture of offering, her face open, everything serves to magnify the moment. Tears well up in Idunn’s eyes. Nothing else matters, her daughter has been healed.

“Pretty,” Surya comments.

She reaches out an arm and grasps Idunn by the chin. Her brown eyes with golden flecks sparkle with irony.

“I’ll accept on my terms. You daughter becomes my ward. I’ll take care of her education. I’ll train her in biology and transgenesis… when it’s time, and if she agrees, of course, she’ll replace me. I figure this little so-called autistic is an empath with my beasts, just as I was at her age. I foresee a great potential and I don’t intend to let it slip through my fingers. Do you have anything to say?

Too moved to talk, Idunn holds her hand out, palm up. Surya slaps it to seal their agreement. At that moment, Diane jumps into the basin, blaring in a hoarse voice, as if intending to announce her involvement in the pact as well.

The trio bursts out laughing.

JOËLLE WINTREBERT

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The New Words of Luxury

Here, for example, are a few entries referring to *neo-luxury* in the dictionary, published in both hard copy and on the Internet, by the multinational publishing group *Lexifrench*, whose name is every bit as scandalous as the ridiculous “Made in France”, which defends French production, albeit in English.

**ARTIFACTUM**, noun.
Borrowed from a Latin expression meaning “created by human activity, technique, savoir-faire”. The word is the opposite of *naturel* as well as *industriel*. Since luxury products are the only ones that can reflect personal artisanal creativity, this Latinism has taken on a meaning different than that of the scholarly word *artifact*, borrowed from the English at the start of the 20th century, first of all in medicine to designate any effect resulting from human intervention, then in archaeology, for pre-history, in order to distinguish artifacts, produced by a human
technique (such as knapped flints) from shapes that occurred naturally.
This word could have been francized into artefact or artifait, but the Latin form prevailed.
Example: Artifacta (or artifactums when anglicized) are those objects, works, services resulting from work to create art; they reveal creativity, innovation and a specific, personal and authentic character; they preserve traces of the individual act of creation, as opposed to the obvious and dreary perfection of industrial reproduction.

BEL-ÊTRE, noun. From the word bel, a form of beau ("beautiful"), and être ("being"), based on the model of bien-être ("well-being").
This compound word, which appeared in the 2050s, designates the objective state, translated by aesthetic sensations and appearance, which correspond to the subjectivity of well-being.
Example: Beyond physical beauty, with its natural, genetic character, bel-être established a status of being that is particular and sensitive to all, making the person who bears this quality a carrier of beauty, both naturally and through the effect of art; luxury is needed to attain bel-être.
This word is used extensively in Québec French.
CALLIPHORE, adjective; CALLIPHORIE, noun. Words formed from Greek elements meaning “beautiful” (kallos) and “to carry” (from the verbpherein).
The adjective describes what “carries”, transmits beauty, regardless of its nature and the noun refers to the action by which beauty is transmitted.
Example: The word calliphore can be used to describe acts, objectives, works and their creators when they are capable of transmitting all types of aesthetic sensations and emotions; luxury producers are honoured to be referred to as calliphore. Calliphorie is the fact of the art and the artists, of certain artisans and their work, and the suffix -phore, in these words, can represent dissemination and commerce.
It is no random chance that euphoria, from the Greek eu- “good” and the same -phoria, is a word of well-being, occasionally bel-être, and even happiness.

C.M.C. or CMC, noun, stands for the Cercle mondial de connaisseurs (“Global Circle of Connaisseurs”), an expression that appeared in 2010-2020, when, using computers, groups of enthusiasts were able to meet, regardless of where they lived, to share their experiences, particularly about luxury brand products.
Example: The members of the C.M.C. (or CMC) are
of all nationalities, all ethnic origins, all cultures, both genders, any age (except for products reserved for adults, such as wine and alcohol); it is the status of enlightened enthusiast, passionate connaisseur that brings them together.

**EXTASIE**, noun, appears new compared to *extase*, but is in actual fact a return to the initial, ancient form of this word. From the 13th to the 21st centuries, it was a religious term taken from the Latin to designate a mystical state in which the subject feels as if he has left his body, which is what the Greek verb that this word comes from indicates: *ex-histonai*, “place outside”. Religious ecstasy, practiced by the great mystics, is a rapture that elevates the soul, drawing it closer to God. Yet, in recent decades, progress made in the neurosciences has resulted in methods capable of producing emotions that were once inaccessible in those who use products that are “immatérialiste” (see this word), produced by the luxury brands. Secularized, as opposed to the French “extatique” (ecstatic), *extasie* creates a state of pleasure in which the usual sensations are transcended, according to the dreams of many poets from the past, such as Rimbaud.

