

ORGAN AND THE PROBE
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ORGAN AND THE PROBE

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CHAPTER 1: THE NEEDLE CEREMONY

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 586

The west window looked out over the garden, and, beyond, over the great plain of Tranquility. The sea, in the distance, was only a touch of darker blue that blended with the clear and empty color of the sky.

Lightning's gaze followed the minuscule silver dot that traced a pale groove in this cloudless expanse: the Probe was still in orbit around Organ. She then followed the flight of a gray heron, which eventually alighted in the pond, stalking the carp. The light made a sort of delicate halo on its plumage. But, regretfully, she tore herself away from her contemplation. The deep joys, unexpected like rays of light, that illuminated her soul before the display of the world, would have to wait for a different moment.

For the time being, she went out on the terrace and stepped into the pond where a source of warm water was held. She was careful not to tear the copper-colored stems of the water lilies that brushed against her, and surrendered her body to the conscientious cleaning of the tiny freshwater fish that fed on her dead skin. When she got up again, after several long minutes, she caught her reflection in the pond and looked at it with curiosity.

People often told her that she was beautiful, and it was true. The human body was so beautiful, so graceful, and so powerful at the same time. So soaked with spirituality. She smiled, with gratitude, at this young, firm, and desirable body, and caressed it very gently to dry it. The tattoos on her skin were always brighter when she got

out of the water; they seemed to sparkle and almost take on a life of their own. The symbols, artfully executed, already adorned a hundred parts of her body, and covered it with names. Leaf, Frost, Cascade, Fog, Winter, Morning, Forest, Reed... the signs made her body the map of a universe. And this universe was on the verge of expanding. She toured it, with meticulous care, mentally listening to each one of its articulations, each one of its organs. The ring finger of the left hand made her suffer violently, just like the day before, and she felt a kind of heaviness in her right kidney. The left lung, too, was getting slightly short of breath. She would have to take care of it without delay, after the ceremony, today. Perhaps during the banquet. As she put her foot on the ground, the pain she had been experiencing on and off for the past few days in her right heel woke up, and she sensed that this pain was not close to being resolved. Old Twig did not have long, and his end would not be pleasant. This thought saddened her deeply, and obscured for a moment the morning peace.

She chose, in no hurry, the light silk dress that she would have to remove later to reveal her body to her clan. During a Needle Ceremony, everyone could see and touch, as much as they pleased, the tattoo that represented them on her skin. Everyone had to witness, as if it were a birth, the Link created by the Needle. And the body of the Keystone had to be naked. She hung pearls around her neck, around her wrists and around her ankles, and carefully tied her hair, holding it back with a braid of green leaves. According to tradition, she coated her nipples and navel with a glistening crimson red paste, then she dressed and headed for the large cabana where several members of the clan were no doubt already waiting.

The walk through the garden and along the forest path would take her about thirty minutes, and she looked forward to this time alone. The aches and pains nagged at her in a dull, continuous way – rare were the days when no part of her body was on alert, and this became a little more true with each new Link. But her trained medi-

tative mind managed for a few rare moments, like this one, to regain possession of itself. She seemed to regain some of the innocence of her original relationship with the world - she walked, simply, among the trees, her feet treading the earth, the grass and the stones; she walked, light, and her solitude stolen from the clan seemed so precious that she appreciated every moment of it. She sometimes imagined what her life would be like without the thousand threads of flesh and blood that connected her to the others, and which, she felt every moment, hindered her - she would then daydream of flying away.

From the forest, you couldn't see the Probe. Lightning really liked watching it, following its slow movement in the soft blue of the sky. It seemed to glide, like a huge bird of prey, free of any attachment. Lightning felt an intense curiosity about this vessel, and about these people - she wondered what it was like to be an infinite distance from her planet, floating like that in free space, untethered. She attempted to imagine what it would feel like to leave Organ - but it was too intense of an effort for her imagination, as if she were imagining leaving her own body. Organ was in her and she was in Organ - their people would never know such weightlessness. The Probe was only just grazing their orbit; it passed there like the wingtip of a dream.

Under the large cabana and in the surrounding clearing, several families were already gathered. Old Twig had been carried on a stretcher, and Lightning went to him first. She stroked his hair and asked him questions about his sleep, his digestion, his suffering. She listened to him with great care and prescribed a number of recipes to his wife and daughter.

"In the case of very strong pain, you will have to come to my house, and I will give you a few grams of poppy. When the agony begins, I will know immediately, and I will come right away to administer him rest. You must not cry around him, nor shout in any way.

You must embellish his last season with songs and stories, memories, gifts."

Frost, the wife, thanked her, but the girl, Cloud, felt a wave of sadness that Lightning felt in her own body, behind the collarbone.

"You must fight your sadness, Cloud, and save it for mourning. For now, he needs you to be brave and cheerful, helpful and patient."

"I did not know he was going to die so quickly," the girl murmured.

"The truth is always better than its many opposites," said Lightning.

Cloud looked up at her, with an air of respectful inquiry.

"Its opposites?"

"Lies, illusions, dreams, memories... The truth is always better, because only it allows us to act. Your father is going to die and you can give him a beautiful death. You must also support your mother. The blow will be harder for her than for you."

Lightning's collarbone was pricked with a twinge of pain when Cloud burst into a short sob. Lightning hugged her and waited for her breathing to calm down and match her own.

Then the girl recovered, and the pain faded into the background, like a sleeping rheumatism. Cloud went to Twig and cooled him down, and the pain in her heel faded also.

Children were playing chase among the columns of the cabana - they were too young to be Linked, but Lightning watched them sympathetically. Many of these children would choose her as their Keystone as adults, and the Link would be facilitated by their previous familiarity. The two boys were called Sprig and Bud; the two girls, Peat and Showers. Showers especially appealed to her - she saw

herself as a child in this free and independent little girl, who always seemed to obey only by chance, because it so happened that the desire of adults sometimes coincided with her own. She winked at her and the little girl smiled back, staring at her with a look of curiosity.

"Do your tattoos hurt?"

"Yes." said Lightning.

"So are you going to be in pain later on?"

"Yes, a little."

"I would not want to be a Keystone."

"And you are quite right," said Lightning. "You are still much too young."

The little girl hesitated, then continued her questions.

"Being in pain does not bother you?"

"I am used to it."

"Do you get used to pain?"

Lightning paused for a moment. Of course, the little girl was right. You do not get used to pain; at least, getting used to it does not dampen it. But you can learn to live with it.

"In a way." She answered cautiously.

With an affectionate gesture, she closed the child's mouth and moved on. Other families were arriving, and were coming to pay her their respects - seeing them in good health, dressed in their festive clothes, gave her great pleasure. She looked around, however, for several people she could not find: Fog, whose name was wrapped around her ring finger, Petal, who was Linked to her kidney, and Swarm, to her lung. They needed her, in one way or another, and she felt an urgent need to help them.

However, the girl who was to be Linked to her today was arriving. She was splendidly adorned, surrounded by her loved ones, radiating the simple joy of being the center of attention. Her name was Vine, and she had chosen, on Lightning's body, the left temple. This would be the first tattoo on her face - Lightning dreaded it a little. The most popular Keystones had their faces completely covered with inscriptions, and this facial marking branded them. Men and women who wore this strange mask were highly respected, but they were almost on the fringe of the human world. Lightning had no desire to support a clan that was too numerous, and began to welcome the new Links with apprehension. But this secret, like a shameful disease, remained hidden in the recesses of her being; the Keystone had to endure, they were the social cement, the guarantor of harmony. She didn't complain.

The crowd had become rather large, and at a certain point, the clan knew it was complete. So they crowded around Lightning and Vine, and each of them took part in the ritual that began with the Offertory. Lightning undressed, and laid down on a stone table, next to which the Needle and the Ink were already arranged. She closed her eyes, to better invite the members of the clan to come and touch her body. Besides, she didn't need to keep them open to recognize those who came to rub her, to caress her, to press her, to place their mouth against her skin, to penetrate with their fingers her nostrils, her ears, her mouth, the lips of her sex. Her body was delivered as fodder to these dozens of hands, which performed obscure gestures of devotion and appropriation on her. Meanwhile, Vine was settling in to receive the Needle's kisses. The incredibly slender instrument had been made solely for this unique purpose. It would be used to prick Vine's body at its fourteen nerve points, and to make, in fourteen signs, the tattoo on Lightning's temple. Then, and only then, would the Link be forged.

Little by little, the touches were more spaced out, and eventually stopped. Lightning reopened her eyes and sat up, facing Vine, who was about to receive the first kiss from the Needle. The pain would be strong, it would no doubt draw tears from the girl. But Lightning would not feel it in her body - not yet - it would be the last lonely torments of this young flesh. It was Vine's father, Winter, who would wield the Needle.

"May the Needle be used today again to sew," said Lightning in her clearest voice. "May it weave a strong Link between Vine and me."

These words were all Winter was waiting for to plant the long needle, so sharp and fine that its tip was almost invisible, in his daughter's forehead. The clan held its breath, and Vine let out a scream of pain.

"I accept to take your pain upon myself," said Lightning.

Winter gently removed the Needle, from which no blood, but a drop of sweat, was beading. He dipped the Needle in the ink and made the first point of the tattoo on Lightning's left temple.

"May the Needle that pierces you mark my body also."

The next seven kisses, on the back of her neck, both temples, both sides, and her ankles, were silent. The tattoo was beginning to hurt Lightning - and she now seemed to feel, in her temple, the kisses of the Needle - still in a dim, imprecise way. From the ninth kiss on, Vine said part of the traditional oath with each prick - and Lightning answered her, in a voice that weakened slightly, with each new dot on her tattoo.

"I renounce all secrets."

"I renounce all indifference."

"I will not bind myself by the Needle to any other."

"I renounce feeding children from my breasts, and renounce the cord that gave me life."

"I will provide for your needs and relieve you of material concerns."

"I will watch over your well being."

"I will respect your decrees and submit to your governance."

"I will not abuse my power."

"I will lend you the strength of my spirit when you need it."

"The balance of the clan will be my only compass."

"I will be your body, your hands, your arm, your legs."

"I will be your courage and your rescue."

The fourteenth Needle struck Vine in the heart - and, following tradition, both women screamed at the same time, from the same pain, which one felt in her chest, and the other in her temple.

The clan, which had held its breath until that final cry, as powerful as a cry at birth or death, erupted into applause. Several clan members were crying, and the celebration began with a flurry of words and laughter.

Lightning stayed sitting for a long while, silent. The sweat that was drying on her body and her suddenly exhausted expression were enough evidence of the pain she had just experienced; and the clan, though smiling at her, let her recover. There was something strange

between her and them. They were able to touch her shamelessly, eager to unload their most intimate, internal sufferings on her body, and yet, instinctively, they kept their distance. She saw them communing, sharing their lives, their concerns, weaving their futures. But she was not one of them - at least, not quite. This distancing was without a doubt the thing she had least expected when she made the decision to become a Keystone. She knew, of course, that the Keystones lived on the outskirts of villages, isolated deep in the forests. But she had not thought about what that implied. The Links, which knew neither spatial distance nor closeness of blood, replaced for her all other human ties. She was the neighbor, wife, colleague, daughter, mother, mistress, of no one. She was the Keystone of her clan. And sometimes, when the aches in her body became too numerous, and tears of discouragement beaded at the corners of her eyes, in the solitude of her sanctuary, she found herself envying the other clan members. Being a member of the clan didn't impose any restrictions on them - just like a family, members could scatter and gather, frequent other clans, travel and return.

She was pulled out of her reflection by Fog's father, who navigated his way over to her.

"I am surprised to see you," she said after greeting him. "It is your son that I feel suffering in my flesh, and not you."

"But I am suffering too."

"Not in the same way. Not as much as him."

The man took the blow hard - there was no point in trying to lie to Lightning, or to lie to himself. The conflict between him and his son was hurting the latter more than him.

"It is all my fault," he said with a contrite look.

"What happened?"

The man launched into a detailed explanation of a situation that Lightning already knew. Fog had not had a mother, because she had

died when he was very young. He had become a difficult young man at twenty, who was slow to take responsibility for his independence and didn't live up to his father's expectations. There had been an incident, more violent than the others. The man had hit his son and chased him out of the house the day before. Fog had not come home, and today, when they had crossed paths, they had not spoken to each other.

Lightning studied him for a moment, mentally listening to the right thigh, by which he was Linked to her, and which never gnawed at her.

"How can you not suffer from this situation?" she finally asked.

"I am sorry, you see: I came to see you to ask for your advice."

"But you are not suffering. Your heart is dry."

The man looked down.

"I have never been able to get myself to feel sorry for him."

"It is not about feeling sorry for him," she told him with a touch of sternness. "It is about feeling something when you inflict suffering on someone, especially your own son."

"I am aware that I am not a very good father. I was happy that he Linked himself to you."

"The Link he made with me does not absolve you of your own responsibilities."

"I know."

"Do you have some savings?"

"Yes, a little."

"You are going to find him a decent place to live, far away from yours, and give him a little money every week until he earns some himself."

"That is a lifetime of savings," he protested.

"The harm you did to him lasted his entire childhood," she said, her eyes narrowing, "and it will cast a shadow on his entire existence."

"At his age, I fended for myself..."

"You took an oath, like Vine did earlier, to respect my decrees. I am surprised to have to remind you of that."

The man looked down again, submissively.

"Okay. I will do what you ask."

"By tomorrow."

"By tomorrow."

"And now, go get Fog for me, and tell him that I want to see him."

The young man was like a stain of shadow in the middle of the colors of the party; he approached Lightning timidly, who asked him to sit next to her and took his hand.

"Look at the tattoo that represents you," she said, holding out her fingers. "It hurts so much that I can hardly think of anything else."

"I am sorry," muttered Fog.

"Do not be. This pain, like all pains, is useful: it tells me what I need to do, what needs to be repaired for harmony to return. Like a burn that warns me to remove my hand from the fire."

"Pain is a good thing?"

"It is the absence of pain that is the most dangerous. Because it allows crimes to be committed."

Fog looked at Lightning intensely.

"My father has no compassion."

"No, and that is why you must live as far away from him as possible."

"But I have no way to support myself..."

"I ordered him to find you a place to live and to provide for your immediate needs. I want you out from under his roof."

"That is what he wants too."

"Is that not what you should want as well?"

"I feel like he is getting rid of me."

"You are getting rid of him. You did not have a mother, and your father failed you. You have to see this separation as a liberation. I ask you to think about what you would like to do for a living, and to come back to me when you have found the path you want to take. The clan will help you accomplish your plan."

"I do not know how to do anything..."

"That is what your father put in your head. But it is not the truth."

"But he is right, I really do not know how to do anything."

"You believe it because he has repeated it to you. You have to tell yourself the opposite every day."

Over the course of the conversation, the very deep pain in the bone of the ring finger had turned into a more superficial burning sensation.

"You are feeling better," said Lightning with a smile.

She took him in her arms, and was surprised to see him shaking with nervous sobs. Each hiccup, however, seemed to evacuate a little more suffering, and when she loosened her embrace, the young man was more serene.

The banquet lasted several hours. Lightning, as soon as she had recovered a bit from her emotions, spent some time with Vine and her family, before making her rounds of the groups. She would receive, on these kinds of occasions, so much information that she could not digest it all - just like her stomach could not digest the countless treats offered to her, her mind stopped at the threshold of all the details she was learning about everyone's life. She had to store all this, small pastries and small sorrows, dried fruits and pregnancy announcements, construction projects and bottles of aromatic oils. She would return home with her arms full of packages and jars, and her head weighed down by the incessant ramifications of the life that irrigated the clan, opened up new paths, overflowed its bed and fertilized new lands, like an untamable delta.

When the party ended she was the first to withdraw, and she took, once again, the forest path that led her home, while the families spread out on the path to the City. But the deep calm which had reigned in her soul when she arrived was replaced by the feverish excitement of her brain. The news replayed in her head, in no apparent order, like a flood of images in a dream. Petal had been injured on the job. Strange rumors about the Sun clan were circulating wildly; one of the clan members had supposedly expressed a desire to sever their Link and had asked about the Lightning clan. Swarm had gone bankrupt and now found himself in deep poverty; the emergency measures that Lightning had taken would have to be followed by a more lasting arrangement. Fog had been driven out. People were saying that the men of the Probe were of different colors, some pale as snow

and others brown as earth. The Sap clan was preparing to change its Keystone, because Sap was dying. Lake and Moon had united and a child might be born.

The bubbling of life never stopped. Neither did that of History. Little by little, however, to the rhythm of the walk, Lightning's consciousness became more distant, moved away from the humans and closer to the other organisms. She absorbed herself in the green silence of the plants and the beating of the insect's wings. She became one with Organ, which she trod with respect, and of which the humans were only one of the innumerable voices. Their rumor gradually decreased, became a steady murmur, as unintelligible and soothing as the rhythm of the current or that of the light progressing in the sky. Birth, life, and death. Continuous metamorphoses.

She arrived, tired, in her garden, where she was greeted by the two large ginger cats that kept her company. Indifferent and full of a majesty usurped from the cousins who had never set their paws on Organ, the cats had no need of Lightning and that was why she liked them. For their selfishness and their independence, for the opacity of their minds only concerned with their well-being. They deigned to purr for a brief moment before resuming their dreamy attitude.

In the sky, the sunset illuminated touching colors that Lightning, like she did every evening, contemplated as if it was the first time.

She searched, in vain, for the groove of the Probe.

*EXCERPT FROM THE QUO VADIS LOGBOOK - Captain
Freya Eastcott*

EARTH YEAR 2731

Digital archives last accessed in the year 2830

It is psychologically difficult for the crew to cross the edge of the solar system. Certainly, it has been over three months since we said goodbye to Earth, or what's left of it, but during that time, if anything had gone wrong, we knew we were close enough to turn around. It was difficult to part ways with each of the vessels that made up our fleet - today it was us who left the Discover and the Hermes. I felt that the crew marked the occasion.

Now the Earth is a memory. The children to be born will not know it.

The Quo Vadis is as vast as a city, and this city is drifting slowly, aimlessly, in a random direction. At the species level, we have to hope that our descendants, one day, will find refuge somewhere. At the individual level, we must learn to live like this, in this floating city, locked in together, for our entire existence.



CHAPTER 2: MISSIONS

EARTH YEAR 3416

At an altitude of seventy or eighty thousand feet, the view of a planet was always dizzyingly beautiful. At times, the captain ordered that the transparent walls of the meeting room be closed in order to prevent the distraction that this violent and forever extraordinary spectacle caused to the men and women of the crew. There were cases, in the records, of astronauts whom beauty had driven mad; pushed to suicide. It was called Pesquet's syndrome. One couldn't lay their eyes on these immemorial lights, these clouds which seemed like pieces of color torn off from the first jolts of the universe, these curved horizons bathed in surreal clearness, one couldn't embrace a whole world, in its sublime finiteness, without having the impression of violating a mortal secret.

For the time being, however, the captain of the Probe, Egon Richards, hadn't found it necessary to close the portholes, and scientist Major Mikael Strauss was grateful. All of the scientific members of the crew were present, and Mikael couldn't tell if they were listening to the captain's words, or if they were totally lost in the hypnotic contemplation of Organ. He himself felt in a somewhat peculiar state of consciousness, his mind split. As aerospace life had taught him over the past few years, he let his spontaneous, deep self wander within the narrow confines of reverie, while the major within him performed the tasks inherent to his post. Listening to the briefing, going to the mess hall, running the fitness circuit, analyzing data, writing reports. While Major Strauss impeccably fulfilled his du-

ty, something in him more blurred and more human continued its underground life.

"It's time to take inventory of our initial findings on this planet," Captain Richards was saying. "As you know, the natives call it Organ. They are undeniably from a human strain, with few apparent morphological changes. Further study of their DNA should confirm that their genome is indeed that of homo sapiens sapiens... which seems fairly obvious since their language is clearly a dialect of English. According to them, a vessel with a few thousand passengers landed on Organ during the Great Propagation. Our data corroborates this possibility as extremely probable: the computer dates their arrival on the planet to 589 years ago, with a 98% probability. They have had no contact with outer space since then."

Surprised murmurs ran through the assembly.

"What stage of civilization have they reached?" asked First Ensign Salama.

"How many do we estimate them to be?" asked Major Saint-Louis.

"Do they occupy the entire planet?" asked Lieutenant Malkine.

Major Strauss remained silent. His teammates were good with numbers. They asked the right questions, the ones that got right to the point. But Mikael didn't want to get right to the point with this planet. He wanted to gradually unveil it from its clouds, to roam it slowly, to *discover* it.

"Do the initial geological analyses promise any resources to exploit?" asked another.

"All of your questions are, of course, both legitimate and urgent," replied Richards. "Unfortunately, you'll have to make do with ap-

proximate answers, for the moment. The level of technology appears at first glance to be quite rudimentary, but there are discordant elements. I saw what appeared to be a large building with a plume of steam coming out of it. Their agricultural, architectural, and mechanical skills seem to me to be overall equivalent to those of 17th century Europe, but of course a much more thorough study is needed to have a clear picture. This was only a first impression. We know that the development of propagated colonies is extremely variable, and does not follow the logic of the history of earth. Some inventions are lost, others are preserved in spite of a regression of all the rest; others flourish at the wrong time.”

“I volunteer myself to go down on Organ for a technology assessment,” said Chief Engineer Ido.

“Granted,” said the captain. “I did intend to assemble an investigation party. You will be particularly attentive to the level of weaponry and military engineering.”

Mikael registered the last remark, but didn’t express the thoughts that it gave him.

“I’d like to be able to go down as well,” he said, “in order to carry out an ethnological and sociological analysis.”

Lieutenant Malkine couldn’t help but snicker.

“I understand that you need to keep busy, Major Strauss, but what’re we going to do with an ethnological analysis?”

Mikael didn’t answer, and continued to look calmly at the captain.

“Granted,” said the latter. “We may need a diplomatic solution.”

“Obviously, I would need a whole team, for my part,” intervened Major Rodriguez.

“A roboticist, a drone operator, and an assistant analyst, at least.”

“Of course,” said Captain Richards casually. “You’ll also bring Second Ensign Touré, who will help with cartography. Geological and mining research are at the heart of our mission. Any questions?”

The crew members looked at each other. They were rarely together, in a vessel large enough to allow them to lead parallel lives. None of them particularly liked to speak in public, and one could feel that they were ready to disperse as soon as the centripetal force that held them together ceased to operate. In this case, the captain.

“Crew members not involved in the investigation mission, dismissed.”

Lieutenant Malkine, followed by his entourage, was among the first to leave. Others lingered near the portholes, taking with them one last image of the glowing planet. Then the designated members closed ranks around the captain. There was Chief Engineer Ido, a serious and discreet man; Major Rodriguez, whom Mikael didn’t know very well; Ensign Second Class Michelle Touré, who specialized in 3D cartography, as well as assistant analyst Damian Azoury and roboticist Isla Brown.

“You aren’t going down, Captain?” Mikael asked when the others had left.

“No. I’ve been down there already, I don’t think I’ll go back.”

Mikael expressed his surprise with a smile, but made no comment. How could anyone renounce the privilege of a stopover on a temperate, vegetated, inhabited planet? How could anyone, with the possibility of putting their feet on real ground, deliberately choose not to do so? Egon Richards was definitely an interesting man; a man Mikael would enjoy analyzing if the opportunity presented itself.

“In this regard, I would recommend the utmost caution. The return to a natural gravity and atmosphere, the proximity of many living organisms, will undoubtedly provoke a strong concentration of endorphins in your brain. But don't let your enthusiasm overwhelm you. Stay focused on your mission of analysis, and do not prolong your stay on the planet beyond what is necessary.”

“Maximum duration of the mission?” asked Rodriguez.

“A few days. A daily report, on my direct channel. Don't hesitate to contact me if you have any sensitive questions. Rodriguez, you and your team probably won't have much contact with the natives. Once the authorizations have been granted by the government in place, whoever it may be, I invite you to move away from the residential areas and start plotting the grid systematically over this entire area.”

He pointed to about a third of the planet on the digital map.

“Over subsequent days you'll return to land at other points on Organ. Nevertheless, it seems judicious to start with the inhabited area. Your devices will cover this type of terrain without any problem. Chief Engineer Ido, you will stay with Major Strauss as much as possible, at least at the beginning. If it's possible for you to travel alone afterward, you'll be able to carry out your technological audit independently. However, I'm entrusting Major Strauss with the responsibility of making decisions regarding diplomatic relations with the natives. Major Rodriguez, I also ask you to follow his instructions in this matter.”

Everyone nodded.

“If we have completed our reconnaissance before the rest of the team, can we come back up separately?” asked Isla Brown

“I consider this investigation mission to have two components. A geological component and an intelligence component. The members of the geological mission must stay together and come up to-

gether, but can come up before the members of the intelligence mission if necessary.”

“What are the stated objectives?”

“For the geological mission, the data are already transferred to your accounts, with the coordinates of the area to be scanned and the types of surveys and samples expected. For the intelligence mission, the objectives are, in order of priority: to establish a friendly contact with the native authorities, to evaluate in a precise way their technical capacities, in particular their capacities of destruction, to become familiar with their social mode of functioning, their mentalities and the broad outlines of their history, and to evaluate the possibilities of later cooperation with the Union.”

Michelle Touré couldn't suppress the smile that was lighting up her face - like a person in love whose mouth involuntarily stretched at the memory of a tender word, her lips smiled despite herself at the prospect of touching ground.

“Are you sure you don't want to come with us, Captain?”
she risked.

Captain Richards smiled at her.

“I'm sure.”

She regained her seriousness, with obvious difficulty, and the effort dug dimples into her cheeks.

“If you have no further questions, meet me tomorrow in the debarkation area at 0800 sharp. Dismissed,” the captain finally said, and Michelle's face, like a body shedding its uniform, abandoned its restrained expression and let her excitement burst through.

Mikael looked at her for a long moment, sympathetically - it wasn't often that he saw such an expression on the crew's stiff faces.

He noticed that Captain Richards was looking at her with the same amused smile, and the two men looked at each other in friendly agreement.

“Stay a moment, Major Strauss, please.”

The others saluted the captain, with a little more warmth than usual - even Chief Engineer Ido, usually so unexpressive, shook hands with Mikael with unusual enthusiasm.

Egon Richards was a man who spoke little, or rather never used speech lightly. Mikael therefore felt intrigued by this request. He wondered if it was a personal request or an order; despite his sympathy for the captain, their connection had always remained purely hierarchical.

At times they felt slight jolts in the vessel as it passed through invisible radiation or clouds of particles. It was an unpleasant sensation, reminding the crew of the fragility of their condition - but the captain, before speaking, kept a straight face.

“Major Strauss, I know you have degrees in extraterrestrial ethnology, anthropology, linguistics, sociology, organizational psychology. You are probably the most qualified person to carry out a rather particular mission.”

Mikael, whose eyes were drawn despite himself to the golden light that haloed Organ, asked:

“A mission on Organ?”

“No,” the captain said quickly. “Nothing to do with that. It's a problem we have on board.”

Mikael tore himself away, with difficulty, from contemplating the planet.

“I'm listening.”

“The chief mechanic Filip Reda seems to have serious psychological problems.”

Mikael had heard the name before, but couldn't picture Reda's face.

“Haven't you discussed this with the medical staff?”

“Yes, of course I have. But the chemotherapeutic solutions seem to have reached their limits. And, to be totally transparent, the doctors are passing the buck and giving up.”

“Is that allowed by the Hippocratic oath?”

“They say that Reda is not sick.”

“But you don't agree.”

“He isn't sick, in the sense that his mind does not seem to be affected; his problem is more metaphysical.”

Mikael's eyes widened.

“Metaphysical? A problem concerning the soul, freedom, time, God, matter?”

“You could say that. He's suicidal.”

Mikael nodded.

“What do you expect of me?”

“I'd like you to try some kind of talk therapy.”

“A psychoanalysis?”

“You don't think that's relevant?”

“I don't have a habit of discussing orders, Captain.”

“It's not an order.”

The surprises just kept coming, but Mikael tried not to show it.

“I'm asking you as a favor, Major Strauss. I would consider it a personal failure if one of my crew committed suicide. And, as you must know, suicides behind closed doors are strangely contagious.”

Mikael nodded gravely.

"Of course, Captain, I'm willing to try. But I must, by professional ethics, remind you that I'm in no way qualified for this kind of therapy. I've never practiced it."

"You are an intelligent and sensitive man, Major Strauss. Those are qualifications enough for me."

"Would you like me to see Reda this evening?"

"Yes, if you don't mind. Before you leave on your mission."

Mikael nodded and followed Captain Richards through the maze of identical corridors and silent elevators. They passed no one - with a little imagination, they could've thought themselves on a ghost ship.

"When I was promoted to captain," Richards said in a distant voice, "I pictured technical difficulties, breakdowns, piloting problems, supply issues. I wondered if I'd be up to it."

Mikael, a little intimidated, didn't know what to say. But the captain didn't wait for a reply and spoke again a moment later.

"In truth, this routine has never caused me any problems. It's the men that cause problems - always the men."

They took a few more steps, then stopped at one of the countless doors leading to the crew's quarters. There was a number on the door: 2C44.

"I'll leave you to it, Major Strauss. It's best you get to know him without me."

Mikael watched the captain walk away, and listened to the sound of his footsteps decrease in the corridor. The feeling of being aboard a ghost ship intensified when he was alone at the doorway behind which death lurked, vaporous, in a state of desire.

He gave several quick knocks, then, without really knowing why, three distinct knocks, and the door opened like a rising curtain.

Filip Reda, who was about thirty-five years old, was considerably more covered than the temperature required; he was also much paler than most of the crew, probably because he had been neglecting the

mandatory UV sessions for some time. He did, however, have a surprisingly lively, almost radiant look that showed an active inner life. One of those faces whose features one forgets, but whose presence exerts an inexplicable magnetism.

“Hello,” said Mikael. “I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“Not particularly,” said Reda.

Mikael liked his voice; it was not the voice of a madman, but a voice full of distinction, rather slow, with a low tone.

“I don’t know where to begin,” Mikael said. “I’m Major Mikael Strauss, and Captain Richards sent me.” Filip Reda smiled.

“Does the Captain think I need a friend?”

“Perhaps. Would you accept to let me in?”

“Why not?”

He stepped aside to let Mikael in, then closed door 2C44 and led his guest into a small, impersonal living room, whose modest size corresponded to his place in the military hierarchy. It was a more cramped space than the one he himself enjoyed - and the sudden awareness of his privileges plunged Mikael into an awkward silence. But these quarters weren't just small; like his body, Reda's apartment also smelled of a kind of abandonment.

“You’re the ethnological officer, aren't you?”

“Indeed, I am.”

“And that's why, among all those hard science enthusiasts, he chose you to come and talk to me...”

Mikael hesitated for a moment, then began.

“He asked me to offer you a kind of talk therapy.”

Reda smiled a little sadly.

“I see. He's very worried, that Captain Richards. He wouldn't want a suicide on board.”

Mikael said nothing and waited.

“And you, Major Strauss, do you think that the desire to die can be cured? That it can be expunged like OCD, or like an addiction?”

“To be honest, I don't know. It doesn't seem impossible to me.”

Reda nodded, with a touch of irony.

“We can try, if you'd like.”

Filip Reda sat comfortably in his chair and waited with a mixture of docility and skepticism. Mikael felt as if he were playing a part in a bad movie when he asked:

“You used the expression ‘desire to die’. How long have you had this kind of desire?”

“I don't know at what point you start calling it a desire. I think about death very often, since I was a teenager. Every day in fact. I always more or less knew that I would die by my own hand. But it didn't become a constant preoccupation, a kind of project, until much more recently. I would say, two years.”

“You've never attempted suicide?”

“No.”

“When you say ‘constant preoccupation’, does that mean that you really think about it all the time?”

“No, there are times when I focus on other things. But, how can I put it - it's getting harder and harder for me to focus on other things, because other things are making less and less sense.”

“And the thought of death does make sense?”

“Yes. It's the most consistent thing in my head. I don't know how to explain it to you, it's a bit like being in love. It becomes the only important thing - everything else seems trivial.”

“What is trivial, for example?”

“A lot of everyday things. Washing, dressing, eating, taking care of your body. And also the tasks on board. I'm a mechanic, I have to accomplish a lot of senseless tasks.”

“You said that death had become your ‘project’, right? Does that mean you're planning your suicide?”

“No. Not yet, not really. I fantasize about it, for now. I dream about it. But it's not time yet - it's like I'm in a maturation phase. I'm getting ready. And when I'm ready, I'll do it.”

“But you don't know when?”

“No.”

The two men looked at each other. The cramped quarters of the engineer, the orders of Captain Richards, the social and military status of each of them, and with them all the artifice of the situation, seemed to have dissolved. All that remained was this magic of exchanged words, this arrow of light and meaning that sprang from the darkness.

“This conversation seems to make a lot of sense to me,”
Mikael finally said.

Filip Reda gave a small, graceful laugh.

“This may surprise you, but it does to me too.”

Mikael smiled back and almost regretted, for just a moment, having to go to Organ the next day.

*EXCERPT FROM THE QUO VADIS LOGBOOK - Captain
Freya Eastcott*

EARTH YEAR 2734

Digital Archives last accessed in the year 2830

I still dream of Earth sometimes. Less and less often - yet, like a cumbersome dead man whose ghost is not at peace, she will never stop haunting us. Is it because it ended so sadly, so cursed? At times I recall the semi-abandoned planet of the last few years. The air saturated with particles. The men and women dragging themselves with heavier and heavier masks. Cities in ruins. Nature sick. Animals burning in fires, or dropping like flies in epidemics. I'd like to be able to dream of the Earth of before - the one I didn't really know, other than in the synthetic images of virtual fictions.

Sometimes I have the impression that it's precisely because we have known it without knowing it, that we are unable to mourn it. Or maybe that mourning is just too big for a simple human heart. Maybe none of us will ever have the inner strength to mourn the Earth. Perhaps the only hope lies in our children, who will not need to grieve, because they will have known only our tiny, drifting ship.



CHAPTER 3: COUNCIL OF THE KEYS

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 586

The Vessel had landed on a plateau, which dominated the valley to the west and formed the foothills of an ancient, rounded mountain to the north. Nestled there, the night-colored giant, which sometimes reflected the blaze of the sunset, or the obscure clarity of the stars, would remain forever immobile - it had traveled through years and space, to end up in this particular place in the universe. With the majesty of an ancient pyramid, it dominated with its fabulous height the buildings of wood, cob and stone, which had grown at its feet, and soon covered not only the plateau, but the gentle slope that led to the valley, as well as the banks of the river. Not as far as the eye could see, because the untouched Organ enveloped them on all sides, but far enough. To the north, the virgin mountain shaded them until midday; to the south, the deep forest revealed its palette of colors, green, copper, gold, rust, like an immense shivering coat of fur. To the west, the sea with its blue tints, sometimes bordering on mauve, offered the spectacle of its powerful swell, and, now and then, the enchantment of marine animals jumping out of the water.

Lightning had arrived early, well before it was time for the Council. She walked with measured steps towards the Vessel. This, like a nourishing bulb, was the root of the City, which had grown on its gutted walls, as an extension of its lines, as if unfolding its internal spaces. The Vessel was neither closed nor demarcated; when one approached it, an alleyway suddenly opened onto a corridor of alu-

minum or carbon, the back room of a building opened onto an immobile elevator, a façade of stone or sculpted wood gave access to a gigantic hall, a hangar or an engine room. Everything that could have been used for the construction had been conscientiously looted - everything, that is to say, the tools, of course, but also the materials, from the sections of wall to the metal bars, not forgetting the screws, the doors, the panels. But some rooms, like the one where Lightning was going, had been preserved intact, almost religiously, and remained freely accessible. The very dark depths of the Vessel in which you had to use a torch to light your way, didn't attract many people however. They knew they had come from there - from this dark building, cold to the touch, from this huge labyrinth that the passage of time did not alter. They knew it, but they turned resolutely towards the outside, the light, the sea and the forest. The destination had long since supplanted the origin in the hearts of the men and women of Organ.

Lightning happily traversed the streets of the City, where she didn't go very often. The streets bustled with activity in the cool morning air; children were busy collecting eggs and, incidentally, making the chickens fly and cluck in the pens. There was the smell of laundry, of baking dough, of wood fires. Until now, she had managed to maintain a relative anonymity outside of her clan, but she noticed that since she had a facial tattoo, people's eyes turned away with respect. The young men no longer followed her with their eyes, and young women no longer smiled at her with an air of complicity; even the elderly gave her small signs of deference. Her body was suddenly no longer a normal body, but an icon; it was invested with a symbolic power, it became a signifier, a vector. When she was in the solitude of her garden, immersed in the silence of Organ, and when she was with her clan, this didn't bother her. But here, in the City, she felt as if she was measuring everything she had renounced by agreeing to be a Keystone. She knew that this feeling would pass later, at

the Council, among her own group. She also knew that the part of her that groaned under the burden of pain, that mourned for the children she could not have, and that yearned for lightness, could be temporarily muzzled, but would never be tamed. It would show itself, it would revolt, at every opportunity. And she would have to continue to make room for it, to hear its voice, and to console its distress.

She stopped at a bakery stall, and chose a cheese roll she was particularly fond of. She did not pay for it - since the Keys, by tradition, didn't handle money. Then she stopped at an herbalist who was preparing an ointment.

"Hello, my dear," the man said with a smile. "Do you have time to stop by so I can tell you about my latest creations?"

Lightning intended to go to the Library, but she was curious: there were plants in the window that she didn't know.

"I went on a very interesting expedition last month, and I found these species of graminae. Have you ever seen them before?"

"No, I have not. They are intriguing."

"You know I have a very strong stomach - I have tried them on myself, in smoke, in decoction, in ointment."

"Do they have any qualities?"

"All plants have qualities, it is just a matter of finding out which ones... These ones seem interesting for a Keystone: as an ointment, they help relieve burns, and if you ingest them, they give you a boost, which lasts for a few hours..."

"You know I am not supposed to relieve my pains!"

"I did not mean yours, of course... But nothing forbids you from giving yourself a boost!"

"I want to try," she said. "Can you give me a jar?"

"Of course I can. I advise you not to infuse them, they have a very unpleasant taste. But you can swallow them directly with water. Are you interested in my work on the plants of the forest?"

Lightning glanced at the notebook the herbalist was showing her. It was a more difficult item to obtain than a jar of herbs or a loaf of cheese bread; she thought of the work involved in making the paper, using the printing press, and the medicinal research of which these few pages were the sum.

“This is a precious book,” she said, her eyes shining. “I am not very good at this yet and it would help me considerably.”

“Well, take it! Do you think I wrote it to keep it in my medicine cabinet? It is an honor to give it to a Keystone.”

“What clan are you from?”

“The Mist Clan.”

Lightning flipped through the book.

“Did you draw the botanical charts?”

“Yes,” said the herbalist proudly.

“It is beautiful work.”

She thanked the herbalist from the Mist Clan, and continued on her way. There were a few bicycles on the streets, some pulling small carts, but most people were walking on foot. She passed a music school, where teenagers were practicing on some kind of guitar, as well as various percussion instruments, and flutes. She had sometimes stopped to listen to a rehearsal as she passed, but for now, the cacophony was such that she pressed on instead.

In the immediate vicinity of the Vessel, the hustle and bustle diminished and, she didn't know why, the noises seemed muffled. The Vessel was a compact block of silence in the heart of the City, and one crossed its threshold with a slightly strange sensation, one that she did not find unpleasant. She took hold of one of the torches left at the disposal of the visitors, lit it at a basin of oil which nourished a small flame, and entered one of the main arteries of the Vessel. For the moment the torch was useless since the wide opening still let the morning light filter in. But, by sinking a few feet deeper into the bowels of the giant, a subtle change took place in the scenery. It was

not only the darkness that intensified - but also the growing impression of circulating, not in a technological object, but in a cave with walls drowned in shadow, or in a primordial temple.

She proceeded for a few minutes before finding the entrance to the Library. Conceived as a kind of sphere whose inner walls could be explored via walkways and moving staircases, this vast hall was always full, and relatively well lit; engineers and architects always had something to consult; the literature sections, on the other hand, were much less frequented. Lightning always looked with regret at the silent screens of the computers and other portable screens, which slept a centennial slumber, and which must have contained an enormous amount of information. The only ones that had escaped the wreckage were those printed on paper - an almost unalterable paper, whose perfect grain Lightning always admired. This Library had been designed like a tomb, with materials made to defy eternity. The tomb of a whole civilization, of its power, its science, its excess, its art, its philosophy, its creative fury and destructive fury. This filled Lightning with a nameless nostalgia - there is no word to describe this feeling that assails you in front of the passage of the centuries and the misguidance of the species. What rested there, on those shelves where the hope of survival had printed the obsession of comprehensiveness, was not an anonymous testament but a collective one, a superhuman legacy. Lightning was saddened to see that the inhabitants of Organ were losing interest in it more and more. Once they had recovered the most useful techniques, they had turned their backs on the mistakes of the past, resolutely, with all the freshness that this new, luxuriant and living planet gave them. What did the people who had led the Earth to ruin have to teach them?

Lightning had spent many hours, since her childhood, reading hundreds of stories from all continents and all epochs of the Earth. The Earth existed in her imagination, with the incredible precision of vanished civilizations. Literature had fabricated worlds - as plausi-

ble as they were totally imaginary. But civilizations that disappeared had a characteristic inaccessible to fiction. A work of fiction was, almost always, the product of a single author's brain - and you could find a kind of internal coherence there, a homogeneity, a harmony, an aesthetic sometimes, which did not exist in reality. Reality was full of irregularities, contradictions and inconsistencies. The Earth, in the finitude of its history, represented an untellable and chaotic world. There was the same difference, in the imagination, between a work of fiction and a vanished civilization as between an ordered garden and a rugged landscape. The rugged landscape was by nature unpredictable, and contained all sorts of traces and elements that defied understanding. And that was why, over time, Lightning had become more and more interested in history, and had ended up forsaking fiction. Lately, she had been reading and rereading the *Quo Vadis* logbook. This was one of the most popular readings, and every child on *Organ* studied excerpts of it. The crew and passengers of the *Quo Vadis* were their direct ancestors, and formed the last link in the chain that connected them to the rest of humanity.

Today she wanted to reread a specific passage, and it took her some time to find it in the familiar architecture of the text. It was the passage that concerned the genesis of the organic Links.

My impression has been confirmed too many times now - this impression that I rejected, each time, because it didn't correspond to what I knew of human beings, I must now make room for it in this book. What is real, is that which arises, and that which imposes. And according to this definition, what I am about to describe is absolutely real.

I have experienced myself, more than once, a strange phenomenon, for which I must choose my words carefully. It seemed to me that I was warned, at times, of a catastrophe that was happening on board, at the other end of the vessel. This happened twice: when the fire broke out in the air conditioning section, and during the accident with the external door, when part of the hangar was suddenly depressurized. In both cas-

*es, I felt like a wave of panic - something that emanated not from a single being, but from many, and that propagated through space like a sound, yet was not perceptible on any radio frequency. I thought for a long time that I had in some way heard the screams, the clamor, much in the way that some animals perceived ultrasound on Earth. But no one else heard it except me, and if I think about it, it was not a sound per se. What I called a wave of panic affected me more directly, it infected me and panicked me in turn; even before I knew why, I was in a state close to sickness, with a discharge of adrenalin and a tachycardia attack. I left these two experiences aside, without thinking about them further, for a long time. Then I became a father, and I witnessed a similar phenomenon. When my daughter was very little, she developed a respiratory illness; one night she coughed so hard that she vomited, and, having rolled onto her stomach, was in the process of choking when my wife leapt out of the bunk and crossed the space between us and her without a word, but with surprising speed. My wife rescued our daughter just in time - it took her a while to catch her breath. And I wondered by what miraculous process, by what invisible link, the baby's suffocation had been felt by my wife, to the point of waking her in the middle of the night. How the feeling of urgency was able to be communicated, as if by telepathy, where sound and sight could not. Since that day, I have been attentive to the appearance of this phenomenon. It seems to me, in view of the situations I have collected, that the capacity to emit what I would call an emergency signal seems greater in children. To be perfectly accurate, it seems to be more prevalent in people who were born aboard the *Quo Vadis*. I can't explain it, but it seems to me that we can identify this statistical recurrence. Furthermore, the phenomena of communicating the feeling of urgency are facilitated when people have a strong bond, such as a baby and its mother, or work colleagues who are used to relying on each other for their safety, or even lovers. Receptivity, on the other hand, seems to be slightly more common in women. But all these observations*

must be organized into a real scientific protocol, or we will miss something that may be a major evolution of human capacities.

The question I ask myself, however, is not: how did this capacity develop? But rather: what should we use it for?

As always, Lightning felt a deep respect for Rootstock - she regretted a little not having known him personally. When she emerged from the Vessel, her head still full of images of that adventurous journey through the Quo Vadis, she felt touched by the inert, night-colored carcass around her. As she emerged into the open air, moved by a kind of instinct, she raised her head and was happy to see the little silver dot moving, with reassuring regularity, in the sky.

Time was a bit short, however, since it would take her about thirty minutes to get to the Council Chamber. During the summer, the Council of the Keys was held on the Western Terrace, which overlooked the valley and the sea, and from which one had one of the best views of the Vessel. The trees with bare trunks, arranged in staggered rows, formed a vegetal colonnade. The various trunks, all of which were about thirty feet high, gnarled or smooth, brown or white, shiny, rough, wide or narrow, supported a vast foliage, artistically carved, with perfect regularity. In the center, wooden seats were arranged in a circle, and the three hundred or so Keystones came to sit, talk and debate on subjects of general interest.