The word, however, cannot be confused with the English word *ecstasy* used to refer to a drug that was popular near the end of the 20th century, and
which created an artificial situation, both dangerous and addictive, a false “ecstasy”.

**FORMOSE**, adjective borrowed in about 1065 from the Latin *formosus*, reminds us that the word for physical beauty, derived from *forma*, “form”, eventually also designated elegance. The adverb *formose* meant “in an elegant, charming manner”. In keeping with its etymology, *formose*, compared to *beautiful*, contributes an idea of natural elegance and charm. For example, we would say: *that dress, that decoration is not only beautiful, it is truly formose, or he has been able to give his apartment a formose look.*

The word is literary, if not precious, which is well-suited for its meaning. The superlative form, *formosissime*, is also used–there was an equivalent in Latin–as well as the noun, *formosité*.

**IMAGIQUE**, adjective, is a portmanteau word that has become fashionable relatively recently, in which the adjective *magique* (“magic”) is partially absorbed by the idea of “image”. It is possible that it may be confused with a derivative of *image* made using the *-ique* suffix.

This word, which is both full of imagery, given the nature of the image, and “magic”, in its strongest sense, takes on a sensitive quality that is both visible
and spiritual. Without attaining the mystery of the word *mage*, a word that came to us from Persia, by way of Greek and Latin, the Latin term *imago* is richer than its descendant; it is used to designate any appearance, real or fantasy, including that of spirits, apparitions and ghosts. The Latin plural *imagines* was also used to refer to “figures” of speech such as metaphors, which “create an image”. It could be said, using an element taken from the Greek, that they are *imagiphore* (“imagiphoric”). In this way, this word, with a fascinating descendence, from *imagination* to *imagery* to the *imaginary*, was made to encounter the prodigies of magic.

Everything that makes an image and which, through the effect of art, produces transcendency and dreams can be qualified as *imagique*. The images are the signs of a kingdom beyond appearances, while being quite real; this fact draws it closer to the effects of luxury, such as *rêver-vrai*.

N.B.: This word should not be confused with the expression *e-magic*, which refers to the supposed “magic” of the Internet, namely the content of the digital universe concerning magic which occasionally is the domain of charlatanism.

**IMMATÉRIALISTE**, adjective formed from *immatériel* (immaterial) about 15 years ago, to refer to the research conducted by certain luxury
industries into the virtual transmission of new sensations evoking rare and precious substances.

Example: *Immatérialiste techniques and processes are intended to create environments, pleasures in which the sources of the most exceptional emotions, emotions too rare to be directly accessible, intervene.*

**INSTÉTERNEL**, adjective, portmanteau word formed by combining *éternel* ("eternal") with *instant*. This latter is an old adjective meaning "imminent", which came to us from Latin, in which it represented the verb *in-stare*, marking rapprochement. From this came the sense of "shortness in time", as opposed to the endless duration of eternity. Now, one of the major paradoxes of luxury is that it produces immediate sensations by means of inherited practices and proven methods, which it creates from long-lasting objects to transmit strong and fleeting emotions, which have to be renewed constantly and which luxury can prolong while innovating in the immediate.

In this word, the idea of “eternal” is metaphorical and only expresses long duration on a human scale, or the long memory of luxurious moments. It could be used to talk about a *meal*, or about an event, as in *instéternel event*, which means much more than
“memorable”. The word can be used as a noun: the instéternal is a category of luxury, which can range from restauration to jewellery, from long-lived objects which are valued for their reference to the past to emotions that are worthy of remembrance. It should be noted that this use of the adjective éternel constitutes a return to our origins, since the ancient Latin aeviternus (“which lasts an entire life”, from aevus, “age, lifetime”) later became aeternus, taking on an absolute then a religious value. In the final analysis, eternity comes from the idea of “duration of human life” and not “endless time”. Yet, this life lasts no more than an instant, as ancient wisdom repeatedly pointed out. Thus, a recent expression, expressing an apparent paradox—that of luxury itself—can reveal reality itself.

INTIPLANÉTAIRE, adjective, expresses, in a rather heavy-handed manner (intimondial, ale, aux could have been given preference) another paradox of luxury: that of creating personal, intimate emotions and pleasures, yet having a universal value, since the reference to “planet” suggests that human establishments away from the Earth, while still exceptional and experimental, have no impact on the “planetary”, “earthly” perception of the human habitat, regardless of what the media say. Formed from intime (“intimate”) and planétaire

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(“planetary”), this word qualifies the character of emotions and pleasures, both humanistic and universal on a human level and yet personal and intimate at the same time; this character is practicable through the development of luxury.

**Example:** *Intiplanétaire realities are rarely natural, most often cultural, involving the art and techniques of luxury.*

The word is more general, more abstract than *proximondial* (see this word).

**NOVENTIQUE**, adjective and noun, formed from the radical *nov-* from *innover* (“innovate”) and *nouveau* (“new”) and the ending of the adjective *authentique* (“authentic”).

This word transmits, concurrently with *innoventique* (“innoventic”), which was in use for too long and which *noventique* has practically eliminated, the idea of an intimate association between innovation, newness, on the one hand, and authenticity, on the other, based on a tradition of savoir-faire that has been inherited and constantly improved.

**Example:** *A noventique object or service reconciles the notions of heritage and avant-garde. The search for the noventique is based on personal creativity associated with talents that are inherited and renewed.*
ORBIQUITÉ, noun, is based on ubiquity and formed from the Latin orbs, orbis “circle”, a term from astronomy, used specifically with respect to the Zodiac circle and in the expression orbis terrae “the circle of the Earth”, as opposed to globus “the sphere”, in the Flat Earth belief. The Latin word is still observed in the Vatican formulation of the papal blessing urbi et orbi “to the City of (Rome) and the World”. As for ubiquity, this word comes from the Latin ubique “everywhere” and is used, in theology, to express one of the divine properties, that of being present everywhere at once, which gives the notion an absolute and universal character; the philosophy of the 19th century added the temporary notion of uchrony to it.

However, if we want to talk about simultaneous presence, not in abstract terms but on the “World of Men”, the noun orbiquité, and its derivative orbi-quitaire, are suitable.
Example: Obtaining a state of orbiquité, for a work or an object that is reproduced industrially, is one of the objectives of luxury artisans.

PROXIMONDIAL, adjective, is made by combining proxi-, from the Latin superlative proximus “the closest” and mondial (“earthly”). Proxi- is known through proximity, borrowed from the Latin,
although French speakers do not use *proxime*, settling for *proche* (“close”).

What is closest can paradoxically belong to the category of the human universal, in an environment that is suitable for life, such as the planet Earth, as a result of a certain order that stands out from and is opposed to chaos; such is the meaning of the Latin word *mundus*, which corresponds to the Greek *kosmos*, which has been transmitted into French and other languages with the meaning “universe”.

The idea of “proximité mondiale” (“earthly proximity”) summarizes the condition of the living human being, an individual, person, child, adult, elder, man and woman, representing an animal species in the primate mammal group. In concrete experience, it represents the individuality, the personality that is felt and experienced. Drawing out human universality, despite the urge to defend and to attack, despite ignorance and prejudice, is a difficult task; science and philosophy are responsible for this along with art, literature, poetry, music and, in concrete terms, activities to develop and share luxury, which are closely related to creation and wisdom. It is this double trajectory, from the unique individual to total humanism, that is expressed through this adjective, which has been in use for several years now.

**Example:** *Proximondial works, objects are necessary for the realization of the human universal; they*
materialize the proximondial nature of pleasure and sensations, which corresponds to the luxury of life.

RÊVER-VRAI, noun, is formed by the infinitive of the verb rêver (“to dream”) and the adjective vrai (“true”), to express the desire and the need to allow everyone to access what used to seem inaccessible, in the pleasure register.

Examples: The rêver-vrai craft and industry correspond relatively closely to their luxury counterparts. The rêver-vrai is real, perceptible, noticeable; it is not a dream but the materialization of the virtual.

The word is collective; it applies to a category of objects and services; as a result, it does not designate a specific thing and is not used in the plural, which avoids a delicate spelling issue in French.

Formed from the word LUXE (“luxury”) itself, several recent creations have appeared: INTERLUXE (“interluxury”) and INTRALUXE (“intraluxury”), with their adjectives, apply respectively to the activities specific to luxury (intra-), and to the relationships between luxury and certain adjacent domains, such as comfort, entertainment, restauration, simple and quality foods… (inter-).