Like the trees, each a different type, the Keystones displayed a prodigious diversity. Some had grown larger, filling the space with their stature. Others had almost lost their human features under the number of facial tattoos. Men, women, elderly, almost childlike faces, radiating joy of life or suffering, they supported the human world, each in their own way, each at their own scale. Lightning, who knew almost everyone, waved and said quick greetings, but she looked for her friend Torrent, a young man with fine features and smooth, beardless skin. She smiled when she found him, because he was staring at her with an amused and seduced look.

Lightning sat down next to him. Slightly older than her, he was from the clan where she had grown up, the Sap clan. The two children had chased each other at clan parties; as teenagers, they had exchanged adult caresses; as adults, Torrent had decided to become a Key, and Lightning, a few years later, as much out of a sense of independence as a desire not to lose him altogether, had followed suit. This happened by chance - her independent and empathetic nature, her great social intelligence, her emotional control, her sense of morals, gave her all the qualities required to support a clan. She had inherited a large clan almost immediately after Spring's death - and for the past four years, she had been carrying out her duties quite peacefully. Her clan loved her and there had never been a serious problem with her human management. The opposite happened, of course, from time to time: some Keys could not bear the pain, let themselves become overwhelmed by the task, and led the clan into a spiral of suffering. Some Keys took advantage of their ascendancy over the clan to create a cult of personality around them. Some others broke the Links by having children. The system had its failures, its flaws, its abuses, but the inhabitants of Organ were satisfied with it, because it was based on a carnal, physical, irrefutable solidarity. It was impossible for a Keystone to exploit the suffering of their clan for his or her own benefit, because the suffering of their clan was their own suffering. The exploitation of man by man had become physically impossible, and this principle, which guaranteed that the errors committed on Earth would not be repeated on Organ, seemed to them all absolutely sacred.

As always, Torrent slid his caressing, slightly cheerful gaze over her before greeting her. Her arrival had just interrupted a conversation between him and Amber, who also greeted her.

"Lightning, my dear... It has been too long!"

"Since the last Council," she confirmed. "How is your clan?"

Torrent sighed comically.

"I have seen better days... My neck, throat and back hurt practically permanently, and quite intensely. Not to mention the little migrant aches and pains that come and go."

"Do not talk to me about aches and pains... I cannot feel my foot after that endless walk."

As she said these words, she couldn't help thinking of Fog, who would soon begin his ultimate calvary.

Amber, who was a little older than them, burst out laughing.

"Listen to yourselves. You sound like senior citizens. One day, you will have your own pains to bear on top of everyone else's, and that is when things will get tough..."

"Do we know the agenda?"

Torrent handed her a wax tablet, which she flipped through quickly.

Today, the Council had three questions to consider. Firstly, that of demographic growth: could the decision-making system, which was starting to become rather cumbersome, last beyond a certain number of Keys? There were already three hundred of them, and it sometimes took several hours to reach a consensus on the smallest issue. Was it not time to think about a different Council organization? Then there was the question of redistributing the urban construction projects between the clans; the previous distribution overburdened the Wave clan and needed to be readjusted. Finally, they would need to discuss the diplomatic direction to take at the meeting planned with the delegation from the Probe. How should the visitors be welcomed, and what information should they be given access to?

"I would so love to be part of the committee that receives them," breathed Lightning.

"Really?" asked Torrent. "Why?"

"I do not know, it fascinates me. I would like to ask them hundreds of questions."

Torrent smiled at her, then put his lips to her ear and whispered:

“Are you fertile today?”

Lightning looked at him with a falsely astonished smile. The sexual tension had never really stopped between the two of them, ever since the blessed days of their adolescence, in the secret folds of Organ, when their young, virgin bodies suffered no pain, and were Linked to no one. She had sometimes wondered what would have happened if they had conceived a child back then... They would probably be married today. They would have become hard-working, family-oriented members of the same clan. She didn't know if this thought made her nostalgic - it simply hadn't happened, and only reality had any weight.

“No, I am not fertile today,” she replied, whispering in his ear.

Torrent looked deep into her eyes. She knew he wanted to meet up with her after the Council, as he often did. She imagined, in a fraction of a second, the sensation of being naked under his hands, and remembered all the hands that had touched and penetrated her during the Needle Ceremony. Something tingled inside her, and with her familiar, affectionate gesture, she closed his mouth, as if to suspend their desire.

The discussions began, and the two young adults, in unison with all the Keystones, took a lively part in the debates. At the Council, there was not one leader, but three hundred. It was the rules of speech, long since internalized, that enabled them to move forward collectively in this improbable dialogue. The first rule was to speak up only when in disagreement - or when making a new proposal to the group. In this way, consensus was achieved through silence. The second rule was to never repeat an argument, and never to reiterate a proposal when consensus had not been reached. The third was to not stray from the topic. The fourth, never to depart from a courteous tone. Fifth, to never abandon the debate.

The discussion started from multiple places at once, beginning in small groups. And then, naturally, when several people agreed, on-

ly one continued to speak, since the others followed the first rule. Most Keystones, thanks to this rule, stopped talking quickly, and the debate ended up being between twenty or so people. When a thesis-antithesis type of opposition prevented progress, the second rule urged consideration of a third path. The Keystones, used to the exercise, were accustomed to abandoning their personal ideas in favor of collective consensus. And, imperceptibly, by taking the time, decisions began to make themselves. Without leaders, without parties, without factions, and without voting. This was the case for the first two questions, which were resolved after three hours. A random rotation would be proposed for the Council sessions, to maintain the number of three hundred. The Bee clan would be responsible for designing and communicating the rotation for the next ten Councils. The urban construction was redistributed on a more equitable basis. And Lightning finally saw the moment arrive when the subject closest to her heart would be debated.

The Key who had been Captain Egon Richards' interlocutor stood up. She was a fat woman in her sixties, energetic and serene, whose name was Rain. Her audience did not, as a whole, share Lightning's enthusiastic curiosity. Many were frightened by the intrusion, and saw the entry into orbit as the beginning of an attempt at colonization. The first meeting with the Vessel's captain, which had been very brief, had been rather reassuring, according to Rain: Captain Egon Richards didn't seem to be animated by belligerent intentions. He hadn't demanded anything. He had shown himself eager to learn diverse information about their history and social organization. He himself had given information that the inhabitants of Organ were now discovering with incredulous stupor. The Great Propagation had worked much better than expected. Many exoplanets were now home to human communities, some tiny, others larger. The Union, which represented a form of central power, and above all had a monopoly on the aerospace fleet, had retained a base on Earth. But it

was mainly in space, in the diaspora of its ever-moving fleet, that the Union deployed, mainly to collect data and useful minerals. There had never been an encounter with another form of intelligence. Humans seemed alone in this gigantic playground.

“Now that I have given you the objective information, I would like to share my personal impressions with you.”

The Keys fell silent and listened even more attentively. Rain was a respected woman, her power of empathy was well known, even outside her clan, and her personal impressions were of indisputable value.

“On a personal level, this man, Egon Richards, struck me as trustworthy. By this I mean that he did not seem to have a warlike or directly imperialistic ulterior motive. His way of addressing me included, of course, elements of manipulation, as in any diplomatic situation. But manipulation was not the foundation of this interview, which unfolded like a real reunion. That said, this man also made me very uncomfortable in many other ways. He is a solitary, withdrawn person. Someone cold, who maintains a physical and critical distance from others. His loyalty to the Union appeared to me as a kind of framework for his psychology. But the Union is a very abstract idea; this way of being at one with an entity spread over several light-years is as strange as the phenomenon of religion, and far removed from our conception of solidarity.

A few questions arose.

“What motivates these men and women, so far from home?”

“Strange as it may seem to you, I think it is discipline. Captain Richards was dressed in uniform, and from the way he talked about the crew, it was clear that they were a military organization. The Union is a fleet, with a hierarchy that is probably very strict.”

There were astonished murmurs in the room.

“Why would they keep an army if they are alone in the universe?”

“What is the point of their space travel for them? Are they looking for new exoplanets?”

Rain smiled meditatively.

“I thought a lot about these questions. To the first, ‘Why have they kept an army?’, I would answer, somewhat haphazardly, that they hold on to what they know. The army, in Earth civilization, was paradoxically a reassuring institution.”

“Reassuring? But did not armies make war?”

“Yes,” intervened Lightning, “but each population felt protected by its own army, at the same time as it felt threatened by the army of others.”

Rain gave her a benevolent look.

“I see our youth are spending time in the Library... and that is very important,” she commented. “The army offers a strict framework. Not only a purpose to existence, but also a rhythm, modalities, a spatial and social organization. As for the second question: ‘What is the point of space travel for them?’, I would say that they surely must justify the fleet. A fleet travels. Space travel does not have a purpose in itself, it is the very functioning of the fleet.”

“You mean they are not looking for anything?”

“They are not looking for anything, or they are looking for everything, which amounts to the same thing. God, aliens, some form of new energy. It does not really matter. Terrans had this old myth, in their Middle Ages: the Grail. All the knights of the realm had to search for the Grail, devoting their whole lives to it, without knowing where it was, or even what it was. The Grail was a condensed symbol of everything they lacked: prosperity, eternal life, redemption. It seems to me that space travel has the same symbolic significance. What they are looking for matters little, it is their search that drives them.”

“They will not be looking to settle on Organ?”

“I cannot answer that question. Captain Egon Richards did not seem to me to be driven by that desire. He is a man of principle, dedicated to his quest. So, if he is the one who decides, I would say no. Now, I propose that we have something to eat, before considering a number of questions. First of all, who will be part of the committee that will host their delegation? Secondly, what information we should give them, and which of those we should keep quiet about, particularly regarding our *organic* practices. What approach should we take: should we ask them to leave us in peace and carry out their research further away? Should we welcome them as friends, and give them free access to all parts of the City, including the Vessel? Finally, it seems to me that there is an even more crucial question. Should we take advantage of their arrival to make a technological leap forward, or should we refrain from doing so? Perhaps they could recharge the Vessel's energy, giving us access to all the computers' data? Should we ask them to tell us what is on the other side of the mountain? In short, should we use their techniques?”

A solemn silence followed these multiple questions. Then, softly at first, like water bubbling up from dozens of points at once, the dialogue gushed out, flowed, swelled, spread from neighbor to neighbor. Under the roof of foliage that shielded them from the view of the Probe, among the centennial trees, these men and women, responsible to their very flesh for the happiness of their people, began a long birthing effort. That of a collective political decision.

*EXCERPT FROM THE QUO VADIS LOGBOOK - Captain
Rön Stigmann*

EARTH YEAR 2748

Digital archives last consulted in the year 2830

As part of my new duties, I made a point of personally visiting the entire Quo Vadis, entering every room and inquiring about the contents of every container. Captain Eastcott leaves a big hole behind her, and the captain's uniform seemed too big for me... I needed, at the very least, this tour to take measure of my new responsibilities. The Quo Vadis contains, in its confined space, all human knowledge, and samples of all the arts, all the techniques, all the accomplishments of man. It also contains a large number of raw materials, animals, plants and cells in culture. There is even an embryo room, with frozen embryos of parrots, elephants, and all the animals of which humanity had managed to preserve only the DNA. I was stunned and awed by this comprehensive tour. The Quo Vadis is monumental, vowed to eternity.

Each of the Propagation Vessels was designed in the same way - and today I think of the captains of The Ahab, The Explorer, The Hermes, The Ganesh and The Ariel. Do they all feel their charge with the same solemnity? Where are they, at this moment? Have they been shipwrecked in space? Have they docked on an island?



CHAPTER 4: LANDFALL

EARTH YEAR 3416

Not one of the Probe crew had ever climbed into the annex that was to take them to Organ, and which, like the escape pods and fire extinguishers, had always appeared to them as an inert part of the decor. The smile of Ensign Second Class Touré had frozen, but not faded. The apprehension of contact with the ground was palpable in both the beating of their blood and the unusual gleam in their eyes. Chief engineer Ido, Major Rodriguez, the assistant Azoury, roboticist Brown... Regardless of age or sex, they were all like trembling lovers before their first time; their chests oppressed, their stomachs turned, their mouths dry, and their eyes almost bulging with anticipation. Mikael felt resurrected, as if all the years he had just lived had counted for nothing - as the annex violently penetrated the atmosphere and gradually uncovered the landscape, he imagined, for a secret, silent second, that he was leaving the Probe forever.

The annex landed without difficulty, in a clearing not far from the City. There was a group of natives there to welcome them - men and women, fairly bare-skinned, many of whom sported impressive tattoos. But, curious as he was about their faces, Mikael first consecrated a few moments looking at the planet. The forest landscape was bursting with a thousand different colors - the shades of green, of brown, were innumerable; natural light rained down, irregular, and the mosses and dead leaves shivered with rays and shadows. Wherever you looked, there was the same profusion of forms and movements. When they spotted a bird, and when they heard its wild cry,

Mikael, his throat tight, fought back tears, and saw that Touré, on the other hand, was crying without restraint. She even began to sob, seized by a dizziness that mingled with laughter, and Mikael let the others disembark to allow her to collect herself.

“Are you gonna be alright?” He asked her.

From her wet eyes, she smiled.

“I’ve never been better, Major.”

He took the time to press her shoulder gently, as if to remind her of a social reality she had forgotten. Then he motioned for her to disembark in front of him, and left the annex last.

Lightning couldn't believe her eyes. It was indeed one thing to know that the Vessel had run aground on Organ several centuries before, and quite another to see and hear, here and now, a flying machine alighting on the ground. She felt a little disappointed by the appearance of the annex, which neither resembled the Vessel in size nor in shape - and was struck by the unbearable racket of the engine. But, when the silence and stillness returned to the clearing, when the first people stepped out of the craft, she could hardly contain her expression of passionate curiosity. The other Keys, beside her, stood in a much more reverent manner, and she attempted to follow their lead. Rain held her head high, and managed to look in the direction of the annex without batting an eyelash. Amber gave the intruders a slightly superior and ironic look. River and April smiled placidly. Lightning, despite her desire to run to get a better look, managed with great difficulty to hold herself in place. She had forgotten about the pain in her kidney and in her heel, concentrating all her energy on her eyes, which were trying hard to pierce the distance.

The first shock was to realize that, unlike Organ's inhabitants, who had mixed their blood for twenty generations, the crew members were extremely dissimilar from each other. Lightning, who had spent a lot of time in the Vessel's library, recognized the races now buried and invisible in her matte flesh. The second shock was to see

them stagger - these people so powerful that they could survive indefinitely in the air, like sea birds, these people who had broken all ties with their nurturing soil, emancipated and free - advanced like newborn calves, their spindly legs wobbling under the crushing pressure of their bodies. She felt the sting of deep compassion before these unbalanced beings, who supported their own weight like a burden, and whose eyes blinked like those of nocturnal animals awakened to full light. She saw, behind their sickly appearance, all the absences and all the lacks of their atrophied existence. The joy of the black woman, and the look of wonder in the eyes of the last man of the crew, made her feel sorry for them. Without offending the eye with its ugliness, there was nothing special about this clearing, and it took a lot of deprivation to come to tears of joy when discovering it. You would have to be a castaway.

She fixed her gaze at length on the man who had come out supporting the black woman; he had very pale skin, pierced by the shadow of a very black beard, and light eyes. He appeared to her to be the only one who cared about the others. His light eyes were perhaps particularly sensitive to the light, because he instinctively squinted to protect himself from the sun - his gait was a little unsteady, but he seemed sustained by an inner strength; he looked around him with the expression of one who doesn't want to lose a single thing from a unique experience. As the others moved forward, he couldn't help leaning towards the ground and he made a gesture that moved Lightning: he gently caressed the earth of Organ with his open palm, with infinite respect.

After a few steps, the black woman fell to her knees, sobbing convulsively, and the light-eyed man lifted her back up, saying words that Lightning couldn't hear, at that distance, but whose effectiveness she admired, because the woman from then on stood straighter and aligned her step with that of her comrades. Lightning, seeing them approach, received various impressions from their appearance: they

were frightfully thin, with bones protruding beneath the stiffness of their suits; they were disciplined, and their bodies, even in these extreme circumstances, had a deeply marked crease, like a fabric that is impossible to wrinkle. They had a way of walking, of holding their arms, their heads, their eyes, at a certain height, which must have been imprinted on them years ago. They were now looking at the Keys with solemnity - when they were a few yards away, the others stepped aside to let the light-eyed man through, who seemed to have been designated to communicate.

The light-eyed man delivered a speech - which greatly astonished the Keys, who exchanged a few glances, but listened politely. It was a speech of peace and mutual respect between peoples, evoking common ancestors and the cradle of humanity. At least that's what Lightning managed to understand, since there were notable differences between their languages. Many words were rendered almost unrecognizable by a different pronunciation, and others simply didn't exist in Organ's language. His beautiful, deep voice acted on Lightning like strange music, with unknown harmonies.

Rain stepped forward when she judged that the man had finished speaking.

"My name is Rain," she said. "I have met the leader of your ship, and I am responsible for my clan, as are all the others with me. What do they call you?"

"I'm Major Mikael Strauss," said the man.

"What does your name mean?" asked River with interest. "We are not familiar with that word."

"My name doesn't mean anything in particular," said Mikael. "Just syllables."

River nodded his head in commiseration, as if this lack of meaning were some kind of handicap.

“Mikael Strauss,” continued Rain, “we do not use language the way you do. We do not practice solitary speech; for us, speech is free, spontaneous, and shared. We have not prepared a speech for you.”

The Major smiled and nodded.

“I hope I haven’t bored you too much with mine,” he said.

“No,” said Lightning brightly with a smile. “No, not at all. Your use of language is very interesting.”

They exchanged a glance, a smile, and Mikael turned to introduce the others.

“How can you remember arbitrary syllables?” breathed April through gritted teeth. “I’ll never remember their names...”

After the greetings, Rain spoke again.

“Your leader has informed me of your wish to visit our planet, and we offer to accompany you to the City, where we will serve you food and drink. We can then think together about the organization of your stay among us.”

They set off walking along a forest path. The Keys walked in front, talking verbosely amongst themselves. From time to time, they turned around to wait for their guests, whose physical capabilities they realized they had overestimated. Chief engineer Ido was sweating profusely, and Isla Brown was so out of breath she had to stop every five minutes. The others were faring better, and were beginning to get used to Organ’s gravity, but their uniforms weren’t suited to the temperature. Mikael Strauss walked last again, taking advantage of this place in line to caress with his eyes everything he saw - wild berries, flowers, lizards running up the trunks. He sometimes closed his eyes, and Lightning, who occasionally turned back to look at them, guessed it was to better indulge in the other sensations. He was probably listening to the rustling of leaves and the song of the invisible insects; he was filling his nostrils with the smell of humus and rotting fruit.

Until now, he had been reluctant to stare at the natives, for fear of appearing impolite, but now that he had become accustomed to the caress of the sun, and the explosion of life all around him, he risked taking long, eager looks at them. The oldest woman, the one called Rain, provoked in him a reverent fear, maybe because of her many facial tattoos. He wondered what these body marks symbolized; he leaned towards identity marks connecting individuals to their tribe. Since the youngest woman wore only one facial tattoo, a sort of vine coiled around her left temple, he wondered if it might be an initiation ritual instead. In some tribes, tattoos and scarifications demonstrated the power of the wearer. This young woman's name was Lightning, and everything about her fascinated him: her young, slender body, with its pale brown skin, so alert compared to his own; the perfect design of her lips, her nostrils, her eyebrows or the trace of her hairline. She was so radiant that he himself felt almost crippled in her presence, and had to look down to escape dizziness. It had been so long that he had been seeing the same faces in the Probe - pale, worried faces like his own, prematurely aged by cosmic radiation. The two men were in the prime of life, and the last woman, Amber, could have been in her thirties. They all wore flowing garments in a silk-like fabric, adorned with small shiny stone flakes.

“How are you feeling, Touré?”

Michelle Touré had recovered, and was adapting more easily than the others to the rhythm of the walk.

“I feel like I'm in a dream. Have you noticed how beautiful they are?”

“Yes, for a while now I've had the impression I'm some kind of sick monster next to them.”

“But that's what we are, aren't we? Sick monsters...”

The forest path soon took them to the edge of the City, and from that moment on, Major Strauss stopped talking and thinking altogether, to devote himself to everything that was happening, as if by

magic, around him. It had been very impressive to see wild animals and plants in profusion - but that didn't compare with the feeling of penetrating into a rich and complex social organization, with its mysterious codes, its history, its urban geography, the unspoken laws of its commerce. It was the first time he had traveled in this way in a colony formed from the great Propagation, and it felt as if he had leapt with both feet into the colorful images of a history book, and found himself surrounded by a thousand new details that had never been represented, or even imagined, by the historians. He accomplished this miraculous leap in time - or perhaps in fiction - with an incredulity that grew with every step. The City was built with stones of many colors, some pink, others white or gray, and the most elaborate houses featured decorative lines or sometimes checkerboard patterns. The architecture was simple yet elegant; the buildings were most frequently only two-stories, and opened wide to the outdoors with windows and balconies, most of them made of wood. Exterior staircases embellished the facades, most of them in carved wood, as well as footbridges that crossed the alleyways here and there at second floor level. There were also trees along the cobbled lanes. Mikael noticed that engineer Ido was taking photos, rather discreetly. His attention was not, like Mikael's, on the aesthetics of the whole, but on technical details. Following Ido's gaze, Mikael noticed that the City had a water network, fountains and even what looked like sewers. Animals clearly had the right to live in the City, like the humans, and were not hunted. There were plenty of rodents, climbing trees and leaping pretty great distances to swipe food that had been forgotten, or maybe laid out for them. Occasionally, cats would chase after them, and return to their post on the doorsteps, almost all of which were wide open.

The natives eyed them with curiosity, some with hostility, but not one spoke to them. They went about their business, some carrying loads, some traveling, some trading. Their way of speaking was

melodic, pleasing to the ear, with an inimitable accent. A general impression, not of idleness, but of an absence of hurry, emerged from this brief crossing: the natives did not walk fast, chatted a lot; one could also hear songs being hummed, and laughter which Mikael Strauss couldn't be sure they weren't the object of. Finally, the Keys ushered them into a vast polychrome building, its interior walls decorated with frescoes, and its courtyard planted with strange, red-leaved trees. A sort of tiny wooden amphitheater was installed here, allowing small groups to hold discussions. The Keys took their seats and invited the members of the Probe to do likewise; then some natives brought drinks and fruit, as well as appetizing cakes. The aroma of the food made Mikael Strauss close his eyes.

"What do you all eat, on your ship?" asked the man named River.

"We raise chickens and cows that give us plenty of eggs and milk," replied Major Rodriguez. "We grow a few plantations in the greenhouse. And for the rest, we make do with lyophilized or chemical foods.

"Lyophilized?" repeated River.

"Food we've dried to preserve it longer."

River nodded politely. Mikael was struck by the air of superiority of these five characters; they were far from what he had imagined of a naïve native population admiring the enchantment of their technology. They seemed to be inquiring more out of politeness than interest.

There was one unpleasant incident when engineer Ido vomited after consuming a drink.

"Our bodies have become quite fragile, as you can see," apologized Isla Brown, who had been breathing a little better since they were in a building. "I have to admit I was a bit dizzy myself when I was out in the open like that, with the whole sky above my head."

"The inhabitants of the cave do not always want to come out," said Lightning kindly.

Major Strauss picked up on this sentence, surprised.

“Are you referring to Plato's myth?”

“Yes. You are like those men trapped in a cave, eating simulacrum of food and looking at the world through screens that are only simulacrum of reality. But you all wanted to get out, and face the sun, did you not?”

Isla Brown was about to retort something when Major Strauss, armed with his appointment by the Captain to conduct the diplomatic talks, commanded her to be silent with his gaze.

“We're very curious about your way of life,” said the Major. “And about your planet.”

“Why are you interested in Organ?” asked Rain, a little abruptly.

“Well,” replied Mikael, “we have the habit of mapping all the celestial bodies, and gathering as much information as possible about the parts of the universe we pass through.”

“What is this information used for?” asked April.

“We send it to the Union. It increases the knowledge of the known Universe.”

“What do you want to know about Organ?”

“We're going to take readings, samples and analyses. We won't do any damage.”

“I note, Major Mikael Strauss, that you are speaking in the future tense, without asking our permission.”

“Would that be a problem for you, ma'am?”

“I cannot answer on behalf of the community,” said Rain. “I do not own Organ, nor do I own the opinions of my fellow human beings.”

“However, we have already discussed this point at the Council of the Keys,” said Amber a little more kindly. “As long as you carry out your analyses away from the City, we have no power to stop you.”

“Are there any other cities?” asked Major Rodriguez.

“Not that we know of,” said Lightning.

"Have you ever tried to visit the planet?"

"What for?" asked Lightning. "We do not need to go any further. We have everything we need here to sustain our existence."

"Aren't you curious about other places?" asked assistant Azoury.

"You are projecting your own feelings onto us, which are foreign to us," said Rain. "You are the one who is curious about elsewhere - you, and our ancestors who were marooned on Organ. But we do not share your fury of conquest."

As she said this, Rain glanced down at the weapons Rodriguez and Azoury were wearing on their belts.

"What are these weapons intended for, gentlemen?"

Mikael looked at her intensely - her face, bluish with the criss-crossing lines of tattoos, remained impassive.

"These weapons are part of our regulation uniform," he apologized. "We'll put them down immediately, if it makes you uncomfortable."

The blue face softened a little.

"What makes you think we would let you use them?" she asked. "You can keep your toys of destruction, if they reassure you. We are not armed that way."

Lightning looked at her annoyed.

"If you would like," she offered Mikael, "I will introduce you to our customs and way of thinking, since you said you were curious about our way of life. How long do you plan to stay on Organ?"

"A few days, if you'll be so kind as to accept us. I'd be most honored by this initiation," he replied.

"Are the ruins of the Vessel still accessible?" asked engineer Ido.

"No." said Rain.

"And yet," continued Ido, "we saw its gigantic carcass from our position in orbit, and..."

"And we decided, in the Council of the Keys, that you would not have access to it."

Ido looked at Strauss, who motioned for him to be quiet.

“As a token of our good faith, we can offer you a certain number of objects or machines.”

“The Council of the Keys concluded that we would not benefit from your technology. We thank you.”

The engineer seemed suffocated with surprise.

“We could greatly increase your agricultural productivity,” he said animatedly, “help you extract stone from quarries, leave you a radio to communicate with us remotely...”

“Yes. You could do all that. But we have decided not to take advantage of this possibility,” Rain replied slowly, as if addressing an obstinate child.

“Can our technical team get to work away from the city?” asked Mikael to change the subject. “As for me and engineer Ido, we’ll be very happy to hand ourselves over to you,” he said obligingly, addressing Lightning.

“Then we will also leave the City,” she said. “My home is in the forest.”

Mikael seemed a little surprised.

“Whatever you’d like,” he said.

The engineer opened his mouth, then closed it again several times, and the man named River couldn’t help laughing.

“Engineer Ido, are you practicing looking like a carp?”

The Keys smiled, and so did second ensign Touré.

“Engineer Ido, like myself, was simply hoping to visit the city,” Mikael said in an embarrassed tone. “Since the Great Propagation, we’ve heard very little news from the human colonies that formed here and there. As far as I know, the last one was discovered over eighty years ago. And we’ve only accounted for six. Your civilization is like a baby brought into the world years ago, and we’re passionately curious about it.”

“Major Mikael Strauss possesses the art of eloquence,” said Lightning. “I will help you visit the City before taking you to my home. And you as well, Engineer Ido. Please forgive our somewhat undue sense of humor.”

Rain consulted the other Keys with her gaze, then, in a fairly remarkable unison, they rose to their feet.

“We will accompany those of you who are returning to your little vessel.”

“There's no need to bother,” ventured Isla Brown, “we'll find our way back on our own.”

Rain looked down on her from her full height, and her tattooed mouth emitted a small click of the tongue, the meaning of which Mikael didn't quite understand. He assumed, however, that it was a gesture of annoyance.

He parted from his team-mates with a touch of concern; it seemed to him that Isla Brown might see her agoraphobia attacks increase with a prolonged stay.

“Are you going to hold up, Brown? Several days in the open air?”

“I brought some pills with me, Major. Besides, I'll be concentrating on my robots.”

“Touré, have you gotten the lacrimal flux under control?”

He knew his sentence would deepen the young ensign's smile and dimples, and she smiled back.

“Don't run off into the wild when you get back to the annex,” he prescribed.

“I'll try, Major.”

Major Rodriguez leaned toward him.

“I hope you're not taking any careless risks, Strauss. These natives may be more hostile than they appear.”

“We'll see, Major. We'll be in touch.”

Azoury gave him a quick salute and he found himself alone with Ido. His face glistening with sweat, the chief engineer seemed to be melting on the spot from the sheer force of his inner anger.

“Can you believe it, Major, that we won't even have access to the Vessel? Can you imagine all the remains we could have found there...”

“I haven't had my last word, Chief. You'll just have to be patient. Our host is far from being the most uncompromising.”

“Major, did you hear what I heard? The old tattooed lady used a weird phrase. She said: ‘We're not armed that way.’”

“Yes, I noticed that too. But you've got to be careful. We're guests in these people's homes, and our mission is to establish friendly relations and learn as much as we can. Which excludes us being rude or sensitive.”

Engineer Ido sighed loudly.

“I'll let you do the talking from now on.”

The Major gave him a friendly pat on the back before hurrying off. The crew of the Probe had lingered to talk, but the Keys had overtaken them and looked impatient. At the first crossroads, River, April and Amber took the direction of the annex with the scientific team. And Lightning gracefully invited Strauss and Ido to walk alongside her in another direction. Mikael looked for the woman they called Rain - but her tall stature and sign-covered face were nowhere to be seen.

*EXCERPT FROM THE QUO VADIS LOGBOOK - Captain
Rön Stigmann*

EARTH YEAR 2761

Digital archives last consulted in the year 2830

It has been thirty years to the day since we left Earth. There were 15,000 of us - and when I consult the civil registers, I realize that our population is tending to dwindle. We've recorded 572 deaths and 392 births in the last thirty years. This worries me, because we used to be a young population, and it means that living conditions in space are unfavorable to our life expectancy. Perhaps we should encourage more births - it's imperative that our population remains stable for as long as possible, since we don't know when we'll be able to hope to settle down somewhere.

Thirty years... I was a very young man then, I remember my fascination with the Great Propagation and the hope that took root in my heart, in my body - hope holds on to youth, like beauty. These two qualities are the first that we lose. These days, I don't hope for anything specific anymore - I just try to fulfill my mission as best I can, day by day, and keep the Quo Vadis afloat. Topping off the hydrogen, the oxygen, making water and air, growing food and ensuring the crew's sanitary safety. For me, the spiritual and messianic stakes have disappeared - I never think about the Promised Land anymore. All that remains are the technical issues - and there are so many of them, so crucial, that they take up all my time.



CHAPTER 5: EDEN

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 586

EARTH YEAR 3416

Lightning kept her word and accompanied Major Strauss and engineer Ido on a guided tour. While Ido took note of many architectural and technical details with his video camera, Mikael tried to pay more attention to the human exchanges taking place before his eyes. Shortly after leaving the rest of the crew, they witnessed a scene that left him dreamy. Animals resembling large wild pigs crossed a square, and headed for a fountain, where they drank. Mikael also noted that an opening had been made for the animals, so that they could bathe. The largest of the pigs, who was limping slightly, rolled in the water making big splashes. As he rose to his feet, he began to squeal plaintively. A young man approached, and - Mikael couldn't have put it any other way - began to communicate with the animal, in a very surprising way. The young man examined the enormous beast, flattering it, and accompanied his gestures with human words, which the pig undoubtedly didn't understand. The squeals became less plaintive, and the young man took some kind of ointment out of his pocket, which he smeared on a slightly bloody hoof. Then he got out of the way and motioned for the pigs to follow him, which these swine did, in the most natural way. They disappeared into an alley, walking at a fairly slow pace to maintain the rhythm of the lame behemoth.

Mikael and Ido, who had never seen such a large animal, remained petrified for a moment.

“These pigs, aren't they dangerous when they charge?” he asked.

Lightning smiled, amused.

"I am sure you are also dangerous when you charge, Major Mikael Strauss."

A few alleyways later, a tiny child, with the awkward face of a baby, was trying out improbable acrobatics on top of a wall. His mother was probably part of a group of women distractedly keeping an eye on him. The youngster displayed an astonishing sense of balance - at one point, however, Mikael thought he saw him wobble and his heart sank at the imminence of catastrophe, but, exactly as if an invisible hand had intervened to draw him away from the precipice, he merely stumbled and resumed his hesitant waltz.

"I thought he was going to break his neck," breathed Ido through gritted teeth... "Such a little baby shouldn't be allowed to climb so high."

Lightning had an enigmatic smile on and took some time to answer.

"He is in no danger, do not worry."

"He almost fell," insisted Mikael.

"No. He would not have fallen."

Mikael and Ido exchanged a puzzled look, but preferred not to add anything. They soon reached the area near the Vessel.

"Look," said Lightning. "I have brought you here so you can see it from a distance, since you are not allowed to enter. There it is."

Ido began filming greedily, hoping to capture, through his camera, details invisible to the naked eye.

"What is engineer Ido doing?" asked Lightning, intrigued.

"He's taking pictures."

"Moving pictures?"

"Yes."

"What does he hope to achieve with this film?"

"I don't know. He hopes to remember things that he hasn't really seen."

Lightning looked thoughtful.

“Is this external memory more effective than a living memory?”

It was Mikael's turn to think.

“It's very different. It's incapable of selection, which makes it infinitely less relevant. But it's more complete.”

Lightning nodded. At the end of an alleyway, she pointed to the materials that imperceptibly transformed into the night-colored metal that made up the wreck. At the far end, the hull of an ancient spaceship could be seen - Ido, his heart pounding, was filming non-stop.

“We will have to move away from the Vessel now, and head for my home. I am going to pick up the pace a little, if you can follow me. We have about an hour of walking from here.”

Mikael had to pull Ido by the sleeve to avoid losing him. As Lightning showed them the way with her light steps, Ido wouldn't stop mumbling.

“Major, can you believe it... A ship built six centuries ago, and did you see the condition its structure is in? It's incredible.”

Mikael was listening to him with one distracted ear. He had noticed that, for some time, Lightning had been slightly dragging her right foot, as if she was suffering from a sudden pain in her heel.

“Are you all right?” he asked as he caught up with her.

“Oh yes, it is an organic pain,” she explained.

“Can I help you relieve it? Do you need something?”

“No,” she said laughing. “Even if you wanted to, you could not help me support this pain! But do not worry yourself, I am used to it.”

And indeed, the malfunction of her right heel didn't seem to slow her walk in the slightest; it simply gave her a slightly more pronounced sway. Her face remained impassive and cheerful, as if she were “carrying” this pain, or as if - even if he didn't know what it meant - this pain was external to her.

On the outskirts of the City, they crossed a vast garden. A choral music, a powerful and complex polyphony, resonated in the distance - and the two men were almost intoxicated by the conjunction of this poignant human song, and the sumptuous exuberance of the flowers, the trees, the birds and the multiple waterfalls, that were exploding on all sides. Light rained down and the water from the streams captured its rays; wherever you looked, it was an enchantment of greenery pierced by arrows of pink, yellow and red. Among all these luminous spots, only the flowers were motionless, since the birds and carp moved at the whim of their nonchalant wanderings. It was impossible not to feel struck with wonder in this place.

They drew closer to the choir, and Mikael could clearly make out, between the groves, a group of dancers that caught his eye. They were all perfectly, absolutely synchronized - as if duplicate computer-generated images were performing the same movements. Only, here they were men, women and children of varying ages and conformations; they danced to the rhythm of the music, which they seemed to know by heart - and their movements seemed a kind of collective improvisation, strangely synchronized.

“What is...”

“It is the dance of Dawn,” she replied hastily, as if she had no intention of dwelling on the subject. “All these people belong to the same clan.”

“The singers and the dancers?”

“Yes. It is a recreational activity, designed to strengthen the bonds of the clan.”

“Do you ever dance like this?”

“You mean: the dance of Lightning?”

Mikael didn't mean it that way, but nodded.

“Yes, we do,” she replied.

Then they left the garden, and Mikael couldn't help glancing back several times to enjoy the paradisiacal view some more.

The path they then took was narrow and invaded by vegetation.

"This trail is hardly marked at all," said Mikael.

"That is because I am the only one who marks it."

"Do you live alone in your house?"

"Yes. That is the case for all the Keys."

Engineer Ido, ever since leaving the City, seemed almost defeated. Mikael, on the other hand, despite his companion's bad mood, wasn't pouting over his pleasure. When would he get the chance to walk in a forest again? He glanced up, mechanically, in the direction of the Probe, but the branches were hiding the sky from him.

"Do you miss your ship?" asked Lightning.

"No," said Mikael. "Not in the slightest. I'll be back soon enough."

"I have often wondered, looking at your ship, what it feels like to be up there. Rid of all gravity, all ties. Does it make you feel free?"

Mikael, surprised by the question, pictured himself inside the ship, trapped in a circuit that was always the same, passing along dozens of closed doors, being required to show his credentials constantly, wrapped up in the uniform like he was wrapped up in the military hierarchy.

"Free? Are you kidding! We're anything but free."

"But you can go anywhere you want in the universe."

"Yes. But I don't know if that's called freedom."

"I am not free at all," she said. "I miss it sometimes, I wonder if I would be lighter, happier, detached from all my Links."

"Far from Organ?"

"I have tried to imagine it, but I cannot even do that. Organ is in me, and I am in Organ. I think I would have the sensation of dying if I left Organ."

"What links are you talking about? Didn't you say you lived alone?"

Lightning laughed.

“You do not need the presence of others to be linked to them... Do you not know that?”

Mikael knew it, indeed - he knew it from books, from films. But it wasn't an intimate, personal knowledge.

“Forgive me. I must seem stupid to you. I don't feel linked to anyone.”

“Only to the Union?”

Mikael turned to Ido, but the latter was far behind.

“I don't feel linked to the Union at all. Just like I don't feel bound to the Probe. They're just frameworks that I'm developing in.”

Lightning was listening to him intently.

“You mean, frameworks outside of yourself? In which you do not participate?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

Lightning seemed a little taken aback, and Mikael could see that her keen intelligence was in the process of digesting what he had just told her. She remained silent for a long moment.

They soon arrived at Lightning's garden - a forest garden, very different from the one they had passed through in town. The tops of the trees, high above their heads, let in only a green, irregular light, whose oblique rays traced lines in the air. The tree trunks, century-old and serene, imposed their silent presence - you had to constantly walk around them, pass between them, and lean over to see behind their mass. And in this vegetal cathedral, smaller organisms flourished and quivered on all sides. Ferns, mosses, mushrooms, flowers, but also insects, some sort of iguanas with strangely human hands, birds that hopped on the ground, squirrels and cats. There were multiple different spaces in this clearing - the wooden house that almost blended into the scenery, but also two ponds, various tables with books resting on them, a wood shed.

“It's paradise,” murmured Mikael.

"Of course not," said Lightning. "Look at your friend, engineer Ido. He does not seem to be in Paradise."

Indeed, Ido had stopped and sat down on a bench near the woodshed. He was bowing his head, prey to a visible uneasiness. Lightning, instinctively, approached him and touched his forehead.

"What can I do for you, engineer Ido?"

"Leave me alone," he said rather dryly. "All I want is a place to rest."

Lightning led him into the house, which, Mikael noted, was very simply furnished. She indicated her own bed, but he refused and asked her permission to lie down on the floor in a corner of the room.

"You all right, Ido?" said Mikael worried.

"I'll be fine once the mission's over. I feel very uncomfortable in this forest. I'm going to stay right here. I don't think I'm being of any use."

"Rest up, then."

The Major then followed Lightning to her terrace.

"Would you like to visit my herb garden?" she suggested.

"Whatever you'd like," said Mikael.

The herb garden was just a few dozen yards away; hundreds of different plants were growing there, sometimes guided by stakes, along small paths, carefully cleared.

"Are these your medicinal materials?" he asked.

"Yes. But it is also a laboratory for observing plant behavior."

"Plant behavior?" repeated Mikael, keenly interested.

"Animal ethology is a highly developed science on Organ, which we learn at school from a very early age. Plant ethology is more complex, and there are still many fields of investigation that have not been explored..."

"Talk to me about what you observe."

“Well, we have been able to establish that there is a form of social life among plants - some vegetation does not encroach on the territory of others, for example. Look up.”

Mikael lifted his eyes up. They were standing under a vaulted ceiling of foliage.

“If you look closely, you will notice that the trees do not mix their foliage. In reality, there exists a fine border, each foliage fitting into the other like a puzzle piece. People sometimes talk about the shyness of trees, but I prefer to call it respect.”

Mikael observed, like she told him to, and was infinitely surprised to see that, indeed, a trim of light separated the foliage of one big tree with little red leaves from another with larger, yellow-striped leaves.

“It's fascinating,” he said.

“Yes. But there are also fights between plants.”

Lightning accompanied him to a tree whose twisted, crooked forms evoked the evil forests of ancient legends.

“This is a cursed apple tree,” she said. “This tree grows by choking another; it takes its space, its water, its light, until it completely surrounds it. Do you see there?”

In the middle of this very recognizable tree, branches of a different species were still emerging, bearing different leaves.

“This tree is the victim?” asked Mikael.

“Yes. It does not have much longer to live.”

“What else do you observe?”

“Epidemics, phenomena of colonization, of resistance, of balances invented by Organ.”

Mikael, with his whole body and mind, was charmed.

“Your science is so beautiful, compared to ours...”

“What do you studying up there?” asked Lightning. “You do not have much to observe.”

“You'd be surprised. There are lots of things to observe: radiation, magnetic fields, and then the celestial bodies whose density, trajectory and chemical composition we're studying.”

Lightning smiled, as if she were hypnotized.

“I have the impression you are reciting poetry,” she said. “These words sink into me without me understanding them, but they are touching.”

She looked up at the sky, and her face was filled with a vague desire; her dark eyes seemed to absorb all the light, like dark wells.

It was as he watched her utter these words that Mikael began to feel a little dizziness in his chest, a slight acceleration of the heart, and felt himself melting from the inside for the first time. Lightning's face and body drew his gaze with incredible power. In a fleeting flash, he imagined himself touching her, and tried to pull himself together.

He was certain, when she laid eyes on him, that she was reading him like a book - she looked at him for a long time, just a few inches away.

“I am not fertile today.”

Mikael felt himself blush all the way to the roots of his hair, and didn't know how to respond to this statement, but she didn't seem embarrassed and moved on to another subject.

“You seemed interested in the singing and dancing earlier. Do you practice music?”

“Yes, I have a piano in my cabin, and I play it regularly.”

“There is one in the *Quo Vadis*, but I have never dared try to play it... Some of the keys seem to be broken.”

“Would you like to listen to it?”

Lightning nodded, and they sat down under a tree. Mikael started up his drive, on which he had recorded certain songs. He hesitated, then played her a nocturne by Chopin that he particularly liked.

She closed her eyes to listen, and he couldn't help himself from contemplating her. The melodious and melancholy accents, which

belonged to the Earth of another era, seemed to him to clash with the song of the birds and the flowing waters, as well as with her own beauty, so fresh and alive. She listened, her eyes closed, until the end of the piece, and he realized that tears were beading on her eyelids.

“It is so beautiful,” she said. “Did you compose this music?”

“No, I only play it. It's Earth music, very ancient.”

“How I love everything that comes from Earth. Have you ever been to Earth?”

“No. But there are only ruins left. What do you know about Earth?”

“I read a lot of books from the Vessel's library. And I look at the printed pictures too. The paintings. But I had never heard music before.”

“What books do you read?”

“I have read so many Earth novels that I cannot name them all. But I have been rereading the *Quo Vadis* logbook for several weeks now.”

“Is that the name of the ship?”

“Yes. The captain was a visionary, a pioneer, who laid the foundations of our society.”

“What was his name?”

“His Organic name is Rootstock.”

“I'd love to read this log. Do you have a copy?”

“No, unfortunately. All Earth Books are in the Vessel Library.”

They were getting up to continue their walk when suddenly, Lightning was pierced by a sharp pain, as if stung by some venomous beast.

“It is Twig,” she murmured. “His agony is starting. I have to get to their house right away.”

Mikael, perplexed, understood nothing about the situation.

“Are you in pain? Can I help you?”

“You will have to come with me, you and engineer Ido. I am sorry, but I made a commitment not to leave you unattended. Please get him quickly.”

Mikael still didn't understand what the urgency was about, especially since the pain seemed to almost prevent her from walking. But her tone was imperious, very different from the conversation they'd just had, and he hurried inside the house, where Ido, mysteriously, had disappeared.

He tried to call him on his intercom, but Ido, despite a quality connection, didn't answer. Mikael retraced his steps. Lightning was preparing a basket containing what he identified as medicines from her herbs.

“He's not here anymore,” he said, a little distraught.

“Did you call him?”

“Yes, he may have wandered off to relieve himself.”

Lightning ordered him to be quiet, putting a finger to his lips. She listened attentively, then answered calmly.

“No. He left. My residence is empty, except for us. But I do not have time to deal with that now.”

Mikael doubted she could be so certain, but he didn't protest.

“Can I help in any way?”

“Carry the basket, if you would like. I will have trouble walking with my heel.”

And they set off, Lightning limping much lower than before, and Mikael disillusioned, puzzled by his hostess's strange behavior, and especially worried about the engineer's absence and the disastrous diplomatic consequences this breach of protocol would inevitably cause.

They took the trail that went back to the City, and soon after forked off towards a village on its outskirts. Here, Lightning was greeted by all the passersby, and enjoyed markedly more respect. The buildings looked a little less rich, and a little less imposing, but it

was a prosperous neighborhood. Mikael wondered if there were any underprivileged neighborhoods. People looked at him curiously, but since he was with Lightning and carrying her basket, no one dared stare at him too harshly. Arriving at a low house, Lightning turned to Mikael.

“Stand in a corner, do not talk and do not do anything.”

Mikael nodded, and followed Lightning, who was immediately let in by a young girl, whom she called Cloud. The entire scene that followed, Mikael watched as if he were the spectator of an immersive and realistic documentary. There were many details he didn't understand, but it seemed evident that Lightning had come to attend the death of an old man, who was in another room, and whom Michael didn't see. Maybe it was a ceremony similar to an extreme unction. No one was paying any attention to him, and he could see how much the two women watching over the old man relied on Lightning, despite her young age. She behaved like a mother, giving advice, consoling, making decisions. The others spoke to her with deference and gratitude. For a long time, the three women retreated into the room where the old man was, and he heard a three-part song, a very pure polyphonic song.

He heard the oldest woman say:

“He looks serene.”

And Lightning replied:

“Do not be fooled. His suffering is excruciating, even if you cannot see it.”

“Then hurry up,” begged the young girl.

Shortly afterwards, they emerged from the room.

“It is over,” said Lightning.

“Your heel is not making you suffer anymore?” asked Frost. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. It is extinguished.”

Mikael observed her gait, which seemed to him to have regained all its lightness. He had already read in psychology textbooks about cases of hysterical conversion, where anguish and intense stress were capable of provoking physiological symptoms such as temporary blindness or paralysis. Was it something of the same order that had caused Lightning such a violent and sudden pain in her heel?

"I am sorry I cannot stay with you for the funeral wake tonight," said Lightning.

Both women glanced curiously at Mikael, and nodded.

"Do not forget I share your pain," she said, embracing them tenderly.

Cloud, the youngest, clung to her longer than her mother, and Lightning, as with an inconsolable child, was patient. She cradled her and sang a soothing melody, and the young girl finally withdrew.

"Organize the funeral wake at the cabana so that everyone can come and support you. I will come as soon as I can," said Lightning again.

Then she took Mikael by the arm and led him outside. It was a little hard for Mikael to get out of his spectator's seat and return to an active role; what he had just witnessed filled him with countless questions.

Lightning was walking without the slightest claudication now, and he had to force his pace to keep up with her. She seemed thoughtful and serious, and he didn't want to disturb her. Halfway there, however, she seemed to remember her duties as hostess.

"Please excuse me, Major Mikael Strauss. You were not supposed to attend that kind of event."

"Are they relatives of yours?"

"All the members of my clan are Linked to me," she said softly.

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you at a time like this, and above all, I apologize for engineer Ido's behavior."

“Are you Linked to Ido? Can you force him to return to my home?”

“Unfortunately, I can only try to convince him, if he agrees to answer his intercom.”

He attempted to reach him again, but in vain.

“His intercom works, and it's not cut off. But Ido doesn't want to answer.”

“He knows you would try to dissuade him from doing what he is doing.”

“I'd like to know what he's doing.”

“I do,” she said with an almost laughing accent.

“Really?”

“What did engineer Ido seem particularly frustrated about today?”

Mikael thought.

“He was disappointed not to be able to visit the Vessel.”

“You see, you also know what he is doing.”

“What's going to happen to him?”

“The consequences I foresee are almost all bad,” said Lightning thoughtfully. “Tomorrow morning, we will go to the City and find the engineer Ido. He will have been captured during his illicit visit, or as he was leaving the Vessel. And he will have to answer for his actions.”

“In what way?”

“His invitation to stay among us will no longer be valid, and you will have to escort him back onto your Probe. But before that, I suppose he will have to yield himself to the Needle.”

Mikael didn't dare ask more, and they walked the rest of the way in silence. When they arrived at her home, Lightning prepared a frugal meal composed of dark bread, fruit and some kind of cheese. These products, which Mikael was aware were probably his hostess's usual fare, struck him as wonderfully fresh and incomparably tasty.

He held back his admiration though. Lightning looked sad, and her effort to explain to Mikael the farming methods on Organ seemed to be costing her a lot. The magic of the day had faded irretrievably.

"You should get some rest," said Lightning at last. "I will have to keep watch tonight. There is no need for both of us to be tired tomorrow."

"Keep watch?" Mikael repeated in a questioning tone.

Lightning regarded him gently.

"Your friend's behavior unfortunately reflects on the confidence I have in you, Major Mikael Strauss. I am very sorry, but I must make sure that you spend the night here."

This time it was Mikael's turn to turn red. He felt full of shame, and of anger at Ido.

"I'll have to send a report to Captain Richards, with your permission."

"Go ahead, if my being here does not disturb you."

"Thank you."

To avoid being overheard, Mikael chose to formulate a written report, which he made as brief as possible.

"Two separate teams. Ido and I received by a Key in her forest home. Ido escaped, unreachable, probably left to visit the Vessel which we have not been authorized to access. Serious diplomatic problems to be expected tomorrow. Stay probably cut short. Natives serene, non-belligerent, but diversly cooperative. Decentralized form of power, clan-based. Very original social and solidarity practices, which would have merited a long observation. Witness to an unexplained form of long-distance communication."

Did this report do justice to all he had seen and experienced today? To the rustling foliage, to the winding forest path - to the majesty, a little stiff, of old Rain - to the strangely synchronized dance he had glimpsed in the gardens - to the three-part funeral song that still echoed in his head - to Lightning's troubling beauty, to her

curious intelligence, and to the tears she had shed listening to the sound of piano notes for the first time in her existence?

Without speaking, he approached his device to where Lightning had settled, and sat down beside her.

“We may not see each other again,” he said.

In the shadows that had descended from the trees at full speed, Lightning’s face looked younger.

“We thought you intended to settle here,” she said. “It seemed to us the most sensible, and therefore the most likely, decision in your position.”

Mikael couldn’t help smiling bitterly.

“The most sensible, and therefore the least likely,” he corrected.

“Is the Union an unreasonable authority?”

Mikael thought before formulating an answer.

“Maybe. I don’t know what the Union will order us to do, but I doubt it’ll be to settle on Organ.”

“Is not the Union looking for a habitable, welcoming planet to serve as a refuge for humanity?”

“That was the case five centuries ago, when it organized the Great Propagation. But since then, humanity has gotten used to wandering.”

“Have you ‘gotten used to’ wandering, Major Mikael Strauss? Would you not like to shed your shell and stop fleeing forwards?”

Mikael felt intoxicated by Organ that enveloped them, as much as by his proximity to her. His desire to touch her was becoming more pressing with every moment.

“I’d give everything I have to settle here, Lightning. But I can’t.”

She nodded, as if she understood the answer perfectly.

“The Union compels you from a distance,” she said with a knowing look.

“In a way,” said Mikael.

“So, you think that you will return to the Probe, tomorrow, and that we will not see each other again?” She asked again.

“I’m afraid so. But I can’t be sure. It’s possible that the captain will order me to come down again - everything will definitely depend on diplomatic relations between Organ and the Probe.”

Lightning gave a charming little amused chuckle, as if Mikael’s words were profoundly naive and touched her with their candor.

“You talk of diplomatic relations, but... you only have one tiny ship and you are only a handful. The Probe is nothing compared to Organ.”

Mikael felt a little sad thinking of the Probe’s firepower. The Probe was, indeed, almost nothing, but this almost nothing was capable of destroying everything. She observed him insistently, a smile still floating on her lips. His desire for her was beginning to blur his vision, to choke the words inside him.

“Do you not have a wife, on the Probe?” asked Lightning, almost in a whisper.

“No. I haven’t been with a woman in months.”

He started the music, and Lightning closed her eyes to appreciate the delicate, subtle harmony that flowed from the tenuous notes like a stream. Mikael didn’t even think when his hand began to caress her, and she responded to his caress, eyes still closed, with a tenderness so natural it almost made him want to cry. They made love in silence, delicately, to the sobbing chords of the piano that glowed, in Organ’s night, like a pale ray of the Earth.

*EXCERPT FROM THE QUO VADIS LOGBOOK - Captain
Joseph Kellane*

EARTH YEAR 2777

Digital archives last consulted in the year 2830, for printing, and preserved on paper in several copies in the Quo Vadis Library.

I am the first Quo Vadis captain to be born on the Quo Vadis. And this is a more profound change than one might think.

My name is Joseph Kellane and I was born in 2752, when the Quo Vadis was sailing along the edge of the Centaur. The Vessel was my wonderland, my playground of adventure, the theater of my first love, of my carelessness, and of my teenage rebellion. I never suffered, like my parents, from space sickness. The gravity of the vessel, which made my mother groan so much, is the only natural reference for me. My universe is enclosed - and wide-open spaces make me dizzy.

I would like to offer this portion of humanity, which fate has entrusted to my care, not a chance at survival, but a chance at happiness.



CHAPTER 6: REPORTS

EARTH YEAR 3416

Captain Egon Richards left the office where he had just been consulting the reports of the officers on the ground. He needed to take a walk, and began pacing the three hundred thirty square feet of his personal space. Over the years, this cabin had become a world of its own, enclosed and saturated with personal objects and symbols. It was like the image of his own mind: impeccably ordered, it opened little to the outside world, and Richards enjoyed its simple, clean organization, which nothing came to disturbed. A diagonal section of the cabin was left open, between the bed and the desk, for pacing - port-side, the vast porthole let in the eternal night of Space. On the starboard side, staggered like totem poles, vestiges of the Earth were displayed. A six foot tall Eiffel Tower, a flag of the Union, a large photographic portrait of his wife and two children, posing, a little frozen, at the foot of the Probe. His ceremonial uniform, displayed on a headless mannequin. An antique sword, chiseled with the patience of a goldsmith. And an enormous block of pink granite, rough and raw, which gave the cabin a weight of archaism and savagery.

He had momentarily suspended his judgment and didn't know, at that moment, how he was going to handle these contradictory pieces of information. Engineer Ido's report seemed by far the most interesting. Certainly, his direct disobedience to the order to defer to Major Strauss in all matters of diplomatic relations called for punishment. He had willingly jeopardized the mission's objective of peace, and placed Major Strauss in a situation that was, at the very least,

uncomfortable, and maybe dangerous. Nevertheless, the fact that Strauss had been allowed to write a report indicated that the consequences had not been disastrous, and the relative benevolence of the natives would perhaps not be too severely tested by this outburst of individual curiosity. What's more, engineer Ido's discoveries were certainly worth the risk. Even if his position made it impossible for him to admit it publicly, he was inclined to think that Ido had shown great skill, initiative, and a certain breadth of vision regarding the profound nature of their mission. The Vessel that had run aground on Organ some five centuries earlier was in a remarkable state of preservation. From Ido's rapid investigations, it appeared that a significant part of the Vessel had remained sealed, and untouched, for lack of electricity. Ido, who was familiar with this type of armament, said he was almost certain that the sealed parts contained materials such as rare earths, uranium, lithium, argon, neon, and helium. The Vessel itself, its engines, its tanks, its entire technical infrastructure, represented an enormous recovery potential, equivalent to several years of mining and light-years of transport to distant planets. The report's conclusion on the Vessel was unambiguous: it represented a godsend for the Union. Ido didn't rule out the possibility of returning the Vessel to orbit, after a few months of repairs, where it could be boarded or docked to the Probe.

The report on the technological level reached by Organ's civilization seemed to Richards less complete, as if Ido had quickly neglected this objective in order to concentrate on evaluating the Vessel. Ido mentioned a fairly well executed urban layout, for a stage 3 civilization. He had seen a few sparse signs of thermal energy and no signs of electrical energy. Stage 4 therefore still seemed a long way off... And they would need to wait until stage 6 before the natives would be able to open the doors of the Vessel themselves, and make use of the resources it contained. The problem that Egon Richards was faced with was, from that point on, a moral dilemma, and above all, a prob-

lem of interpretation. Either the Great Propagation was considered an absolute priority - and it had been, five centuries earlier, when humanity, asphyxiated by the fumes of its industry, had launched its ships into space like a shipwrecked man throwing bottles into the sea. Had humans, in those dark days, seen their future assured on Organ, much of their anguish would have dissipated. One could then consider this peaceful, organized indigenous civilization to be an end in itself, and maybe even the only desirable end for mankind. In this case, preserving it from all outside interference, the way you would nurture a fragile organism in a greenhouse, became a sacred duty. What the Probe had to do, then, was to leave as quickly as possible, leaving at most one or two crew members on the ground, with radio equipment and express instructions not to alter the course of Organ's history.

But one could just as easily consider that the Great Propagation had been a circumstantial attempt, dictated by the fear of extinction, which, today, was overcome. Humanity had found, as it always had in its history, artifices and subterfuges. It had lost its motherland, but had set out to conquer the universe. Other planets had been found that could provide the resources necessary for life. Although air, water and food had become more precious than earthly gold; although they required colossal technologies to obtain, they had succeeded in organizing their production and distribution on a sustainable basis. Planets were exploited, raw materials were transformed in factory-ships, freighters took care of transport, and the Union ensured the legality and security of all this using its fleet. Maybe humans were not happy in the sense that these natives of Organ surely understood, but they lived in peace with their labor, in relative security. A new culture had supplanted terrestrial culture - humanity had changed direction. Organ was a planet that could be widely exploited - its water, its air, its food, its minerals, its building materials. And its Vessel. This indigenous civilization was not troublesome in and of itself, but

its development remained parallel, like a stranger to the Union. Organ should therefore be seen as a means to an end, at the service of the Union.

How do you decide between these two interpretations? Egon Richards paced back and forth across the diagonal space of his cabin, pondering what might, indeed probably would, happen if the Organ civilization were allowed to reach stage 6. The same causes producing the same effects, it was likely that the natives would themselves proceed to the destructive exploitation of their planet. This was the tragic human destiny. While blindly squandering resources, they would multiply out of control, and in the course of their history develop increasingly massive technologies of destruction, which they would need in the inevitable wars that would bathe them in blood. In the end, the Union would be faced with a powerful civilization, pushed out of the nest by the same asphyxiation, the same visceral need for conquest as its own. Would the natives then accept the Union's tutelage? Or would their deep-rooted *planetarity*, culturally anchored in their hearts for generations, push them to set themselves apart, maybe even to oppose the Union? Wasn't there a risk of war? And couldn't this Vessel, once armed, still pose a serious threat to the Union?

As he mechanically paced back and forth between the desk and the bunk, his eyes fixed on the distant nebulas that marbled the night with violet gleams, Egon Richards made his decision. Unhurriedly, after having endeavored to weigh all the causes and effects, he let the decision ripen on its own and detach itself from him, autonomous, objective, and fraught with consequences. He would remove the Vessel from Organ, thus removing from this civilization the powerful accelerator that lay there like a time bomb. Left to its own devices, the Organ civilization, at stage 6, would have to wander for millennia before posing a threat to the Union. With this decision, which appeared to him in all its wisdom, he would follow the two paths that

opened to him, simultaneously. He would let the Organ civilization develop in its biosphere, limiting the Union's intervention to the extraction of the Vessel, and the intensive exploitation of an uninhabited continent of Organ. In this way, he prevented the risk of war, paid his tribute to the Union, all the while leaving this offspring of the Propagation in peace.

He sat back down at his desk to write his own report to the Admiralty. He knew that the message would take several months to reach its destination, at the speed of light - the decision was entirely up to him. The impossibility of immediate communication meant that the captains of each ship were vested with absolute authority, which sometimes proved, as it had tonight, to be a heavy burden to bear. When he had finished his report, in Major Strauss's absence, he decided to pay a visit to Filip Reda, whom he hadn't seen in the mess hall all day. He couldn't say for what reason the mechanic's fate bothered him so much - perhaps it was because, as captain, he was responsible for all these souls. But, if he were to be honest with himself, he had to admit that if Reda were dying of cancer or radiation, he wouldn't be thinking about it so much. What was so disturbing, then, about the idea of suicide?

As he walked through the empty corridors, in which his steady footsteps echoed familiarly, Captain Egon Richards became aware that he was afraid of contagion. Death, tragedy, was epidemic in nature, especially behind closed doors. Filip Reda was saying out loud what others were quietly dreaming in their nightmares. He was saying that death was preferable to a life of physical and mental constraints, the meaning of which had been lost for ages. He was saying that time, when stretched to infinity inside spaceships, no longer produced any fruits. He was saying that desire had been defeated. And he didn't need words to do so - Filip Reda was hardly a proselytizer, nor did he seek to impose his views on the crew. His sui-

cide would speak for him, louder than any voice. Suicides echoed in-to eternity with an insubordinate force.

When he knocked, Reda took a long time to open the door - long enough for the captain to fret.

"Is that you, Captain?" he asked in a courteous tone, putting himself at attention with an air of absence. "Do you need me?"

"I've come to see how you're doing, Reda. At ease. Will you let me in?"

"If you'd like, but I'm afraid I don't have much to offer you."

"That's not what I came for," said Richards.

He entered the cabin and was struck by its cramped conditions. He never went into the crew's cabins - he had no reason to. When he did spend an evening with one of the officers, it was always in the mess hall, in the common room, sometimes in his cabin. But he hadn't set foot in these crowded spaces since his comprehensive tour of the Probe. On that tour, the cabins were empty, clean, gleaming, like the glossy compartments of a lavish dollhouse. But now, they were full of life, laden with human odors, clutter, objects of all kinds that devoured the space. It was a far cry from the impeccable order of his own cabin... His eyes didn't know where to rest to avoid violating this modest privacy - underwear that were drying, opened packets of cookies, some medicine boxes, handwritten notes, cluttered every surface.

"Perhaps you'd be more comfortable in a larger cabin?" the captain offered.

"You think it would make a big difference?" asked Reda, interested.

"I don't know."

"A few square feet more or less could make the difference between the bearable and the unbearable, is that it?"

"It's just a suggestion."

Reda wanted to talk - to really talk, to exchange views devoid of verbiage, hierarchical considerations and ulterior motives. This question of material well-being and its possible consequences on psychological life, interested him, but he understood that Egon Richards was not Mikael Strauss. He wouldn't get much out of him. The gleam in his eyes, briefly lit, faded.

"You're very kind, Captain. But I don't think it would do any good. Besides, how would you justify such an exception? You don't have enough large cabins for everyone."

"That's what I was thinking," said Richards.

In truth, the ship had a large number of extra cabins, of all sizes. It would be very easy to grant privileges, and therefore much more decent living conditions, to a good half of the crew, but Egon Richards didn't operate that way. For him, the hierarchy was a backbone, and each rank in the Astro-Spatial was assigned a specific number of square feet. If we began to make exceptions, the whole spine would be damaged, eaten away. The entire edifice threatened to collapse. He was relieved by Reda's refusal.

"I believe you had a positive exchange with Major Strauss?"

"Yes, I did. He's a remarkable man."

"I think so too. Many of our officers are remarkable men."

"Many of your men are too, without being officers."

"Yes, of course, forgive me. I didn't mean to be insulting."

"It's alright. It must be because we don't have the same definition of the word 'remarkable'."

Egon Richards was uncomfortable.

"Maybe it would do you some good to go down onto the planet?" he said, again ready to do anything to avoid suicide, and yet full of reservations in the face of this unprecedented procedure.

Filip Reda gave a pale smile.

"You're really scared, aren't you? Otherwise, you wouldn't offer me that."

“I feel very concerned about your health status, Reda. I want to help you with the means that are in my power.”

“How much time could you grant me down there?”

“Two, three days maybe.”

Reda's eyes lit up intermittently - most of the time, they were dull and inexpressive, and then suddenly they came alive with a remnant of life. The prospect of treading on land, of having his face bathed in sunlight, of breathing in the scent of the trees, gave his gaze a glimmering spark.

“There's one thing I won't dare ask you.”

“Well” said Richards keenly, “go ahead. I'll do what I can to make you happy.”

“Could you drop me off on the ground, and leave me there? If you don't want me to mingle with the residents of Organ, I could stay away, live in a forest, like a hermit. But leave me there, don't ask me to come back on board.”

“That's desertion,” Richards observed calmly.

“It's mercy,” Reda corrected gently.

“What would I say to the others? To all those who dream of it just as much as you?”

“You could say I'm dead. You could declare me dead.”

Egon Richards remained silent for a long moment. Filip Reda didn't know whether he was thinking about his proposal, or whether he was simply looking for the least violent way of expressing his refusal. And, admittedly, Egon Richards was already regretting letting himself offer to bend the rules. This was the result - a wild hope, which he was going to have to disappoint. It was worse than if he had done nothing.

“Three days, maybe I can get a week. But you'll have to come back on board.”

Filip Reda didn't protest, didn't argue, didn't show any spite. His eyes simply dimmed, and he resumed his gentle, resigned attitude.”

“No, Captain. If you were to force me back on board, after having tasted the joys of life one more time, I'd kill myself within the hour. I'd kill myself on the spot so I wouldn't have to come back up.”

He spoke without aggression - it wasn't a threat, just a lucid observation.

“I'd rather stay on board, in that case.”

He stood up, as if the conversation was drawing to a close, and the captain, who wasn't used to being dismissed, rose to his feet nonetheless.

“Tell Major Strauss that I'm looking forward to his visit, Captain.”

Egon Richards didn't know how to take his leave, and while feeling vaguely ridiculous, he saluted.

Filip Reda returned his salute with a slight delay and a discouraging sluggishness, and soon the door to the miniscule cabin closed.

Egon Richards quickened his pace, prey to a feeling of oppression that he hoped to appease by walking. Was it the confinement of the cabin? Or the unfathomable abyss contained within this narrow metal box? The captain felt his ribcage compressing his lungs. He felt an irrepressible need to inflate himself, to suck in air in great gulps, until his ribs burst. Then, little by little, the feeling subsided. His organs, revolted for a moment, found their usual place, their clock-like ticking, their peaceful adjacency. His heart, trapped in its cage like Filip Reda in his, had momentarily given up trying to escape.

*EXCERPT FROM THE QUO VADIS LOGBOOK - Captain
Joseph Kellane*

EARTH YEAR 2786

Digital archives last consulted in the year 2830, for printing, and preserved on paper in several copies in the Quo Vadis Library.

What does the term "leader" mean? At times I wonder, because I don't feel I'm leading our crew - at least, not in the way we usually understand it. There are a lot of things that emerge from a group, and it's these things that drive the deeper directions. Throughout history, leaders have only ever lent their shape, their name, their image, to something that already existed in the crowd before them. They don't lead, they embody, sometimes in spite of themselves, carried along by circumstances.

What is emerging now, aboard the Quo Vadis, fascinates me. I would never have thought of it - none of us would ever have thought of it on our own - because it's a purely social phenomenon, a group phenomenon, and as such, it escapes any conscious decision or any intention.

I'll try to name this phenomenon, but it seems to me that the words of our old common language, which was once English, are too restricted to describe it. We would definitely have to talk about spirituality, and perhaps even magic. But can we speak of spirituality when we know that the heavens are empty? And can we speak of magic when we only believe in ordinary causality?

I've already mentioned in this journal the peculiar, almost telepathic link that seems to operate between certain members of the crew. Everyone has now noticed and accepted the reality of this psychic phenomenon, and social practices have begun to develop around it. A whole vocabulary too. And rituals - I see more and more people reinforcing these Links with tattoos.



CHAPTER 7: SANCTIONS

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 586

EARTH YEAR 3416

The dawn, in the forest of Organ, was so beautiful it was touching. A white vapor rose from the damp earth, reflecting the first rays, in a way that gave you the impression the light was rising from the earth rather than descending from the sky. As he walked, Mikael sometimes closed his eyes to take in the song of the invisible birds - he imagined them by the hundreds, by the thousands, celebrating the return of day with an overflowing of life. There was no sound more joyful than this - no music that penetrated your soul with more powerful hope. Mikael had managed to reduce the thought of departure to an almost imperceptible black spot in his consciousness. He tried to be completely present, adhering to every second, fully aware of how lucky he was to be living these fleeting moments, which would perhaps, in the years to come, constitute his most precious possession. The night he had spent with Lightning was like a miracle in his military existence; and he couldn't help feeling grateful for engineer Ido's treachery which had offered him the opportunity of this overnight getaway. Could a single memory fill a lifetime? In this sacred dawn, which bathed the forest in mysterious glimmers, it seemed to him that it could. These few hours on Organ, in the arms of this young woman, would cast their comforting light over the eternal gloom of the ship, never running dry, never dimming.

Lightning was walking in front, worried. At this hour, she was still listening to the murmurs of her tattoos - without fail, the pains

of the Keys always subsided with the night, when their clan surrendered to sleep, and revived when it woke up. Cloud and her mother were the most acute pains, but there was an ache, a soreness in her whole body that came from the entire clan in mourning. She felt the need to be with them and comfort them; in truth, it was the only way to calm the tension in her own body. This was how the Links had been designed - to compensate for human imperfection, selfishness, blindness and the Keys' desire for individual happiness. It wasn't necessary to want the Good, with one's reason, feelings, or one's soul: it was the body that took over, imperious and primordial. Even if Lightning felt dangerously troubled by this man from the Probe, at the risk of forgetting her duties, there were these innate pains in her flesh that imprinted in her, as deep as the instinct of survival, the instinct to help her clan. But today was a peculiar day, and she would have to fight both against her inclination towards Mikael Strauss and against the clan's instinct, because her presence would be required with the other Keys for engineer Ido's inevitable sanction.

By the time they reached the large square at the main entrance to the Vessel, a large crowd had already gathered. Mikael immediately saw engineer Ido, standing unperturbed beside the Keys who had received them the day before. He didn't appear to be restrained by force. While Lightning went to speak with Rain, Amber, River, and April, Mikael observed the square. The town's natives were lingering, some of them curious about what was going on, and you could hear snippets of their conversations.

"It seems he visited the Vessel without permission."

"He was found inside this morning, and no one knows how long he was there."

"It seems he was taking all sorts of notes, right up to the last moment."

"These people have plenty of audacity."

"You mean they are reckless."

“Which of the Keys is going to carry out his sanction?”

Mikael, uncomfortable in his military garb that marked him with the stamp of the traitors, silently asked himself other questions. What exactly had Ido been looking for? What had he found? Had he acted on Captain Richards' orders? Should he try to defend him? Present himself as a diplomatic intermediary? What mysterious sanction were the onlookers talking about?

“Lightning,” he said in a low voice.

She turned back to him, looking sorry.

“Your comrade is going to be subjected to the Needle.”

“Is it lethal?” asked Mikael anxiously.

She couldn't help smiling.

“No, not at all. You will then have to escort him aboard your ship, and he must not appear on Organ again.”

“Who's in charge? Is it the Key they call Rain?”

“Yes,” said Lightning, “in a way.”

Mikael stepped towards the old woman, who lifted her chin a little as he approached, so she could look down on him better.

“On behalf of Captain Egon Richards and the entire crew of the Probe, I apologize for the unworthy behavior of engineer Ido.”

Rain regarded him gravely.

“Why are you apologizing for him? Are you responsible for his actions?”

“No,” stammered Mikael.

“And your Captain Egon Richards, did he force engineer Ido to act?”

“I don't know, ma'am. I don't think he did.”

Ido stirred a few feet away.

“I swear, Captain Egon Richards had nothing to do with my initiative.”

Rain seemed to be thinking.

"I am trying to understand," she said. "Does your leader have the means to force you to do or not to do something?"

"The captain is in command, and the military hierarchy requires us to obey."

Rain looked meaningfully at River, then at Lightning, as if they'd just received confirmation of something they had suspected. However, Mikael didn't understand what it was.

"But you are free to disobey orders, are you not?" asked Lightning gently.

"Yes, of course. But I assure you that engineer Ido will have to accept the consequences of his choice. Captain Richards does not allow any breach of military discipline to go unpunished. I assure you that he will understand the extent of the affront that has been done to you and that..."

"We have no doubt," said Rain slowly.

"In that case, could I request an immediate return to the ship, so that engineer Ido can be confronted by his superior as soon as possible?"

"But of course. You will escort him back as soon as we have completed a small formality on his person."

Ido, with a stubborn look on his face, remained impassive.

"I must insist," began Mikael, "that..."

"Your insistence will do no good, young man. The decision was taken collectively, and I think your hostess will add her voice to ours."

Lightning, without hesitation, nodded in agreement.

Rain made a small gesture with her hand covered in intertwined tattoos - a small gesture of imperious grace, to dismiss, or to silence him.

Mikael addressed engineer Ido with his look. He nodded, as if to thank him for his vain attempt at intercession.

"I will be the one to proceed," declared Rain. "And I choose... the right eyelid."

The eyelids were the rare remaining untouched parts of her skin - no doubt because the tattoo would be particularly painful there.

"Lightning," said Rain, "can you maneuver the Needle? You have the steadiest hand."

The young girl moved towards River, who was presenting her a strange set of utensils in a box. There was a very long, and very thin needle, and a small vial containing an obscure blue liquid.

They made Ido sit down, his head held by April and Amber, not without a certain degree of gentleness.

"We are going to whisper the words you have to say," breathed Amber in Ido's ear.

"Do I have to go along with this nonsense?" he grumbled.

"Absolutely," she said.

Ido saw Lightning approach him with the long needle in hand, her light fingers feeling the bone of his skull at forehead level.

"Do not worry, the pain is bearable," she said.

Ido stiffened a little, but his head was firmly held, and he closed his eyes so he couldn't see the needle approach his forehead.

"*May the Needle serve to sew up the torn trust,*" said Rain in a strong voice. "*May it weave a strong Link.*"

He felt it penetrate his flesh, and had the impression - despite contradicting all his knowledge of anatomy - that it was passing through his skull.

"*I take responsibility for your actions,*" said Rain.

"You must answer: 'I renounce all secrets.'"

"I renounce all secrets," said Ido, surprised by the sound of his own voice, as if detached from himself.

Then the needle withdrew, and Lightning dipped it, still humid, in the blue ink, before making a dot on Rain's eyelid.

"May the weight of your mistakes be lifted from you," said Rain again.

"I will be pure like a child."

As Lightning inserted the needle at various points on Ido's face and body, Mikael, hypnotized, heard the ritual words and tried to make sense of them.

"I will watch over your sanity."

"I will respect your decrees and submit to your governance."

"I will show no cruelty."

"I will lend you the strength of my spirit when you need it."

"The balance of the clan will be my only compass."

"I will be your body, your hands, your arm, your legs."

"I will be your courage and your rescue."

The ceremony seemed to be drawing to a close - the spectators, looking serious, were nodding their heads, and an imperceptible shudder in the crowd indicated that it would soon disperse. The last kiss of the needle, and the last oaths, were followed by a long silence.

Rain then addressed Ido.

"You will never set foot on Organ's soil again."

Ido bowed. His face was glistening with sweat, and his features seemed drawn like after a sharp pain. Mikael reached out to give him his arm, and he didn't refuse.

"Thank you for your hospitality," he said timidly, addressing Rain.

"You are welcome on Organ, Major Mikael Strauss," said Lightning in a clear voice.

"When is your ship due to leave our skies?" asked Amber.

"I don't know, but I hope to have the chance to see you again, and to accept Lightning's invitation."

The Keys nodded indifferently.

Lightning offered to escort them back to the annex, and Rain joined them. Mikael, despite his desire to find a moment to talk to

Lightning, supported his team-mate, and the two of them remained immersed, by an unspoken agreement, in near-complete silence. No doubt because of the morning's events, the wonder he had felt in the presence of the forest was already waning - and he wondered, vaguely, how long it would be before he would have become insensitive to its presence, if he had had the chance to live here. Probably very quickly, he mused, to give himself the courage to climb back up. The sensations that assailed him gave him no rest - there was concern for Ido, mingled with a certain aggravation, since he was forcing them both to abridge their mission, maybe permanently. But there was also Organ enveloping them, in the background, with its rustling and its caressing breaths. And Lightning, behind him, whose voice and body he could distinguish, whose nakedness he remembered, and whom he would have to leave behind. To cut short these various impressions, he tried to concentrate on the conversation the two women were having in low voices.

"You did well," said Rain. "I think you could have gone even further."

Lightning's voice was too low for Mikael to hear.

"How did you interpret his emotions?" Rain asked.

Again, inaudible words.

"For the other, it is a bit different. It is a kind of excitement."

A question, whispered.

"No, not that kind at all. Something violent, like when you catch your prey, or discover a particularly fruitful idea."

Another question.

"I am afraid so. It may not yet be conscious in all of them, but it is there."

Lightning remained silent for a moment. Then she said something a little hastily.

"I know, I am not thrilled about it either. But it will have to do."

This time, Mikael managed to understand Lightning's question:

"Do we know where the others are?"

"No, there is no way of knowing. Organ is too vast - information is lost with distance."

"What about the distance to the Vessel? Is it not too great?"

"There is only air in between. That will not be a problem."

Then the two women fell silent. Mikael murmured to Ido:

"Do you feel normal, engineer Ido?"

"I'll feel a lot better once we've got the annex off the ground."

"No, I meant this needle, this ceremony... It didn't injure you, did it? You don't feel any side effects?"

"I'll go see the doctor on board. But no, I don't think so. It's a primitive decorum, a cheap circus act," he grumbled. "At most, it's a kind of acupuncture."

"You think so?"

Ido looked at him in astonishment.

"And you, do you believe otherwise?"

Despite his perplexity, Mikael was a little ashamed to be so easily seduced by the natives, and to abandon his rationality so quickly.

"No, of course I don't. I was just asking to make sure everything was all right. Have you reported to Captain Richards?"

"Yes, in fact I made several reports, as I made new discoveries. In case I was incapable of doing so later."

Mikael nodded. He imagined engineer Ido's exceptional and solitary night in the Vessel, and his feverish reports sent in haste. Had Captain Richards pulled an all-nighter, waiting for this drip-feed of information?

They finally arrived at the annex, and Lightning spontaneously approached Mikael.

"You have to come back, Mikael Strauss," she said, with her deep-set eyes fixed on him. "We have not finished exchanging our customs."

The memories of the night before flooded into his mind and skin, he saw the moonlight on her abdomen again, and the scent of her hair entangled his imagination.

"I hope I will be able to, Lightning."

"You have to," she said, smiling. "I order it."

He smiled back, then she solemnly backed away and stood beside Rain. Engineer Ido had already climbed into the annex, and Mikael joined him after waving goodbye to the old woman whose right eyelid, slightly swollen, was red.

The aggressive sound of the engine - the brutal jolt of take-off - Mikael's heart, suddenly torn from his chest - the trees, the streams, the birds of Organ becoming in a few seconds as small and unreal as details on a painted picture... When the annex docked on its platform, Mikael's eyes recognized the familiar decor of the hangar, and his body immediately readjusted to the artificial gravity to which he was accustomed. But his mind had remained down below.

Captain Richards and Lieutenant Malkine were waiting for them, with obvious impatience. It took a great deal of effort for Mikael to accomplish what was expected of him, and which had momentarily, he hoped, quite lost its meaning. The straight back, the military salute, the words of regulation. He understood, through a sort of fog, that Captain Richards was requesting them both in the debriefing room, which was perfectly logical. Lieutenant Malkine, as second-in-command, would also be present.

"Major Strauss, let's start with you. Have you managed to establish friendly diplomatic relations?"

"Yes, despite the interruption caused by engineer Ido. I managed to forge a bond of friendship with the Key who welcomed me into her home.

"Can you give me a brief report on the mentality of the natives?"

Mikael's impressions were too intense, for the moment, to form anything more than a kaleidoscope. But with the help of his habit of

synthesis, and a sense of duty, he managed to formulate a few sentences.

“The society is clan-based, marked by a strong sense of solidarity within each clan. The Keys are the clan chiefs; they seem to cooperate with each other to make the City's overall decisions. Hierarchy is not marked by formal protocol, but by universal respect for leaders, regardless of age or gender. This does not appear to be a particularly patriarchal society. There is no remarkable personal enrichment among these chiefs, who live modest, secluded and simple lives. The City is remarkably beautiful, I haven't seen any deprived neighborhoods, and I'd tend to think there's a strong sense of social solidarity, and little in the way of income inequality.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Lieutenant Malkine, as if urging him to cut to the chase. Mikael didn't acknowledge this interruption.

“The mastery of language seems excellent, and the habit of reading seems ingrained in some of the natives.”

Captain Egon Richards smiled.

“They seem to have developed knowledge and practices in singular fields,” Mikael continued, “such as body synchronization, plant and animal ethology...”

The captain was still smiling politely.

“You seem charmed, Major Strauss.”

“Indeed. It's a peaceful and prosperous civilization.”

Lieutenant Malkine sighed loudly - Captain Richards didn't, but Mikael felt he had said enough, and stayed quiet.

“I hope this feeling of friendship towards the natives won't prevent you from carrying out your diplomatic mission,” said Malkine.

“What mission is that?”

The captain gave the lieutenant a reproachful look, but, as Mikael had expected, he didn't reproach him openly.

“Lieutenant Malkine anticipates, of course, the possible diplomatic consequences of analyzing all the reports.”

The sentence didn't mean much - Captain Richards often uttered hollow phrases in a solemn tone. Mikael refrained from commenting and swallowed his question.

"We won't be making any decisions until the second team returns, which isn't scheduled for another seventy-two hours," added the captain.

Then he turned to Ido and addressed him sternly:

"Engineer Ido, I formally ordered you to defer to Major Strauss in all matters of diplomatic relations, and it appears that you've gone without his approval to break the rules set by the natives."

"I'm aware of this oversight, Captain. Would you allow me to explain why?"

"Please do," intervened Lieutenant Malkine, rather kindly.

"My objective was, above all, to evaluate the technical potential of this civilization, and to get an exact idea of what they had mastered or not. Visiting the Vessel seemed essential to achieving this goal. Unable to reconcile the two, I gave priority to the technical objective over the diplomatic recommendations."

"At considerable risk to Major Strauss, not to mention yourself. The natives could have killed you," the captain insisted limply.

"I didn't think about the possible consequences for Major Strauss, and I ask him to forgive me. I, on the other hand, was determined to accept the consequences of my actions. I felt that this information was somehow more valuable than what I was risking.

"And that's a brave decision," said Lieutenant Malkine.

"Brave, but rash and dangerous. Things turned out well, but you could have been killed without getting any information, and put the whole diplomatic mission in trouble," hammered Captain Richards.

Mikael could see the disagreement between the captain and his first officer - and the captain had to have the last word.

"Indeed, Engineer Ido," Lieutenant Malkine finally said. "For your breach of discipline, I propose four days in the brig."

“Eight days,” said Richards. “It’s the least we can do.”

There was a brief silence. Ido must have felt relieved - Mikael had feared a much heavier penalty. But he understood that the information he had gleaned was truly precious - so precious, in fact, that it aroused an expression of obvious interest on the faces of the two superiors, which his own speech had not aroused at all. Ido was officially sanctioned. But Lieutenant Malkine, clearly, would have been more inclined to congratulate him. In fact, Mikael understood that this masquerade was played out solely for him - so that he couldn’t complain about an injustice. If he hadn’t been there, this part of the interview wouldn’t even have happened, and Captain Richards would have come straight to the point he was at now:

“Once this matter has been settled, Engineer Ido, we’d like to hear your detailed report on the Vessel’s condition and cargo.”

“These questions don’t concern Major Strauss,” said Malkine.

“Indeed,” replied the Captain. “Major, I’d be grateful if you could visit mechanic Reda. He’s expecting you. Of course, there’s no real emergency. You can have something to eat first.”

Mikael saluted and left - he was used to being similarly dismissed from sensitive meetings. Captain Richards was more polite than Lieutenant Malkine, but it all boiled down to the same thing. He wasn’t hungry, and headed straight through the corridors to Reda’s quarters. On the way, he thought about Lieutenant Malkine’s little phrase: “I hope your friendship for the natives won’t prevent you from carrying out your diplomatic mission”. This sentence, despite the uncertainties it contained, promised him a return to Organ. Another diplomatic mission was the chance to see Lightning again, to smell the grass, the trees and the sun. It was enough to fill him with joy - even if he fully understood the possible implications of what he had just witnessed. The Vessel must contain usable raw materials, and Richards and Malkine would probably want to negotiate them with Organ... Mikael wondered if he would be up to the task, then,

as he reached Reda's cabin, he shrugged and concentrated on the task ahead. Filip Reda opened the door for him as soon as he knocked, and Mikael immediately perceived a change in the atmosphere surrounding him. He seemed somehow more alive, more awake. And his cabin, which had left him with the memory of a certain disorder, was almost excessively clean.

“Major Strauss, I'm happy to see you.”

Reda was smiling, a pale, slightly distant, volatile smile - but he was smiling, and Mikael found a charm in his face he hadn't seen before.

“You seem to be feeling better,” he said.

Reda didn't reply, and invited him to sit down.

“Do you know that Captain Richards himself came here while you were away?”

Mikael didn't hide his surprise.

“Was it helpful for you?”

“No.”

Reda sighed, his eyes unfocused, as if searching for the right word.

“Captain Richards' company is no more interesting to me than that of an ant.”

Mikael let out a surprised laugh.

“What do you mean?”

“His mind is inhabited by codes, signals and information that are of no use to me. He himself lives in a world that I don't.”

“How does that make you think of an ant?”

“Well, I read somewhere, I can't remember where, that on Earth, even at the most acute point of overpopulation, the total amount of ants exceeded that of humans. Which means that in every space, ants coexisted with humans. They lived side by side, in parallel universes. They might touch, hurt or kill each other, but their respective agendas never met. They were absolutely parallel, as separate as mil-

lions of light-years. If an omniscient being had had to tell the story of men on one side, and the story of ants on the other, these two stories would have had no common events - and probably not even a common framework. That's how it is for me with Captain Richards. He's as radically alien to me as if he were light years away, in another universe. As foreign as an ant."

"I get it," said Mikael. I probably share a similar perception, at times."

"At what times?"

"When we're having a conversation. I often have the illusion of being able to communicate with him, and then he suddenly says something that brings me back to reality."

"Why can't you really communicate with him?"

"Maybe it's his sense of hierarchy, which creates this watertight wall. I don't know." Reda shrugged.

"He offered me a bigger cabin, he even suggested I spend a week on the planet."

"And you turned it down?"

"He didn't want me to stay there permanently, so... what's the point?"

Mikael hesitated before asking:

"If you could live on Organ, you wouldn't want to die anymore?"

"No doubt I'd ask myself the question again, in a different way."

"Where are you now, with your dark thoughts?"

"You know, it's not like something that can come and go. It's more like an organism that's there, and that grows, at an uneven rate, with pauses, and accelerations. But it never decreases."

"Do you think everyone who wants to die ends up committing suicide?"

Reda considered the question, with interest and seriousness.

"No. When it isn't too developed, it doesn't prevent you from living. Many people have to die of something else, prematurely as it were."

"What is that like?"

"You really don't know?"

"No," said Mikael, "I don't think so."

"That's strange. I could have sworn that this organism was present in every man. More or less developed, more or less cultivated. But in every man."

"A death wish," articulated Mikael. "It's an idea I've heard before. But I've never really believed in it, until now."

"Do you believe in a survival instinct?"

"Yes, I suppose I do."

"But the two are not contradictory. Well, yes, they are, but what I mean is that they're not exclusive. They coexist, in a way."

"Like humans and ants."

"Yes. For example, for me, the survival instinct is weakening, while my death wish is growing. But they have been equally strong for a long time."

"Tell me what your death wish looks like."

Reda sighed, and Mikael was troubled to recognize in his expression, in the tone of his voice, the same subtle and profound alteration that transforms lovers when invited to talk about the object of their desire.

"It's first and foremost a desire to let go, to simply let go, to stop fighting. A desire to sleep, to slip away. But it's also a desire to escape."

"Like a door that opens when you feel locked in?"

"Not exactly like a door. More like a horizon, a very broad horizon."

Mikael remained silent for a moment, dreaming of these images.

"Is it present in you?" asked Reda, after a moment.

“Yes,” said Mikael in a low voice. “It’s like a very muffled sound that I can hardly hear unless I listen closely.”

Reda seemed satisfied.

“You see, Captain Richards wouldn’t have answered my question like that. He probably wouldn’t have understood it. He sees suicide as something purely external to him - some kind of malfunction that could affect his crew. He doesn’t grasp its human scope. He only grasps the consequences for the anthill.”

Mikael wanted to change the subject - but Reda was talking animatedly, and it seemed to him that, by doing so, at least, he was reattaching himself to life. If their talks interested him enough, maybe they could keep his demons in check.

“You should agree to spend a few days on land. What’ve you got to lose?”

“One thing I’m becoming increasingly attached to: my peace and quiet. I don’t want to die with a painful feeling of being torn away. I don’t want to feel like I’ve wasted my life. I’d just like to clear the air, gently, to get rid of the things in my life one after the other, like emptying a room to air it out. There’s less and less furniture, fewer and fewer objects, and the pure lines of architecture can finally reappear. Minimalism makes you feel lighter. You feel purified. This is how I want to die, not crying in rage or despair.”