TRANSLUXE (“transluxury”) stresses the character of dissemination and transmission that increasingly applies to all of the activities that produce luxury. As
for PÉRILUXE ("periluxury"), this noun defines, in a rather imprecise manner, all of the productions that approach luxury without truly achieving it. Inasmuch as this implies value judgments, which can be controversial and are always subjective, the word is dangerous. Of course, this does not prevent it from being fashionable: “You ate, you stayed with so-and-so? That’s not luxury, barely periluxury!”

PANLUXE ("panluxury") is a luxury of universal nature.

As for other derivatives, the verb LUXIFIER ("luxurify") means “to give a product a luxury character”, while improving it and so that more and more consumers prefer “less but better” over quantity.

And yet another neologism would be useful for designating the pedagogical component of luxury: LUXAGOGIE ("luxagogy").

Alain Rey
This work is the result of a challenge launched by the French luxury firms: to imagine an optimistic future, to build a collective utopia, to Dream 2074.

2074, in 60 years, what world do we dream of having created, despite the naysayers who always make their daily share of sinister announcements? And what better than luxury, the industry of rêver-vrai that has characterized France since the Middle Ages, to provide the optimism needed to build the best world of tomorrow?

For 60 years now, the French luxury firms have learned to think together as part of the Comité Colbert. They co-opt one another within the association although they compete elsewhere. It is this tradition of dialogue, mutual respect, this custom of rubbing shoulders that created the spark that set the pages you have just read ablaze.

The Utopia Factory started in April 2013 in the firms, with each developing its own dream for 2074
and expressing it in five words, one image and a short text intended to nourish the collective reflection.

This corpus of close to 250 distinct words, about 100 images and texts, shared by all, was then analysed, discussed and enriched, from September to December 2013, through ten workshops conducted within each of the Comité’s think tanks.

During this time, six science fiction authors and a composer immersed themselves behind the scenes of luxury to grasp a better understanding of the reality, the tensions, the creativity and roots in French culture. This immersion gave them an opportunity to understand the paradoxes that drive the essence of dreaming within the Factory.

These days shared in the sensitive world of the firms also resulted in an experience of another nature: that of creating a collective work in which each individual’s personality is respected and melts into those of the others to create something that is both distinct and common.

The tenth workshop conducted by the Utopia Factory, which brought together the presidents of the firms and institutions that are members of the Comité Colbert, summarized the major elements of the collective utopia of French luxury in the following words:

*Filled with paradoxes, luxury in 2074 draws its creativity from the tensions generated: instigator of taste/*
The bearer of human values, luxury plays an important role in society in 2074.

There is a duty of transmission: transmission of know-how, values, French taste, as broadly as possible.

There is a duty of intelligence: to give meaning to what we do, to provoke a desire for knowledge.

And there is a duty of bonding, to “connect” with one another, enthusiasts, the hands of the artisans grasping those of the users, the collaborators... To develop a sense of complicity.

Luxury is found in sharing, altruism, a future of mingling. At the same time, as a counterpoint to globalization, to the acceleration of the world, it guarantees authenticity, singularity providing a place for individual well-being. The ruptures that affect it are more sociological (changes in lifestyle, ways of thinking and so on) than technological.

More than ever, in 2074, luxury will be defined by its concern for aesthetics.

Beauty, elegance—of people, objects, minds, behaviours—mould luxury and, in this respect, the increased transparency of society giving it an exemplary ethical and aesthetic role. This implies a requirement that never wavers in importance: to ensure a constantly superior production quality – as we have witnessed
since the 18th century – and remain at the service of aesthetic emotion.

The tension between matter and immaterial, in an environment that has grown overwhelmingly immaterial, lies at the heart of luxury in 2074.

Matter is the element that creates the possibility of rupture for luxury; the shortage of quality raw materials is the force that drives innovation, in order to develop new materials or new properties of known materials, new ways of working with them in order to use less.

But, while luxury is always supported by “beautiful materials”, it is intended to be innovative in its immaterial aspects—above all, it invents dreams in 2074. Therefore, it provides the basis for sensory experiences that are often dematerialized and, for this reason, it has long been attentive to the evolution of the senses and the adaptation of humankind to its environment.