“I think I can understand that. But at the same time, the simple act of reconnecting to a planet generates such a powerful feeling... The life all around is contagious, too: the energy of the trees, of the animals, of the countless human community, starts to flow through your veins again.”

“And doesn’t it hurt when the circulation returns?”

“Michelle Touré sobbed after setting her foot on the ground. And some others had phobias of space and crowds. But I felt this flood of energy, and I felt like I had been resurrected from among the dead.”

“We're all undead on these ships. Pitiful, pallid creatures.”

“You know, I think that's how they saw us.”

“Who did?”

“The natives. They looked at us with such compassion - I think that was the worst part.”

“So they're not ants, then?”

“No. They're more human than you and I.”

Filip Reda remained pensive for a moment. He wasn't smiling any more, and fatigue was setting into his features again.

“I'll come back tomorrow?” suggested Mikael.

“With pleasure. I promise to still be here.”

“Thank you.”

They shook hands, and Mikael left.

To return to his cabin, he took a detour via the Promenade - a long gangway covered with portholes that allowed the whole crew to come and admire the cold beauty of the starry night. One was rarely alone there, but the spectacle of emptiness, radiation, and the slow, inexorable rotation of time incited silence. Mikael was pleased that the Vessel was oriented in a way that he could see Organ - blue and green, in its atmosphere that protected it from space like a magnificent shield, the planet rotated slowly, almost imperceptibly. Light and shadow, like divine principles, alternated on its perfect surface - as if, at a certain distance, everything, every body, every life, became a mathematical abstraction.

EXCERPT FROM THE QUO VADIS LOGBOOK - Captain Joseph Kellane

EARTH YEAR 2819

Digital archives last consulted in the year 2830, for printing, and preserved on paper in several copies in the Quo Vadis Library.

My assembly project is coming to an end. Will we ever be able to implement it in an environment other than in the Quo Vadis? The future will tell. I'm approaching seventy and the future is shrinking before me. But my energy remains intact.

I suggested to the crew that they assemble themselves into groups of one or two hundred people, welded around a person I don't want to call a leader, because his or her main role would not be to command, but to create links between all the members of his community. The telepathic links between this person, who would be a sort of keystone for the community, and all the other members, would be reinforced and made visible by ritual tattoos.

The leaders of each community - there would be around a hundred of them - would be in a position to help me in my decision-making, by expressing the needs and aspirations essential to the well-being of their group.

In this journal, I can confess that my dream would have been to Link myself to all the members of the crew, to get to know each and every one of their joys and sorrows. But I pondered this. The human brain is not capable of mentally picturing numbers above a certain quantity. Nor is the human heart capable of loving and knowing people above a certain number. No leader should have to answer for more than a few hundred people - beyond that, the leader no longer handles people, but numbers. And that's where all the evil comes from.



CHAPTER 8: TERRA INCOGNITA

EARTH YEAR 3416

On paper, the mission was a simple one. After returning to the annex, they detached the aero-terrestrial vehicle and embarked on a systematic exploration. The vehicle climbed to a high altitude, making it possible to cover great distances in a short amount of time. The sampling sites had been determined in advance, and all they had to do was methodically apply the procedure: lower the vehicle to the surface, bring out the analyst robots, and take samples of all kinds, before going back up and doing it all over again. Air, soil, organic matter and water were conscientiously bagged and tagged. The robots' sensors measured everything from magnetic fields to radiation levels to gravitational forces. An extensive terrestrial ultrasound was conducted, with software that extrapolated the missing results based on the input results. All this was, on a scientific level, perfectly under control, and there was in fact very little difference between this work and the work carried out by remote controlled robots on the usual planets. Being able to move and operate the robots manually merely saved precious time.

Major Rodriguez was in charge of the itinerary and defining the sampling sites. He spent a lot of time studying the images taken in orbit, as well as the multimedia maps that Michelle Touré was constantly creating, based on the multiple data observed. The Major also distributed orders, wrote reports, and decided on working hours and breaks. He didn't talk much, and seemed extremely focused on his mission, remaining aboard the vehicle most of the time. Roboti-

cist Isla Brown, assisted by Damian Azoury, accompanied her small herd of robots, which, outside of their carbon and titanium environment, whose humidity was constantly monitored, tended to require regular care. Manufactured to withstand the vacuum of space, the absence of pressure and extreme temperatures, they were ultimately ill-prepared to wade through mud or withstand colonies of ants. But it wasn't these technical problems that agitated Major Rodriguez - like Captain Richards had told him, technical problems were nothing compared to human ones. During his one-on-one meeting with the captain, the latter had strongly emphasized the possible psychological, even psychotropic, effects of the planet on the crew. His advice had been clear: stay as much as possible inside the vehicle, sleeping and eating there. Limit outings as much as possible, and never let a crew member go out alone. Minimize the time spent on Organ as much as possible, even if it meant doing a second mission later. At the slightest sign of psychological failure, at the slightest misbehavior, at the slightest symptom, Captain Richards wanted everyone to go back up. Ever since Engineer Ido's more or less uncontrolled escapade, the Captain had made it a point of honor - and Rodriguez shuddered at the thought of one of his team-mates having such a fit of madness.

Michelle, stuck with the Major most of the time, was doing a great job on the map, but Rodriguez sensed her volatility, ready to escape him at the slightest opportunity. Involuntarily, her eyes kept wandering to the outside, which she could only see through the vehicle's slightly dirty windows. Sometimes, she would give it an almost pleading look - but, thank God, a silent one. Military discipline had taught her not to talk about whatever was on her mind. She diverted her intense desire to take a walk on Organ with a methodical concern for cartography. But Rodriguez wondered how long this self-control could last - how many days the volcano, under its internal pressure, would remain calm before exploding. Michelle was infinite-

ly respectful and never overstepped an order - but all it took was the slightest crack, the slightest gap, the slightest crevice, and she would disappear into it. As long as the Major hadn't explicitly forbidden her from touching ground to help Isla Brown and Damian Azoury reassemble the robots, she jumped out to welcome them, and stole these few moments of freedom, greedily, like a starving woman. As long as the Major didn't demand that the crew use the vehicle's basic toilet facilities exclusively, she took advantage of this pretext, three or four times a day, to get out of their sight. She never abused the Major's trust - she always returned without being called. But he wouldn't relax until she was back aboard the Probe and no longer his responsibility.

Fortunately, she wasn't the assistant analyst - Brown and Azoury weren't particularly worrying him, but they objectively had the possibility of escaping at any moment. Rodriguez often wondered what would have to be done if they didn't return to the vehicle... He would usually get palpitations at the thought, and try to move on. In the evenings, living together in the vehicle was a real pain. Even though they were used to the tight, enclosed spaces of the ships, sleep was hard to come by. Rodriguez had insisted on eating inside on the first night, but the next day he relented and allowed a picnic on the outskirts of the vehicle, for thirty minutes. Organ, so lush and inviting in the light, became an indistinct mass of darkness at night. Nowhere had they experienced such darkness. In space, two things radiated incessantly: the ship on which you necessarily found oneself, and which was, even on standby, never completely dark. And, of course, space itself. "This dark light which falls from the stars"...

Today was the fourth and final evening - the Major had decided to bring this first mission to a close. Everything had gone well so far, they had collected a great deal of data, perhaps enough, and it seemed to him that they shouldn't tempt the devil. Michelle had become melancholy over the last twenty-four hours. She was no longer

asking Isla and Damian her incessant questions - questions from every direction that had tired everyone for the first three days. To Rodriguez, this sudden dejection seemed ominous. He had great difficulty falling asleep, and didn't fall asleep until dawn, when he saw for himself that his three team-mates were asleep. He awoke three or four hours later, due to the lower back pain inflicted by the sitting position, and took quite a long time to open his eyes. The light bothered him, maybe even more than the darkness, and he longed to be back in the familiar twilight glow. He couldn't hear any voices - the others were probably still asleep. Worry finally opened his eyelids, and he felt a pang in his heart, followed by palpitations, when he realized that Michelle was no longer beside him. Isla and Damian were asleep in the back, and he rudely woke them up. But Michelle had left the seat empty, and already cold. By what miracle had she managed to escape without making a sound? He had to be really exhausted after four sleepless nights... Without delay, Rodriguez sent a report to Captain Richards, and ordered Brown and Azoury to get ready immediately to leave in search of Touré. He wasn't really panicked by this event - he had felt it coming for four days, and regarded it more like a kind of fatality, which had finally found its way into reality.



Michelle had struggled, like lovers sometimes struggle, for a time, against a forbidden desire. But desire is a powerful wave, against which levees cannot hold. What she found hard to understand was Rodriguez's attitude, and even harder, that of Isla and Damian. They were acting exactly as if hierarchy, mission orders, the interests of the Probe, still made sense. They acted as if this daydream in which they had survived their entire existence were really reality. They acted as if they hadn't realized that their reality had just been shattered.

No one had understood why she had sobbed when she touched the ground of Organ. They chalked it up to her skin-deep sensitivity - that was easier. There was something predictable and reassuring about “emotional shock due to contact with a biosphere”. But these words didn't reflect what had happened, what had broken, what had given way, deep inside her. All tears are tears of mourning - Michelle had cried because she had understood, in a flash, that there would be no turning back, that there was a before and an after. Certain moments possess this radicality. They possess a special characteristic that transforms them into a dividing line. They redetermine the meaning of all past and future moments - casting them in an entirely new light. It's what literature tries to express through love at first sight. It's what everyone feels when someone close to them dies suddenly. And for Michelle, touching the ground of Organ had been one of those special moments.

The realization that the world continues to turn normally is always the first proven surprise after the shock of this epiphany. The invisibility of the cataclysm, its lack of effect on others, is an agonizing mystery. We feel absolutely alone, cut off from the world, entrenched in this overwhelming impression as if in a delirium. And more often than not, we continue to carry out our usual actions, in a state of psychological dissociation akin to schizophrenia. This was what Michelle had gone through during those four days - locked up in that dusty vehicle, with the Major barely speaking, bent over her maps, trying to concentrate on her work to forget, for a few minutes at a time, the enormity of what was happening to her. It was during the nights, especially, that she had had time to think. Excitement kept her awake, and perfectly lucid - it seemed to her that she would never need to sleep again, that her long sleep had just ended, and that her eyes would now always be open. She had tried to put it all into words. What was happening to her was the clear and irreversible realization that the existence she had led on the Probe and the other

Union ships was nothing but a pitiful simulacrum of life. They were all trapped in Plato's cave - mistaking shadows for reality. Her contact with the sun had been definitive - some people wanted to stay in the cave, but those who had gone out, even once, never came back. She would have liked to talk about it with Major Strauss - of all people, he was probably the only one who could understand her. She wondered if he had had the same realization.

In light of this truth, all the cards were reshuffled. What had been important was no longer important, what had once made sense no longer made sense. The risk of dying, for example, seemed absolutely trivial. The sense of her disloyalty, of her disobedience, the idea that her companions might consider her a traitor, the very concept of "desertion", had become absolutely alien to her. None of this had anything to do with reality - it was all sophisticated, collective fantasies, rooted in nothing. The planet was real. It was the Real. Michelle had felt connected to it by every fiber of her body, by every nerve, from the very first second. Organ was a world you could cling to, in which you could implant yourself, blossom and bear fruit. The Probe, on the other hand, was nothing but a floating coffin, a ghost ship, which now inspired a profound horror in her.

On the last evening, when Major Rodriguez had finally let his guard down, she had managed to leave the car door ajar and monitored the breathing of her three team-mates. Once she was certain they were all asleep, she had made a run for it. It was as simple as that - she had wandered off into the forest, and once lost in the thick organic night, she had lain on the ground, heart racing, caressing the earth with her hands and lips, laughing and crying with joy.



"Maybe there's something wrong with her," remarked Isla Brown. "Maybe she wandered off for some reason, and maybe something's happened to her."

"What exactly could have happened to her, Isla?"

"We're not sure that there aren't any dangerous wild animals."

"We've only seen very small animals," Azoury observed doubtfully.

"But we're far from having visited the entire surface of this huge planet," protested Brown. "We may very well have missed some more consequential wildlife. It's also possible that something else has happened to her, that she has fallen into a hole, that she blacked out..."

Major Rodriguez shrugged.

"You can talk as much as you like. She deserted."

"You can't say that, Major. There's the assumption of innocence. And desertion is punishable by..."

"By court-martial. I'm perfectly aware of that. And it's precisely to this court martial that we're going to refer Touré as soon as we get our hands on her."

Isla Brown remained silent. The Major's determination frightened her - he didn't seem in any way panicked, or even angry. But his gestures were precise and brutal, like someone preparing for battle.

"There are at least 250 miles, without a single marked trail, between here and the human settlements..." murmured Azoury, taken aback.

"250 miles, with a good map, and in good physical condition, it's doable," said Rodriguez stubbornly. "You can see if she took the maps with her - I'm sure she did."

Isla Brown looked quickly through the organized belongings in the back of the vehicle.

"Maps, and the bulk of the food and water. She only left us one bottle!"

“Does that surprise you, Brown? I've been telling you all along: she deserted,” grumbled Rodriguez, looking glum.

The situation was making Damian Azoury nervous.

“But how are we going to do it?” he asked, his voice rising to a high pitch. “It's like looking for a needle in a haystack!”

“We're going to search this area on foot,” Rodriguez pointed to the map. “Then this zone with the vehicle, at low altitude, in a grid pattern.”

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes,” said the major dryly.

Isla Brown, however, reassured her assistant.

“We're out of water, and almost out of food. Our hunt can't exceed twenty-four hours.”

“With three of us?” whined Azoury. “Three people for a hunt on a... planet?”

“Don't be ridiculous, Azoury, or I'll report you for cowardice. Get ready, we leave in ten minutes.”



Michelle didn't want to die right after finding the meaning of life. So she left nothing to chance. Certain that her team-mates' search could not exceed one day, or two at the most, she decided that all she had to do was hide until the vehicle had left for good. She needed to stay under cover, since the bulk of their search would undoubtedly be conducted at low altitude. For this, a tree seemed ideal. But she also had to watch out for the trail she was sure to have left when she took off. You don't leave a trace of your passage in a human environment, on a ship's gangway or even on a road. But you can only make your way through nature by breaking shrubs and trampling grass. There was undoubtedly a trail leading from the vehicle to where she had laid

down - not to mention the potential help of robots that would be able to detect inaudible noises and vibrations...

Remain motionless for one or two days, to avoid being detected by the robots. Stay under cover, to avoid being spotted by the vehicle. Avoid being at the end of a trail where Rodriguez could simply pick her up... It wasn't an easy equation, but she seemed to find the solution just as the sun was rising. She was going to make a large circular trail, several hundred yards in circumference, which would waste her pursuers' time, since it would take them time to realize they were going in circles. Then she would choose a tree from among all those on the circle - one point among an infinite number. And this tree, which would be indistinguishable from all the others, would be the starting point for a second course - a more dangerous one, and necessarily shorter, where this time she would progress through the canopy. She was used to acrobatics, and in her jumpsuit she had the equipment to rope herself up. As soon as she felt she had reached a safe hiding place, under the canopy of trees, above virgin ground, she would stop and wait, silent and patient, for the vehicle to depart. She had enough food for that. And when the vehicle had left - only then would she implement the second part of her plan.

EXCERPT FROM THE QUO VADIS LOGBOOK - Captain Joseph Kellane

EARTH YEAR 2827

Digital archives last consulted in the year 2830, for printing, and preserved on paper in several copies in the Quo Vadis Library.

I still can't believe it. But the various probes we've sent out have all come back with the same miraculous news. This planet is endowed with a breathable atmosphere, water and plant cover.

I keep repeating these words to convince myself, but I can't seem to believe them yet. How many planets have we set foot on, poisonous or burning, icy or shaken by earthquakes, gaseous or devoid of atmosphere... So many desolate rocks, so many bleak solitudes, so many forgotten regions of hell... And then, this time, when no one was hoping for it anymore, she appears!

All those who left Earth are dead today. None of us will have set eyes on both Earth and this new, unnamed planet, so virgin and so beautiful. What are we going to name her?

Even before I know her name, I'm already hopelessly in love.



CHAPTER 9: TIGHT BRIDLE

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 586

Twig's funeral wake had not gone very well. Cloud and Frost had shown themselves to be very affected by their grief, and when Lightning had wanted to approach them to comfort them, they had turned away quickly, telling her that she had abandoned them on the evening of the old man's death and that they had done without her, comforting each other. Lightning had looked around her, and noticed that there was a general feeling of resentment towards her - her clan didn't understand what could have motivated her not to attend the wake. She had justified herself at length, explaining that the diplomatic visit by the crew of the Probe was an exceptional event, and that the Council of the Keys had appointed her to host the delegation. This was a mission of a higher order, one that went beyond the interests of the Lightning clan to represent those of Organ. They had listened respectfully, but their closed faces remained cold. She had reassured them, collectively and individually, and sworn to them that their Link had not weakened, that she felt their pain as keenly as ever in her flesh, and that she would work to make up for the lack they had experienced. She gave herself to them with redoubled energy, denying her own fatigue, and using her imagination to invent new solutions to their endless problems. The young Vine, whose Link had only recently been formed, expressed her doubts to Lightning about the soundness of her choice: had she done the right thing in choosing to Link herself to a Key that could elude her at a time when she urgently and tragically needed it? Lightning also had to reassure her.

No, she wouldn't shirk. She had come to administer a gentle death to old Twig, she had dropped everything, and had only left when he had peacefully passed away. She would never have abandoned Cloud and her mother if the two of them hadn't been very tight-knit - she would never have asked the members of her clan to make an effort they weren't capable of. But she had had to make a choice, and it was possible for necessities outside the clan to intervene in their lives. They had to accept this.

She knew how fragile a Clan's balance was. She also knew that the trust which Clan members placed in their Key was never acquired definitively; this trust was renewed with each suffering shared and alleviated, with each problem solved. When a Key displeased certain Clan members, it created damaging dissension. When a Key wasn't absolutely fair, and didn't give everyone exactly the same amount of attention, jealousies flared. When a Key was ill, or temporarily unable to provide support, deep anguish developed at the heart of the Clan, and each of these imbalances took an infinite amount of time to resolve. You had to be on your toes, all the time, and always with the same strength. Lightning knew of nothing more exhausting than ensuring happiness. Suffering was far easier. Maintaining harmony implied perpetual motion because, like certain wheels that could only remain upright at high speed, and whose trajectory could be interrupted at any moment by the thousand obstacles along the way, the harmony of a Clan could not do without the energy of its motor for a single second. Nothing in the world is more fragile than equilibrium - equilibrium is, by its very nature, in constant danger of breaking down, it is a battle without end and without victory - and whoever is entrusted with it is entrusted with the most arduous task of all.

By the time she was finally able to leave her clan, Lightning had almost forgotten the hours she had spent with Major Strauss. All day long, she had held back her anger. She had kept it on a leash, like a

dangerous dog, and silenced it. But now it was time to unleash the beast - its anger demanded to be let out so imperiously that it was, now, impossible to resist. The peace that fell from the hundred-year-old trees along the path slid over this anger without managing to breach it. Lightning needed to feel alone, cut off from all her organic Links. Did the members of her clan even realize how much she was sacrificing for them? Her constant efforts, her concern for their well-being as her first thought every morning, her very body, of which she made an almost complete sacrifice to them... Did they know that she suffered as much and more than an old woman, though she was only in her twenties? Did they know that she was never *alone* in her body, never safe from what they could, and would, inflict on her? Did they know that she had sworn an oath not to give birth, so she wouldn't break the Link she had with them? Of course they knew, but they had no idea what it meant. They didn't have the slightest idea - nor did they care. They simply demanded, demanded, every day, and felt entitled to reproach her when she failed to give enough... But was it ever enough for them? Were they not like parasitic animals whom she fed with her own blood, and who were never satiated? With tears of rage in her eyes, she looked at the tattoos on her arms, and imagined them as leeches covering her body, and even her face. This was what she had consented to, what she was still consenting to with each new Needle ceremony. To this ruthless exploitation of her person. No one, of course, shouldered her own pain. Nobody cared - in the world of Organ, the pain of the Keys was the parameter no one ever talked about, the dark matter no one could measure.

Like a mantra, she recited one of the four poems of anger.

*Rip, trample, grind to powder, hate,
Burn, drown, blow, twist and lacerate,
Bite, claw, spit, melt, smashing and shattering
Crush, destroy, and kill without answering.*

Suffering the reproaches of the Clan was so unbearable, at times, that the Keys resorted to these diversions. Lightning felt like throwing back in their faces that she had infinite power over them, and never abused it. That to have such power and not to use it was in itself exhausting - because the temptation to use it never completely disappeared, and therefore had to be pushed back incessantly. All she needed was a word, a phrase, even a thought, to deeply suggest whatever she wished into their minds. She could plunge them into anguish, guilt, desire or war, with a mental manipulation so easy they wouldn't even realize it. But she didn't. She had never done it, and she knew of very few Keys who would have been obliged to do so, on rare occasions, to preserve the Clan's equilibrium. The very existence of this power was enough to command the necessary respect; and its exercise was not only unnecessary, but forbidden. At the thought of the power she held over her Clan, which made her relationship with its members absolutely asymmetrical, her anger dropped a notch. She had to consider their reproaches and anxieties in retrospect. Like the cries of a baby. They had voluntarily given her this power over them - wasn't it normal now that she owed them something in return? There was no equality between her and them, no reciprocity, no mutual relationship. This was symbolized by the solitary location of her home. She couldn't claim their understanding just because she gave them hers. She couldn't demand high standards from them just because she was demanding it of herself. She couldn't expect their help because of the help she gave them - because power wasn't equally distributed between them. She held it, not them. And with power, she had accepted the very thing that made her so angry today, the very thing that was so difficult to live with day after day, the very thing that sometimes revolted her to the point of making her want to leave everything behind: responsibility. She was responsible for them. And that's what they reminded her of with their reproaches.

It was the counterpart of her power - you didn't deserve one if you didn't bear the other.

The poem of power accompanied her return to calm.

*Clinging, writhing at teats that bleed and quiver,
The young ones fight for their mother's still frame.
Worn by fierce pangs and suckling's fervent claim,
Her closed eyes dream of flight, a restless shiver.
She could, in one swift surge, rise and defy,
Reduce them to nothing, frail and crying, left to die,
Huddled in shadows, doomed to waste away.
Yet with head bowed, her breath in ragged play,
She gives them still her blood, her milk, her pain.
Weakness holds rights. The strength that reigns supreme
Has but one pillar—a duty's draining stream.*

By the end of the poem, the peace that fell from the centennial trees was finally flowing through her veins.

She arrived at Rain's home after a long walk, and had to wait for her for quite some time. The Rain clan was so numerous that Lightning wondered how much time she had left for herself - but Rain was old, and wise, and perhaps she had found paths through the intractable thickets where she, Lightning, at the height of her twenties, saw only obstacles. She was a role model for the other Keys - in extending her clan to limits rarely reached, in her apparent ability not to be overwhelmed by the task. Perhaps the important idea lay there, in this notion of submersion. You could drown in a glass of water, or float in an ocean. The trick was to keep your head above water - and that was what she herself had to learn to do, very quickly. Rain arrived after dark, walking slowly, savoring her solitude. She didn't seem surprised to see the young girl sitting on the garden bench, her features pale and drawn. She couldn't help but burst out laughing when she saw her.

“Well, young lady, have you come to ask me to Link yourself to me?”

Lightning smiled humbly.

“There are times when I would like that. Has this ever happened to you?”

Rain stopped laughing and nodded, several times, as she put down her walking stick and tapped her thigh to call her dogs, who came to surround her.

“Me? Linked to a Key? Never,” she said. “I am far too enamored of my freedom for that.”

“But what freedom do we have? Our clans harass us day and night...”

Rain went to a fountain to rinse her face, and took a long drink of water.”

“What do you want, Lightning? What brings you here?”

“I wanted to know what we would do if they sent another delegation from the Probe.”

“This is a matter of great concern to you.”

“Yes, it is.”

“You are not wrong to be concerned, but it takes you away from your clan. I can feel your unease from here.”

“That is true too. But my clan can wait. I have been worrying about it all day, and I feel I have the right to worry about this issue, which concerns all clans.”

Rain removed one of her cowls and sat down next to Lightning. A little dog wouldn't stop wacking her with his tail, and she was flattering him affectionately.

“You want my opinion on this, is that it?”

“Yes.”

“And what is your opinion?”

“I do not know. I am not objective.”

“Because you slept with the handsome Major Mikael Strauss?”

Lightning laughed.

“Yes, no doubt.”

“I think this situation is very critical, and that these men are not reasonable.”

“What are you worried might happen?”

“I do not know. That they will demand something we will not want to give them.”

“Like what, for example?”

“Like allegiance.”

“What will happen if we refuse to give them what they demand?”

Rain emitted a throaty little laugh that sounded like a strange bird sound.

“What usually happens when there is a conflict?”

“The stronger of the two reduces the other to impotence.”

“Exactly.”

“And who is the stronger of the two?” asked Lightning.

Rain nodded again, all her facial tattoos seeming to come alive with this movement.

“That is an excellent question. And, what is more, it is a question they are not asking themselves.”

“Why not?”

“Because they take us for primitives.”

“And that is not that what we are?”

“No,” said Rain. “That is not what we are.”

Lightning thought.

“So they will demand, threaten and strike. And us?”

Rain caressed Lightning's face, where her recent tattoo was hurting a little.

“We will demand nothing, we will not threaten.”

“And we will strike first,” finished Lightning.

Rain gave a slightly sad smile.

“I advise you to forget your Major Mikael Strauss,” she said.

Lightning fell silent, and they sat side by side for a while, communing in the quiet of the evening. This was the hour when clans rested, putting off their sorrows until the next day the way one lays down a burden. The hour when the Keys, on top of an almost exquisite fatigue, felt rising in them the sense of a duty accomplished, and the silent freedom of being themselves, for a few moments.

Through the gaps in the black branches, a deep blue still flowed from the star-studded sky, where some very white clouds were drifting slowly, wispy as dreams.

EXCERPT FROM THE QUO VADIS LOGBOOK - Captain Joseph Kellane

EARTH YEAR 2827

Digital archives last consulted in the year 2830, for printing, and preserved on paper in several copies in the Quo Vadis Library.

We who have crossed light-years... was it to die like this, of a petty epidemic? What sense can we make of this collective death, this death by the hundreds, by the thousands, at the very moment of fulfilling our destiny?

It is with a heavy heart that I write, to record in this logbook the unspeakable horror of our hecatomb. The planet is so splendid, and we approached it with such a confident footing... But life is a poisoned gift - we had forgotten that, we sky-born people. We had forgotten that nature is dangerous, that it brings death as much as life. We worshiped a myth, and it was reality that welcomed us - our organisms, accustomed to the asepsis of space, were unprepared for this swarming of microbes, this trickle of germs. We're dying from every angle - from the lungs, the intestines and the heart.

We who knew only the weightlessness of death in space - the shadow of a body gliding through the dark - are now confronted with the stench of bonfires, competing with foul worms for loved bodies, unskilled at digging deep enough holes.

We learn that nature kills children first, and sometimes leaves the elderly alive.

We thought we loved her without knowing her - and we understand that we'll have to learn to love her, because we don't know her, and everything we thought we knew about her was wrong.

Oh how we despised the Terrans for destroying Nature... It seems to me today that perhaps I could understand them.



CHAPTER 10: IN ORBIT

EARTH YEAR 3416

“We’re going through an unprecedented crisis,” Captain Richards told Major Strauss after Touré’s desertion. “There’s a feeling of unrest on board.”

“It’s probably the proximity to Organ.”

“Is that really enough to explain this negative atmosphere?”

“It seems to me that the violent contrast between the lifestyles of Organ and the Probe is bad for the crew’s morale,” Mikael had cautiously suggested.

“Contrast on what level? I need concrete ideas to remedy this deplorable state of affairs. Don’t hesitate to question the crew, and give me some project proposals,” Richards had ordered.

Mikael had asked for time to think. Then he had returned to the captain.

“I think the contrast is particularly violent in terms of social interaction, which are very poor on the ship. We’ve just come through a long period of travel, with few events as rewards, and everyone withdrawing into a solitary routine. I suggest we organize some social events.

Lieutenant Malkine, who had been invited to attend the meeting, made no secret of his contempt.

“You want to organize a Christmas ball?”

“If you ask me,” Strauss replied, “it would be better to do something to sublimate aggressive instincts.”

And so the “games” began. Chess, basketball, boxing, squash. Captain Richards was pleased - these workshops, in which he had made participation mandatory, were a small success. Mikael himself had taken great pleasure in beating Lieutenant Malkine at chess, encouraged by technicians to whom he had never spoken, but who dreamed of seeing the second-in-command lose. He had been applauded when he had gently, and without ostentation, overthrown the White King by pronouncing the ritual “Checkmate”. That didn't count for nothing. Men and women, officers and mechanics, scientists and ordinary soldiers, doctors and patients, emptied their quarrels, forged solidarities and enmities and commented on events.

In the locker room, Mikael was always overhearing snippets of conversation about Organ, and couldn't help but listen in on all the rumors.

“I think Touré was right to give them the slip, and if they let me down, I swear I'll do the same.”

“Don't be ridiculous... She'll end up on the end of a rope.”

“Touré? Are you kidding?”

“She'll be court-martialed, and I bet you they won't do her any favors. The hierarchy can't take desertions lightly.”

“Oh yeah? Why's that? Once we're out of this damn orbit, deserting won't be an option for anyone, so what's the point of hanging her?”

“Who says we'll be leaving this damn orbit anytime soon?”

“Everyone's back on board, right, except for her? We've got the information for the Union... What's the Captain waiting for?”

“It's not information we came here for. It's resources. And resources take time to extract. I wouldn't be surprised if we were here for eighteen months. I've heard it's not uncommon when you come across a rich planet.”

“Eighteen months of going around in circles?”

“Exactly. And Touré won't be able to hide for 18 months. She'll have to resurface among the natives, and they'll be forced to hand her over to us.”

“Holy cow, do you really think they'll hang her?”

“It'll cast one heck of a shadow, if you ask me. That girl had the most beautiful smile on the whole ship.”

Mikael shivered as he heard the last words. It was true, she did have a gorgeous smile. Unintentionally, he conjured up a mental image of Michelle strangled by the rope, twitching with spasms. And then he saw her landing on Organ, overwhelmed by profound joy. Was the technician right? Would Captain Richards have the guts to have her hanged? He never dared ask him directly, despite numerous opportunities to do so. Major Strauss had in fact been especially in demand since his return to the ship two weeks earlier - much to the dismay of the Second, who still didn't acknowledge that he had any particular competencies.

Mikael's status was somewhat ambivalent - as designated ambassador, he was in the know, and he was called upon to give his testimony, but as a mere major, he wasn't really consulted on the diplomatic course of action to be taken. The captain was a level-headed man who didn't take decisions lightly, and he insisted on thoroughly analyzing all the data gathered before making a decision. Mikael knew that once a decision was made, it would be irrevocable, and he did his best to steer his thoughts in less technical, more human directions. The captain regularly called him to ask new questions, which he tried to answer. What did the governmental organization look like? Was there, in his opinion, a written penal code? What system of property ownership was in place? To which legal entity did the Vessel belong? Then the captain lost himself in contemplation of the satellite images.

“The Vessel is deeply embedded in the city. Even encrusted, one might say.”

Mikael didn't know how to answer, because he didn't know why this might matter. He knew that the Captain had been summoning Engineer Ido at least as often since his release from the brig, as well as Major Rodriguez and the roboticists who had accompanied him. But the Captain always received them separately, and it was difficult for him to form an idea of the decision he was in the process of making. Once the Major had given his best answer to the Captain's demanding questioning, the latter usually paused to broach the other subject close to his heart.

“What about Reda?”

Mikael told him about the progress in his relationship with Filip. Their meetings had become a daily occurrence, and Reda always looked forward to them. He was also showing a keen interest in events about Organ.

“What events?” asked the captain a little dryly.

“Well, the escape of Michelle Touré. And the lone mission of engineer Ido. He also asks me a lot about my personal experience.”

“I see,” said the captain. “Keep him on his toes, Strauss, keep him on his toes as long as you can... As long as someone is waiting for something to happen, they don't end their life.”

Mikael allowed himself a smile.

“Should I do like Scheherazade?”

The captain didn't smile, and answered very seriously.

“Yes, Major Strauss. The difference being that it's not your life you want to save, but his.”

This phrase engrossed Mikael's mind all day. “It's not your life you want to save”. Yet it was his life he felt he had left down below, or at least, if it wasn't really his life, it was a possible life, a desirable life, a future that kept imposing itself on his imagination. And wasn't this, after all, what Filip Reda and himself were talking about? The mourning of a better life, the acceptance or not of life as it was on the Probe, of an escape... Michelle had fled physically, Filip Reda wanted

to flee in his own way, and Mikael felt a strange and disturbing affinity with them. Would Michelle survive, 250 miles from any inhabited place? Would Filip Reda one day stop waiting for the next? Wasn't he himself hanging on to the rest of his story with Lightning - in parentheses, on hold? If he hadn't been intimately persuaded that he would soon be returning to Organ, how would he be reacting now? Wouldn't his own life be in danger too?

These disjointed reflections went round and round in his head, without ever arriving at any certainty. When the day's duties came to an end, he would lock himself up in his cabin with relief, and there he would put down reality and his uniform, and allow himself to dream. He exercised his imagination and memory, practicing and recording all the sensations he had experienced on Organ, from the song of the birds to the way light and shadow played under the forest cover. He recalled the color of the City, the presence of animals, the murmur of human voices in the distant, open sky. And insensibly, by leaps and bounds, on the wings of logic-free associations, he always ended up returning in his imagination to Lightning's house. He would hear the slightly rocky grain of her voice, he would see her plunge naked into her pond of warm water, he would feel the velvety texture of her skin on his palms, smelling of grass and sun, and reflecting the stars. And desire, always, was at the end of his reverie.



The entire crew was gathered in the large conference room. Captain Richards and Lieutenant Malkine faced the audience, and there was a slightly eerie solemnity to the setting. Major Strauss was in the third row, next to Isla Brown and an ensign second class named Norca. Filip Reda was probably the only one exempted from this exceptional communication, and the Major found himself envying the solitude of his small cabin.

“Crew of the Probe, it is with great honor that I command this ship, because I know I can count on your sense of discipline, hard work and loyalty. Loyalty to the Probe, to the Union, to the values that drive us and push us to the furthest reaches of space. We represent Earth's ultimate heritage. The thirst for knowledge, the desire to push back the limits, the audacity to conquer, still burn within us. And I, like you, am proud to belong to this vast and noble fleet, to this diaspora that knows no borders, no horizons. Crew of the Probe, we are, like every ship of the Union, the reflection of the whole Union.”

There was no whispering - the soldiers were too disciplined for that. Moreover, speeches of this kind were rare enough to flatter ears accustomed to the prosaism of everyday existence. Glancing to the side, Mikael didn't see ironic or closed faces - but fervent ones. He wondered if he was the only one harboring seditious thoughts, and tried to smother them. But Captain Richards was really too grandiose, and his exordium was crude... What was he going to announce after such an introduction?

“We have the distinct honor of having found a planet where the Great Propagation dispersed part of humanity. We don't know how many such planets have yet to be found - but we do know that, in the past five centuries, only five have been found. This planet, which you have all been able to contemplate from near or far, is extremely rich. It has a Stage 4 civilization, rather peaceful, with a relatively small population. In the main City, the Vessel that brought their ancestors here remains almost intact, laden with extremely rare raw materials and precious knowledge of the history of the Great Propagation. The rest of the planet abounds in resources of all kinds: potable water, breathable air, plant seeds, minerals, wood... The benefits for the Union are incalculable. At the end of a long period of analysis of the data provided to me by the scientific and diplomatic missions, I

have made a series of decisions, which I hereby communicate to you, and which will be implemented without delay.”

“Here we go,” Mikael thought, his heart beating a little faster.

“We will proceed to rehabilitate the Vessel and put it into orbit in preparation for an embarkation. This is our top priority, and we'll be starting work on the engines in three weeks' time. It is impossible to say at this stage how long these repairs will take. But the scientific report by the officer who visited the Vessel indicates a minimum of two to six months. At the same time, during this period, raw materials will be extracted according to a precise schedule. Extraction teams will be stationed at various points on the planet, namely, those points far from the settlement. We'll be leaving Organ with the cargo holds loaded with these treasures. Among them, the largest of them all: a Vessel from the First Fleet, of which no functional specimen has been studied to date.”

“This mission, soldiers, will earn us a very special distinction from the Union. Not just for the officers, but for the entire crew, down to the humblest mechanic. You will be rewarded and honored as heroes. And do not think that this recognition will be in any way undeserved... No, you will amply deserve it, because this mission will be one of the most difficult you will have to carry out in your military career.”

Captain Richards paused. Mikael, like all the others, was hanging on his every word.

“Organ is not only a planet full of resources. It's also a planet of great beauty, a hospitable planet with a mild, temperate climate. It will exert such a strong seduction on you that the desire to desert, however devoted you may be, will be born in your hearts. That's what happened to your comrade Michelle Touré. Ensign Touré deserted, soldiers. She didn't resist the temptation, she betrayed the values of the Union, of the Probe, she betrayed the respect she swore to her captain. She behaved like an animal released into a natural environ-

ment, forgetting any form of domestication. She behaved like a beast snatched by its biosphere. Not like a human being, not like a Terran attached to the Union by all the symbolic ties that make them a descendant of our noble species. Ensign Touré will be prosecuted, and have no doubt she will be caught, court-martialed and tried for her crime. We will show her no leniency - for her deed is that of a despicable treachery.”

“The schedule of the technical teams that will intervene in three weeks will be communicated to you in the next few hours. Depending on your skills, you will be assigned to the extraction or repair of the Vessel. This last mission will be more selective, because it will take place in an inhabited place. Between now and then, starting tomorrow, two preparatory missions will be launched. The first is the location and questioning of Ensign Touré. It will be orchestrated by Lieutenant Malkine, who will be accompanied for this objective by Ensigns Wilson and Fabre, as well as by Engineer Ido who already has experience of the planet and will be able to provide technological insight. The second mission is of a diplomatic nature. It is about persuading the natives to let us act peacefully, if necessary by negotiating compensation for them. It will be led by Major Strauss.”

Mikael responded to Isla Brown's smile as she discreetly congratulated him. A few rows behind, they heard a strange noise, which was quickly covered by the solemn voice of the Captain in the microphone.

“Heroes – heroes who have resisted the most seductive temptation – that is what you will be. Stock up on memories, sensations, anecdotes, record photos, videos, lights, pin animals and flowers in books... But remember that this harvest is not for you alone – it is for the Union. Organ is a wonderful planet that we must offer to the Union – it is not for us to know today what the Union will decide to do with it. Perhaps a vast colony will settle here in the decades to come. Perhaps the Union government will choose to make it their

home. Maybe this planet can become a new Earth. Maybe some of us will return here. But it is not for us to decide. We are only the discoverers, we are only the ferrymen, we are only soldiers.”

Mikael felt, for a brief moment, almost convinced - it was a strong speech, which played on loyalty and courage as much as on dreams and myths. Wasn't it easier to leave, thinking that one would return? The major would have bet ten years of his life that the captain didn't believe a word of his peroration. No member of the crew of the Probe would come back to settle here - the distance was so great, anyway, that a man's life would barely be enough to make the round trip between here and the Central Astroport. His thoughts were interrupted, however, by a new noise at the back of the room - it was, as he understood quite quickly, a member of the crew who was feeling unwell.

The ship's doctors were quickly at the patient's side - who turned out to be Engineer Ido. Shaking and sweating, his eyes dilated as if he were on the verge of death, this normally cold and calculated man was in the grip of an almost feral panic.

“I won't go back!” he screamed. “I can't go back! I won't go back!”

His screams eventually became clearly understandable to everyone.

“What's gotten into him?” Brown asked in a low voice.

“I don't know,” said Mikael. “This isn't like him.”

As the crew dispersed, casting a curious glance at the hysterical engineer as they passed, Captain Richards motioned for Mikael to join him. He seemed annoyed by the exuberance of Ido's crisis, which made something a little evil hover over his entire speech. Ido screamed as if he were afraid - but what was he afraid of? In the anxious minds of the crew members, this fear was confusedly associated with the gallows that awaited Michelle Touré, erected above Organ, and which cast its anguished shadow there.

“Major, I need to speak with you. Follow me.”

Mikael complied, but couldn't help turning around several times to sneak a look at Ido's spectacular convulsions, which soon ended with a sedative injection.

"Captain, I don't know if this has anything to do with it, but... during that symbolic punishment engineer Ido received on Organ, he was ordered not to return."

"You're right to remind me, Major. His presence is not recommended after all, because the natives might take it badly. And his behavior is more and more unpredictable, especially since he got out of the brig."

Mikael didn't answer. Once they were seated face to face, the Captain spoke again. This speech, which he had also prepared, was intended for him alone.

"Lieutenant Malkine and I hesitated for a long time before entrusting you with this mission. Lieutenant Malkine insisted on going on land himself, so that he could supervise you or take over in the event you get on the wrong track."

Mikael opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. It was not customary to interrupt a superior during an exposition.

"I won't hide from you that Lieutenant Malkine opposed your appointment, because of the sympathy you expressed towards the natives. In the end, it was me who took the opposite approach, and paradoxically for the same reason: precisely because you expressed sympathy for the natives. You see, you have to understand the situation. We're not going to negotiate as equals. It's not a question of reaching a compromise satisfactory to both parties - at least, if that can be done, all the better, but it's not a priority objective. The priority objective is to get that Vessel out of there, into orbit, and extract all possible resources. With or without the consent of the natives."

Mikael took in the information.

"Your diplomatic mission is not crucial for us. If you succeed in convincing the natives to let us operate, this will obviously represent

a major facilitation of the mission. I'll tell you exactly what you can offer them in exchange for their peaceful cooperation - it may be, if you're good, that you can manage to convince them."

"And if not?"

"If not, we won't hesitate to use force. Their military power is apparently nil, and we'll take control of the city in no time. It'll be child's play."

"And if we encounter unexpected resistance?"

"You know the firepower of the Probe very well. This indigenous population is not essential to the Union. Humanity is not on the brink of extinction. Collateral deaths will not be taken into account in the chain of command."

The captain had spoken - and Mikael knew there was no point in arguing. Richards was a man who never spoke lightly, and never changed his mind.

This second mission therefore promised to be far less romantic than the first.

EXCERPT FROM THE QUO VADIS LOGBOOK - Captain Joseph Kellane

EARTH YEAR 2828

Digital archives last consulted in the year 2830, for printing, and preserved on paper in several copies in the Quo Vadis Library.

Today we have decided on the location of our City. So far, we have continued to live on board, and we have explored various parts of Organ. We have chosen a hilly region, at an ideal distance from the sea, close to forest and mountains, on the banks of a river. There is no shortage of water, wood, rocks or fish. We have everything we could possibly need all around us.

The question arose as to what we should do with the Quo Vadis: should we “park” it somewhere, hide it away, set it aside as if it were a mere means of transport? Should we still live in it? Some of us are very attached to it - the Quo Vadis is our birthplace and our only universe.

I think it would be better to leave it there, right in the heart of the City we are going to build. It will be easier to transport materials and tools; and it seems to me that our future generations should never forget that we come from the sky. That we come from a destroyed planet. That this second chance cannot and must not be wasted.



CHAPTER 11: SUN AND LIGHTNING

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 586

Lightning was sitting on a rock she was fond of, in the shade of a huge tree, at the edge of a village where many members of her clan lived. Fog had just brought her a drink and a piece of fried fish, and she had thanked him warmly. The young man seemed much better than the last time she had seen him. She tried to hide the expression of pain on her face. Old Leaf, Linked to her left collarbone, was experiencing terrible anguish. But her main pain came from her neck and right hip, in other words, from Moon and Lake. The two young spouses had quarreled violently after a miscarriage - Moon's suffering was more intense, and Lightning's neck was in permanent, almost crippling pain. Lightning would go see them as soon as the interview with Astre was over, but this should not - it should never - render her unavailable or distracted. This interview would not be cut short - that was one of the basic principles to which, as a Key, she was committed. Astre was a man in his thirties, quite handsome and strong-looking. She liked him - which was not forbidden. She had the right to have relations with whomever she wanted, outside her clan, as long as she didn't start a family.

“You wanted to talk to me, Astre, and I am listening.”

“I am sure you have heard rumors about the Sun clan.”

“Yes, I have. But I do not pay much attention to rumors.”

“I would like to unLink myself from Sun, and if you wish, I would like to explain to you the reasons why.”

Lightning nodded, inviting him to continue. He was about the same age as Major Mikael Strauss - but he didn't look at her in the same way. He looked at her with distance and respect, the way one looks at a Key. He didn't look at her as if she were a marvel of complexity and beauty, like Mikael Strauss.

"Sun is worshipped by part of the clan. And that is just what he is looking for, as far as I can tell: adulation. Some members of the clan have put themselves directly at his service, and voluntarily live in his house to attend to him. This seems to me contrary to the ethics of Organ. It is claimed that Sun has sexual relations with some of the women who serve him, but I do not know if this accusation is well-founded."

"It is a serious accusation," said Lightning.

"I know. This closeness to certain members necessarily distances him from others. They say he uses beverages to numb his pain. He does not bring the support he should to the Clan. Many of us can live with this. We can live our lives almost without seeing him, and we get by. But there is no unity in the Sun clan, no solidarity. Most of the members do not realize it, because that is all they have ever known. But I grew up in another clan, and although I never felt the Link with another Key, I witnessed a harmonious clan life throughout my childhood."

"Which clan were you in?"

"The River clan."

Lightning nodded. She liked River and was not surprised by this description.

"Anyway, I want to unLink with Sun, and I would like to know if you would accept me into your clan. Many Keys refuse to accept defectors."

"I know they do. Unbonding is a bit sacrilegious, and the Keys consider it a form of disloyalty."

"Should I remain subservient to a being I despise?" asked Astre.

“No, I do not think so.”

They remained silent for a moment, and Lightning allowed herself to be absorbed by the pain in the back of her neck.

“Why did you choose me?” she asked after a moment. “Did you not want to join the River clan?”

“They say that you are fair and never favor a member of the clan.”

“They also say lately that I am not present enough.”

“They say that about all the Keys. I have friends in the Lightning clan, and I know I will be happy if I Linked myself to you.”

Lightning gave him a benevolent smile.

“I will discuss this problem at the Council of the Keys. You have never asked for arbitration from another Key?”

“No, this is the first time I have mentioned it.”

“It may be that Sun is considered unworthy of his position.”

“I do not want to hurt anyone - I know that some members of the clan like him. I would only like to change clans.”

“Neither you nor I are masters of the consequences of our actions - and that should not stop us from acting. It seems to me that the practices you mentioned are not in line with our code of ethics. If the Council of the Keys authorizes it, I will welcome you into my clan.”

Astre took her hand and brought it to his lips - Lightning let him, as if to give him her blessing. She no longer considered him a possible sexual partner, and their contact was perfectly chaste.

Afterwards, Lightning spent several hours comforting Moon, and talking to Lake. Mediating between the young people proved difficult, and she had to be very diplomatic to get them to talk to each other. Moon held Lake responsible for her miscarriage, and he could not understand why she was becoming mean. Lightning, however, managed to soothe them - her hip pain disappeared altogether, and the pain in the back of her neck eased considerably. There were some pains, though, that a Key could not soothe, even with a

lot of patience: the loss of a baby would leave a trail of grief in Moon's heart, and in the back of her neck, for many months to come.

Finally, she made her way to the City to attend the Council. She was determined to speak with Sun before the Council began, and found him in the midst of a group of young men from his clan. He was an attractive man in his forties, dressed with great distinction. She did not hesitate for a moment, and walked straight up to him, frank and direct, as she had always been.

"Sun, we need to talk privately before the Council. It is very important."

Sun scanned her face and decided she was determined enough. He dismissed his clan members, who reluctantly withdrew, promising to wait for him until the end of the meeting.

"Lightning, is it not? To what do I owe the honor?..."

"It is not a question of honor, Sun, but of a serious problem. A man from your clan came to see me. He claimed that you were living with a number of your clan members, who served as your servants, and that you were having sexual relations with some of them. He affirmed that you consumed narcotic beverages to numb the clanic pains, so as not to have to deal with it. He asserted that you sought the adulation of your Clan and set up favoritism as a system."

Sun turned pale with rage.

"Who is it that thinks they can tell such rumors?"

"I will not tell you."

The two Keys locked in on each other, like a cat and dog, with animosity.

"Who do you think you are? Are you setting yourself up as a censor? Guardian of Organ's ethics?"

"I just wanted to let you know that, if you do not speak up yourself and raise this issue at the Council, I will be forced to do so."

Sun's expression changed dramatically.

"What could happen to me?" he asked.

“There will be an investigation, probably by Rain. And if the man was telling the truth, your indignity will be pronounced. Everything will happen as if you were dead: the Sun clan will be dispersed, unless they adopt a new Key and change their name. As for you, you’ll have to Link yourself to one of us. It is also possible, if you are convicted of lying, that you will have to submit to the Needle.”

Sun now looked frightened, and Lightning was surprised by such cowardice.

“Did you never think about all this before committing yourself, Sun?”

“What do I have to do?”

“You need to radically change your behavior. Dismiss all your favorites, do without servants and respect the rule of no sexual relations within your clan. You must devote your efforts to relieving suffering. It is for this, and this alone, that you have been entrusted with the role of Key. If you do not feel up to it, you must relinquish this role. The laws of Organ allow you to do this.”

“But how am I to live?”

“You will have to work, like all the inhabitants of Organ. And believe me, their work is less exhausting than the responsibilities of a real Key.”



It was a fairly quick Council. The agenda was not very full, and Sun, whom Lightning was holding under fire with her insistent gaze, took the floor to confess his breaches of Organ's ethics. Nobody got angry, nobody vilified him, but the matter was discussed, like all the others, with the utmost seriousness.

Consensus was quickly reached on the obvious: Sun was not cut out to be a Key. He could not continue to lead his Clan. A lively debate ensued on the question of punishment. Some proposed subject-

ing Sun to the Needle - but his crimes, according to others, were only crimes for a Key, and if he ceased to be one, there was no need to sanction him a second time. So no double penalty was imposed - but indignity was pronounced, by consensus. As Rain took the floor to close the council, Sun looked defeated - and yet, inexplicably, something like a sense of relief could also be read on his features.

“My friends, we are all sad when we have to pronounce indignity. It is of course because, at some point, we are all responsible for an error of the Needle. It was the Council of the Keys that made the mistake of entrusting too great a responsibility to a man whose vocation was not there. Beyond the sadness, this is an opportunity to collectively remember our mission. Our power is a priesthood, and must remain so. We are responsible for the well-being of our clans. Our clan pains are signals we have no right to ignore - and resorting to drugs to mask these pains is the greatest betrayal we can commit. Indifference to the suffering of others led our terran ancestors to their collective doom. We swore that there would be no such indifference among us - that no one would be excluded, exploited, abandoned, persecuted. We created these Links so that our solidarity would become flesh and blood. So that no Chief can ignore the evil he commits on his clan. We must endure and almost cherish our pain, for it is essential to the balance of Organ. They are our nobility and our superiority over our ancestors.”

The ceremony of indignity was held on the spot. Sun was stripped of his tattoos with a hot needle - and, although no one was Linked to him, all the Keys sympathized with the suffering inflicted on him. He was given drugs to enable him to endure this barbaric treatment - and then his battered body, burned in multiple places on the skin, was nursed back to health. Once fully healed, Sun would choose a Clan and Link himself to another Key. In the meantime, Sun's clan would be gathered. Some would choose to Link with another Clan; most would wait for a young Key to take up the

torch. Wounds opened and healed. Such was the course of the world, marked by ruptures and mourning, new beginnings and merges, in perpetual transformation and yet, mysteriously, always the same.

EXCERPT FROM THE QUO VADIS LOGBOOK - Captain Joseph Kellane

EARTH YEAR 2830

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 1

Paper archives preserved in the Quo Vadis Library.

Never, even when I took over as captain of the Quo Vadis, have I felt such a strong sense of responsibility. Our responsibility, I should say, because the decision we have reached was not taken by me alone, even if it was my idea. I hope we do not make mistakes. I hope our grandchildren do not hold it against us. I hope that the lives that cannot be saved will not weigh more heavily, in the end, than everything else.

We have decided this day:

- To found a new calendar, and to make the Earth calendar obsolete, stopping for us at the year 2830.

- To affirm our belonging to the planet's ecosystem by naming all our unborn children after phenomena or elements of nature.

- To carry out the most gigantic "shutdown" in human history, by immediately and definitively ceasing all electricity production. Nine-tenths of the resources of Quo Vadis will now be inaccessible to us.

This renunciation of technology includes medical technology, and represents a deliberate renunciation of the longevity that has been ours for centuries. This renunciation, which includes logistics and transport technology, also represents a deliberate renunciation of the mobility that has been ours for centuries.



CHAPTER 12: SECOND MISSION

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 586

EARTH YEAR 3416

When the Annex landed in the same location as the first time, there was no one there to welcome them. The trip, despite its brevity, had been tense. Mikael and Lieutenant Malkine only spoke to each other when absolutely necessary, and Fabre and Wilson exchanged whispers not intended for the officers, for whom they seemed to feel a reverent fear.

“Perfect,” said the lieutenant as he left the annex. “Fabre, take the vehicle out, we won’t waste time on diplomatic chitchat...”

Mikael Strauss couldn’t wait for them to clear out - in fact, he wanted more than anything to enjoy this moment of solitude on Organ. The forest was palpitating - and Mikael wondered how Lieutenant Malkine, this probably being his first outing on a habitable planet, could be so unresponsive. Fabre and Wilson seemed a little slowed down by the sensations assailing them. Their distraction irritated the lieutenant, who didn’t hold back from rebuking them.

“Wilson, what are you staring at? You’ve got packages to load in to the vehicle!”

The two young adults, the young woman especially - Solveig Wilson - were opening their mouths and eyes, and making a slow, circular movement with their heads. But Malkine’s reproach was more powerful in their minds than the mute call of the planet, and they soon recovered to become perfectly operational once again.

As they left the clearing where they had landed, Lieutenant Malkine felt obligated to say a few words to the Major.

“Major Strauss, Captain Richards is counting on you to negotiate the cooperation of the natives. Remember that their own survival is at stake.”

The Major gave a regulation salute that dispensed him from answering, and watched the vehicle drive away, thinking of Michelle. He didn't hide from himself the fact that, contrary to the dictates of his duty, all his wishes went out to her. He fiercely hoped that she would escape Lieutenant Malkine and the noose - and if he had found himself in a position to help her, he would have done so without hesitation. He was well aware that, in the eyes of the hierarchy, this made him an accomplice to her desertion. This bothered him a little, because he had never considered himself a disloyal officer. He had always applied the rules scrupulously, and thought he shared the Union philosophy. Certainly, his studies and culture had strengthened his critical mind, and he had always known that he could not become a blind cog in the machine, or a fanatic soldier. But until their arrival on Organ, this aloofness he had kept had never entered into frontal opposition with the system he belonged to. By fleeing, Michelle hadn't just divided the crew - she had divided each of its members, necessarily torn between their sympathy for her and their military ethics. There was nothing left to do but draw conclusions: Mikael, if he wanted to be honest, had to admit that his military ethics had just been relegated to the back seat.

When the vehicle had completely disappeared, and there was no longer any trace of its presence either visually or audibly, Mikael took a deep breath. He looked out at the forest, smiling - and he mused that solitary smiles, the kind you give to no one in particular, but which blossom on your lips when you're alone, are rare and precious. He tried to make the most of this moment: he touched the trunks, the vigorous green leaves on their stems, the crunching red leaves

crumbling on the ground, the mosses, the drops of water trapped in the hollows of wildflowers. As he stood still, he noticed a whole host of shy fauna emerging from their hiding places. He heard the carefree songs of the birds, which the noise of the engine had momentarily silenced.

He took to the path with a wonderful sense of freedom - at the end of this path, there was a young woman he longed for, and a whole world, barely glimpsed, yet to be discovered. They say that desire is never greater than before it is satisfied - but Mikael saw exactly the opposite. This planet was no longer completely unknown, it had already given him some of its secrets, and Lightning had let him embrace her body. But this only increased his desire for them tenfold - because he knew that the riches he had dipped into were infinite, varied, deep, just like this forest. He couldn't imagine ever getting bored of it. If he succeeded in obtaining the cooperation of the natives, the repair work on the Vessel would last several months. As the one in charge of a diplomatic mission, he would probably need to visit Organ often during this period, maybe even settle there temporarily. He couldn't see beyond that - these few months, whose limit remained indefinite, lit up with all the potentials of his desire. He knew the pain would be terrible afterwards. But this afterwards, for the moment, didn't exist. Not yet.

As he walked, he also thought of Filip Reda, whom he had left up there. He had obtained Captain Richards' permission to continue his daily sessions by textual communications. There was something strange and complex going on between him and Reda, something he couldn't quite grasp. On the one hand, it seemed to him that their conversations, and their friendship, were distracting Reda from his suicide, at least for the time being. Reda was keenly interested in the Major, in his mission on Organ, and curious about all the details of what he wouldn't be able to experience himself. In fact, Reda was more interested in Strauss than in his own life - as if some kind of

shift, transfer, or bequeathal had taken place. Reda was living somewhat vicariously - in a way, he had invested Strauss with the meaning of his own existence. Mikael didn't know how this had happened - and more importantly, he didn't know how to receive such an offering. He felt that such a bequest required some kind of reciprocation, which he couldn't quite envision. As he thought to himself, he typed a short message to Reda on his transmitter.

I'm alone in the forest of Organ. No one to welcome me. A precious experience that makes me smile by myself.

The answer didn't take long to arrive.

What are the three most beautiful things?

Mikael smiled.

The song of the birds. The colors. The scent of damp earth.

Since he was arriving not far from the City, he switched off his transmitter and promised himself to communicate regularly with Reda. At the end of the path, it was not, as he had hoped, the graceful silhouette of Lightning that awaited him, but the powerful, hieratic figure of Rain. There was no delegation, no snack, no guided tour today. One stern look from the matron was enough to sober Mikael, and make him feel the humility of his position.

"Hello," he said, stepping forward. "I'm delighted to accept the invitation given to me by Lightning to return for a while among you. I hope this is not an abuse of your hospitality."

Rain glanced at him almost mockingly, but didn't reply.

"Other people arrived with you. Where are they now?"

Mikael, a little surprised, answered frankly:

"A member of our crew ran away a few weeks ago, far from here. The others who came with me are looking for her."

"Why did they not come here with you?"

"They wanted to start their search without wasting any time."

Rain clicked her tongue expressively in her mouth.

“They have lost a few weeks, but they cannot lose another hour,” she said sarcastically.

Mikael tried to smile.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “They’re my superiors, I can’t give them orders.”

Rain’s gaze softened, but she didn’t smile. Only her eyes shone with a mocking glint, which was not without a certain tenderness.

“If I understand correctly, the Probe is sending us an underling?”

Mikael’s smile deepened.

“I’m afraid so.”

“And what orders have you received, Major underling Mikael Strauss?”

Mikael turned serious again.

“I need to negotiate something with you. Your collaboration on a project I need to talk to you about.”

Rain nodded.

“Do you know what I think?” she asked.

“No.”

“I think you are a nice man, Mikael Strauss, but your mission is not. I think that from the moment you start obeying your orders, there will be no more jokes and grins between us. I think this negotiation risks going badly.”

Mikael was afraid of saying too much, without preparation.

“I am not so sure, he said cautiously.”

“Because you are not the type to face the truth, that is all. Here is what I believe to be the wisest: you will go to Lightning’s house, and spend time with her. You will try to understand and embrace our point of view on the world. You will let yourself be imbued with our philosophy. And you will have the opportunity, perhaps, to make her understand your point of view too. Thus, when we meet again, in three days, at the Council of the Keys, you will perhaps have revised your claims in the negotiation. You will perhaps have found a com-

promise that will seem acceptable to us. And you will have, in Lightning, the best advocate there is. I cannot give you better proof of my good will - if I wanted the negotiation to fail, I would force you to explain yourself immediately concerning this famous project that we should, according to you, collaborate on."

"You show great wisdom, said Mikael."

"And you, you flatter me like a child. I wonder who, the wise or the child, will have the upper hand in this negotiation."

Mikael smiled again.

"Are there any guidelines that I must respect? Places where I must not go?"

Rain looked him up and down.

"What... how old are you, Mikael Strauss? What is this people who turn their men into children?"

Mikael felt a little annoyed, but was careful not to show it. He didn't lower his eyes and simply waited for another answer, but Rain seemed to take a malicious pleasure in letting him marinate in his silence.

"I see," he finally said. "I will assume the consequences of my actions, especially during the negotiation. It is up to me to inspire confidence in you by respecting your philosophy. Nothing is forbidden to me, but all my actions will be interpreted."

Rain burst into a loud, crackling laugh, like Mikael had never heard.

"Lightning is lucky," she said. "You are funny. Here, put this on your back, you will avoid some inconveniences."

She threw him a sort of embroidered jacket, large enough for him to wear over his uniform. Then she superbly turned her back on him and walked away, leaving him disoriented on the threshold of the City. True, Lightning had accompanied him once, but he had not really paid attention to the path then. He was not sure he could make it to her forest home without getting lost - and this wandering,

he understood, was part of his initiation. If he had risked asking for a guide, no doubt Rain would have loudly pointed out to him that he was incapable of guiding himself - and Mikael, at that precise moment, was too proud to admit his concern and ask for help.

He had to get lost? Fine. He would get lost - there were far more frightening things than getting lost in this fascinating City. The feeling of freedom that had overtaken him on the path began to flow through his veins again, maybe with greater intensity.



For most of the day, Filip Reda received messages from Major Strauss. Pictures, short descriptions... Strauss was alone, wandering around the City; when something struck him, he shared it with Reda, as if he were making a travel diary. Reda meditated on each of the images, fascinated. One depicted a square, with two women in the foreground and several different animals going about their business in the background: a dog running from left to right with an object in its mouth, a pig asleep in the sun, and a group of four goats climbing a stone staircase. The second depicted a garden, probably a public one, bordered by a multitude of building facades. Reda didn't know what Strauss had wanted to show - maybe just the beauty of the materials, the imperfections of the white stone, the way it reflected the light, the way the vegetation ran over the walls in wandering yet harmonious directions, the grace of the immense trees, the quality of their shade. The third photograph showed a very old man, with countless tattoos on his face and the backs of his hands. He was sitting on a bench, his hand on the knob of a cane, gazing into the distance with an expression difficult to decipher. On the last one, Strauss had tried to capture the magic of the forest - he had sent a very short video, in which the high-pitched trills of several birds could be heard, and the lazy swaying of foliage in the breeze could

be seen. Reda never got tired of looking at them, and he also reread Strauss's short messages.

Here, time doesn't flow in the same way, and can't be measured.

I'm totally lost, and it's a delight. Have you ever gotten lost on a ship?

The sound of human voices in the open air resonates so differently...

It's like music, an

opera in a foreign language, whose beauty you perceive without understanding its

meaning.

I wonder if there are storms on Organ.

People here cry and scream like everywhere else. Do people ever know how lucky they are?

Reda kept trying to come up with a witty answer. He could almost imagine Strauss wandering among these few scenes - speaking, perhaps, to these strange characters. He hoped Strauss wasn't missing a morsel, that he was drinking life in with great gulps. Reda thought that if he had been able to cherish just one memory, or nurture just one dream, life might have been worth living. It wouldn't have been so cold and empty. A man needed very little - a pure, sacred bastion in his thoughts, a fortress that the present could not assail. Dreams and memories protected each other in the same way, and had the same power to enchant reality - even if memories are sadder than dreams. You don't want to die when you're grieving for something. So maybe it was enough to be continually in mourning, this sad light could, in spite of everything, illuminate space. Strauss would never really recover from this visit to Organ, but it would be his bastion, his inner monument.

Reda was sad to realize that he had no inner monument, in other words, nothing to defend and nothing to preserve - his whole life was transparent, flat and dusky, like the conference room of the Probe.

There was nothing hidden in it, no safe, no precious retreat. The most precious thing he had, at this very moment, was this tenuous link with this young man. It was these photographs, these messages, from this boy he loved without knowing him. There was a certain pleasure in letting go of your ego for good, and giving more importance to an existence other than your own. It made you feel infinitely light. Ready to fly.



It was only the second time he had arrived in this place, yet it was already dear to him, and he returned to it with as much emotion as if he were returning home. Lightning wasn't there - no doubt she was looking after her clan - and Mikael was greeted by the cats, who blinked at his arrival and eventually roused themselves from their nap to rub against his legs. All was peaceful; he didn't dare go inside, but settled down on the terrace, among the flowers and the sound of water from the pond. As he remained motionless for a long moment, a heron finally landed on the ledge, a few yards from him, and he took a photo of it for Reda.

Do you have to be wild to be free - do we still know what that word means?

The answer came to him almost immediately.

I've never seen a bird.

Mikael had never seen one either, until he set foot on Organ. He contemplated it for a long time, from the colorful beak to the fine, waxy legs, the piercing eyes and the completely white feathers. It was so finely chiseled, so harmonious in form and attitude, that it appeared to be painted. As he flew away, Mikael recalled his conversation with Rain. "You're a nice man, but your mission is not." Was she right? Was it objectively wrong to want to take this Vessel? Mikael wasn't fully aware of what it represented to the inhabitants of Organ.

Certainly, they considered it a precious relic, since they had forbidden access to their visitors, and had harshly reproached Engineer Ido for trespassing on it. But was it really so terrible to lose this machine from the past, which was no longer of any use to them? They had their City, so beautiful, their herds, their forests, and the sea in the distance...

His imagination lingered on the sea, which he had never seen - then he naturally began to think of Lightning, to imagine her reaction when she saw him, to imagine their embrace, and his diplomatic mission disappeared from his mind almost without a trace. He may have dozed off, because he didn't hear Lightning arrive, and only became aware of her presence once she was really close by.

"You have returned," she remarked cheerfully.

He rose to his full height and kissed her shyly. She let herself go for a moment, with adorable abandon, then pulled away a little.

"Easy, Mikael Strauss. I am sore in a lot of places today. But it will pass later."

It took Mikael a moment to reacclimatize to her face - he realized he hadn't looked at her enough last time.

"May I take your portrait?"

"If you like."

Mikael took three photos in a row, as he often did, and put his transmitter away.

"Would you like something to eat or drink?"

"If you like," he said, imitating her.

She smiled.

"Then wait a few moments."

As she moved away, he realized that the smile that had stretched his lips was still stuck there. He couldn't stop smiling.

"I'm happy to be here!" he shouted.

"How long are you here for?"

The question was like a sting.

“Three days without owing anything to anyone... Then I’ll have to fulfill my diplomatic mission to the Council of the Keys.”

“Who told you this? Rain?”

“Yes.”

“And what’s your diplomatic mission?”

“Rain advised me to spend three days with you, and soak up your culture, your view of the world, before revealing it to you. She thinks it might soften the deal I’m supposed to offer you.”

Lightning looked thoughtful, and Mikael wasn’t sure if it was because of what he was saying or because of the pain she had mentioned. He realized that she had a full life, apart from him, and that she hadn’t spent her time waiting for him and dreaming about him. He conceived a little sadness at this - because it seemed to him that he, on the contrary, had lent reality to nothing else except her memory. She disappeared into the house for a while, and when she reappeared with drinks and sweets, she looked refreshed and more relaxed.

“Here, try this. They are hibiscus flower fritters.”

Mikael took a bite - it was crisp and sweet, with a subtle fruity note.

“I feel like I’m biting into a poem,” he said. “It’s delicious.”

“We hardly ever eat meat,” she said. “It happens when an animal dies in an accident. We have read that meat contains certain proteins that are essential to our body’s equilibrium. But it is very rare.”

“So all the animals I’ve seen in the City aren’t farm-raised?”

“They are, more or less. We take milk and eggs from them, but we do not slaughter them, and we leave them free to roam. Our ancestors, whom we call the Forefathers, meaning those who arrived on the Vessel, had forged very close relationships with certain species, particularly pigs.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Pigs are extremely intelligent. They are rather cumbersome companions, but they can help us with certain tasks. They seem to have been able to perform certain tasks in the Vessel.”

“I haven't seen any horses...”

“No, there are none. The Vessel contained mostly farm animals, and the few horses that came aboard did not reproduce. Some say they could not stand captivity.”

“What about lizards, birds and rodents?”

“Endemic. The Forefathers found them on Organ.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because I have read it.”

“So there's a record? A logbook from the Quo Vadis?”

“There are several. The Quo Vadis voyage lasted 96 years... The first captain kept an electronic logbook, as did the second. But the third, who took up his post some thirty years before arriving on Organ, anticipated the loss of electrical technology. He kept a paper diary, and even made a brief summary of the previous diaries.”

“What was the name of this forward-thinking captain?”

“His Earth name was Joseph Kellane. But we know him best by his organic name: Rootstock.”

“Rootstock?”

“It is a kind of root that grows by integrating neighboring roots, forming a network. Rootstock was a great man, a visionary. He laid the foundations of our philosophy.”

As Lightning spoke, Mikael was seduced by everything that emanated from her. Firstly, by her speech, so intelligent and lively - he had a deep and fluid conversation with her, the likes of which he could have had with almost no one on the Probe. Then there was her voice, which appealed to him with all the sensual modulations of its pitch. By her precise, graceful gestures. By her body, which smelled like grass and sun. By her forest home, which was like a jewel box around her. He was so seduced that he felt himself becoming stu-

pid, and almost numb. He struggled against this numbness and sat up straight to stay level-headed.

“I'd love to see this logbook.”

“To do that, you would have to go into the Vessel.”

“Do you think that'd be possible?”

“With me, perhaps, if we confine ourselves to the Library.”

“Wouldn't you be curious to read the journals of the other captains?”

“Of course I would. All of that dormant data has always appealed to me.”

“It'd be very easy for us to give you access to all that data.”

“I know it would. We have discussed it, all of us together.”

“Discussed what?”

“The opportunity to take advantage of your presence to make a technological leap.”

“And what did you conclude?”

“That it was a bad idea.”

Mikael understood that nothing in these three days would be totally detached from his diplomatic mission. When he wasn't thinking about it, it was she who drew him back to it - this mission was there between them, with its trail of unspoken words and lies. He wondered if she was hiding as much from him as he was from her. Probably.

“Lightning,” he said, “I'd like to be here without a mission to complete. I'd like to be here without ulterior motives, and simply enjoy your company.”

Lightning smiled.

“You would like to make love to me.”

“Yes,” he laughed.

“It will not be possible right away.”

“Why?”

“Because I am fertile.”

“How can you be sure?”

Lightning laughed.

“When you listen to your body really carefully, you can... feel what is going on inside. Not necessarily pain, no. But what is going on inside our organs. With practice, we can feel things happening in our brain, for example. Ovulation is a very delicate, minute sensation. But when you are a Key, you learn to recognize it, in order to keep our oath.”

“Because you can't give birth?”

“No, I must not. If I did, it would break the Link I have with my Clan. And I do not want that.”

“I see,” he said. “Actually, no, I don't understand. How would that stop you from looking after your Clan?”

“There must be no preference between a Key and the members of their Clan. All Links must be of the same nature. A child would distance me from all the others.”

“So you pay for your power with your loneliness.”

“My solitude, my pain... a lot of things.”

“Is it worth it?”

Lightning thought for a moment.

“I do not know. There are days when I would like to be a simple person, who relies on a Key when she has trouble, and lives her life peacefully the rest of the time. Sometimes I think that is what freedom is. And other days, I tell myself that I could not bear to be dependent on anyone else. That I play the only role that suits me, and that is what freedom is. Not taking orders from anyone. I cannot answer your question. I do not know if it is worth it. It is not a calculation I am making, it is what it is. All roles have their share of servitude. On Organ, if you do not depend on someone, it is the others who depend on you.”

Mikael told her all about the Aerospace Academy, life on the Probe, the military hierarchy, the galactic auroras, the crossing of

nebulas. He made her laugh and dream. She told him about her childhood in the Sap clan, her adolescence at Torrent's side. She made him laugh, too, and made him jealous. At dusk, the forest lit up with hundreds of flying lights, and Mikael remained silent, amazed, for several long minutes.

"They are only fireflies," she said, smiling. "Nothing compared to the galaxies you travel through."

"It's much, much more beautiful," he said sincerely.

"You love Organ, do you not?"

"Passionately. And I love you. I don't know who I like better, you or your planet."

She shook her head, laughing in denial.

"You talk like a child... You hardly know me."

"I feel more connected to you in a few hours than to my entire crew, who I've been traveling with for six years."

He couldn't make out her face very well in the shadows, but it seemed to him that she looked soft and infinitely sad, as if she felt great pity for him.

"Let us prepare something to eat," she said, changing the subject.

He regretted declaring his feelings in such a childish and perhaps grotesque way. But he knew it had touched her - only something was holding her back. He thought it must be her duties as Key, her customs, or the weight of the diplomatic mission, or the fact that he was destined to leave. She had lit a cauldron that cast a pleasant glow on the terrace, and lamps inside the kitchen, where she was preparing a snack of some sort of mixed salad and fried food. He watched her for a long time - her every gesture seemed like a painting. In the chiaroscuro, her pure profile stood out, amidst utensils and still lifes. It was a living image of simplicity and... of reality. Everything seemed infinitely real here on Organ - and Mikael could have spent hours contemplating the texture of a spoon, a terracotta dish, or a wood surface scratched by wear and tear. He felt as if he'd been living for

years inside a computer screen, in a rigorous, geometric world where light, temperature and even people were constant. On this planet, on the contrary, everything was mobile and changing, and the impression was that anything, at any moment, could happen. Demons and wonders. Death and crazy love.

He had a sudden thought about Michelle, and wanted to talk to Lightning about it.

“I told you that one of my crew ran away last time.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I hope she survived. And I hope they don't find her.”

“Why? Are you linked to her?”

“Not particularly. But she's friendly to me.”

“Why do the others want to find her?”

“I don't know exactly,” he lied. “But I'm afraid they might hurt her.”

“Who would hurt her?”

“Our leaders.”

Lightning looked at him sharply, almost indignantly, then collected herself.

“On Organ, a Key cannot harm a member of their Clan. It is unimaginable.”

“What if someone ran away?”

“That never happens. But if it did, I suppose we would untie the Link.”

Mikael sensed that there was something obscure in this notion of the Link - something that went beyond what he had understood, and had to do with the pains that Lightning was feeling.

“What is the Link?” he asked.

She remained silent for a moment, placing the food on the table.

“What is the project you want us to work on?” she asked without aggression.

"I'm sorry if I asked you an intrusive question. I didn't mean to take advantage of your hospitality to get information out of you. I was just curious."

"I know," she said gently.

They ate in silence, and she tried hard to get him back on track, but his mood had darkened.

When Mikael went to bed, alone, on a hammock that Lightning had set up for him, he felt miserable. Nothing had happened as he had dreamed - Organ and Lightning were even more beautiful than he remembered, but he couldn't quite reach them; his desire remained on the threshold, for the good reason that he had no future either in this fabulous world or with this young stranger. He was a passing plunderer, a comet that crossed the sky to race towards other universes. Lightning was attracted and sympathetic to him - but she didn't want to get attached to him, and she was right. She didn't want to trust him, and she was right again. He was only there as an enforcer of dirty deeds - Richards had sent him to shove a pill down their throats that would be very difficult to get them to take. And if he failed, he couldn't hide indefinitely what might happen. Their love story, barely begun, was doomed to failure, and she had realized it before he had.

Before falling asleep, he sent a message to Reda.

You were right not to come down. The very idea of leaving all this poisons the air I breathe.

Reda's reply took a little longer than usual.

Believe me, it's better to have something to miss.

*ROOTSTOCK'S JOURNAL**ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 2*

Paper archives preserved in the Quo Vadis Library.

The difficulties encountered by the Keys are innumerable.

This function must always be a choice, and that choice must always be reversible.

Solitude.

The personal life of a Key must not be constrained any more than necessary - although I think it is a good idea not to have any real children when you take charge of an entire community, I do not think it is a good idea, as some people advocate, to devote yourself to celibacy and sexual abstinence.

Of course, the Key must be available to their clan first and foremost, and can therefore never combine their duties with an exclusive love affair, which would cut them off from the others. The Key must not have sexual relations with members of her clan either, for two reasons. Firstly, because there can be no equality between a Key and the person who is Linked to them - and sexual relations without equality are a socially dangerous thing. Secondly, it would create jealousies and imbalances of all kinds within the Clan.

Therefore, The Keys must find their sexual equilibrium outside of their Clan.

Pain.

All clan members will have their pain relieved, with the exception of the Key, whose clan pain has a special status.

As a matter of principle, ignoring clan pain by numbing it with drugs is forbidden, as it is contrary to Organ ethics. Pain is the Link that enables us to look after the well-being of all - to numb the Pain is to sever that Link.

However, at the end of a Key's life, or at special times when their personal health is in jeopardy, they may be given occasional sedatives, with the approval of the Council of the Keys.



CHAPTER 13: MANHUNT

ORGANIC CALENDAR 586

EARTH YEAR 3416

For days, Michelle had no longer been the ensign second-class who had landed on Organ a few days before. Her name was no longer Touré; she was a body thrown into the world, barely an “I”. She absorbed light like a leaf, clung like a vine, fell like a stone. She swallowed whatever she could find, ants, berries, lizards, and when she had nothing she chewed bark. In the crevices, her tongue became a troglodyte, searching for drops of water and sap. For a few minutes each day, before falling asleep and after waking up, she would pull herself together and tell her own story. She was heading north-west, towards the City, and would soon come upon a river, whose course she had decided to follow. The river, which the cartographic tradition noted in blue, was rather greenish on the satellite photos. Around her, there was nothing but green, brown and an infinite variety of colors, the marvelous diversity of which she could only appreciate now, after days of immersion. They said that on Earth, the Eskimo people had had more than forty words to describe white. It seemed to her that she would now be able to invent hundreds for the colors of the forest. A word for every moment of the day, a word for every stage of plant life, a word for every species, a word for every texture. Everything was brownish-green, yet no two patches of color were the same in the vast, moving painting unfolding before her eyes.

Michelle wasn't sad or happy. She was alive. Her vital functions were in full gear - she was digesting, sometimes painfully, she was ex-

uding, she was producing adrenaline. She was converting oxygen into energy. Her blood circulated at top speed. Through the exhaustion of her flayed limbs, new strength was born again and again from her young body. She wasn't afraid to die, because she knew she was moving in the right direction, and would eventually find humans. What would happen next was another chapter, another story she couldn't afford to think about.

Thinking was not her priority, and she spent most of her days in a kind of trance. Physical exertion, solitude and silence, but also immersion in the radical, indifferent beauty of the forest, occupied her mind. So when she heard the sound of a vehicle engine overhead, it took her several minutes to interpret it as a threat. Then, as if a bucket of cold water had been dumped on her brain, she came to. Someone was after her again - maybe Major Rodriguez and Isla Brown, who had returned with supplies to follow her trail. She struggled to stop, as if her own body were a galloping animal. It was her first reflex - an archaic one, coming from deep within her DNA. Play dead.



Henry Malkine was a patient, forward-thinking man who applied the same method to everything. He had organized this manhunt in the same way he had organized his career: by planning. Nothing resisted planning, which was capable of reducing everything, producing everything, breaking everything, building everything. Malkine had first assessed his objective, and decided that it was necessary to apprehend Michelle Touré. As is often the case, he had to battle against Captain Richards, who was inclined to indulge this spontaneous young woman, whose smile carved such charming dimples. Richards had mentioned the possibility to “let it go”. Those were the words he had used: “let it go”. For a man so sensitive to military discipline, there was something shocking about those words. In the mili-

tary, you never let anything go. Not the enemy, not the wounded, not the objectives. It was a matter of principle - and principles were the lifeblood of existence. An unpunished desertion was likely to sabotage the crew's cohesion and sense of service for a long time, perhaps forever. On the contrary, severe punishment would restore order. The crew would unite against the leaders - and that was a very good thing. Hatred and fear of leaders were part of military life - and it was best to know this before applying for command positions. Malkine was one of those people who didn't seek to be liked. His popularity was a parameter he very rarely took into account in his calculations. Appearing unfair was the least of his worries - while appearing weak was extremely dangerous. Better an injustice than a mess, they say. But Lieutenant Malkine didn't even consider this to be a real injustice. This young woman had made her choice. She had left, taking her maps and supplies with her. She had deserted. The military code wouldn't take her by surprise. In life, as in a poker game, everyone knew what they were betting, what they were risking. You didn't cry when you lost, and you paid your debt. Dimples or not.

Malkine had chosen Fabre and Wilson based on his own personal criteria. Solveig Fabre and Gus Wilson didn't stand out in any way - and that was their primary quality. They didn't have dimples, hardly anyone in the crew knew their names, they didn't win sports tournaments, they didn't make anyone laugh with their jokes, and they did their work in a way that made their reports read: NTR. Nothing to report. For Lieutenant Malkine, a crew stamped "NTR" was the best crew there was. He had no worries about their potential desertion, their lack of courage in apprehending Touré, or the unpleasant excesses of their compassion. They probably harbored a great deal of exasperation towards Touré - that passive, mute exasperation that people in the shadows harbor towards those who expose themselves a little too much. That petty satisfaction when something bad happens to them. That way of closing the case by saying: "She got what she

deserved". And that's exactly what Lieutenant Malkine was counting on: the unmentionable resentments, the unspoken jealousies, that would lead some of the crew to accept hanging as a necessity of service, without asking too many questions. Of course, there would be the refractory types, the freethinkers, the Mikael Strauss, whom he could already hear pleading her case. Touré had succumbed to vertigo, lost her mind and then just survived. One night of madness could not call into question an entire existence of active obedience... It would suffice to treat this argument for what it was: a tiresome, but inconsequential babble. Touré would hang, in the end, and that was all that mattered.

The vehicle had flown over the area at very high altitude. A thick, boundless forest stretching for thousands of square miles... Malkine couldn't help but admire the sheer quantity of raw materials lying there. This forest extended all the way to the settlement - the river that passed through the City continued its course through the forest, and it was, from this height, the closest thing to a road. The river was as wide and winding as a main road - it cut through the trees like a brushstroke on a green canvas. There was no doubt that Touré had thought of the same thing - the river was objectively the best way to get back to the City. The vegetation on the banks was sparser; if the river was full of fish, it would also provide the fugitive with food and fresh water. One would have to be stupid, devoid of practical sense or deprived of the slightest geographical knowledge, not to come to this conclusion. And this was certainly not the case for cartographer Michelle Touré.

After an initial reconnaissance flight, Lieutenant Malkine ordered Wilson and Fabre to fly back and forth over the river, at medium altitude, between the town and the point that seemed closest to where Touré had deserted. Then he took a close look at the satellite photo of the town's forest edges. The river passed through the first hamlet, then flooded the first suburbs. From here, Touré could

spread out a little, but this area had to be visited first. If the natives could cooperate, that would be ideal, but Malkine wasn't counting on it. Instead, cameras would have to be installed, and conveniently, the Lieutenant had brought along a hundred of them.



Michelle had remained motionless all day, stupefied, paralyzed. The sound of the vehicle never really stopped - it came and went, sometimes changing altitude. At times, it seemed to her that this altitude was low - lower than the treetops, and this made her think that the vehicle must be flying over the riverbed, and that the river wasn't far away. It took her a long time to accept this idea, to incorporate it. For a number of days that she wasn't counting anymore, she had been intoxicated by silence and solitude, and had been thinking only of getting to the river, and then traveling along it. The noise of the vehicle had destroyed everything - the silence, the solitude and the itinerary. Michelle tried to shake herself out of it. It had been so long since she had thought in words - her thinking was rusty, ankylosed, contaminated by physical sensations that came to her instead of words. If she had spent several days locked up, unable to move, she would have to do body exercises before regaining normal mobility. Now she felt the need to do mental exercises. As long as she couldn't think properly, she'd have to keep on playing dead - and as long as she was playing dead, she had nothing better to do than exercises. She had grumbled a lot at AeroSpace, when they had given her these mental recovery protocols. She had laughed at her trainers. What was the point of these exercises? Yet they were all she had on hand, today, to reboot her broken brain. First, there were the lists. Making lists of words out loud - colors, objects, people, movements. Then there were song lyrics to find. Multiplication tables to recite. History dates. Insensibly, articulating words aloud brought back the immediacy of lan-

guage. After an hour or so, it seemed to her that her mind was more or less clear, and she began to elaborate, still out loud, an outline of an argument.

“If they’re monitoring the river, don’t I have to take a different route?”

“But according to my calculations, going through the river would save several weeks. How long can I survive if I go the other way?”

“Isn’t it possible to walk at night?”

“Some nights are very dark.”

“But there are two moons, most nights are bright.”

“Walk at night, and take cover during the day.”

“They’ll be waiting for me at the end.”

“When the first houses come into sight, I’ll have to make a detour.”

“A detour?”

Michelle picked up the map. There was a hamlet, and then the town grew denser towards the northwest. But if you went due north, you’d also come to some dwellings, a little more sparse and out of the way.

“I can try that.”

“Yes. I can try that.”

Michelle wondered who was in charge - that information would have been useful to her. Major Rodriguez, for example, might, due to his training, come to the same conclusions as her. But if it was someone else - say, a non-scientific officer, then she might have a chance.

And so, for several weeks, Michelle forced herself to live and move around at night. Once or twice during the first few days, the vehicle also drove at night. She saw its lights in the distance, just before she heard its engine, and had time to hide. All she lost was a night’s walk. The soldiers on board must have realized that this night drive was of little use, and soon abandoned it. Her walk became slow-

er and more perilous, and she sustained a few nasty wounds. But she had enough to drink, and there were plenty of animals in the river that were easy to catch. She sucked on slimy things whose names she didn't even know. She vomited, once or twice. But it seemed to her that her body was getting harder and harder, drier and drier, and needed food less and less. At times, she lifted her head, just to look at the reflections of moonlight on the outcropping of dripping stones - which reminded her, she didn't know why, of giants on the prowl, sticking their heads out of the water. The sound of the current, the lapping of the waterfalls, was such sweet music that she sometimes closed her eyes to let it fill and purify her soul. As soon as the first light of dawn broke, she would regretfully slip away, and sink a few hundred feet beneath the cover of the trees. She would usually go through the trouble of climbing up onto a large branch to nestle down, and there, between heaven and earth, she would keep an ear out for the sound of the engine, which never took long to make itself heard. This tenacity frightened her - because behind such determination, she could see Lieutenant Malkine's angular profile.

She was almost caught a few hours' walk from the first hamlet - as she came around a bend in the river, she saw two soldiers in a concealed position on either side of the river. She had been very lucky. Firstly, because she hadn't had the reflex to scream. Secondly, because they hadn't seen her immediately. Lastly, because she had been able to retreat quietly into the forest. Her heart was beating wildly - she wasn't sure, but it seemed to her that there was a girl among the two soldiers, maybe Solveig. This shocked her, and it took some time for her to regain her composure. When she had, she left the riverbank and headed north - it would take a few days longer, but there was no other way.



The Storm clan was one of the most peripheral. It was a small clan of around fifty people. Unlike other clans, whose members often lived in different villages, with a dispersed structure, the Storm clan was, by the will of its Key, deeply united, both geographically and in its customs. Storm was an already elderly man who was gentle and deeply benevolent. He never raised his voice, and his clan lived peacefully, in harmony with the forest where they lived. Storm was a misnomer, people would say with a laugh, because he never lost his temper.

One morning, two of the clan's women, who had gone deep into the forest to gather mushrooms, were startled when they spotted a very large animal stirring at the top of a branch. The forest contained only small species, water rats, squirrels, birds, frogs and lizards, and all kinds of insects. The thing moving on the branch was huge - and, trying to spot where the head and tail were, it took them long enough to recognize a synthetic garment and a human face in Michelle Touré's wild appearance.

She looked down at them from the high place where she was waking up. And the two women saw the strange face, which didn't resemble any of the faces on Organ, break into a big smile.

"I'm happy to see you," Michelle said rather slowly. "I need help."

The women looked at each other.

"Where are you from?" asked the eldest.

"From that ship up there. The Probe."

"What are you doing here?"

"I escaped because I didn't want to live in the sky anymore. I fell in love with Organ."

The two women burst out laughing - this wording must have had a double meaning, or some kind of quirk, because it took them some time to regain their seriousness.

"The people up there are looking for me."

“Soldiers from the Probe came to the village,” confirmed the young woman. “They have set up small machines all over the place, facing the forest.”

“Cameras?” asked Michelle.

She climbed down to join them, and the two women helped her down.

“Do you sleep in the trees every night, like a cat?”

Michelle smiled.

“I didn't know cats slept in trees,” she said. “On ships, when they're allowed, cats tend to sleep on the bunks.”

“Poor cats, are they happy, locked up in these metal buildings?”

“Happier than the humans,” said Michelle. “They always find an opportunity to be lazy.”

The women laughed again, and the youngest seemed to remember something.

“Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“Yes,” said Michelle.

The two women insisted that she eat and drink all their provisions, which made her stomach ache a little. But they were natural, kind and talkative, and Michelle felt revived by them, like a frozen body gradually regaining sensation through warmth. The oldest was called Flower, and the youngest, Breeze.

“We cannot decide what we are going to do, but we will ask our Key for his opinion.”

“Your Key?”

“The Keystone of the Clan is the one who supports all the others. Our Key is a wise old man named Storm. He will give us good advice.”

Michelle smiled somewhat melancholy at the thought of Breeze and Flower leaving her. She was afraid, now, of being plunged back into the loneliness she had endured so well until then - as if the feat she had accomplished could never be repeated. She said absolutely

nothing, but wondered the next moment if she had expressed her feelings aloud, because it seemed to her that both women had heard her.

“Would you like one of us to stay with you?” asked Flower. “I can sit here, with you. Breeze walks faster.”

The young girl immediately adopted her idea, and Michelle felt tears of gratitude welling up in her eyes. Not once, not once had she cried since she had gotten back up in the forest and fled. Not once had loneliness, hunger, pain, uncertainty, fear, shaken her. But this immediate, wordless understanding, this selfless solidarity, moved her to tears.