At ease with paradoxes, luxury continues to work materials, but its future lies in the immaterial value with a change in paradigm from being to appearing; in 2074 luxury is a manner of being.

Finally, luxury is both local AND global. The more global, even spatial, we grow, the more the original—sometimes viewed as “natural”, “authentic”—becomes important. Also, in 2074, in a world that is ever more open, ubiquity, immediacy, identity, roots, pleasure are asserted with even greater vigour. The luxury of the
utopia factory is French; in a radiant, inspirational France, it highlights local know-how and even local materials—in the richness of their diversity—both in France and also elsewhere, in a network that is planetary and peaceful.

This collective utopia imagined by French luxury then passed through the hands of several writers and a composer, resulting in the birth of a new form of collective work, in which the different facets of dreaming are interwoven from one tale to the other.

Alain Rey translated the utopia into 14 neologisms of French luxury which should appear in any good dictionary in 2074.

The assemblages of Roque Rivas painted the utopia with the sensitive colours of luxury that will be sustainable and amplified in 2074.

Samantha Bailly, Jean-Claude Dunyach, Anne Fakhouri, Xavier Mauméjean, Olivier Paquet and Joëlle Wintrebert gave the utopia a narrative form, in which the emotional aspect is expressed forcefully.

Utopia, which is “manufactured” today, will simply become true.

Dear reader, it is now up to you to draw your own outline!
THE AUTHORS

This is a collective work to which contributed all of the members of the Comité Colbert through *The Utopia Factory*, writers and a composer.

ALAIN DUCASSE AU PLAZA ATHÉNÉE

BACCARAT

SAMANTHA BAILLY

Samantha Bailly was born in 1988. Her first novel, *Oraisons*, published when she was 19 years old, received the *Prix Imaginales des Lycéens* in 2011. With a Master’s degree in Comparative Literature and a professional Master’s degree in publishing, she worked as writer for a video game company for two years. For Samantha, writing is the focal point of her intellectual curiosity and her desire to create. She uses it to draw her passion for sociology, neuroscience, fashion and many other fields together. She has written fantasy novels, contemporary novels, and short stories, navigating through all the genres that call out to her imagination. The universe of luxury is just the latest… *Métamorphoses*, Éditions Bragelonne, 2014
Les Stagiaires, Éditions Milady, 2014
Souvenirs Perdus (3 volumes), Éditions Syros, 2014
Oraisons, L’intégrale, Éditions Bragelonne, 2013
Ce qui nous lie, Éditions Milady, 2013
À pile ou face, Éditions Rageot, 2013

BERLUTI
BERNARDAUD
CHAMPAGNE BOLLINGER
BONPOINT
BOUCHERON
BREGUET
BUSSIÈRE
CARON
CARTIER
CÉLINE
CHANEL
PARFUMS CHANEL
CHÂTEAU CHEVAL BLANC
CHÂTEAU LAFITE-ROTHSCHILD
CHÂTEAU D’YQUEM
CHLOÉ
CHRISTIAN DIOR COUTURE
PARFUMS CHRISTIAN DIOR
CHRISTIAN LIAIGRE
CHRISTOFLE
COMITÉ COLBERT

Created in 1954, the Comité Colbert brings together 78 French luxury firms and 14 cultural institutions. They work together to disseminate French culture and art of living throughout the world. Representing 12 different sectors in the luxury industry, the firms
that make up the Comité Colbert share the same values of innovation and authenticity. An integral part of the image of France, they contribute to its economic development and the growth of their sector through globalization.

DALLOYAU
DELISLE
DIANE DE SELLIER S EDITEUR

JEAN-CLAUDE DUNYACH

Jean-Claude Dunyach was born in Toulouse in 1957. He started his professional life as a guitarist with a rock group with firm intentions (the Worldmasters). He has also been an itinerant story-teller, lyric writer and the manager of a sex shop in Toulouse (for one week, which is the minimum amount of time, or so he believes, for a job to be included in a biography).

Simultaneously or successively, he has worked as a writer, songwriter, science fiction columnist, anthologist, editor of French-language fiction for Galaxies until 2005, then director of the Bragelonne SF collection, a position he gave up in 2009 in order to return to writing. He is also a member of the jury for the Grand Prix de l’Imaginaire.

He has been writing science fiction since the early 1980s. And, in his spare time, he is also an aeronautics research engineer.