The girl left and, quite naturally, Flower took Michelle in her arms like a child. She began to sing a strange melody, revolving around three or four notes, which had the effect of soothing Michelle within a few minutes. Then Flower set about looking at Michelle's wounds; she undressed her gently, without seeming to take any interest in her nudity, but only in the lesions, the gashes, the open wounds that bled on her. She made a kind of balm, using an oil she had in her pocket, and a number of plants she found and ground on the spot. The ointment, with its mysterious warmth, seemed to disinfect and dry her wounds.

“I would really like to be accepted by your Clan,” murmured Michelle.

“Storm is old, he has not formed a new Link in a long time. But there is not just the Storm clan, there are other clans, all over the place.”

Michelle shook her head.

“No. I've fallen in love with the Storm clan.”



There was one thing Lieutenant Malkine knew about method: you couldn't apply a method halfway. You had to be systematic, exhaustive, and follow through with equal attention. If you were scanning a thousand squares for a clue, for example, you couldn't miss one, or get distracted. Not once. So, when the surveillance cameras were installed, he was alert to anything out of the ordinary in these primitive villages. Any gathering that seemed out of the ordinary, any visit, any intrusion, any even temporary stoppage of the camera. Hundreds of scenes of rural life flashed before his hundred screens. These videos would no doubt have fascinated someone like Mikael Strauss - but Malkine couldn't care less. The lives of these primitive humans were of absolutely no interest to him, and he didn't seek to understand their meaning, symbols or structures. When he got tired of staring at these monotonous images, and rubbed his reddened eyes, he thought about the fact that men had spent their lives doing this - and that they even enjoyed great social prestige in their time... Now that humans were able to navigate the four-dimensional continuum, what was the point of knowing how these poor wretches chopped their pieces of wood or sharpened their knives? If he was perfectly honest with himself, he felt they really didn't belong to the same species. *Homo stellaris* had little in common with *homo sapiens* anymore.

What caught his eye, in the furthest area of his grid, was a simple hooded figure emerging from the forest in the company of two women. The clothing clashed with that worn by the natives - perhaps it wasn't seasonal. And, above all, this person's skin was not the same tone as the others'. Undoubtedly, she was black. He zoomed in and looked closely at the - very fleeting - image showing the three women heading into the village. He couldn't say he recognized Touré in this sparse silhouette. Nor could he say that the Organ natives didn't include black people. But there was enough evidence to warrant a visit the very next day.



Over time, Storm had developed a very special Link attribute. Not only was he sensitive to his clan's suffering, he could also physically feel their well-being. This took the form of sudden sensations, bursts of joy, and some more or less fleeting grace. At times, he felt almost young, and his own pains seemed to be erased. Maybe this was what he had liked about Michelle, that potential for life and joy, that big smile that pierced the pain like a ray of sunshine pierces the clouds. Perhaps he felt sorry for her great loneliness. In any case, when she presented herself to him, and bowed almost to the ground to ask him to accept her into his clan, he accepted. Usually, the Needle ceremony, which marks the passage to adulthood, is prepared well in advance. But Storm, within a few words, understood the urgency and the threat to Michelle's life. He ordered the procedure to be carried out that very day, and the Link was created without delay. Michelle chose the location for the tattoo on Storm's body: just below the heart.

"I'll help it beat," she promised.

Storm, surprised, had smiled.

The old man then retired, exhausted by pain, and the clan welcomed Michelle with an impromptu party.

"Here, have some wine. We need to dance and have lots of fun, to help Storm bear his ills."

Something that had been asleep for years was slowly awakening in Michelle, as she let herself be carried away by the group of dancers and the delicious intoxication. It was almost nothing, barely a sensation - like the murmur of a waterfall in the background. An almost maternal presence to which she felt connected beyond space, by an invisible umbilical cord.

*ROOTSTOCK'S JOURNAL**ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 2*

Paper archives preserved in the Quo Vadis Library.

If we could do it, we who are imperfect, belligerent, weak and limited, then others can do it. The sky of Organ may one day be a gateway to other civilizations. Humanity, although we have lost contact with Earth, has not disappeared - and thousands of other living, intelligent organisms may logically exist in the Universe.

If such a confrontation should ever arise, what should we do?

Respect the other's freedom, while preserving your own - after all, isn't this the only possible rule governing all human relationships?

No human relationship, be it family, clan, sexual, marital or collective, should ever alienate the freedom of one of the parties. This does not mean that there is no power - the power of the Keys is immense - it does mean that no one should ever abuse it.



CHAPTER 14: QUO VADIS

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 586

EARTH YEAR 3416

During the night, Mikael had a strange dream. He saw himself as a child, as if at a distance from himself, and found himself in the Probe, in the middle of a room that didn't exist in reality, and in which a scaffold had been erected. He approached the scaffold, accompanied by Filip Reda, and suddenly became aware of a woman's body swaying at the end of a rope - though the swaying wasn't really frightening. The woman had a black hood over her head, which frightened him, and, without knowing how, he found himself at her height and tore the hood off, only to realize that the hanged woman was none other than Lightning, who was looking at him with an apologetic look and whispering, "It's nothing, it's just my ovulation". Then Captain Richards arrived, but he was covered in strange tattoos. "Major Strauss," he said in a hoarse voice, "where did you put your mission?"

"Major Strauss... Major Mikael Strauss?" The voice was decidedly not that of Egon Richards; it was soft, and caressing, with an inviting accent, it was a woman's voice. Mikael opened his eyes and found Lightning smiling down at him.

"You look very tired, Mikael Strauss... But I am eager to resume our conversation, and perhaps take you on a visit."

Mikael was young and used to military wake-up calls; he was up and about in such a short time that Lightning barely had time to prepare the breakfast table.

“I got up at dawn,” she said. “The forest is so beautiful at dawn - gray, mysterious, full of mist and bird songs. I washed in the pond where you will be going later, after our meal. And I thought long and hard.”

Mikael couldn't fight it - the cakes and fruit were so tasty, the morning sun so fresh and cheerful, there was so much transparency in the air, and the sounds of water from the nearby cascade sounded so clear in his ears; Lightning herself seemed so pleasant, that in a single movement he forgot the dreams of the night and the worries of the evening, and let himself be overcome by a good mood he hadn't experienced since the distant years of his childhood.

“I'd give anything to enjoy mornings like this for the rest of my life.”

Lightning smiled.

“Mornings are lovely, it is true. The world always seems to be waking up for the first time.”

They lost themselves for a moment in contemplating the garden.

“Do you not want to know what I have been thinking long and hard about?” resumed Lightning.

“You really want to dampen my mood... No, I don't really want to know, because I think it's going to be everything I don't want to think about.”

“And what do you not want to think about?”

He pointed to the sky without looking up.

“I don't want to think about the Probe. Or my departure. Or the inevitable problems my mission will bring.”

A slight shadow passed over Lightning's eyes.

"Are they really inevitable?"

Mikael shrugged.

"Obviously."

"Obviously," she repeated, as if it were, indeed, a given.

"And you, what don't you want to think about?"

"Me? Oh, the list is quite long... I do not want to think about Shore's tumor, which has appeared on his neck, or about Rock's behavior towards her second child, which is causing her whole family to suffer; I do not want to think about Fog, who suffers terribly from his loneliness, and who loves a young girl who does not love him in return; I do not want to think about the grief of Frost, Cloud, Moon. I do not want to think about Vine, who slanders me and sows doubt and insecurity around her. I do not want to think about my clan."

"What have you been thinking about then?"

"About Rain's decision. I think she wants us to be close, to love each other, to have the greatest possible desire to see the negotiations through. I think that this way, she puts all the chances of peace on our side. And I think we have to obey her, trust her, and bare it all. If we cannot do that, our communities will be even less able to. So, I will answer your question. And I hope you will answer mine."

Mikael leaned back in his seat and waited.

"The Link is psychic and physical at the same time. It allows us to perceive the feelings of those to whom we are Linked, even from a distance. That is how I knew that old Twig was dying last time. That is why I suffer, sometimes suddenly, in some part of my body."

"The information reaches you in the form of pain?"

"Yes."

Mikael, deeply interested and curious, took the liberty of caressing the tattoos on her arm - his caress lingered a little, because the touch of the velvety skin had rekindled his desire.

“And the tattoos?” he asked.

“The tattoos are a symbol of the Link I have with a person. For example, here,” she said, pointing to her left temple, “is the symbol for Vine. When she is not well, when she is suffering in her flesh or in her heart, my temple will hurt.”

“The Vine who slanders you? Will you feel all her pains?”

“Yes.”

“Always in the same way?”

“No, pain varies in intensity - and then, over time, Keys learn to read their pain, like reading a subtle text full of nuances. Tattoos sting, burn and itch, sometimes like open wounds, sometimes as if paralyzed or hardened; and each variation has its own particular meaning. It also depends on the person - each Link is unique.”

Mikael sighed.

“I’m speechless,” he said. “It’s an extraordinary evolution.”

“Yes, we do not know exactly what brought it about, although Rootstock does put forward a few hypotheses in his diary.”

“Did this evolution start before you arrived on Organ?”

“Yes. Perhaps it was simply due to promiscuity in the Vessel, or to a community of destiny so strong, so pervasive, that it ended up expressing itself in our bodies. In any case, he recounts how, in the third generation, links of this kind began to appear between some of the Vessel’s passengers.”

“It’s incredible.”

“And he, Rootstock, developed a particular sensitivity to the suffering of others, which is why he was chosen as captain. It was he who gave a name and a shape to all this, he who laid the foundations of what we now call our organic links.”

“I’m so jealous of the members of your clan,” he said.

“You should not be jealous.”

“Why shouldn't I?”

“Because I am like a mother to them. I cannot take my pleasure with a member of my clan... Now it is your turn to answer my question. What do you have to negotiate with us?”

Mikael, whom Lightning's words had put on the verge of desire, didn't think long enough before answering.

“You've been honest, and so will I. Captain Richards wants to repair the Vessel.”

Lightning reacted sharply with her eyes, but forced herself to remain silent for a few seconds, before replying:

“We do not want it repaired, I have told you. The technology may seem attractive, but we are not interested.”

“But that's not all. When the Vessel is repaired, i.e., fit to fly, he also wants to take it far away from here.”

Lightning leapt to her feet, as if bitten by a snake.

“He's ready to give you something in return,” he said. “The least you can do is discuss it.”

“No compensation could ever make up for the loss of the Vessel.”

“But what good is it to you?”

Lightning was pacing back and forth. She was obviously trying to contain her anger, or at least not direct it at Mikael.

“Is there an object you keep with you, up there, in your cabin? Something that reminds you of your past?”

“Yes,” said Mikael.

She didn't ask him what it was, but he had thought of a recording he had kept from his mother - a fairytale she had read aloud to him when he was a child, and which she had made a recording of to help him fall asleep when she had to go away. He only listened to it on exceptional occasions, but the idea of losing it would have shaken him to the core.

“How would you react if a complete stranger broke into your cabin and seized this object for his personal needs?”

“I’d be furious,” he said.

This admission seemed to disarm Lightning’s anger, and she returned to his side and pleaded, almost begging:

“The Vessel is like the root of our City - it is from it that its branches have grown and branched out. The mysterious information it contains makes it a kind of temple, which we visit rarely, but always with a sense of sacredness. Seeing with our own eyes the metal carcass from which we came reminds us of how lucky we were to be adopted by this planet. Seeing this ultra-sophisticated technology stranded on the ground before our very eyes also reminds us that technology is not indispensable, and that it led the Terrans to failure. We are attached to this Vessel; it is our monument to our forefathers, our place of memory. You cannot rip it away from us.”

“Lightning,” he whispered, “Lightning... It wasn’t me who made that decision.”

She backed off.

“I know,” she said. “But you are going to come and see it, regardless, this Vessel that your master wants to take away from us without even seeing it. Is it because of Engineer Ido?”

“Yes, in part, no doubt.”

She clicked her tongue in a contemptuous gesture that he had already noticed in Rain.

“He will pay for this,” she hissed.

She was so angry that Mikael didn’t dare ask her what she meant, and how she intended to take revenge on a man standing at an altitude of ten thousand feet.

“How is he, by the way, Engineer Ido?” she asked sarcastically.

“To tell you the truth,” said Mikael, a little embarrassed, “the captain ordered him to come down to the ground to help in the search for our fugitive. And he had some kind of fit.

“Did he come down on Organ?”

“No. He couldn't - I reminded the captain that you all had forbidden him to. And the captain judged it more diplomatic not to send him back down given the circumstances.”

Lightning appeared to be thinking, her face firm, her eyes squinting and her eyebrows slightly furrowed.

“You can wash yourself in the pond,” she said. “I need to be alone for a while before accompanying you to the Vessel.”

She had spoken coldly, and Mikael felt, once again, miserable. She had left him alone, and set off on foot into the forest, or at least in the direction of her herb garden. He undressed and slipped into the warm water. Despite all the reasons he had to curse fate - his frustrated desire, the delicate harmony of that romantic morning torn to shreds, the certainty that this mission could only end in the destruction of the natives - he couldn't help savoring a little the sensation of immersion in this idyllic setting. He was thrown off by the tiny fish that nibbled at his dead skin, but managed to regain some of his calm.

When she returned with a handful of herbs, Lightning's face was still hard. But she resolutely undressed, and joined him in the pond with a certain abruptness.

“Let's make love,” she said. “I need to express things I cannot say with words.”

This invitation was all the more troubling in that it wasn't tender like last time, but he sensed she was angry. He approached her and she finally threw herself on him, almost with all her claws out. They embraced with a certain violence, as if in combat, indifferent to the roughness of the stone, the lapping of the water and the torn stems of the water lilies. The orgasm they shared was very intense - then they fell back into the water, whose surface eventually regained its limpid calm.

Her face was no longer tense, and he could once again admire the purity of her features. She looked up at him and her eyes were laughing again.

“Do you often make love when you're angry?”

“No, this is the first time.”

“It seems to work...”

“Yes, it looks like it... Tell me, Major Mikael Strauss, are you in love with me?”

Surprised by the question, he replied:

“Given that we're almost officially enemies, that my diplomatic mission will end in fiasco in a day or two, and that we're destined to live light-years apart, it would be quite stupid of me to fall in love with you, wouldn't it?”

“Yes. It would be quite stupid.”

“Well, I guess I'm pretty stupid, then.”

Lightning wasn't laughing anymore. She kissed him with sad tenderness, and got out of the water.



Mikael had envisioned a blueprint of the Quo Vadis - maybe because Lightning had referred to it as a temple, or because he had seen it from above, from the annex, in all its majesty. But the natives never saw it that way - the Quo Vadis was a heart, or rather, it was a cave, into which you could enter, whose entrances you could see, but which had no outward form. You could pass imperceptibly, as if in a subtle morphing, from an alleyway to a half-collapsed passageway - and then the light became scarce, and you understood that you had entered the heart of the mystery. Mikael therefore felt no particular sense of awe or reverent fear; he followed Lightning into an environment that was merely becoming more metallic, taking on a charcoal-gray color and a twilight aspect. It was at once a plunge into the fu-

ture and into the past - since the Vessel was the origin, but also the destination, or at least one of the possible destinations, of all human civilization.

Lightning had given Mikael a torch; he held it carefully, because it was the first time he had held a flaming object in his hand. It took him back to his childhood readings, in which brave adventurers explored dank underground passages, armed with torch and dagger. It was exciting, but much less illuminating than electric flashlights - though Mikael didn't want to point this out to Lightning, and avoided taking out his own equipment. The dancing glow of the flames cast tawny lights on the obsidian-like walls - there was a thick silence inside the Vessel, very similar to the silence of space, so familiar to Mikael. Lightning moved confidently. She showed him various rooms, and even entire quarters - living quarters, kitchens, machine rooms where technologies Mikael had never seen before were sleeping their last. Lightning would sometimes stop in front of blades, cables, a console or a screen. She would caress these objects with her fingertips as if they were precious artifacts from an archaeological dig; you could sense that she had the same fascination for these objects that Terrans had long felt for ruins.

They passed by closed doors.

"You've never been to the other side, have you?"

"No, I have not. We gave up opening them generations ago. Children still try sometimes, and come up with all sorts of theories about what might be behind them. Reality is probably a lot less colorful than their imagination."

Mikael didn't answer, aware as Lightning was that this part of the mystery, so invigorating for children's minds, was probably going to be taken away from them. They would live in a flatter world, with no depths, no underground to explore.

They finally arrived at the Library, and this time Mikael was very impressed. It was a cathedral - in modern ships like the Probe, there

was no room of this dimension. Mikael had seen paper books before, but they were rare, collected like antiques. In this library, which had been sheltered from the sun and open air for five hundred years, the books were in a remarkable state of preservation. The computer screens, of course, were off, blind, like opaque eyes. But volumes of all sizes and colors followed one another almost endlessly on the shelves, from floor to ceiling, accessible by questionable ladders and walkways. Mikael had read in history books that the ships of the Great Propagation had contained, like arks, the essentials of human knowledge. But he had no idea what this amounted to in reality.

“I prefer the literature,” said Lightning. “And, of course, Rootstock’s journal.”

Laid out like a sacred book on a lectern was a very large, hand-bound book. There was nobody in the Library at the moment, but you could tell from the relative cleanliness of the place, and particularly that of the lectern, that it was far from abandoned.

“Can I have a look?” asked Mikael.

“Of course.”

Mikael approached, almost expecting, in this journey through time, to find a manuscript. But Rootstock had used a printer to produce this book, and there was no medieval writing in Gothic letters, but a very neutral-looking book. The quality of the paper, however, was unusual. Mikael noticed that there were several copies of this book, maybe a hundred, laid out on an adjoining shelf. Rhizome seemed to have taken great care of this legacy. Mikael opened a page at random, towards the end of the volume, and read.

*ROOTSTOCK'S JOURNAL**ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 4*

Paper archives preserved in the Quo Vadis Library.

Failure is the most important legacy our fathers left us. The vision of their failure. I'd like to be able to transfer these images of the Earth before my eyes onto a rot-proof canvas - images that no book talks about, and no life bears witness to, because these images lie beyond human experience and language. But we still need to interpret this legacy, to understand its paradoxical teachings.

During the two centuries of The Destruction, many people spoke out. Many people spoke of the will of omnipotence, of man's pride and domination, and some even went so far as to say that the threat of extinction was a just punishment. But that's not what these images tell me. What these images tell me is an immense blindness. A refusal to see. A contempt for science. Terrans didn't destroy their planet through an excess of science, as is often believed, but through a contempt for science, a failure to process information. What a paradox, when you think about it! Never on Earth had information circulated faster or more freely, and never was it so poorly decoded, so poorly heard. Terrans didn't destroy these billions of precious animal and human lives on the altar of power, but out of sheer thoughtlessness. This is what we must question. What is the point of glossing over the moral ins and outs of this failure? In the end, the real issue was not moral, it was cognitive. It was a question of conscience. Not between good and evil, but between the real and the fictitious. Between the true and the false. Humans, during the last few centuries, like a dying man who denies his symptoms and declares himself in perfect health, humans denied reality.

This reflection led me to imagine a society where thoughtlessness, ignorance, error and loss of information would not be possible. I mean, they would be materially impossible. I asked myself, on a biological level, how information circulates. And then I understood the importance of pain in human life. To feel pain is to feel the reality of evil, to feel danger.

Did the Terrans not destroy themselves by destroying pain? Because by destroying pain, we cut ourselves off from reality. By destroying empathy for the pain of others, we cut ourselves off from reality. Leaders who adhered to the pernicious myth of growth, locked away in their privileged circles, no longer had access to the day-to-day realities of their peoples. And when we cut ourselves off from reality, we start living in fiction. And it is fiction that kills us. It is understandable that the richest capitalists sought to multiply their profits - so, their share of responsibility is not obscure, it is clear and glaring. But we must not forget the millions, the billions of people who, despite the unprecedented informational resources of their civilization, despite the constant progress, attested by all, in the global level of education, continued for two centuries to accept the dictatorship of money - worse, sometimes, to vote for its henchmen, to believe in electoral promises that a five-year-old wouldn't accept, to gorge themselves on fictitious goods and mindless stories. In the civilization I dream of, no leader could deny reality, because reality would impose itself on them, physically, immediately and organically, through pain. No people could live in a murderous fiction.



CHAPTER 15: INCONSIDERATE REQUESTS

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 586
EARTH YEAR 3416

Here we are, the morning of the third and final day has arrived. In a few hours, I'll be separated from Lightning, from Organ, and from my life.

Filip Reda answered instantly .

Couldn't you try to run away, like Touré?

If I run away, who will try to plead Organ's cause with the captain? I have to go back up there. I've got to talk to him, at least try to dissuade him.

Have you ever succeeded in convincing the captain?

No, never.

You'd do better to run. Strauss, I beg you: save yourself, don't come back on the ship. It hurts me almost as much as it hurts you.

Mikael smiled sadly as he read the words on his transmitter.

It would hurt you even more if I ran away and they hanged me.

I wouldn't live to see that - but I'll have to live to see your return aboard the Probe.

I need to go now, Filip. I'm due for the big negotiations. See you later.

Good luck, Strauss. Run away if you can.

Lightning had shown no sign of impatience, but he could see she was ready. They set off for the City in silence. The day before, he had told her about Reda, and she had immediately understood his sense of responsibility towards the man. "You are Linked to him," she had said simply. He hadn't contradicted her - Filip Reda's suffering didn't resonate in his flesh, but it was present in his mind. The day before had passed without a hitch, and Mikael had learned a lot about Organ culture. He had discreetly photographed part of the Quo Vadis diary, which he intended to continue reading when he was on the Probe. He had also accompanied Lightning on her tour of care and advice, admiring her ability to make decisions as much as to listen to others. She was a doctor, mother, judge and administrator. She was constantly deciding between difficult choices - with the single principle of never sacrificing one for the other. There could be no scapegoating, there could be no exclusion or hatred, because the excluded suffered in her own flesh. She therefore maintained, sometimes hanging by a tenacious thread, the harmony of all, respecting individual mentalities until this became truly impossible, which was rarely the case. The solutions she came up with were imaginative and unexpected - at least to him. He saw her "punish" a woman who was mistreating her child by placing her in the victim's place. The clan members present were accused of ignoring her, placing too heavy a burden on her, and leaving her and her child to struggle in an impossible situation. The child was placed under the control of the extended family, and the woman wept with gratitude and shame. No one had blamed her. She had merely been relieved of too heavy a burden.

Once back at Lightning's home, they had exchanged caresses and kisses for most of the night, seized by a sense of urgency. But Mikael knew that Lightning wouldn't cry, when the time came for him to

leave her, and that she would tuck away the moments she had spent with him in her memory, without them having the slightest effect on her social behavior. He didn't hope for a moment that she would take his side, at the Council of the Keys, in recommending that the Probe crew be allowed to take the Vessel. She would oppose him as fiercely as the others - and Mikael understood this perfectly, because it was an unjust decision, which he himself did not approve of, and which he was forced to defend by hierarchical obligations. The only incentive he had to negotiate sincerely was the fear of Richards' reprisals against the natives. He hoped the latter would bow to strength, and not attempt desperate action.

The indifferent beauty of the forest wasn't enough to soothe his worries.

"Does it ever rain on Organ?"

"Of course it does!" replied Lightning, laughing. "How do you think the forest could be so green if it did not rain?"

"What is rain like?"

"You would have to come back a lot longer to see it, Mikael Strauss. Three days is not enough at this time of year. And the only Rain you're going to see today will be neither beautiful nor convenient for you."

Mikael gave a sad little chuckle.

"I can imagine. I'm already trembling."

"Eh, do not be afraid. The Council is not a place for aggression. Or at least, the aggression is channeled so that it is not dangerous."

"Who will make the final decision?"

"All our decisions are taken by consensus," explained Lightning.

"You never have a profound disagreement, between black and white? Never a head-on opposition that prevents consensus?"

"The world is not black and white; situations are not black and white. Head-on opposition is a Western Terran invention."

"What do you mean?"

“That there is always more than one alternative to a given problem.”

“Accept or refuse, isn't that a simple alternative that corresponds to the question I'm about to ask?”

“You are not going to ask a question like that. You are going to present a complex situation, leaving out nothing of its complexity. And we will define a complex attitude that we feel is the most appropriate for the situation.”

Mikael pondered these words, whose wisdom, for the moment, eluded him.

“Sometimes,” said Lightning in an enigmatic tone, “you just have to suppress the question to avoid having to answer it.”

The trees were beginning to thin and they soon entered the City. Mikael took many photographs and videos, under Lightning's amused gaze.

“You are a strange tourist,” she teased. “Do all the people of the Union think of themselves as a group of tourists on a trip?”

“In general, our destinations are hardly touristy. I'd never stepped on anything naturally surrounded by a breathable atmosphere.”

Lightning looked sympathetic and said nothing more.

When they arrived in front of the Council Chamber, Mikael took out his camera once again and took numerous pictures of the place. This terrace overlooking the City offered a beautiful view of the Vessel he had visited the day before - the presence of this noble wreck, which two diametrically opposed communities would fight over five hundred years after its grounding, seemed full of meaning. On the inside, the vast space, shaded by a canopy of greenery, had the majesty of ancient colonnades, except that these were not wooden columns, as he had first thought, but living, sculpted trees of immense height, among which Mikael saw hundreds of Keys, many of them discreetly staring at him, strolling quietly. He whispered to Lightning:

“If we become enemies, don't forget that I'm quite stupid, and that won't stop me from loving you.”

“I will cherish your memory,” replied Lightning.

This sentence sounded strange in Mikael's ears, as if she were contemplating the possibility of his death. He wanted to continue talking to her, but the moment had passed - a crowd was pressing in around them; Lightning greeted almost everyone, and stepped aside for a moment with Rain. Mikael felt a kind of vertigo - the Keys, who had until now been very abstract figures in his mind, had just become embodied in a reality that enveloped him on all sides. The bubble that had surrounded him and Lightning for the past two days had burst: the rhythm of reality, suddenly accelerated, caught him in its rapids. The Probe, above the Quo Vadis, clearly visible when you looked up, loomed as a silent threat. And Mikael even thought he spotted Lieutenant Malkine behind a column. This impression was soon confirmed.

“Major Strauss,” he said. “I need to speak to you before this charade begins.”

Mikael followed Malkine against the flow of Keys hurrying inside, and they reached the edge of the terrace.

“I've found Touré,” he said, “but the chief of the clan where she's taken refuge told me to address myself here. Since I'm afraid I'll lose my temper more quickly than you, I'd like you to bring this element into the negotiation: collaboration in the repair and return of the Vessel is only one of our two demands. The second is that they agree to return Touré to us. Immediately. I'd like to take her up with us later.”

Mikael remained silent for a moment too long. The return to reality had been too brutal - accustomed to conversing only with Lightning and Reda over the past two days, he had lost the habit of hierarchical conversations, in which one had to know how to keep

silent, lie, and think at full speed to avoid the traps that words could set.

“Well, Strauss, you're not going to answer? Did you get dumb?”

“Apologies, Lieutenant. The truth is, negotiations are already going to be extremely tense over the Vessel, so I'm not sure it's a good idea to add a second point of disagreement to the mix.”

The lieutenant considered him with contempt.

“I wasn't aware that Captain Richards had commissioned you to give me advice, Major. I don't seem to have asked for any.”

“No, Lieutenant. That's true. I was merely giving you my insights.”

“I already know your insights, Major. You probably consider that the natives are attached to this stranded Vessel, and that it's illegitimate for us to seize it. And you certainly feel that Ensign Touré should be left with her new family without suffering any consequences for her desertion.”

Mikael didn't know what to say; he didn't feel like contradicting the lieutenant.

“You see, Strauss, I know you by heart. Fortunately, your rank is low enough that these stupid ideas are of little consequence. So you'll do as I say, not out of a spirit of discipline - which you hopelessly lack - but because you're intelligent enough to understand the meaning of a direct threat. If I don't get my two demands met, we'll have to take what we want by force. And your tattooed friends won't be able to stop us. You see, the Probe is right there. I'll be waiting for you here.”

Mikael threw a glance toward the sky - his ship had never looked so sinister.

“Aye, aye, Lieutenant,” he finally said.

Then he gave a military salute and turned in the direction of the Council.

The Keys were scattered everywhere. Some on wooden seats, some leaning against trees, others sitting cross-legged on the ground.

Others remained standing. Mikael looked around for Lightning, but didn't find her immediately. Rain, when he arrived, beckoned him forward, and he joined her, his heart gripped by galloping anguish.

"My dear friends," said Rain. "You know that this Council of the Keys is an extraordinary council, and we won't be dealing with the current business of Organ today. We are going to listen to what Major Mikael Strauss, who has been appointed by his masters to act as their intermediary with us, has to say. Then we will discuss what response we should send to his masters, again through him. We will let him have the floor, and then you can all ask him any questions you like, so that our deliberations can be fully informed. Finally, we will invite the young man to leave the premises, to await our response."

Mikael took a deep breath, and began to reel off the little speech he had memorized. Lightning had advised him to lay out the facts in all their complexity.

"The ship you have all seen in the sky, called The Probe, is a technological jewel, enabling our crew to travel immense distances. We are pioneers for the Union, which represents what's left of Earth, a human diaspora of around a million people. We don't know exactly what the Great Propagation has achieved in the Universe: to date, you're only the fifth human colony we've found. The Union obviously wishes to represent a bridge between all human communities, and naturally considers that your colony is related to it in one way or another. We share the same DNA, the same language, the same history. That's no insignificant matter, and it's undoubtedly enough to justify a regular exchange, a permanent trade, both cultural and economic, between us."

"I say trade because it seems the most peaceful and natural way to describe the relationship between Organ and the Probe. You possess, on Organ, marvellous riches for us humans of the Union. You have air, water, carbon, wood and a thousand other minerals and natural resources in abundance. You possess something extremely rare in

the universe: a habitable planet, capable of providing shelter for the whole of humanity if it ever needed it. Better still, these resources are largely untapped, and their eventual exploitation would hardly bother you. But we're not without riches for you either, especially intellectual riches. We have mastered knowledge and techniques that far surpass those of your ancestors, having constantly innovated and developed new capabilities thanks to our space travel over the past five centuries. We have the power to heal, the power to fly, the power to cross mountains and seas, the power to build... and, of course, the power to destroy. But all these powers could be yours - we're willing to stay long enough on Organ to train you. We're ready to give you machines, to explain how they work, and the secrets of their manufacture."

"A good relationship with the Union would also guarantee your peace. By now, a message has certainly already left for the Admiralty, the Union's central power, and Organ's coordinates are no longer secret. More humans will come, even if it takes a long time. The time when you were separated from the Union by the insurmountable barrier of secrecy is already over. So it's in your interest to forge fair, mutually beneficial relations with the Probe."

"This brings me to the two points that constitute the delicate part of our negotiation. Captain Richards, who heads the Probe, would like you to make two gestures to show your good will. These are two gestures that wouldn't cost you much, since they don't endanger the lives of any of Organ's native inhabitants, nor do they jeopardize your way of life or your principles of solidarity. First of all, you would let us bring back aboard the Probe the young woman who got lost on Organ and who has taken refuge in one of your clans. Next is to let our engineers - not engineer Ido, of course, who has proved his disrespect, but others - enter the *Quo Vadis* and try to repair it. This Vessel, I understand, means a lot to you. But we could very well leave you with everything that is already at your disposal, including the en-

tire contents of the Library. We would be content, if we could repair the Vessel and get it airborne, to take only its main structure with us. We could even perhaps provide you with a replica of the *Quo Vadis*, to leave you with something to remember it by.”

Mikael fell silent, and serious, worried murmurs ran through the assembly. Lightning asked the first question - maybe because she had had time to think about it over the past two days, and had been longing to ask him.

“Is Captain Egon Richards prepared to use force against Organ's inhabitants if we refuse?”

“Yes, I'm afraid so,” said Mikael without backing down.

Lightning insisted.

“For the Vessel, but also for the young woman who has taken refuge in the Storm clan?”

“Yes.”

Mikael had expected an outcry, some protesting, but they didn't come. There was a long, long silence. Then some Keys unknown to him began to ask him questions, almost gently.

“Do you use your technology to procreate, or do you always procreate naturally?”

“Most of the time, naturally.”

“You said there were about a million humans in the Union, does that include the four colonies you found?”

“Yes. They are smaller colonies than Organ.”

“Are there any children aboard the Probe?”

“No. Procreation is forbidden during military space travel.”

Mikael thought he sensed an imperceptible relief in the assembly, which he didn't understand.

“How many passengers are on board the Probe?”

“We have a crew of 169.”

Again, the silence lingered. Mikael had the impression that they knew they wouldn't have another chance to ask their questions, and

that they didn't want to forget anything. He had expected emotion, aggression, revolt - and he was faced with calm, composed questions.

"How many light-years away are we from the Admiralty?"

"About 1.8."

"Is that how long it will take for the message to get there?"

"Yes."

"How fast do your ships travel?"

"We reach a tenth of that speed."

Lightning spoke again.

"Major Mikael Strauss, on a personal note, would you like to live on Organ?"

"Yes."

"Do you urgently need the Quo Vadis for your survival?"

"No, not really. We're not in danger, at the moment, nor do we have a shortage of resources."

An old man covered in tattoos asked in a clear voice:

"The fugitive you are looking for, what will you do to her?"

"She will be court-martialed for desertion."

"What risk does that entail for her?"

"Capital punishment, I'm afraid."

"Can you be more explicit?"

"Death, by hanging."

"Are there other forms of intelligence in the universe?"

"Undoubtedly, but we haven't found them."

"Is the Union's aim to settle on a habitable planet like Organ?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Why?" asked a young Key.

"Because the Union scans, explores, criss-crosses the Universe. This quest is what holds it together. Aren't you going to ask me questions about the technologies we could bring you?"

No one answered.

“How long could it take to repair the *Quo Vadis*?” asked a rather elderly man.

“Two to six months.”

“Are there any valuable resources behind the sealed doors?”

“Yes, precious for a technological civilization.”

“What can you make with them?”

“Energy, mainly. And perhaps building materials and equipment.”

Mikael realized that the questions were getting spaced out, and would soon run out. None of the questions seemed essential or relevant. They hadn't asked about the Probe's firepower or coercive capabilities. They hadn't asked about the technological advantages the Union was offering them. They had asked nothing at all.

When the silence had lasted long enough, Rain asked:

“Are there any points we forgot to mention?”

Voices talked to each other, answered each other, then fell silent.

“Good,” resumed Rain. “In that case, Major Mikael Strauss, I invite you to join your friends from the Probe, outside, and await the outcome of our deliberations.

Mikael bowed, and gave Lightning an almost despairing look. She smiled at him, a little sadly. Then he moved towards those who were not at all his “friends”.

“It's over already?” asked Malkine.

“No, they're deliberating.”

“And your impression, Strauss? How did the negotiations go? Will we get their agreement?”

“I don't know, Lieutenant. I presented the situation and our demands. I made it clear that it was in their interest to reach a mutually beneficial agreement, and that Captain Richards would not hesitate to use force if they refused.”

“Did they protest much?”

“No, that's what I find strange. They didn't protest at all.”

“They're primitives, Strauss. They don't even realize the firepower of the Probe. Maybe they think we're all going to fight with our bare hands.”

“Maybe.”

Fortunately, the Lieutenant was in no mood to prolong this conversation, and Mikael, after briefly greeting Wilson and Fabre, was able to walk away quickly. He wanted to talk to someone, however, and took out his transmitter to reach Reda.

I carried the message of threat and death from the Probe.

And what did they say?

They asked if there were any children on board.

This time, Reda didn't answer, and Mikael waited a long time for his interpretation, in vain. The deliberation, however, didn't last long, and less than an hour after leaving the room, Mikael was called back. He saw that Rain was holding a piece of paper in her hand, on which a short text had been written.

“Please take a seat, Major Mikael Strauss. I will read you this paper. If you have any questions, you can ask us. Then take the answer back up there.”

Mikael nodded silently.

The Council of the Keys has decided, by democratic consensus, to respond in the following way to the demands expressed by Major Mikael Strauss on behalf of the Captain of the Probe:

- Concerning Michelle, who now belongs to the Storm clan, and who has taken the organic name of “Forest”, she has, through the ceremony of the Needle, abandoned her community of origin and espoused the Storm clan. We cannot voluntarily expose her to suffering, nor can we do her any violence. We cannot let you take her away against her will.

- Concerning the Quo Vadis, we are very attached to it and do not understand the need to repair it or rip it out of the ground.

- *We do not want to benefit from any technological advances you might artificially bring us.*

- *Nevertheless, we understand the interest we might have in cooperating with the Union. We grant the Union a tenth of Organ's territory, on the opposite side of the world from our home, for free exploitation. We also offer all crew members who wish to join one of our Clans, to enjoy the beauty and fertility of our beloved planet.*

- *As a token of your good will, and to seal this pact of good understanding, we ask Captain Egon Richards to kindly leave Major Mikael Strauss with us, and to release him from his duties and other commitments to the Union.*

- *We hope to receive a favorable response by next dawn. If not, we will take certain measures against you.*

*ROOTSTOCK'S JOURNAL**ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 6*

Paper archives preserved in the Quo Vadis Library.

I have thought long and hard, and reread my classics. If we want to found a community where inequalities are almost non-existent, how do we go about it? Rousseau's hypothesis has long interested me... Abolishing private property would take civilization in a different direction. And why not abolish money? But I'm afraid that would not work. Animals themselves are very often territorial - which means they claim possession, the right to use a territory. If not on an individual level, then at least on the level of a pack or tribe. What is the point of smoothing out inequalities between individuals if there are still inequalities between tribes, between communities?

No. I have come to consider that the best way would be to do away with inheritance. It is inheritance that has pushed inequality to its extreme. That a baby is born an owner, or future owner, when others are born slaves. It is not right for anyone to be born with any rights other than the right to health, education and freedom. With every generation, everything has to be levelled out. All the assets accumulated over a lifetime should be returned to the community, and shared out again. This would not cause anyone to suffer. It would only prevent us from accumulating profits that we would not be able to enjoy in a lifetime. It would also prevent the creation, from birth, of castes of rulers and castes of ruled.



CHAPTER 16: INTERPELLATION

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 586

EARTH YEAR 3416

Lieutenant Malkine was not discouraged. He had almost torn the paper, then stuffed it into his uniform pocket. Mikael didn't dare speak to him to ask where they were going; Malkine pretended he didn't exist anyway. He had finally ordered Fabre and Wilson to direct the vehicle towards the village where Touré was hiding. Mikael, a little shaken by Fabre's sporty driving, had watched the landscape go by without asking the question that had been burning in his mind: were they really going to fight? Four against a whole clan? Mikael, in the back of the vehicle, didn't dare take out the transmitter either, for fear of having it confiscated, or being accused of treachery. It was suspicious enough that the natives had demanded his resignation from the Union and his definitive transfer to Organ.

“What's the matter with you, Strauss?” said Lieutenant Malkine, scathing. “Don't you understand that anyone who stays with the natives will share their fate?”

Mikael didn't reply.

“I don't want you to get out of the vehicle when we get there, Strauss. I don't want you to have any more contact with those damned natives.”

In addition to Malkine's anger and the stress he was spreading all around him in the vehicle, plus the anxiety at the thought that force was going to be used to bring Touré back on board, and that it would most likely be for the purpose of hanging her, Mikael also had to deal

with his own lack of understanding of the situation. His lack of foresight and discernment. Something had escaped him about the natives - something that allowed them, even though they weren't crazy, to behave as if they were.

After a few minutes, the silent monotony of the journey calmed his nerves a little. Lightning was highly intelligent, he'd had ample proof of that, and so were the other Keys, he was sure. They had the necessary culture to understand the issues Mikael had described. They must have understood the message. So why were they acting as if they had nothing to fear? As if they were in no danger? It remained a mystery. Mikael was afraid to guess the reason: maybe they were simply so united and so respectful of life, that they didn't really imagine that Egon Richards would be capable of killing them to achieve his ends. Maybe they thought it was a bluff. But what "measures" were they talking about? Were they bluffing too? Did they have a deterrent weapon - maybe a Quo Vadis cannon they had somehow managed to make work? What unknown power did they have that made them feel so safe?



Storm, with the caution that characterized all his decisions, didn't go to the Council of the Keys. He had explained the situation to Mist, who had been his voice to the other Keys. The man from the Probe would be back, and back in force, with weapons in his hands and threats in his mouth, and he would demand that the refugee, now fully part of his clan under the beautiful name of Forest, be handed over to him.

"For the last few weeks, I'd had the feeling that I wasn't myself anymore, and that I was the forest," she had explained.

The name was therefore given to her unanimously.

Forest was of a cheerful, courageous nature; her eagerness to learn and fit in had smoothed over any difficulties, conquered any reluctance on the part of certain clan members. Her symbol was engraved just below the old man's heart, and he felt it was a good place to be. She had indeed won her way into his heart, and he guessed that her smile would light up his old age, and that she would be one of the last faces he would want to see before he passed away, when the time came.

So he didn't hesitate for a second when the man from the Probe came to claim her. To judge her, he had said. To punish her. Because she had deserted. Storm had been very diplomatic, courteously explaining that Organ's customs required the approval of the Council of the Keys. He had offered the three of them plum wine and fritters, which the man from the Probe had barely touched. He hadn't been fooled by this deliberate procrastination - he couldn't decently react to it as if it were a refusal, but he knew that this procrastination was an insolence, a refusal and a diversion. He had hurried the two young people accompanying him, and withdrawn with a word of icy politeness. Storm had watched the vehicle disappear over the river, and had stayed there meditating for a long time after the noise of the engine had given way to the lapping of the water.

Today, he had gathered the entire Storm clan in the main square, and as soon as they recognized the mechanical hum of the engine in the distance, they began the ancestral ritual.

"I will lend you the strength of my spirit when you need it," all the clan members sang in unison.

"The balance of the clan will be my only compass," replied the old man's hoarse and solitary voice.

"I will be your body, your hands, your arm, your legs."

"I will be your courage and your rescue."

The words of the Link ceremony were repeated several times, and little by little, they all felt that a kind of bridge was opening

up between their minds and bodies, which were separated most of the time. Old Storm, who for many years had had the stooped posture of an old man, straightened up with an impressive resurgence of youth and power; as if drawing on all the life forces available to him, he was flowing with a new energy, more impetuous than a torrent. Then Storm began to perform the movements of the ritual dance, and each time he moved his own body, he moved the bodies of all the others at the same time. He began to dance, with slow movements, and admired the perfect unison, the absolute synchronization of his clan, who executed without thinking the movements dictated by his brain. The young Forest, experiencing the ritual for the first time, had a smile of wonder on her face as she watched the dance of Storm. It required no effort on her part - she seemed to be guided by an inner force, and this ease gave her deep satisfaction. This didn't mean she couldn't think - part of her consciousness remained awake, and individual - but something collective had taken possession of her body, much like the gestures of love. Of all the experiences she had ever had, it was sexual intercourse that most resembled this unconscious synchronization, this participation in a shared movement, this fusion with the other.

As the vehicle approached, the dance of Storm didn't end. And when Lieutenant Malkine, flanked by Fabre and Wilson, got out of the vehicle and entered the village, it didn't stop then either. Michelle - or rather Forest - felt troubled when she saw his hard face - but this trouble was soothed, almost immediately, by an influx of strength from the group. She managed to smile, and felt invincible.

Soon Storm stopped all movement, and turned to face the intruders. As one, all the clan members stood still and turned towards them as well.

"I'm here to pick up Ensign Michelle Touré, who I see here," declared Malkine in a loud voice. "For your own safety, do not resist. Touré, you don't want to be responsible for a massacre among the

people who took you in. You have enough dignity left to follow us voluntarily.”

Storm didn't bother speaking. He advanced towards the soldiers of the Probe, and the whole group moved with him, like a human tide. Lieutenant Malkine drew his weapon, while Solveig Fabre remained stunned and terror-stricken. Gus Wilson, a little late, also drew his weapon.

Storm pressed his advantage by starting to chant - which, echoed by the hundreds of voices, had a startling effect. This was enough to momentarily disable the young woman, and cost the young man precious time. Only the leader seemed difficult to impress - Storm was going to have to go further. With surprising vigor, he rushed at the strangers, and, assailed by the whole clan, who moved together, at constant speed, and without the slightest hesitation, Malkine fired. Galvanized by fear and the smell of gunpowder, Gus Wilson also fired - the two shots tore the sacred silence of Organ even more than the sound of the engines had done. And Storm, through the blast of extreme pain in his kidney and left hand, felt a sudden sense of rage at these sacrilegious killers. His rage made him lose clear awareness of the limits of his own body - he wished for hands to snatch the guns and throw them into the river - and this was done. He longed for the vehicle to be torn to pieces, and dismantled - and it was. There was one more man in the vehicle who offered no resistance, and who was violently pushed along with the others. He desired that the soldiers of the Probe be driven away, that a shower of branches and stones rain down on them, and so it was done. When calm had finally returned to the banks of the river, Storm cut the Link.

Michelle felt as if she had awoken from a dream or a trance - or maybe an alcoholic sleep. She was a little hungover, but her consciousness was clear. She clearly saw Storm, who a moment before had been striding forward with majestic power, collapse, panting and almost senile, both hands pressed against his side. She saw, with

guilty horror, the red blood flowing from the wounds of two people - she rushed forward, and recognized, with a cry of despair, the frail young body of Breeze, pierced in the belly. Dead. And a few yards away, a man writhing in pain, with a bullet in his shoulder. She began to weep with shame. Lieutenant Malkine's words came back to her with unbearable sharpness:

“Touré, you don't want to be responsible for a massacre among these people who took you in.”