Le jeu des sabliers, Folio SF, 2012
Les Harmoniques célestes, Éditions l’Atalante, 2011
Déchiffrer la trame, Éditions l’Atalante, 2011
The Thieves of Silence, Black Coat Press, 2009
The Night Orchid: Conan Doyle in Toulouse, Black Coat Press, 2004
Étoiles Mourantes with Ayerdhal, J’ai lu, 2003
Étoiles Mortes, J’ai lu, 2000
Anne Fakhouri was born in Paris and returned there after various stops elsewhere. Her globetrotter father, a citizen of the world, had her travel from Lebanon to the United Arab Emirates, by way of the Bahamas or the USA, whereas her mother, a French professor, opened her library to Anne, making her what Colette would have called “an immobile traveller”. Enthralled by Lewis Carroll, Victor Hugo and English literature, her very classical training took her to the Sorbonne, where she specialized in medieval literature, yet another of her passions, then to a college where she exercised her second trade, as a French teacher. In 2008, Atalante published her first YA novel, in two volumes, *Le Clairvoyage* and *La Brume des Jours*, for which she was awarded the *Grand Prix de l’Imaginaire* 2010. Four novels and a dozen short stories later, she continues to write for adults and adolescents in order to explore all the paths of the imagination—this world without borders.

*L’Horloge du temps perdu*, l’Atalante, 2013

*Hantés*, Rageot, 2013

*Narcogenèse*, l’Atalante, 2011

*La Brume des Jours*, l’Atalante, 2009

*Le Clairvoyage*, l’Atalante, 2008
PARFUMS HERMÈS
HERVÉ VAN DER STRAETEN
HÔTEL LE BRISTOL
HÔTEL DU PALAIS
HÔTEL PLAZA ATHÉNÉE
HÔTEL RITZ
JEAN PATOU PARIS
JEANNE LANVIN
L’ATELIER DE JOËL ROBUCHON ÉTOILE
JOHN LOBB
CHAMPAGNE KRUG
LACOSTE
LANCÔME
LE MEURICE
LENÔTRE
LEONARD
LONGCHAMP
LORENZ BÄUMER JOAILLIER
LOUIS VUITTON
LA MAISON DU CHOCOLAT
MARTELL
XAVIER MAUMÉJEAN

Born in 1963 in Biarritz, with degrees in philosophy and religious studies, Xavier Mauméjean is an editor, writer and essayist. He is a member of the Collège de Pataphysique, and the Club des Mendients Amateurs de Madrid which brings together police novel writers and critics. When he is not writing incredible novels or biographies of fictional individuals, he works in the television and movie sectors. We owe him a debt of gratitude for various radio scripts, whether adaptions or original creations, produced for France Culture.
American Gothic, 10/18, 2014
Rosée de feu, Folio SF, 2013
Hercule Poirot, une vie with André-François Ruaud, Les Moutons électriques, coll. Bibliothèque rouge, 2012
The League of Heroes, Black Coat Press, 2005

MELLERIO DITS MELLER
OUSTAU DE BAUMANIÈRE
OLIVIER PAQUET

Born in 1973, Olivier Paquet is above all a man who is curious about everything. Fascinated by the stars, political science and manga (and his fascination resulted in articles and conferences on luxury in Japan at the initiative of the Luxe-Mode-Art magazine), he published his first text in 1999, in the magazine Galaxies, and received the Grand Prix de l’Imaginaire award in 2003 for Synesthésie, a short story about communication using odours. Since 2006, he has contributed to the radio programme Mauvais Genres (France Culture), where he talks about mangas and Japanese animation. He has just released a space opera trilogy, Le Melkine, a future history, with Éditions l’Atalante.

Le Melkine (3 volumes), L’Atalante, 2012-2013.
Les Loups de Prague, L’Atalante, 2011.

CHAMPAGNE PERRIER-JOUËT
PIERRE BALMAIN
PIERRE FREY
PIERRE HARDY
PIERRE HERMÉ PARIS

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ALAIN REY

Born in Pont-du-Château, near Clermont-Ferrand, in 1928, Alain Rey would contribute, starting in 1952, to the major dictionary of the French language conceived and edited by Paul Robert, and then served as the senior editor for that dictionary from 1958 to 1964. He co-authored the *Petit Robert* with Josette Rey-Debove, served as the senior author of various dictionaries, in particular, the *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* and wrote, with Danièle Morvan, the *Dictionnaire culturel en langue française*, which was published in 2008. Moreover, he published many other works, including *Littré, l’humaniste et les mots*, (Gallimard 1970; Saintour award), *Révolution, histoire d’un mot*, (Gallimard, 1989), *Antoine Furetière, un précurseur des Lumières* (Fayard, 2010; biography award from the Académie française), *Les spectres de la bande, essai sur la BD* (Editions de Minuit, 1978), *Miroirs du monde, sur l’encyclopédisme* (Fayard, 2007).