As she furiously embraced Breeze's inert body, she murmured over and over, “Forgive me, it should have been me.”



It was Gus Wilson who led the way, and the others followed. There had to be a path in this direction, but they couldn't find it, humiliatingly slowed down by the stupid difficulties of walking in the forest. The accidents of the terrain, the brambles, the thickets. This accursed planet seemed to be thwarting them on purpose with all the ramifications of its flora. Lieutenant Malkine had never felt such rage and helplessness at the same time - and only the prospect of reprisals kept him from exploding. Strauss had the good taste, or rather the prudence, to keep quiet - the slightest remark on his part would inevitably have led to an exchange of blows. Fabre was following the direction with the GPS, right behind Wilson. At first, Malkine was following them, with Strauss bringing up the rear - but then Malkine realized that Strauss might very well desert too, and made him pass in front of him.

If not Touré, he could get Strauss punished. Not hanging, of course, but at least a couple of weeks in solitary confinement. The thought was a very mild balm on the raw burn of his self-esteem. He also thought of the pleasure he'd get from bombing this town and decimating its inhabitants. He felt no remorse about it - the weak

had to pay the price for their folly when they attacked the strong. Small fighters didn't fire on big warships, or they'd end up pulverized. A child could understand that. So it wasn't qualms that stopped him - but exasperation at not being strong enough right away. They had been disarmed and chased out of this primitive village, with branches and bare hands. This was what the weak would pay for - the momentary loss of control, the colossus' wavering, his awe at what he had from all eternity considered impossible. You couldn't negotiate with people like that - any more than you could with animals. As far as Malkine was concerned, they were outside human rationality.

Mikael, for his part, indifferent to the repeated lacerations of the branches, the pain in his feet, and the almost palpable hatred of his boss behind his back, tried to think calmly. Eventually, they would find the annex, that was certain, and get back on board the Probe. Lieutenant Malkine had been so humiliated by his failure that he would urge the captain to attack right away - but Richards was a thoughtful, level-headed man. He wouldn't make decisions in a hurry, and he would make a point of hearing everyone, including himself. This was probably his only chance of avoiding a massacre - he would have to plead Organ's cause with this man who, however stubborn he might appear, was not cruel, and not without a certain humanism either. Never before had he had to deliver such a high-stakes speech - Mikael suddenly felt like the advocate of an entire people facing the death penalty. He tried not to think about the stakes, which were too high for him, but to concentrate on the arguments that would carry the day with Richards. The futility of killing - the City could be taken over without massive bloodshed. The advantage of negotiation - you had to at least consider accepting the natives' terms. They refused to give up the Quo Vadis - it was certainly a loss of gain for the Union, but there was still almost an entire planet to exploit, and natural resources galore. Wasn't it better to respect the life of this human colony? The cooperation of this community,

its psychic and social know-how, would perhaps be more profitable spoils than five-century-old raw materials. His brain grasped this argument and, as sometimes happened, Mikael let it grind its grain.

His brain, at times, worked almost like a machine, solving a lengthy problem in the background, and freeing up his immediate consciousness, as much for everyday tasks as for routine conversations and even matters of lesser importance. Of lesser importance, really? Lightning? It wasn't just all of Organ's inhabitants who were in danger of perishing - it was her in particular, and that was even more unbearable. An idea occurred to him: the transmitter. He could leave the transmitter, like a bottle in the sea, on the planet's soil, before leaving Organ. He could hope that she would find it, or that someone would find it and hand it over to a Key. With any luck, this detail, known only to Richards, would be forgotten in the crowd of emergencies to be dealt with - would the Captain care about this little instrument, set up to distract Reda from his suicidal impulses, when it came to deciding on acts of war? Thanks to the transmitter, he could warn the natives, enabling them to flee the epicenter of the bombardments. He might save lives. Maybe Lightning's.

By the time they reached the clearing where the annex was still waiting for them, night was falling. The sky, hidden from their view for hours by the treetops, appeared to them in all its twilight splendor, streaked with purple and mauve, against a background of fading azure. The stars made a trail of golden dust. Clouds floated in this light like fantastic vessels. There was a delicious freshness in the air - the beauty of this evening almost made Mikael ache. He was leaving Organ, with no hope of ever setting foot there again, and the thought made his walk to the annex almost unbearable. He wasn't the only one, either, grumbling on the final stretch: they were all exhausted - and, by some all-too-human mechanism, the sight of their finish line had taken the wind out of their sails. All of them, even Malkine, were struggling to get through the last few yards, which

seemed, paradoxically, the most difficult, after the intense effort they had all put in. So it came as no surprise to Lieutenant Malkine when Strauss stumbled a few yards from the annex and fell - he felt a little contempt for this inability to sustain his effort to the end, but this inability corresponded perfectly to what he thought of the person.

Intellectuals in general, and humanities specialists in particular, had always inspired him with profound contempt, and this lack of dignity only confirmed what he already thought he knew about them.

Mikael threw the transmitter into the shadows, a few yards away, when he voluntarily let himself fall. Then he struggled to his feet, with real difficulty, and pulled himself into the annex. It was strange to feel such physical relief, at the same time as such moral distress. He pressed his face to the glass and tried not to look in the direction of the transmitter, so that none of the other three would have the idea of looking in the same direction. Organ was plunging into darkness, and the harsh lights of the annex were rendering it invisible.

When the annex's engine sounded and the acceleration abruptly unhooked his heart from his chest, Mikael realized he was crying.

*ROOTSTOCK'S JOURNAL**ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 11*

Paper archives preserved in the Quo Vadis Library.

Like all true human bonds, all loves, all attachments, Organic Links must be reversible. That is what makes the price of a bond, to be voluntary - if it becomes unavoidable, like the bond of blood, then the bond has no meaning and is nothing more than a hindrance. I have never understood why traditional civilizations demanded perpetuity in marriage, for example. What good does it do to force people, by law, to remain bound to those they no longer love, or sometimes fear? I advocate the right for everyone to leave their parents, their chiefs, their village, if they feel compromised or seriously affected by the links they have forged with them. No social or family institution should require any individual to give up his or her freedom and happiness.

Thus, a member of a Clan may dislike their Key - and this is a terrible situation, for the Key has real power over its Clan, and there is nothing worse than being under the yoke of someone you despise. Anyone should be able to free themselves from this Link and choose another - if the Link is an obligation, the Key should not be.

It can also happen that a Key wants to give up his or her duties, or proves to be unfit for them. In that case, it is urgent to break the Links they have woven, whatever the cost, because a defiant or faltering Key would do more damage than is conceivable.

A rupture ceremony should be considered in parallel with the Needle ceremony. What the Needle has sewn, we need to be able to unsew, if necessary.



CHAPTER 17: VERDICT

EARTH YEAR 3416

Egon Richards had not received any communications from Organ for over five hours when he was informed that the annex had taken off. He was greatly relieved, and rushed to the dock to witness the mission's arrival. The latest news was not very encouraging: Lieutenant Malkine had informed him of the refusal of the natives, and of their exorbitant conditions. He had received a photograph of this strange handwritten message, and had read and reread it so many times that he knew it by heart.

The Council of the Keys has decided, by democratic consensus, to respond in the following way to the demands expressed by Major Mikael Strauss on behalf of the Captain of the Probe:

- Concerning Michelle, who now belongs to the Storm clan, and who has taken the organic name of "Forest", she has, through the ceremony of the Needle, abandoned her community of origin and espoused the Storm clan. We cannot voluntarily expose her to suffering, nor can we do her any violence. We cannot let you take her away against her will.

- Concerning the Quo Vadis, we are very attached to it and do not understand the need to repair it or rip it out of the ground.

- We do not want to benefit from any technological advances you might artificially bring us.

- Nevertheless, we understand the interest we might have in cooperating with the Union. We grant the Union a tenth of Organ's territory, on the opposite side of the world from our home, for free exploitation. We

also offer all crew members who wish to join one of our Clans, to enjoy the beauty and fertility of our beloved planet.

- As a token of your good will, and to seal this pact of good understanding, we ask Captain Egon Richards to kindly leave Major Mikael Strauss with us, and to release him from his duties and other commitments to the Union.

- We hope to receive a favorable response by next dawn. If not, we will take certain measures against you.

Then Lieutenant Malkine told him that he was on his way to arrest Michelle Touré, and that he would bring her back immediately. The Probe was able to locate the ground transport vehicle to Touré's presumed location - then, for over five hours, the vehicle disappeared from radar, as did Lieutenant Malkine's intercom, whose frequency now read only "*Transmitter module not connected. Please check connection settings.*" Remembering the transmitter given to Major Strauss, Richards had gone to Reda, and asked him to send a message to Strauss. With his own eyes, he saw "*Transmitter disabled. Channel Inactive.*"

Back at the bridge, Richards patiently drew conclusions from the incomplete data at his disposal: Lieutenant Malkine had failed to apprehend Michelle Touré - yet he had certainly used force. His vehicle and intercom systems had been destroyed or sufficiently damaged to put them out of commission. Malkine, Fabre, Wilson and Strauss might be dead. And, when he put this conclusion in perspective with the natives' message, he was led to think that their threat had been underestimated. The inhabitants of Organ were not the harmless people they appeared to be. They possessed something - a hidden weapon, a technology of some kind - that enabled them to stand their ground. Never underestimate your adversary - it was an age-old lesson of military strategy. But the lessons of the AeroSpace Academy had dissolved into routine, because the Union was an army without a war and without an enemy. And Richards had been taken

aback by this sudden eruption of war into his daily routine: the desertion of a soldier, the engagement of a combatant, the loss of several soldiers on a mission, now had the effect of a particularly scathing cold shower. Richards had not wanted to act immediately or rashly. He knew that if there were any survivors, they would reach the annex within hours. He would then be left with about ten hours before dawn - about ten hours to mature a strategic decision.

On the platform, the mechanics on duty could hardly hide their curiosity and impatience. Richards felt the same way, but his expression was immovable. The Head should not show his emotions, that was a fundamental principle, and Richards needed more than ever to remember the valuable lessons he had learned in his youth - now was the time to use them, to put them into practice. Principles were precisely what remained when you lacked visibility, when intuition failed you, when judgment was muddled and difficult. Principles were a safety railing you could follow in the dark.

Everyone was relieved to see the same number of people emerge from the annex as had entered it - Richards even sensed relief among the mechanics that Ensign Touré was not among them. The shadow of court martial and the gallows, at least, receded from their worried brows. Malkine, Fabre, Wilson and Strauss looked pitiful: torn uniforms, bloody scratches, mud in their hair, worn features. Lieutenant Malkine was about to speak, but Richards cut him off.

“Welcome aboard,” he said calmly. “A medical team has been prepared for a quick check-up. Lieutenant Malkine, Major Strauss, I expect you in regulation uniform in the briefing room in thirty minutes. Fabre and Wilson, you will also be heard for an initial debriefing with your commanding officer.”

This cold, formal welcome got the mechanics talking - which was Richards' intention. There was nothing in the captain's words or attitude to suggest urgency, panic or disorganization. Military strategy

may have been forgotten, but military discipline had been preserved intact, and now had to be relied on.



Mikael was grateful for Captain Richards' wisdom. After all, they were in dire need of some food and drink, of being bandaged and massaged, of being washed and clothed with dignity. These thirty minutes were not wasted - Mikael wanted to use all his mental and physical faculties to defend his point of view. Lieutenant Malkine, who had already been ranting with remarkable consistency since their failure in the village, was showing his anger from every pore of his skin. His temper flared against one of the nurses:

“You’re hurting me, idiot, and this wound doesn’t need to be bandaged... Leave me alone.”

After thirty minutes, the two men, who hadn’t spoken a word or looked at each other directly for several hours, were received by the captain in the meeting room. Richards stopped pacing and invited them to sit down.

“Lieutenant, give me a brief, factual account of what happened.”

Lieutenant Malkine, despite his rage, played along.

“Captain, we drove by land transport vehicle to the native village where we had spotted Ensign Touré. When we arrived, all the natives were assembled. We asked them to hand over Touré, whom we had identified in the group. In response, they collectively advanced menacingly towards us. We opened fire. Then we were overwhelmed by their numbers - they rushed us and the vehicle, which they tore to pieces. We were disarmed and driven off. It then took us several hours to get through the forest to the annex.”

“Major Strauss, do you have anything to add?”

“Lieutenant Malkine ordered me to stay in the vehicle, because he wanted me to avoid any further contact with the native popula-

tion. I didn't see the fight. I distinctly heard two shots. Then the natives rushed the vehicle, dragged me out and indeed chased us out of their village. The shots left two victims, I'd say one wounded and one dead. What struck me was the coordination of their attack. They were moving perfectly *as one*."

"Lieutenant Malkine, how do you explain your failure, when you had firearms and they didn't?"

"Numbers, captain. We were outnumbered fifty to one."

"But all of human history shows that a single armed man can often take control of a crowd, especially if it's peaceful and civil. Just look at the attacks at the beginning of the 21st century: a single man, armed with a simple box-cutter blade, managed to subdue all the passengers on a plane. Numerical inferiority is only part of the explanation. Major Strauss, do you have any ideas?"

"Yes. As I said, the natives didn't act in isolation, nor did they give in to individual feelings. They were deeply coordinated - like soldiers perfectly executing a collective order, in defiance of their individual interests."

"How do you explain this? Did they have more advanced military training than we had assumed?"

"It's possible," said Strauss.

"Excuse me, Captain," said Malkine, "but Major Strauss is indulging in literary speculation as usual. What happened is much simpler and less mysterious than he claims: we were caught off-guard, taken by surprise, because we didn't expect any resistance. We underestimated the adversary's determination, and lacked initiative. Fabre and Wilson weren't up to the task. Fabre didn't even draw her gun, and Wilson didn't do much better. I take full responsibility for this fiasco."

Captain Richards began pacing again. What the lieutenant was saying resonated with his own thoughts - they had underestimated

the adversary and had no experience with real warfare - but Strauss's analysis seemed important to him.

“Why did you ask Major Strauss to stay in the vehicle?”

“The Major is not a fighting unit.”

“True, but you could have used his diplomatic skills.”

“After reading the message from the natives, it seemed to me that Major Strauss was somehow... in league with the enemy.”

“You use strong terms, which have a legal meaning. You're talking about treason,” Richards observed. “Do you wish to maintain this accusation?”

Lieutenant Malkine hesitated.

“No. I'm not accusing Strauss of treason. But his empathy for the natives, which we could use during the diplomatic phase of negotiations, seems to me not only useless, but harmful, in a phase of physical confrontation. In fact, I'd recommend confining him to his quarters for the rest of this phase.”

“Did you observe any behavior in Major Strauss that would lead you to believe that he wished to desert or act against the interests of the Union?”

“No, sir.”

Richards sighed.

“With that cleared up, I'd like to hear both of your points of view on the message we've received from the native chiefs. And I'll start by listening to your analysis, Major.”

This was a breach of protocol: it was indeed customary, as Richards had just done for the report on the arrest mission, to give the floor first to the most senior officer. Mikael wasn't sure whether to regard this as a glimmer of hope - at any rate, it was a sign of openness on Richards' part, showing the lieutenant firmly that his decision was not predetermined.

“The content of this message took me by surprise. The natives aren't stupid, they have a solid knowledge of Earth history. They can-

not be ignorant of the fact that they risk destruction by refusing our conditions. Nor can they ignore the firepower of a vessel like the Probe. I can't explain the terms of their response, unless..."

"Unless?"

"Unless they feel like they are, somehow, in a position of strength."

Lieutenant Malkine gave a brief exclamation of protest, which Captain Richards ignored.

"What do you have in mind?"

"I don't know," said Mikael. "But we have to admit that, against all odds, they successfully resisted our attempt to apprehend Ensign Touré."

"Even if they have the most advanced military training, enabling them to coordinate their tactics perfectly, what good will that do them against a ship in Organ's orbit?"

"I don't know," Mikael admitted. "I've been asking myself that question for several hours."

"Thank you. Your analysis, Lieutenant?"

"These primitives act proudly and irrationally. They think they can re-enact David's battle against Goliath endlessly. Maybe they are convinced that they have supernatural help from a god or some other power they revere. I see absolutely no reason to give the slightest credence to their intimidation - engineer Ido's report is formal: they have no offensive technology sufficient to worry us. Their refusal is at their peril, and they will soon suffer the consequences."

"What do you recommend, Lieutenant? I'm going to have to make a swift decision, and I need to hear your advice. What do you think I should decide?"

"I think it's necessary to take control of Organ, outright and definitively. A ground invasion would have been conceivable, but the tactical resources available to the natives, in our experience and according to Major Strauss, make this a risky solution. We'd probably

be able to secure the city, but we'd lose men. For my part, I'd opt for a major blow to the heart, with no risk to us: a massive bombardment of their city and surrounding villages. The survivors will learn their lesson for generations to come."

"What time do you recommend the bombardment?"

"The Probe has left its geostationary position and returned to orbit, correct?"

"That's correct."

"What time will the Probe fly over the city again?"

"In seven hours and thirty-four minutes. It will be around 5 o'clock."

"Then I'd recommend preparing the bombardment for that time."

Richards looked grave. He nodded silently, then turned to Mikael.

"Major Strauss, do you agree?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"I'd be surprised if you did," breathed Lieutenant Malkine.

"And that's why I need to hear his opinion," said Richards firmly. "Let him speak without interrupting, Lieutenant. Strauss, I'm listening. What do you think I should decide?"

"Firstly, I am surprised that you have discarded the proposal from the natives without even considering it. They are ceding a sizable part of the planet to the Union, and this part of the contract is certainly negotiable. Plus, as you rightly point out, they seem technically incapable of preventing more massive exploitation from taking place. Their proposal, in short, leaves the Union free to recover a large quantity of raw materials - over a perimeter that can obviously be extended over time. Organ is a B planet."

"True," intervened Richards. "But if we take control of the city, we'll also be able to exploit Organ. Are you really advising me to accept their proposals? What decision do you think I should make?"

Mikael sensed all the danger of a clear answer.

"I advise you to consider the advantages of cooperation. The social expertise of Organ's inhabitants is highly developed, and acquiring it may be a greater civilizational advance than reclaiming the resources of the *Quo Vadis*, without even knowing what condition they're in."

"What kind of expertise are you talking about?" asked Richards.

"I'm talking about their coordination, their ability to communicate almost at a distance, their integration of animals into their daily lives."

"How could this be useful to the Union?"

"It's useful to mankind, Captain. Isn't humanity above the Union?"

There was a silence, then the Major continued.

"This colony is the crowning achievement of the Great Propagation - to be honest, it surpasses all hopes of that desperate effort, until proven otherwise. Do we have the right to betray those who founded the Union, those who sent these ships to the four corners of the universe, just because they arrogantly respond to our ultimatum? These men and women share our DNA; the civilization they have created is unique. Is their refusal to benefit from our technology not proof of this? On Earth, wouldn't this contempt for technology have saved the planet, when there was still time? Isn't it a good thing that somewhere there's this human enclave, on a free planet, to preserve our most precious capital - our species?"

"The human species is no longer in danger, Major Strauss."

"Today, no, but tomorrow? You know as well as I do how fragile living organisms are in these icy deserts we're crossing. An epidemic, a cataclysm, a drop in fertility - anything can happen."

"We could very well repopulate Organ with Union inhabitants."

"But then, over the centuries, the Union's inhabitants would multiply and exhaust Organ, and we'd have to start all over again. As

you can see, this civilization is different. It doesn't seek to exploit the planet. It will avoid the Fermi Paradox. You asked me what I advise you to do? Well, if you can't accept the conditions they're proposing, which I understand, I advise you to give the order to stop the Probe in geostationary flight at the opposite side of the planet from their settlement, and to set up a mining, hydro, and wind exploitation colony on land. I advise you to negotiate with the Union a perimeter and period of exploitation compatible with the preservation of the biosphere. Finally, I advise you to cease all contact with the indigenous people."

"And let them get away with it? Just like that?" asked Malkine, bewildered.

"Yes, exactly. Let them get away with it," replied Mikael. "We're not here to avenge our honor or to prove anything."

"True," said Richards after a moment's silence. "Gentlemen, thank you for your advice. I'll retire and think it over. Lieutenant, meet me at the bridge in two hours. Major, you may return to your quarters."

"Am I to understand that I'm confined there?" asked Mikael.

"No," said the Captain. "I suggest you both try to get some sleep. You look terrible and, whatever I decide, we'll have our hands full tomorrow."



Filip Reda had been mechanically activating the transmitter every ten minutes for the last eight hours. He hadn't left his cabin since Captain Egon Richards had informed him that all the personnel on the mission were missing. Had Mikael deserted? Was he in danger? Had he decided to cut all contact with the Probe, or was he suffering unintentional damage to his equipment? These questions circled in his feverish mind, and part of him was aware of the absurdity of this

obsession. Wasn't he, most of the time, haunted by images of his own death? How could Mikael Strauss's fate have become so vital?

At times, Reda dreamt that Mikael had followed his advice, that he had left everything behind - maybe even abandoned his transmitter somewhere in the middle of the forest. He imagined Mikael happy, free from the evil pull of the Probe. He imagined him alive, in the fullness of his humanity. But this reverie invariably gave way to another, more morbid one. Mikael forcibly taken back to the Probe, hands tied, gaze empty. This last image made him particularly sad - when he concentrated hard enough to imagine all the details, he almost wanted to cry.

Suddenly, the transmitter emitted something, and Reda was startled.

Mikael Strauss?

Reda frowned, looking at the transmitter without touching it as if it were a machine overheating. Why would Mikael write this?

No. Who are you?

The person on the other end of the line was writing very slowly.

My name is Lightning, and I am trying to reach Mikael Strauss.

Reda thought for a moment.

As far as I know, Mikael Strauss is still on Organ.

No. The little ship took off a long time ago. He has certainly returned to the Probe. And who are you?

A friend of Mikael Strauss. My name is Filip Reda.

Hello, Filip Reda. Mikael told me about the special link he has with you.

These words touched Reda.

Can you try to find him, Filip Reda? I absolutely need to talk to him. It is urgent.

Reda shrugged. After all, he hadn't left his cabin, and it was quite possible that the annex had returned. There was no reason for anyone

to warn him - Egon Richards had come to fish for information, not to share his own. Filip Reda was not only a simple mechanic, he was also marginalized by his depression. He thought back to the organizational sociology courses he had taken when he was younger. It was said that certain members of a group or crew were connected to all the others, and that certain others, at the end of the chain, were connected to only one or two other members. This was his case. Weren't peripheral individuals, like himself, always the last to know?

I don't know his cabin number.

The delay was even longer than usual.

I do not quite understand what you mean, but could you try to find the necessary information to contact him?

Reda sighed. He didn't feel like leaving his cabin; in fact, he felt downright oppressed by the idea of meeting crew members and having to talk to them.

I don't know.

Filip Reda, it is a matter of life and death. If you care at all about Major Mikael Strauss, you have to make an effort.

Reda sighed again.

What should I tell him?

Give him the transmitter so I can talk to him.

Caught by a sudden impulse, Reda cut the connection. No one could force him to return to life. To talk, to take action, to search. He was done with all that - he had delivered himself from it - and there was no going back. There he was, on the threshold, and everything around him was uncluttered and empty. There was only his living body, his bare soul, and his even more bare death. The others he had left behind, far, far behind. The others, with their incessant demands, their judgments, their various concerns, their indecent feelings. It seemed to him, from where he stood, like a swarming, disgusting anthill. He wouldn't have wanted to cross the path back to

men for anything in the world. Death, reduced to an almost geometric line of white light, seemed more desirable.

And yet, he had let Mikael Strauss into this sanctuary. He had enjoyed talking to this sincere soul. A little less bare than his own, but simple, calm and devoid of futility. It was a last conversation before setting sail - he knew it. In fact, he longed for Mikael to leave - to flee, to plunge into the unknown of Organ, to be absent. It was like a double of himself that he was looking at in a mirror before jumping into the void - Mikael had to jump into the void too, but into a void full of hope and life. This image only made his own leap easier.

Determined not to come out of his silent retreat, he was just putting the transmitter away in a drawer when a knock sounded at his cabin door. He approached the door, and hesitated to open it.

"Filip, it's me!" came Mikael Strauss's voice.

Reda burst out laughing as he opened the door.

"You're in luck," said Reda. "There just happens to be someone trying to reach you."

He took the transmitter from the drawer and Mikael activated it frantically. Reda watched him do it - Mikael was in life, he was in the anthill. He felt emotions, qualms, fears. As he read and wrote the messages, Reda could read the feelings on his face. He didn't like it - it was a bit like seeing a man naked when you don't want to. There was something aggressive about feelings.

"I don't understand," Mikael murmured.

"Don't understand what?"

"She told me to find a way to get to the surface of Organ. She said I had to."

"And what did you say?"

"That the surface of Organ might be blown away at dawn, and that she had to flee."

"What was her last message?"

Mikael leaned over to read it aloud:

“I do not have any more time. Do not stay aboard the Probe.”

“What else?”

“That's it. Communication has been cut.”



Exactly two hours after the end of the debriefing, Lieutenant Malkine entered the bridge. Several officers were there, visibly a little tense. For the next quarter of an hour, everyone stood still in anticipation - since Captain Egon Richards, usually so punctual, didn't show up.

Malkine didn't know what to expect, and feared an error of judgment on Richards' part. When, at last, the captain entered the bridge, the officers present rose and saluted.

“Officers of the Probe,” he said solemnly when he had reached his post, “for the first time since I have had the honor of commanding this vessel, I ask you to initiate procedure 43 B of the space code.”

His words fell into dead silence. Malkine was exultant, and even felt a touch of admiration for Richards. Procedure 43 B was an orbital bombardment of a small inhabited area. It differed from procedure 43 in that its primary objective was the destruction of infrastructure, whereas procedure 43's priority was the destruction of population units.

“What the hell are you waiting for?” he shouted, breaking the silence. “Everyone to their posts! The Union is counting on each one of you!”

ROOTSTOCK'S JOURNAL
ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 13

Paper archives preserved in the Quo Vadis Library.

I've reached the age where you can say: I was lucky. Because whatever happens to me today, however I die, and even if I suffer the worst pain, nothing can change that. It's like when the votes are counted in an election - the last ballots do not count. The result is already there, before the end - in human life there is such a tipping point, where the scales start to weigh one way or the other.

I have reached the age of 91 - in space, this corresponds to a probability of 3%. I was captain of the Quo Vadis - one in fifteen thousand. What was the probability of finding a habitable planet in my lifetime? Maybe one in a million. If you multiply these probabilities, it makes a mind-boggling calculation. I have been so lucky that I can hardly believe it myself. Maybe that's what outsiders call destiny.

There was a phrase in one of the ancient religions. "Of those who have been given much, much will be required."

I ask myself, before I die: have I given enough in return?



CHAPTER 18: THE EVE

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 586

It was already late into the night. The entire Rain clan had been gathered since dusk, and the chatter, the spicy scents, the laughter rising from the crowd, resembled that of an evening party. Rain, however, felt a particular clan pain in her flesh - it wasn't a specific tattoo that was hurting her: rather, she felt discomfort all over her skin. The clan was anxious, and its Keystone was not mistaken. How could they not be? These death-bringing men had demanded the *Quo Vadis*, and beyond that, they had declared stewardship of Organ. The refusal that the Council of the Keys had given to the Probe had been greeted with exclamations of pride - but pride had a price, and that price was often blood.

What Rain was about to do, no one had ever done before. There was no theoretical reason why it shouldn't work - in fact, spatial distance in no way hindered psychic circulation, and this had been verified many times over. But there were so many possible accidents, so many rough edges in reality, so many unknowns in this terrain she was venturing into. She considered her numerous, prosperous clan, which constituted an immense reservoir of psychic energy. But would it be enough? At the Council of the Keys, she had explained her intention, and the question of involving the other clans had been raised. It was indeed technically possible for a Key to use another Key, and thus its entire clan with it, to increase their power. All it took was for the two Keys to Link through the Needle. But Rootstock, in laying the foundations of Organ society, had outlawed any

pyramid structure: each Keystone had to be independent, and Links between Keys had been outlawed. Rootstock's two arguments were developed in a famous text that everyone on Organ was familiar with.

Firstly, there was the risk of a dilution of responsibility and solidarity: the Supreme Key could hardly feel the clan pains of the Key under them with the same intensity as their own. As a result, there was a risk that the leader would once again become indifferent to the suffering of part of their people. Secondly, it was essential to avoid, at all costs, a structure that concentrated powers into just one: if Links between Keys were authorized, there would be nothing to prevent one Key from taking ascendancy over all the others. No counter-power could stand up to such a mass of psychic energy. This deviation was almost as dangerous as the first. The equality of the Keys was in fact the foundation of organic democracy.

It had therefore been decided that if other clans were to subordinate themselves to Rain that evening, the Keys who would devote themselves to this operation would then have to renounce their status, cut the Link with their clan and then live as simple members of the Rain clan. The question had been posed to all, and at first not a single voice had come forward, so Rain was about to speak again, when Lightning had stood up.

"I accept to assist Rain, in the name of Organ's integrity. The Lightning clan will lend itself tonight to the offensive against the Probe, and will be disbanded tomorrow."

Rain had been surprised by this decision - Lightning had always seemed to her a very promising Key, and she liked to see in her a younger version of herself. She would have liked to see her evolve, expand and manage her clan, and to be able to count on the accuracy and originality of her views at Council meetings. But it was no doubt the soundness of her views that drove her to this sacrifice today. She alone, perhaps because of her lifelong interest in the Earth, had been

able to grasp the scale of what was happening. And Rain was well aware that, in her sacrifice, the most difficult was that of Mikael Strauss.



Lightning had acted with such fervor that she hadn't had time to think. The decision had imposed itself as the only one possible. To refuse the conditions of the Probe was to choose violence. She knew this from the start. And she also knew that accepting them was out of the question, because they were unwarranted, iniquitous, terribly violent in themselves. It was the Probe who bore responsibility for the initial violence - the Probe who had acted as conqueror and decreed that the "natives" should submit. Non-reciprocity in relationships was violence. It was the founding violence.

The Lightning people had protested, but Lightning hadn't needed to remind them of their oath. They were now following her, taciturn, in the direction of the Rain gathering. Lightning hadn't explained things in detail. She had only mentioned "the need to destroy the Probe before it destroys us." Of course, they would suffer a little from the change of Key; but no one was irreplaceable. Someone else would take over, and their suffering would be temporary.

When they arrived, the two clans mingled a little - but the strange, party-like atmosphere suddenly ceased.

"Have you thought through what you are about to do?" Rain asked Lightning tenderly.

"Nobody else has, Rain. And it has to be done."

"Those are the words of a leader," said the old woman.

They prepared, under the dismayed gaze of the Lightning clan, to link themselves by the Needle. Rain had undressed for the Offerory and was now showing off her old body, all adorned with tattoos - the folds of skin making them illegible in some places. Lightning

watched as members of the Rain clan moved towards their Key, and touched her, with deep respect, almost as one would touch a dead person. Some carefully unfolded the folds of her belly or chest to reveal their symbol in its entirety.

A very young man was in charge of the Needle, preparing it with an expert hand. Rain, whose body no longer had a single square inch of virgin skin, was already sticking out her tongue.

The ceremony could begin.

"I accept to take your pain upon myself," said Rain. "May the Needle that pierces you mark my body also."

Silently, the Needle pricked Lightning's neck, both temples, both sides and ankles. It was strange to be re-enacting this timeless scene, but in the opposite role.

"I renounce all secrets," said Lightning.

The pain, from that moment on, was slightly eased. Lightning could still feel it. But it was like floating in very salty water - something was carrying you, helping you to stay afloat and keep your head above water.

"I renounce all indifference."

"I will not bind myself by the Needle to any other. I will cut the Links already formed."

At this invocation, Lightning felt a great emptiness, and a wave of panic, which was calmed by something that came from outside.

"I renounce feeding children from my breasts, and renounce the cord that gave me life."

Lightning let herself be guided by Rain's voice - she imagined the children she could now give birth to.

"I will provide for your needs and relieve you of material concerns."

"I will watch over your well being."

"I will respect your decrees and submit to your governance."

"I will not abuse my power."

"I will lend you the strength of my spirit when you need it."

This immense force already belonged to Rain - Lightning was being relieved of her own power.

"The balance of the clan will be my only compass."

"I will be your body, your hands, your arm, your legs."

"I will be your courage and your rescue."

It was finished. Rain had the Lightning tattoo on her tongue. She approached the young woman and hugged her.

"How is your tongue, Rain?"

"It is burning and my saliva tastes bitter. I feel your fear and the tearing of your sacrifice, I feel them even though no one can see them."

"When I am happy, Rain, I will give you a taste of honey, I promise."

Rain smiled sadly.

"Are you strong enough to start now?" asked Lightning.

"Yes."

So, by the light of the torches and the stars, amidst the forest rustling with night, Lightning stood in unison with her clan, for the last time. She felt the telluric power welling up inside her; for the last time, she commanded this choir, countless and sublime as a firmament. Then she looked at Rain, who in turn joined in with her clan, and Lightning felt herself drawn in, dissolved in a flood of extraordinary power. Before she lost all self-consciousness, she felt a twinge of pain in her heart as she thought of Mikael Strauss, lost up there in his metal boat; of his love for her, so pure, so distant and so inaccessible, and of the gentle touch, gone forever, of his palm on her body.

ROOTSTOCK'S JOURNAL, Conclusion
ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 11

Paper archives preserved in the Quo Vadis Library.

As I leave, I wish you all an existence full of meaning.

For a long time, I thought this was an individual matter - as if each person were free to give weight to their existence, to fill it with beauty, love and knowledge - or with wind and anger.

But I was wrong.

It is institutions that have always deprived people of their freedom, their time and their wisdom. It is institutions that empty men of the meaning of existence. They turn them into brutes, madmen, murderers and make them irresponsible.

Never lose interest in public affairs, for they are a monster to be constantly watched, which will devour you if you turn your back on them. Stand up for the need for meaning in public life - never let anything be imposed on you that does not make sense to you.



CHAPTER 19: FIRING

EARTH YEAR 3416

2400

Captain Richards had ordered most of those working on deck to take a few hours' rest, including Lieutenant Malkine, who must have been exhausted after his frustrating experience on that damned planet. Everyone was to return at 4 a.m. to finalize the procedure. He felt almost alone with the four silent technicians watching their screens, headphones on. And he tried in vain to shake off the feeling of unreality, or rather, of distance from reality, that had taken hold of him. Ever since he had made his decision, he had been unrolling its rational consequences, giving the necessary orders, taking the necessary measures, but without feeling that he was actually taking part in the events. It was a very strange feeling to act in this way as a puppet of his own reason, silencing the doubts, questions and qualms that constituted the very flesh of his humanity. Egon Richards was still wondering whether this planet should be bombed - but Captain Richards seemed very determined. His words betrayed no doubt.

This internal tug-of-war felt like a tear inside him, throbbing like a pain, preventing him from thinking about anything else, let alone sleeping. He thought back to Strauss's arguments, which seemed to him, ever since he had decided to ignore them, to make perfect sense. After turning the question over and over, he finally contacted Strauss, who replied immediately. He, too, was clearly not asleep.

“Major Strauss, I hope I didn't wake you.”

“How can I sleep on a night like this, Captain?”

“Can you meet me in the small conference room? I'd like to talk to you one more time.”

Mikael's heart raced with hope.

“Right away, Captain,” he said simply.

In the corridors, the lighting had been switched to night mode about an hour earlier. It wasn't much - a dimming, a less warm, bluer light. If we added this tiny variation to the fact that the place had practically emptied out, we could say that the nocturnal atmosphere was quite successful. Nothing to do, of course, with the deep, fragrant, sonorous and slightly frightening night of Organ. The journey seemed long to Mikael, and twice he felt a sort of muscular weakness in his left leg. The exhaustion of the day was making itself felt, despite the mental excitement - Mikael wouldn't sleep, but he felt he would pay for this lack of sleep with a kind of wear and tear that would be hard to repair. He was pulling on the rope, and had no idea when this rope would break.

The Bridge was almost deserted - the first time, no doubt, that Major Strauss had been there around midnight. He merely crossed it, silently greeting a technician who looked up at him, his face lit from below by the bluish light of his monitor. The small meeting room was open, and the captain was there, lurking at the door, clearly as tense as he was.

“I'm sorry for disturbing you,” said the captain, without giving him time to speak. “You're probably hoping I've changed my mind, but I haven't, so I'll tell you right now.”

Mikael felt his hopes freeze inside him and the fatigue take over.

“In that case, what can I do for you, Captain?”

“I need to understand something.”

“I'm not sure I can help you.”

“You must have some idea, or at least some hypothesis, as to why the natives wished to keep you with them. I don't understand this ad-

ditional condition they had the audacity to add to the end of their demands.”

Mikael knew he wouldn't be able to play his part without being sincere - because puffs of memory, intoxicating and disturbing, intruded on his thoughts, invading the present moment. Lightning's face when she had asked him if he would like to live on Organ, and his own freedom when he had answered “yes”.

“Lieutenant Malkine has already asked me that question,” Strauss remarked to save time.

“But, given the nature of your relationship with him, it's safe to assume you didn't give him a satisfactory answer.”

“That's true.”

Mikael took a long breath. He didn't want to - but he couldn't help it, the truth came out of his mouth and he couldn't stop it.

“I had a relationship with a native woman.”

“A sexual relationship?”

“Not exclusively, sir.”

“What do you mean?”

“That you can get attached to people in a very short time.”

“You mean you're in love with a native?”

Mikael lowered his head.

“Yes, Captain.”

Richards opened his mouth, then closed it again. This explanation, which he had obviously not thought of, plunged him into an abyss of perplexity. Mikael naively hoped that this middle-aged man would feel not only indulgence, but perhaps compassion for the young man he was. He watched for a tender smile on Richards' thin lips.

“You amaze me, Major.”

That was all he had to say - and it was articulated in a very cold tone.

"I understand Lieutenant Malkine's allegations better now," continued the captain. "And I also understand that all your reasoning is absolutely subjective."

Mikael went from disappointment to anger in an instant.

"I assert my subjectivity, Captain. I claim it as a specifically human treasure. Analyzing situations objectively is the prerogative of machines - we possess something far more powerful."

"Words, Major, pretty words to mask your unforgivable bias!"

"No, not words!" Strauss protested. "Our sensitivity, our emotions, our affectionate and physical interactions with others, and with the world, are the source of our genius! I know you have doubts about slaughtering these peaceful natives, and that guilty conscience honors you, Captain, far more than the rationalism that drives you to blow them away!"

Captain Richards gave him a hard look and observed a short silence.

"I won't allow it, Major. You're overstepping the bounds of respect that you owe your superiors."

"I beg your pardon, Captain, permission to retire to my quarters?"

"Permission granted, Major."

With the last three sentences almost shouted out, Mikael knew he had to make a formal salute to save face, and with difficulty managed to do one properly, without showing his anger.

Captain Richards didn't watch him leave - and Mikael kept of him the image of a stubborn, principled man who looked resolutely elsewhere.

The trip back to his cabin seemed much shorter - rage and disappointment brought tears to his eyes, and his feet pounded the floor. When he locked himself in his cabin, which had never seemed so cramped, he collapsed onto his bed and punched his pillow silently.

Wherever his mind wandered, he could think of nothing more useful to do.

He had failed.

0200

Filip Reda was breathing very calmly now. There had been this gradual build-up of anguish - first dull, then violent - and then, as he struggled without hope of escape, something clicked. A sudden change. A door opened, like a sudden realization. There was no need to get out. This was the sign he had been waiting for - tonight was the night. The anguish ceased all at once, with its procession of symptoms that crawled back somewhere - under his skin - like insects chased by the light. There was no more choking, no more racing heartbeat, no more sweating. Everything faded away, silence returned to his organs, and Reda felt free. It was a wonderful new sensation, a lightness like no other. Tonight, things would come to an end. There was an unspeakable sense of calm.

Very calmly, Reda got to his feet and tidied up his cabin. He didn't want to leave anything behind - everything had to be neat, tidy and clean. It didn't take him long. Then he got ready to leave.

For everything to be perfect, he first had to find Strauss. Reda was aware that the young man might resist his plan, so he decided not to tell him about it, and even, if need be, to lie to him about the true nature of his intentions. All Strauss had to do was obey his mistress, who had contacted him from below and told him to leave the Probe. He just needed a little push, a little courage, to make him jump of his own free will, because he too had his own reasons for jumping. Reda still didn't know why Strauss's departure was so important to him - maybe it was to satisfy some kind of need for symmetry. Strauss had to live so that he could die properly - it was a very ancient, very archaic blood magic, which postulated a principle of balance. A life for a death. The Organ for the Probe.

There were, however, some difficulties, despite all the blinding clarity. He still didn't know where Strauss's cabin was. He assumed, though, that this information would be posted on the ship's plan that adorned the officers' mess. And, at this late hour, he was unlikely to meet many people. It would take a while, of course. But he had plenty of time - soon, he'd have eternity.

0230

Engineer Ido tossed and turned in his sleep. Beneath his wrinkled forehead, a disquieting universe wrapped itself around his mind. He was in a ship that resembled the *Quo Vadis* in the obsidian color of its materials, but was in the same working order as the Probe. This ship had been infected, or infiltrated, by something alien, and Ido was pacing up and down the deserted corridors, convinced he was being stalked by an unknown, invisible evil. He heard incomprehensible noises, and managed, breathless, to reach his own cabin. There, he discovered his own belongings as if they belonged to someone else - and found among them weapons of all kinds, blades, guns, and foul-smelling poisons in vials labeled with a skull and crossbones. In the bathroom of his cabin, he watched in horror as gallons of blood smeared the enamel of the shower, sink and toilet, while the word "DESTRUCTION" was traced, dripping like a horror movie, on the mirror.

He awoke to a sort of electric shock, buzzing inside his skull. He'd never woken up like that before, and a feeling of fear, linked to both his nightmare and the buzzing inside, seized him. This was the second time he had felt like he didn't belong to himself. He didn't know how else to put it. The first time had been when he had that seizure, during the meeting when he had been ordered back down to Organ. Even if he had never been a fervent believer in theories of the unconscious, he had to admit here that something of that order was at work, driving him to this fit of madness. And this "something" was at work again, he sensed it vaguely. He got up and went into the

bathroom, where the enamel of the shower, sink and toilet sparkled white. The mirror reflected only his own tense face, which he looked at with a sense of strangeness. An urge was swelling inside him - an unfamiliar urge, which he could see shining in his steady eyes. What was it he craved? A growing, invasive craving... He felt he had to go out and find out, that he had to leave his cabin and roam the ship. His face refreshed, a white T-shirt pulled over his night pants, Ido stepped out of his cabin. Dream and reality, at this late hour of the night, merged in an indistinct half-light.

Ido walked on, without knowing why, looking outside himself for a meaning to the inner compulsion he felt. And it came when he passed the safety equipment placed under glass every sixty feet in the corridors. A dry suit, a fire extinguisher, an oxygen tank and... an axe. The glass shattered before he was even fully aware of what he was doing, and he grabbed the weapon in a daze, with the disturbing images of his dream still fresh in his head. The word "DESTRUCTION", in letters of blood, dripped into his sick mind.

At every deserted crossroads, he turned without hesitation. The lucid part of engineer Ido was astonished by this determination, the source of which he didn't understand, and frightened by its consequences. What was happening to him? Why was he heading so confidently towards the central part of the Probe, carrying an axe?

After a quarter of an hour, Ido spotted a uniformed figure he recognized as the soldier named Norca. The man was standing guard at the junction of four passageways, and gave the engineer a friendly salute.

"Well, Engineer Ido, having trouble sleeping?"

Ido liked Norca; he was a friendly man, always kind, devoid of the slightest aggression. He would have liked to beg him to run away, but no sound came out of his mouth. Instead, Ido approached within striking distance, raised his axe, and brought it down in horror on Norca's head, his eyes expressing almost comical surprise at the final

moment. Ido stood there for a few seconds, staring at the death he had so brutally administered. Then he picked up his axe and continued on his way.

0300

“Mikael Strauss! Mikael Strauss!”

The voice was muffled, but distinct. Mikael got out of bed and made his way mechanically to the door of his cabin - because he thought he recognized Filip Reda's particular intonation, both precise and urgent.

“Reda, is that you?”

“Open the door.”

Mikael opened the door, and Filip Reda, with a slight pause on the threshold, entered the cabin. Mikael could see that this intrusion into his privacy, into a space saturated with his own body odor, was costing him. He also knew that the mere departure from his cabin was almost torture for him, especially into a remote and unknown part of the Ship.

“What are you doing here at this time of night?”

“I've been thinking, Major Strauss. And I needed to share my thoughts with you.”

Mikael, a little disconcerted, invited him to sit down on the only available seat apart from the bed.

“What is your greatest desire, Mikael Strauss?”

“My greatest desire? You already know. To avoid the massacre of Organ's inhabitants, and to settle on its surface.”

“Did you succeed in avoiding the massacre?”

“No, I failed miserably. The captain didn't listen to me.”

“And what are you doing?”

“What am I doing? But... nothing, I was trying in vain to sleep, I...”

“What are you waiting for, Strauss? Are you under arrest? Are you impeded in your movements? Is there anything physically preventing you from reaching Organ?”

“But I wasn't ordered to, I...”

“What orders did the Captain give?”