A columnist for France-Inter radio from 1993 to 2008, he published numerous articles on words (Gallimard, Robert Laffont, Fayard, etc.), several works on the French language (Denoël, Gallimard, Perrin) and, recently, *Des pensées et des mots* (Hermann, 2013), *Le Dictionnaire amoureux du Diable* in 2013 (following the *Dictionnaire amoureux des dictionnaires*, both published by Plon), and *Le Voyage des mots de l’Orient (…) vers la langue française*, with calligraphic compositions by Lassaad Métoui (Guy Trédaniel, 2013). In 2011, Alain Rey collaborated with the Comité Colbert on a bilingual work (French-Arabic) entitled *Au cœur du luxe, les mots*.

ROQUE RIVAS

Born in 1975 in Santiago (Chile), Roque Rivas started out as a jazz musician. After studying for years at the National Conservatory in
Santiago, he travelled to France where he took electro-acoustic composition and computer music courses at the Conservatoire national supérieur de musique et de danse (CNSMD) in Lyon, before moving to the Paris CNSMD. From 2006 to 2008, he studied composition and computer music at the IRCAM. Rivas is a specialist in live electronics. He loves to assemble and juxtapose heterogeneous sound sources in order to refresh his sense of musical imagery. In addition, he is very interested in modern architecture and literature. He has received commissions from the Ensemble Intercontemporain, the London Sinfonietta, Ictus Ensemble, and Remix Ensemble. His works are presented at prestigious festivals and in museums around the world.

*Threads, for two dancers and live electronics, 2012-2013.*
*Assemblage, for piano ensemble and live electronics, 2011-2012.*
*Mutations of matter, for five voices and live electronics, 2008.*

ROBERT HAVILAND & C. PARLON
ROCHAS
SAINT-LOUIS
S.T. DUPONT
TAILLEVENT
VAN CLEEF & ARPELS
CHAMPAGNE VEUVE CLICQUOT PONSARDIN
JOËLLE WINTREBERT

Born in Toulon under the number 9, Joëlle Wintrebert joined the magazine *Horizons du fantastique* as senior editor in 1975. Journalist and critic (literature and cinema), she started publishing poetic texts and short stories in the 1970s. Her first novel, *Les Olympiades truquées*, was published in 1980 and has been re-issued on a regular basis since then. It was followed by about 20 other books (novels, short story collections, poetic texts and photos) as well as a very large number of articles, anthologies, prefaces, translations, TV screen plays, and so on.
Passionate about the problems pertaining to the status of authors, she has also been an affiliated or founding member of various associations and unions for authors since the 1970s. A jury member for various literary awards since 1980, she took on the position of President of the *Grand prix de l’Imaginaire*, replacing Jean-Pierre Fontana who established it in 1974.

*L’amie-nuit*, la-coop.org, 2010

*Le Créateur chimérique*, Gallimard, 2009

*La Créode et autres récits futurs*, Le Bélial, 2009

*Les Olympiades truquées*, J’ai lu, 2009

*La Chambre de sable*, Glynhe, 2008

*Les Amazones de Bohème*, Robert Laffont, 2006

*Pollen*, Au diable vauvert, 2003

YVES DELORME

YVES SAINT LAURENT

YVES SAINT LAURENT PARFUMS

ACADÉMIE DE FRANCE A ROME VILLA MÉDICIS

AIR FRANCE

LES ARTS DÉCORATIFS

CHÂTEAU DE VERSAILLES

COMÉDIE-FRANÇAISE

LA DEMEURE HISTORIQUE

MUSÉE DU LOUVRE

MUSÉE D’ORSAY

MOBILIER NATIONAL-GOBELINS, BEAUVAS, SAVONNERIE

LA MONNAIE DE PARIS

OPÉRA NATIONAL DE PARIS

CERCLE DE L’ORCHESTRE NATIONAL DE FRANCE

LA SORBONNE

SÈVRES, CITÉ DE LA CÉRAMIQUE

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