“The order to bomb the City.”

“Are you going to keep obeying orders for much longer? Or are you going to disobey once and for all?”

“Like Touré, right?”

“Yes, that's right. I told you from the start. I told you not to get back on the Probe.”

“But someone had to plead their case...”

“But now what? Did they let you plead your case? Is there even one good reason for you to stay aboard the Probe?”

Mikael remained silent, his heart pounding, suddenly wide awake and no longer feeling the slightest sign of fatigue.

“Tomorrow, you'll participate in the bombing. You'll live, eat and sleep for years alongside the men who bombed Organ. Then you'll leave this planet forever. And you'll spend the rest of your life in cabins identical to this one. Don't you think that one day you'll regret having spent this night trying to sleep? Don't you have better things to do? The planet is just around the corner, a hop, skip and a jump away. You'll never get another chance to live out your dream.”

“You're right, Filip. And that's what she told me: don't stay on board the Probe.”

“Maybe she has her reasons. Just like Captain Richards has his. You just have to choose your side, Major.”

“If I use the annex without authorization, it's possible they'll take me out mid-flight.”

“Yes. But it's also possible that they won't realize it until it's too late, or that they don't consider your elimination worth the materi-

al damage, or that they're counting on the fact that the city will be bombed anyway."

"It will be," said Mikael gravely. And my place is there, with them. With her. I'll try to warn them in time, or I'll meet their fate..."

"Perfect. But there's still one difficulty: you need someone to help you land the annex."

"Are you going to help me?"

"Yes, but we've got to be quick. I haven't got all day."

Mikael looked closely at Reda's face, which seemed to light up from within, but he preferred not to ask. A few minutes later, dressed and carrying a light bag in which he had packed a few personal items, he followed Reda into the deserted corridors. Their footsteps echoed in the enclosed space. They had to cross a large part of the ship to get to the annex hangar - they passed a few men on guard duty, a few nervous strollers on their way to the Promenade to draw some serenity from contemplating the planet. It was a special night, one that kept everyone in suspense, waiting for that unlikely yet certain morning when the Probe would use its firepower against humans for the first time. This imminence of destruction was combined with the magnetic attraction of the planet, which unfurled its stirring beauty a few miles beneath their feet. All the crew members felt agitated - and you could almost hear, in the silence of the empty corridors, the murmur of the many sheets that insomnia creased ceaselessly behind the cabin doors, and could guess at the wet clatter of eyelids compulsively opening and closing.

0330

From a distance, in the bluish half-light, Mikael found it hard to recognize engineer Ido. Maybe because he walked with a strange regularity, like a machine, or because his gestures were marked by a kind of stiffness. But after a dozen yards, he recognized him completely, and touched Reda's arm as if to warn him of danger. Both men stopped, instinctively, in front of this moving vision. Ido was carry-

ing a long object in his hand that was pointed downwards - and, as he advanced towards them, it became clear that it wasn't because of the half-light that his face, pajamas and hands were stained dark. At this distance, it was impossible to make out the expression on his face - but the whites of his eyes could be seen gleaming, like the pupils of a cat.

Five yards away, when Ido crossed the puddle of bluish light falling from the neon lamp, the vision was complete and Mikael couldn't hold back an exclamation of terror. Ido was covered in blood, and what he held in his hand was an axe, its bloody blade spreading a trail of red beads across the impermeable floor. He drew nearer. Reda raised his head and looked Ido in the face - it was indeed an image of Death, the Death he had made an appointment with that very night... But it wasn't the right one. There were a thousand and one deaths, just as there were a thousand and one women, and he was only in love with one of them. This one horrified him, and Reda shakily held Ido's gaze as he slowly raised the hand that held the axe.

"No!" shouted Mikael - and this simple cry diverted Ido's attention, who stared at him for what seemed an endless moment. Then something incomprehensible happened - the murder in his eyes faded, his hand fell back, and he continued on his way, with the same mechanical step, without turning once towards the two men he had spared.

Mikael and Reda, panting, watched him walk away, disappearing around a bend.

"He's completely insane," Mikael murmured at last. "We should warn someone, he's going to wreak havoc."

Filip Reda looked at Mikael as if he wanted to get to the bottom of his soul. Was he really so naive? What did it matter? Hadn't he realized that he himself would take the whole Probe down with him?

"I'm crazy too," he said. "But you must stay focused on your task: you must leave this ship of doom. I'll deal with the others later."

“You're not coming with me?”

“No. I have other things to do.”

Mikael returned his penetrating gaze - he knew there was something there to dig into, something to do with his death wish, but he also knew that if he started thinking about it, he wouldn't leave. He felt strangely dissociated - unable to recognize himself at all in the acts he was committing, or even in the events that were happening. Was it really he, Mikael Strauss, who was about to steal the annex and desert? Was it really him who had just miraculously escaped the deadly path of engineer Ido? Had Captain Richards really ordered this heinous bombardment? It was all so strange that action seemed momentarily safer, and simpler, than reflection, and he followed Reda without question, to the hangar and the dock.

The spectacle awaiting them there plunged them back into a state of shock, and Mikael felt the rift between his mind and his surroundings widen, as if he were witnessing a strange fiction that had no immediate hold on him. The few technicians and mechanics who were on call that night would not be relieved of their duties; they lay massacred, seized in the midst of their professional gestures by a death so brutal that they sometimes still had their hand on a joystick, or their face collapsed on a keyboard. Mikael and Reda wandered for a moment in this gruesome snapshot - they circled the vast hangar, and counted six corpses, most of them familiar to Reda, who had worked with them before sinking into his depression. Mikael saw Reda, so sure of himself until now, frozen in front of the peaceful face of a dead man, whose chest had been savagely smashed with an axe - deciphering, perhaps, the enigma of that smile that floated on the bluish lips. The equipment had not been damaged - Ido's murderous madness had fallen on the men.

“Filip?” asked Mikael.

Reda struggled out of his funereal fascination.

“That's Glücks, Chain, and Cinammon. And Volberg and Lacombe. I don't know the last one.”

Mikael rubbed his eyes, as if waking from a nightmare. Were communications still working in the dock control center?

They went inside the glassed-in cubicle, through which they had seen Cinammon's body, hacked in the back with an axe. Reda moved him carefully and tested the controls.

“Everything's working, Major Strauss. Communications are working, and so are the annex controls.”

“Can you put me on the channel to the upper deck?”

“Yes, of course.”

Reda pretended to set up a communication channel, and passed the microphone to Mikael.

“This is Major Mikael Strauss. I'm reporting that Engineer Ido appears to be suffering from a bout of homicidal mania. He has been seen in corridor 27 and is heading towards the center of the Probe armed with an axe. He has left several corpses behind. Make sure you're prepared for an attack.”

“That'll do it,” said Reda. “Would you like me to loop it every minute for a quarter of an hour?”

“Yes, that would be perfect.”

Reda launched an imaginary procedure - while Strauss, short of breath, tried to gather his wits.

“I'll get you airborne right away,” Reda continued. “The most important thing is that you leave before you're discovered.”

Mikael seemed ten years younger, and his resurgent adolescent face filled Reda with an almost paternal sympathy.

“Hurry up, now. Look, we're still a little way from the city, so you'll be landing quite a long way from home.”

“Shouldn't we wait a bit?” asked Mikael.

“No, said Reda. The adjustments take a long time, so it's going to take me a while. Settle down in the annex, close the doors and don't come out unless I tell you to.”

Mikael stared at him for a moment.

“Why don't you come with me? You're going to kill yourself, aren't you?”

“I'm not coming because it's time, Major Strauss. It's time for you and me to fulfill our destiny. Don't worry about anyone but yourself - I want to know that you're on Organ. It's very important to me.”

“Why?”

“I don't know, Major Strauss. I'm handing down a life to you, a good life in the open air. This legacy is the most important thing to me right now.”

Mikael, strangled by a torrent of tumultuous feelings, hugged him briefly, and headed for the annex.

He settled in - for the third time in the last few days - and turned his back on the desolate hangar where bodies lay in their own blood. Everything about the Probe reminded him of death, from those disfigured corpses to engineer Ido's nightmarish vision, from Filip Reda's impulses to Captain Richards' fateful resolve. He remembered his words, which had echoed throughout the Ship: “For the first time since I have had the honor of commanding this vessel, I ask you to initiate procedure 43 B of the space code.” These were very rational and polite words, more honorable, no doubt, than Ido's bloody pajamas. And yet, these cold words, spoken by this reasonable man, would have consequences as horrific, and perhaps a hundred times more extensive, than the insane engineer's fury. The bombardments too would shatter skulls, sever limbs and open chests.

Among the victims there would be hundreds of children. Did the fact that all this was happening at a distance, the fact that, aboard the Probe, we couldn't smell the blood, couldn't see the unspeakable disorder of the carnage, make it any less cruel? Less immoral? Mikael

considered that he was leaving a Ship haunted by death, to go to a planet where death would rain down. But the planet was strong, and vast, and the life within it pulsed so strongly that death could never reach its depths.

0400

It was as if he were in a remote-controlled vehicle. He had no control. It was as simple and as stupid as that: he was perfectly aware that he was heading for the Central Bridge, and that he would kill anyone in his path. It was a clear-cut thing, emerging as you went along, like watching the beginning of a film and wondering where the story is going - at some point, you manage to anticipate, to understand the direction of the narrative. Engineer Ido had reached this point when he passed the C-class staff quarters. This was in fact an entire wing of the Probe - like a peninsula on a map of Earth's geography, it formed an appendage to the ship - the four appendages, which respectively contained the C quarters, the production plant, the starship hangar and the A quarters, were often referred to as "the legs" of the Probe. The consequence of this particular location was that there were safety devices that completely blocked the articulation between the ship's body and its legs - a fire, a collision, a depressurization of some kind in one of the legs, and the heavy double doors would seal the ship's body, making it impervious to what was happening on the other side - fire, explosions, and the pleas of the soldiers trapped inside.

No sooner had he thought of this than engineer Ido regretted it. His pace slowed, and the idea of mass destruction entered his mind, developing with astonishing speed. It was perfectly possible to kill the eighty or so people sleeping there in one fell swoop. The engineer found himself making technical calculations, comparing methods. His intelligence was collaborating with his body - and that was the strangest thing. He quickly came to the conclusion that the easiest thing to do would be to start an electrical fire not far from the

watertight doors - that way, he would have time to get out before they closed. He approached the electrical panel closest to the doors, and began manipulations which, despite his haste and lack of tools, proved surprisingly precise. He noted, as a remarkable fact, that destruction was always faster than construction. Killing someone was instantaneous, whereas training an adult took some twenty years. Destroying the Earth had taken mankind very little time - four or five hundred years - when billions of years had been needed for its geological formation, for the slow maturation of life, for its emergence from the water, for its deployment into every nook and cranny of space.

Sabotaging the switchboard, inducing a power surge and igniting the spark of fire took him just a few minutes. The power surge spread like wildfire across the entire wing of the C quarters - he had calculated that many fires would break out at the same time. When the carbon dioxide level in the air became too high, the doors would instantly lock.

Engineer Ido didn't stay to see it all; he continued on his lonely way, axe in hand, through the Probe.



At the same moment, Lieutenant Malkine entered the Bridge. The technicians and officers present greeted him with a certain solemnity, but he barely looked at them, searching for Captain Richards. The two men felt like they were almost alone on board, and they shared a look of extreme seriousness. They were preparing, with an almost equal share of responsibility - since Malkine had advised Richards - to turn an idea into reality. The idea of bombing was easy to handle - because ideas don't weigh much. But reality is infinitely heavy; heavy with its thousand details, its temporality, its space, its endless, unpredictable ramifications. The actual bombing was soon to take shape,

to become part of history, to be given a date, an hour, geographical coordinates and a radius of effect. It would have a material and human toll that was impossible to predict. Just as a newborn baby escapes its mother forever when it comes into the world, an event unleashed into reality forever escapes those who trigger it. Lieutenant Malkine tried to banish this thought, but Captain Richards indulged it to the point of obsession.

0410

In a troubling coincidence that seemed ominous to Richards, just as everyone was ready to launch pre-procedure no. 43 B, the three notifications reached him at the same time. The first and second were purely technical. On the one hand, the on-board computer reported a Class 3 fire in C quarters, and indicated that the procedure for isolating the ignited zone had been initiated. Secondly, it indicated that the Probe annex was taking off on a vertical trajectory towards Organ. The third notification came from a distraught human voice. It was Private Wilson, struggling to articulate a coherent statement - but there was talk of death, of Engineer Ido and an axe.

All the men, including the Second-in-Command, had stopped in their tracks, and everyone was hanging on the Captain's next words. It was at times like these that you were truly a leader - when you had to make decisions that no one else wanted to make, but whose urgency and necessity everyone understood.

"Somebody figure out what Wilson's saying. How many people are there in C quarters right now?"

"78."

"Is the fire progressing or regressing?"

"Progressing at high speed, Captain."

Captain Richards desperately needed time to think - but he sensed he didn't have any. Lieutenant Malkine, who had taken Wilson's call, intervened:

“Engineer Ido seems to be suffering from a form of homicidal madness. There seem to be corpses along his route, and he’s heading for the Central Bridge.”

“That’s a priority,” said Richards. “He must be apprehended and put out of commission. Lieutenant, I’ll let you handle it.”

Lieutenant Malkine hesitated briefly, then ordered two men to follow him, and hurriedly left the Bridge, gun in hand.

“What are the options for the fire?” Richards asked his technical advisor.

“We can manually reopen the double doors and try to rescue the victims, who are probably already losing consciousness. This will probably save many lives. However, there is a risk that the fire could spread to the whole ship, but I think we should take it.”

“Very well. Organize the rescue. Leave me the personnel strictly necessary for procedure 43 B on the Bridge.”

“And what do we do about the annex?” asked the radar technician, who was following the annex’s progress towards Organ’s soil on his screen.

“Is there anyone on board?”

“I don’t know, I’ll find out.”

The technician searched the hangar’s surveillance videos, and came across images of Ido arriving and slaughtering the six mechanics. The video didn’t continue beyond that point. The captain swallowed with difficulty.

“Are you sure it wasn’t him who escaped?”

“Yes, this footage was taken at 0255. Engineer Ido was seen less than ten minutes ago by Wilson.”

Richards didn’t understand. Did Ido have accomplices? Had he simply sabotaged the annex so that no one could escape?

“The annex isn’t a priority,” he said hoarsely. “We need to concentrate on the fire, Ido’s insanity and procedure 43 B.”

Addressing the technical advisory officer, he said:

“Oversee the rescue of the soldiers in C quarters. Don't skimp on the means. “

The man immediately began issuing orders on his intercom, and entering lines of commands into the on-board computer.

“Ensign Cartridge, keep me updated every five minutes on the status of the fire and Lieutenant Malkine.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Richards sighed. Delegating was a leader's greatest advantage - it allowed him to concentrate on one problem at a time.

“Ensign Mausgaard, you may now initiate the pre-procedure.”

0430

Filip Reda had fantasized about this moment so many times, in so many different variations, that his actions seemed to flow naturally. After getting the shuttle airborne, he had returned to contemplate the enigmatic smile on mechanic Glucks' face, and closed his eyes very gently before leaving the hangar. He had made his way to the engine room with a certain slowness - maybe he should have hurried a little more, to avoid the Probe bombarding Organ. But he wanted to enjoy this last walk, this purifying ritual, he wanted to savor Mikael Strauss's salvation, he wanted to take the time to imagine his life on Organ, his happiness among trees and waterfalls, women and birds. Images of Eden bloomed in his mind, and he almost had the impression that it was he, Filip, who would land in this multicolored picture. Yet, he knew, it wasn't quite the same journey he was about to take. There was, he couldn't deny, a little anxiety - a bit like when you go on a first date, or when you go to give a speaking presentation where you really want to shine. There's a dizziness in your stomach, a lump in your throat, but you feel extraordinarily alive. Filip Reda had never acted in a play, but he thought this was what was known as stage fright. Stage fright for a strange performance without an audience.

He glanced at his watch as he reached the engine room. 0430. That gave him half an hour to do his work, which was more than he had hoped for. From a distance, he had seen unusual movement in the direction of the C quarters - but he assumed it was Engineer Ido who had caused the disturbance. That was another sign - it probably wouldn't have been so easy to get Mikael Strauss in the air if Ido, in his deadly escapade, hadn't wreaked havoc behind him. It seemed that everyone was now rushing to the C quarters and the rest of the ship was completely deserted; the path to the engine room was so free of obstacles that he was almost disappointed. Everything was easy, too easy... Could it be that easy to die?

Filip knew the engine room as well as the hangar. He had worked there for 12 years, and had memorized all the codes and procedures. He hadn't been assigned to the hangar until much later. He remembered the safety instructions very well, repeated daily by his reference officer: "You may not be recognized, but you are responsible for the safety of the whole ship. One false move with the nuclear reactor, and it's a chain explosion." The mechanism was a little complicated, but Reda had mastered its intricacies. He knew exactly what gestures to avoid at all costs - and it was precisely these gestures that he was going to make now. Increase the reactor's power to its maximum, then cut off the cooling circuit completely, and finally, when the heat in the engine was exponential, irreparable, when nothing or nobody would be able to stop the chain reaction, he would just have to wait.

It wasn't difficult to operate the various levers - after all, death was a sum of mundane gestures, none of which had the symbolic significance he dreaded. During his long months of depression, as he fought against his dark thoughts, he had pictured the ultimate moment many times. Now he realized that there was no ultimate moment, no fateful instant. There was only a familiar continuity. The last second would be nothing special. It would simply be the last, because there wouldn't be another one after it.

This thought, as he watched the thermometer needle vibrate in the reddest heights, relieved him.

0450

Ido now saw the conclusion. There was only one possible outcome to such an adventure - and although he understood the necessity of what was happening, his sense of horror was not diminished. That was the tragedy of it all. Ido stared forward with a deadly fascination, unable to deflect his trajectory. Like a moth drawn to a flame, he walked towards the Central Bridge. He was now very close to it - and when he spotted armed figures facing him, he knew his run would end there. Whether he killed them or not - there would be others after them. His furious progress would eventually hit a wall.

When he recognized Lieutenant Malkine among the three figures, he felt a strange surge of energy, and knew that it was the leaders to whom his devastating fury had been directed all along; his goal at the Central Bridge was none other than to kill the leaders. As he unthinkingly performed the desperate gestures of a fight he had no hope of winning, his curiosity overcame all other feelings. He dodged shots - he didn't count them - and might have taken a superficial one to the leg, which he didn't feel. Why did he have this compulsion to kill the leaders, why tonight? Why had he had a similar fit of madness when it had been decided that he would go to Organ? Suddenly, light dawned on his split mind.

As Lieutenant Malkine took aim at him, he raised his axe and hurled it with tenfold force at the man closest to him - this forward movement also served as a parry, and the bullet passed so close to his ear that he heard its reptilian hiss. Everything was clear now. He was unwittingly obeying the natives of Organ - he didn't know how, by this strange acupuncture, whose importance he had been wrong to underestimate, profound suggestions had been implanted in his mind. Only this could explain his reaction when it came to defying

the native's prohibition to return to the planet - only this, still, could explain this irrepressible murderous compulsion.

He heard the click of Malkine's weapon, and began another dodge, leaping to retrieve his axe from his victim's body. The natives were using him to decimate their enemies - to cut off the hydra's head and disorganize the whole ship. How obvious! And how could he have overlooked the clues to what he had been looking at all along?

Malkine's bullet didn't miss him this time, and Ido was slightly startled by the shock in his chest. He felt the life drain out of him in rapid waves - but, strangely enough, he thought back to a seemingly insignificant scene at that moment. This child, this baby, whose mother was letting him run on a dizzying ledge... If he was safe, of course, it was because his mother was able to control his body... This discovery stretched Engineer Ido's lips into a kind of smile as he died, because he was experiencing the special, impersonal and intense joy we feel when the solution to a difficult mathematical problem finally appears to us, whole and bright, even though we were no longer searching for it.

0457

"Functional anomaly in the nuclear reactor," announced the on-board computer.

But in the confusion, it was Ensign Cartridge's words that took precedence.

"The situation is under control," announced Cartridge with a proud resonance. "Lieutenant Malkine has shot the maniac, and the fire seems to be well under control. Only four people have been injured so far."

"Thank you Cartridge. Mausgaard, is the anomaly in the nuclear reactor likely to delay us? Display the anomaly report on screen T."

"The situation is under control" - these had been the young man's exact words, and Captain Richards would remember them a few minutes later as a cruel irony. Admittedly, these words had plugged

some gaps - and gaping, painful ones at that. But the feeling that the ship was taking on water on all sides hadn't stopped. When he thought about it, Richards felt hotter and hotter - was it the dizziness he was feeling? First, there was the annex that had taken off, and for which no action had been taken. This had been a thorn in Captain Richards' side for half an hour - as it became increasingly clear to him that it must have been that imbecile Strauss who had stolen it. And that infuriated him - in truth, it infuriated him more than the fire in the C quarters or even the murders that had taken place on board. It exasperated him because it was a blatant rebellion, a personal affront, a questioning of his choices, his morality, his humanity, even.

He remembered, with fire in his cheeks, Strauss's angry words, "I know you have doubts about slaughtering these peaceful natives, and that guilty conscience honors you, Captain, far more than the rationalism that drives you to blow them away!" How had he dared? He should have arrested him. The two members of the crew he preferred, the ones for whom he had shown the most indulgence, the ones he had defended almost systematically against the attacks of the Second in command - Touré and Strauss - were the ones who had stabbed him in the back, who had betrayed him, the Union and the whole common existence they had led, on good terms, for years.

All the rage unleashed by this betrayal was now being turned, logically enough, against Organ - and Richards was pestering the technicians to speed up procedure 43 B. He sensed, however, that the conditions were not ripe - the Academy manuals, which he knew by heart, insisted that no action, even an act of war, should be carried out under hazardous conditions, that the slightest factor of uncertainty became a risk factor. Technical security and internal discipline had to take precedence over external actions. He knew it - he had been taught it - you don't start a battle in the middle of a mutiny, in the middle of a fire, and even less in the middle of a nuclear incident. Richards knew it. He knew he should have cancelled the procedure,

carried out all the safety checks on the nuclear reactor, deployed his entire staff to restore order to the four corners of the Probe, investigated the murderous actions of engineer Ido, urgently sent a team to apprehend Strauss and bring back the annex. But this wasn't what he had planned, this wasn't what he had been preparing the Probe for since the day before - and it now seemed essential to stick to the plan.

The plan was all he had left. The only thing he still controlled.

“Arm the missiles.”

But Mausgaard didn't answer with the expected “Yes Captain”. Faced with the anomaly report from the nuclear reactor, he remained dumbfounded, frozen, his breathing increasingly difficult.

“Mausgaard!”

Almost at the same moment, a major alarm siren sounded on the Bridge.

“Evacuate all crew immediately. The nuclear reactor will reach fusion temperature in less than three minutes.”

Richards felt tears welling up in his eyes. On the bridge, it was a scene of unimaginable panic - his men, tearing off their uniforms in the suffocating heat, screaming, running, crying, jostling each other in a complete debacle. What was the point? Three minutes was not enough time to evacuate. No one would escape. He wanted to take the microphone to exhort his men to die with dignity and discipline. But no one listened, and he felt as if he had become invisible.

The nuclear reactor... How could this have happened? Were Strauss and Ido in collusion? Did they have other accomplices? Had the Probe been infiltrated by the enemy? He realized that the questions in his head would remain unanswered forever, and were therefore of no importance. With the sensation of no longer belonging to the same temporality as the frantic men around him, Captain Richards in turn undid his uniform and fell to the floor, sitting against the wall of the command console. Memories swarmed into his mind, in a sheaf so thick he didn't know which side to pick them

up from. This had happened to him before, when he had learned of the death of his mother, whom he hadn't seen in over ten years. All the memories had risen to the surface, as if an underwater eruption had propelled them all at once - the speech tics and voice intonations, the mischievous smiles and reproving glances, the silhouette from behind as she walked the corridors, the smell of her asthma medication. Today, he was mourning himself - what had triggered this eruption of memory was the imminence of his own death. He gave in to this powerful wave, which carried him far, far away from the Probe and the infernal present - and he died buried under an infinite kaleidoscope of scattered sensations, from his past - among a Tchaikovsky concerto he had heard on the Admiralty Ship one evening as a child and the supernatural vision of the Orion nebula on his first astral voyage - in the arms of his young wife, tender and naked against him - in the peaceful heartbeat of his eldest child, whose long eyelashes gently closed in the twilight of his first day.



CHAPTER 20: IMPACTS

ORGANIC CALENDAR YEAR 586

Lightning couldn't stop crying. It was the pent-up tears of the last few years pouring torrentially through her burnt eyes. She wept for the souls of the Probe who had exploded in the sky, and spread in glittering sparks across the black of the night. She mourned the clan she had lost, and the strong bond that had held her to it with every fiber of her being. She mourned Organ's childhood, which had ended in this spray of fire. She wept for Mikael Strauss, whose mere mention made her tears redouble, and for whom she felt, in all that emptiness, a painful, haunting tenderness. Her tears disfigured her face and altered the landscape of her heart, carving furrows and deep crevices. All the water that left her would leave her as dry and arid as scorched earth.

Yet, deep in the watery darkness she was drowning in, something new was casting a faint glow. It was as if Rain was inside her, contemplating her devastated heart with her. It was as if she breathed courage into her, understanding each of the accidents that had shaken her. She wasn't lightening the load, no - but she was helping her find her center of gravity. Lightning didn't feel like talking to anyone, and let herself go without uttering a word - a fire balm was applied to her tattoos, which would break the Links. Already, she could feel the presences of her clan members slipping away from her, like lost memories. It seemed to her that each tear took a little of her clan with it - and that when she had finished shedding them, she would no longer know the names, faces or hearts of all those she had supported and

loved. She didn't know whether this work of forgetting was accomplished by the burning ointment or by her tears - water and fire mingled in this strange psychic destruction.

Her entire clan was present, watching this painful operation with an infinite sadness. What they were feeling was no longer in anyone's hands, and they would have to mourn alone for this ministerial presence who had cared for and supported them like an invisible angel. They didn't love her as a family member or someone close to them, because she had never spoken to them about herself, and they knew nothing about her inner life - their love for her had something symbolic and abstract about it. And the sadness they felt was, in a way, abstract too. They knew that another Link would replace this one, but Lightning's qualities now seemed irreplaceable. She was brave, strong, intelligent, benevolent and wise. Not all Keys were.

As for Rain, she was confronted with a clanic pain in her tongue so acute that, at first, she thought she couldn't stand it. Then, as the hours passed, she got used to it - her tongue, one of the last silent organs of her body, was now linked to one of her most sensitive daughters - since Rain considered all members of her Clan as her children. Lightning's pain was intense - it had no equivalent in the usual lives of the men and women of Organ. But Rain knew that Lightning was also uncommonly strong, and that she would recover. Hadn't she promised her a taste of honey on her tongue when she got better? For the time being, however, the poor girl was letting herself go in total passivity. Usually so active, so self-confident, so present, she no longer showed the slightest initiative. After the trance, her exhausted body had been laid down, then lifted, then fed, and now her naked body, completely veined with the blue streaks of her tattoos, was being anointed. Her relentless tears blinded her, creating an impenetrable curtain between her and the world. Rain approached her and sat down beside her. The clan's presence was so silent that the old woman could almost forget them.

"I am here," she whispered, taking the girl's hand.

Lightning turned her face towards her.

"Thank you," she said.

"Your life does not end here, Lightning. There will be a tomorrow."

"I know."

Then her head turned the other way, and Rain gazed for a moment, fascinated, at the inexhaustible stream of tears. The stream made her look mineral - her swollen, gray eyelids almost like rocks obstructing the gush of a spring.

Rain sighed. There were few examples of Keys who had voluntarily renounced their clan - most of those removed were, like Sun, punished for their behavior. But all the Keys who had had to abandon their duties had experienced the greatest difficulties. The path Lightning had chosen was one of sacrifice - and they both knew it. What kind of future would this young girl have? In the Rain clan, they would find her a home, a job, and after a few months, maybe a few years, she would be able to live a normal life. But in the meantime... she would have to readjust to everything. Rain imagined herself having to go back among people, not as a Key, but as a simple member of a clan. It seemed almost inconceivable to her - for so many years she had integrated the special distance between the clan and the Key, that she had forgotten all about the simple, direct relationships that had nurtured her childhood. She was on an equal footing only with the other Keys - she liked their elevated viewpoint, their distance from individual suffering and problems, she liked their withdrawal from the world, their solitude. The existence of the Keys sharpened some of their qualities, and it was precisely these qualities that she had learned to appreciate in particular... She knew she would be unhappy if she had to return among those of her clan. As if an adult were condemned to live only with children, from morning to night

and from night to morning, without ever having the chance to speak with another adult.

But Lightning... Lightning was young. Her habits had not yet irrevocably shaped her body and mind - childhood was not far behind her, and perhaps she could still draw on it. The moment of the fork in the road, when she had chosen to be a Key, was not so far away; perhaps she could still go back, and look for what she would have become had she followed the other path. Something told her, however, that Lightning wouldn't be satisfied with that - she was a loner, and she commanded as naturally as she breathed. The simple life would never be enough for her. What made others happy would never quench her thirst - and when she had finished crying, when all the water in the world had left her body, her thirst would be even more ardent.



Mikael was jolted awake by the tremendous sound of the explosion. He literally believed that the sky was breaking into a thousand pieces and that it was about to fall onto the world - the animal terror he felt took a long time to give way to a form of thought. First, he regained awareness of his body and immediate surroundings - and snatches of memories directly linked to his situation came back to him. He had left the Probe aboard the annex, helped by Filip Reda - and in the uncertain glow of the fire-streaked dawn, he could make out around him the place where he had landed. It was on a slope, seven or eight hundred feet above sea level, and the annex was wrecked. Filip Reda must not have taken this hill into account in the trajectory, and the annex must have hit the ground at a much higher speed than when it was landing. Mikael was still strapped into his seat, and could see through the porthole a sloping horizon that drew a line between the oblique, meteor-scarred sky and the black ground. He unbuckled

himself, and when he tried to stand up in the collapsed cockpit, he gave in to the intense pain in his leg. Fractured, no doubt - walking in this state was out of the question.

He tried to open the door, which was jammed, and undertook a difficult crawl among the rubble to find one that opened - with groans of pain that no one could hear, he managed to extricate himself from the annexe and move a little further away. The annex had fallen onto a kind of plateau, and he was able to move away about thirty feet without too much effort - if for some reason the annex exploded, he would probably be out of danger. He laid down, overcome by a sudden, intense fatigue, and lost consciousness.

When he awoke the second time, the sun was already high in the sky. He made no attempt to get up. His mind, he felt, had deserted the paths of logic, and was drifting in a strange reverie. All that remained of the Probe was black smoke, billowing ominously at high altitude. Mikael stared at the smoke in a daze for several minutes. The elegant vessel, capable of crossing worlds, this solid structure, impervious to solar storms, resistant to vacuum, freezing cold and asteroid rain, had dissolved in a simple combustion. All its molecules, all its elementary atoms, dispersed. All that remained of its complex and marvelous material organization was smoke. He felt a little naked, without that ship in the sky.

He understood that the universe had just shrunk in one blow - there were no other star systems or horizons for him, now, in his human life. He was on Organ, he would die on Organ, and his eyes would never again rest on the world other than at human height. Nebulas, moons, planets of unreal colors, brightly lit against a backdrop of space night - all these images now belonged to his memories. He fell asleep again, lulled by visions.

By the third time he opened his eyes, the sun had risen above the zenith, and he felt thirst, hunger, pain and cold. These unpleasant sensations brought him back to a form of lucidity, and his first reflex

was to sit down. After realizing that he was forbidden to walk, he leaned against a rock and looked around. The annex hadn't exploded, but looked to be in bad shape. Inside, however, he might find some form of shelter, a survival blanket and some freeze-dried food. This was part of the mandatory equipment. He painfully dragged himself there, and stuffed into the survival blanket all he could find useful - which wasn't much; two liters of nutritive liquid, a flashlight, a transistor... What use was a transistor on a planet with no electricity?

An idea popped into his head just as he resolutely set aside the transistor. Where was the little transmitter Reda had shown him and given him during the night? He searched his pockets frantically, but couldn't find it. Then, with great pain in his leg, he slid back into the seat where he had been, and searched the floor. Finally he found it, and with trembling hands, ignoring his pain, his hunger, his thirst, he tried to turn it on. It still worked. He put it down with the rest in the blanket, which he dragged, painfully, to his rock. He swallowed half the first liter of nutritive liquid, and felt a little reassured. Then he propped himself up against the rock, under the blanket, and began to write a message.

"Lightning, I escaped from the Probe. I landed on Organ, but I'm wounded and unable to walk."

Mikael paused for a moment and thought. This information would serve no purpose other than to make the young woman desperate. She would have no radar, no reconnaissance vehicle, none of the usual means for a rescue mission. He had to describe what he saw as precisely as possible.

"I'm on a hill, about seven or eight hundred feet in elevation. To the north and east, I see nothing but forest as far as the eye can see. But to the south, I can see a mountain range around twenty miles away. To the west, in the distance, I seem to see the sea. In the forest, there's a river flowing, probably westwards, since it flows towards the

sea. There are no other hills like the one I'm on - I think it's an isolated hill."

He sent the message, and sighed.

"Ask Michelle Touré for help. She knows the geography of Organ like the back of her hand."

Writing this message exhausted him. His only chance of survival lay in it. The soft warmth of the survival blanket, and the comfort of the nutritious liquid in his stomach, made him want to sleep. And Mikael once again dozed off.

This time, he had a dream.

Captain Richards, Mikael and the old woman from Organ, the one Lightning called Rain, were in a sumptuous vessel with a humid atmosphere. Mikael was astonished to find that a tree seemed to have grown in the middle of the room, its tallest branches reaching across the ceiling. He was a visitor, as was Captain Richards, and this Ship, which was called the *Quo Vadis*, was Rain's ship - they were orbiting Organ, but at a very low altitude - as if the Ship were orbiting inside the atmosphere. The views through the window were nothing like what Mikael had seen on Organ - in truth, the planet looked like a desert, sometimes volcanic and sulfurous, sometimes like a sandy wasteland. Animal corpses littered the burning ground. Mikael turned back to Rain to ask her what was happening on the ground, but realized that his contemplation had lasted longer than he had imagined, and the two leaders were already talking, even seeming to argue. The sound came back to him, as if a demiurge had just pressed the button on a remote control, and he could distinctly hear their words.

"You can't take the *Quo Vadis*," the old woman kept repeating.

"It's not your place to oppose the Union's decisions," said Richards.

Anger shook the lines of Rain's tattoos - and Mikael, whose overriding feeling was intense curiosity, approached her to observe her

arm more closely. She kept repeating "The Quo Vadis is ours, you have no right" - and Mikael, gaping with admiration, realized that the blue lines of the tattoos quivered like rivers on her skin. Suddenly, they came to blows, and Mikael was at first afraid for the old woman, whose advanced age made her almost brittle. Captain Richards was strangling her, and the lines of the tattoos now stood out like monstrously exorbitant veins. Mikael was watching the fight from a distance, as if it were impossible for him to take part; he could see Richards' hands tighten on the old woman's neck, and after a moment that seemed very long and painful, he realized that it wasn't the old woman who was suffocating, but Richards himself.

The more his murderous hands clutched at the withered neck, the redder he became himself, and when at last the struggle ceased, it was he who fell back, dead, on his side. Rain kicked at him and opened a trapdoor - Mikael, speechless, bent down to watch Richards' body whirl through the air before being washed up among the bones of a cow and a horse. The next moment, Mikael was below, as if he had accompanied Richards' body in its fall, and he looked up at the sky. The dream ended with the sublime vision of the Quo Vadis, floating at an altitude of around 1,500 feet. The strange charcoal-grey vessel reflected the shimmering lights of a sunset, and sailed peacefully through the evening air.

When Mikael opened his eyes, it was the same sky as in his dream, and he wondered if he hadn't lifted his eyelids in his sleep. There was no anthracite vessel in the evening air - just a few black clouds in a virgin sky, drunk with its debauchery of color. Mikael lifted himself a little and drank another quart of the nutritious liquid. His mind, for the first time since regaining consciousness, seemed alert and functional. And the question he hadn't asked himself in all those hours came sharply into focus. Against a backdrop of day-dreams and reveries, it stood out with sharp clarity: what had happened?

Replaying the events in order, he came to the conclusion that Filip Reda must have blown up the Probe. This was consistent with his death wish, and with his double-edged answers... The hour of destiny at hand, the legacy of life... Mikael wondered how it hadn't occurred to him earlier. But, if he was honest, he knew why. His subconscious had taken over - if he had been clearly aware of Reda's intentions, he would have tried to convince him not to carry them out, and that would have kept him from escaping. It would have prevented him from landing here, on Organ, with any hope of finding Lightning. So it had been simpler to put a black veil over the obvious, to obliterate it for the crucial moment - Mikael had acted without any dilemma, without scruples and without remorse. He had acted without thinking, and this thoughtlessness had saved him. By costing the lives of the entire crew.

Mikael shivered for a long time, not knowing whether it was because of the cold, or because of this realization which cast a chilling glow over events. Had he stayed on board, what would have happened? Maybe he could have prevented Reda from committing the irreparable - maybe. But in that case, Captain Richards would have gone through with procedure 43 B, and instead of the 161 dead - the 169 passengers, minus him and Touré, and the six men Ido had already killed in the hangar - there would probably have been many more on Organ. An orbital bombardment killed far more than 160 people - that, at least, he knew for sure. He felt as if he were walking through dizzying heights. If the consequences were anything to go by, he had been right to act as he had, since, if the lives of Organ's inhabitants were worth those of the Probe's crew, his act had probably saved lives. Judging by the principles that had governed his action, however, everything became blurred.

Hadn't he acted according to the inclination of his heart, his desire, in defiance of all logical or moral reasoning? What saved him, perhaps, was that he had never doubted that the bombing would

happen - in fact, he was about to share Lightning's fate, whatever it might be. He hadn't consciously acted in his own interest, because he was convinced when he left that it was Organ and not the Probe that was in danger. It was an irrational act, following an unconscious, internal logic more powerful than reason. It was an act beyond morality, involving his life, his death, and the meaning of his existence, in a way that was beyond even language. He had fled the same way he had fallen in love - radically - that is, at the very root of his being. What did this make him? Innocent or guilty?

He understood that this question would never be settled, and that it would remain gaping, like an open wound, in his heart, for the rest of his life. He was assailed by the memory of the men and women of the crew, with whom he had worked, eaten, and sometimes argued, for all those years. Richards. Malkine. Reda. Ido. Salama. Saint-Louis. Rodriguez. Isla Borown. Azoury. Fabre. Wilson. Norca. Glücks. Chain. Cinammon. Volberg. Lacombe. All the others. Their elementary particles had been scattered hundreds of miles around. They had once again become oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus and sulfur. And he, Mikael, maybe deserved to join them.

Yet life was pulsating inside him. He needed to empty his bladder, and this operation, and the pain it cost him in the leg, exhausted him. He curled up again in his survival blanket, his eyes plunged into the stars, which had never seemed so beautiful. Organic scents reached his nostrils - scents of grass, earth, sun-warmed stone and dew - scents of forest and waterholes that intoxicated him like a healing wine. All he had to do now was wait. Death or life, it was no longer up to him to decide. His fate rested in Lightning's hands - and the thought gave him immense peace. He had nothing left to do but let himself go, lulled by the murmur of leaves, caressed by the breeze, enveloped in night.



Flower couldn't tear herself away from Forest's contemplation. The young woman, already so strange in her own right, was plunged into a trance-like concentration that Flower had only ever seen in the Keys. After the explosion of the Probe, she had felt a sort of queasiness, and had a fit of dry, tearless sobbing. Flower found it hard to understand why, since those people from the Probe wanted to hang her, as far as she understood. Maybe that was why she couldn't shed any tears - but this explosion had shaken her in unexpected ways. Forest was gentle, and not one to rejoice at the death of her enemies - indeed, when Flower thought about it, it was likely that not all those men and women on board had been her enemies. It was even likely that Forest, when she was Michelle, had made many friends among the crew, given that the qualities that endeared her to the Storm clan were universal, and must have endeared her to the Probe. Forest had asked for something to draw on, the largest sheet of paper possible. Flower had to ask the schoolmaster, and had also brought, at her request, brushes of all sizes and paints of all colors.

And, with an almost compulsive effort, Forest was now creating the strangest painting Flower had ever seen. At first, she had traced a sort of grid with a light pencil, then she had counted things half-voiced, barely moving her lips, and had begun to draw thicker lines, some straight, some curved, on the grid, counting the squares. It had taken some time for Flower to understand that she was charting a vessel. And then, as the hours passed, the map grew richer - Forest was writing things, in tiny letters, in certain areas. A Quarter. Central corridor. Officers' Mess. Footbridge. Upper deck. And in some small squares lined up, she wrote what appeared to be names. Rodriguez. Azoury. Salama. Fabre.

Michelle was drawing, with all the strength of her cartographic memory, a map of the Probe. It was all she could think of to do -

all that would fill the immense void she had felt when she saw it explode. A siphon-like void that threatened to absorb everything in its vortex. She was only on the first level, and already knew that after this first map, she would create a map of all the other levels, and also, on another scale, a map of all the rooms she could remember. She would probably spend several months on it, but this absurd work seemed absolutely necessary. One day, if she managed to acquire the necessary skills and materials, she would also try her hand at making a model. It was a task she had to take on - it was her war memorial. She was in the process of recalculating the area of the conference room when Flower gently pulled her by the arm. She was about to ask her not to disturb her, when a young woman she didn't know stood beside her, looking at her feverishly.

This look made her lose her concentration - she felt it, just like you feel you lose your balance - and she regretted it for a moment, before being completely available to the outside world. This was an unfamiliar face. The young woman must have been very beautiful in normal circumstances, but she looked ill, or more exactly, exhausted by some recent ordeal. The skin on her arms, hands and even temple looked irritated and slightly inflamed. She gave off a pharmaceutical odor, and a fiery expression animated her face. She was possessed by a demon at least as imperious as her demon of maps.

"Hello," said Michelle, when she had completely snapped out of her trance.

"Hello," said the young woman. "My name is Lightning, and I received this message from Mikael Strauss."

Michelle felt a surge of adrenalin stir her heart. Mikael Strauss was such a sensitive and understanding man... She had always liked him, despite his slight distance.

"Wasn't he aboard the Probe?" asked Michelle.

"No, look."

With great astonishment, Michelle grabbed the transmitter and read the message on the screen. A huge smile lit up her face.

“Is it true that you know a lot about the geography of Organ?” asked Lightning, apprehensively.

“I’m a cartographer,” said Michelle, pointing to the plans she was drawing. “I’ve been working for several weeks on the physical geography of Organ.”

“Do you think these indications will be enough for you?”

“It has to be! Right? We’re not going to let Mikael Strauss die!”



After all these hours, starlit nights, twilights, blazing suns, cool dawns and identical awakenings, time had expanded. Mikael couldn't remember when he had last had a drink - there was a little dew, and the occasional short shower. But the nourishing liquid had run out a long time ago - and time as he had known it before, with its lovely straight arrow and measurable order of succession, had ended along with it. As his body became heavier, weaker and more mired in motionlessness, time had gone off the rails. Morning could follow evening without night. Dawn and dusk could follow each other indefinitely.

And it wasn't just time that was out off its axis. Reality, memory and imagination, which had once had such a clear boundary, so sharply drawn with a pen, a beautiful full line, now formed a single blurred universe, like a mental painting where colors smudged, where memories were indistinguishable from visions. The birds in the sky flew in all directions, hovered, and sometimes landed so close to Mikael that he could, smiling, contemplate the marvelous detail of their feathers, the color of their beaks, the shape of their legs. But the convolutions of the plumage were imperceptibly transformed into moving nebulae, and the scaly skin of the legs became the synthet-

ic texture of the curtains of the Probe. Faces appeared in halos, Lightning's face, Egon Richards', Filip Reda's, Engineer Ido's all bloody, and Lightning's again - Lightning's was the one that came back most often, and the only distinct thought left was that he was waiting for her. He was waiting for her and he was waiting for death, indifferently, calmly, and both at once. They were both on their way, and he didn't know which would arrive first.

Maybe it would be one with the face of the other - death, with the face of that young woman who lived beneath his eyelids, deep in his heart and at the edge of his lips.



She arrived at daybreak. Mikael hadn't been able to open his eyes for some time, but he could still perceive the variations in light, and feel the softness of the morning rays on his arid skin. He imagined the skies, birds and foliage he could no longer see. And he could hear, too. It was by her voice that he knew she was there, long before she was. Her human voice had a tone so pure he wondered if there was a more beautiful melody in the world. She was speaking words he didn't understand, to someone he couldn't hear.

And then he was enveloped in her presence - it was even sweeter and more comforting than the morning rays. She touched him, lifted his head, flooded him with her perfume, parted his lips, examined his body, poured something into his mouth. God, he was thirsty. The water flowing through his body irrigated him like cracked earth, loosened his parched skin, unfolded his compressed organs and brought them back to life. It was painful - but exquisitely so. His lead eyelids parted, and through their tiny slit, like a porthole about to open, all the light of the world rushed into him, and Lightning's face permeated him completely.

Now, Organ would never again be outside of him.

