

CHAPTER I

For Kobor Tigan't, which rose there as always in the five-fold foundation of its colossal and extravagant cities, yesterday, recently, before, what did it have?

What dramas, what laughter, what cries, what stirrings in the souls and bowels, what seasonal turning, what face of the sun?

Forgotten! Already forgotten! Almost... No doubt, yes, there were the vital medley and their daily twists. There was a day. A baroque pearl in the infinite necklace... But this day is long gone. It was forgotten, I tell you!

Now night was reigning. Absolutely. Of course, one might believe that it would not persist. It spread out, though. Its gentleness was relentless, its progression perfect, its settlement complete.

Now it had conquered everything. Blossoming! In the end it proliferated, triumphant!

For everything that had groaned and cracked in the narrowness of conscious living, here was immobility, sleep. And beyond, the opening, the escape, liberation: the greater night. That which is black. Here, thick and heavy and also, elsewhere, sleek and thin like funereal satin. The true, black night. The only one. It billowed everywhere, over its narrow gullies, over its bays, the archways and the exits, bearing the neuter flow of silence in which other silences drift, infinitesimal, those pilgrims in long theories of dispersed vacillations...

But Kobor Tigan't, the pyramid of terraces in titanic levels, the five-fold city of Giants, it stood there and did not leave, anchored in the port of its destiny like a five-deck ship.

Down below, in the first city, which was like the earth, in Kob'Lam, the blacker than black was like velvet between the silos and storerooms where the great muteness of the food reserves slept and also the dark dwellings that harbored the old people, the tranquil people, a vast humus of creatures.

Above it, in Kob'Vam, the vegetal, it was the night of leaves, the bushy trees, the formless gardens among the ranks of foam where the water babbled, rivers and waterfalls, torrential turbulence.

Higher, in the middle of Kob'Ram, the wild heart of the night, a pink halo of embers betrayed the dream of the forges. It never slept like the others, this city of metal and activator bellows! Even in sleep it retains the afterimages of its daytime life: sudden roars or bright bursts, jets of fire and flurries of sparks, a little of this opulent and painstaking activity that makes it vibrate, in constant commotion by the crowds enthralled by the work of the Blacksmiths.

Higher still, in the altitudes where the air became pure and thin, in the mists of geysers and the stupendous waterfall that divides the noble city of Kob'Iam, the bountiful architecture faded away.

Beyond the bridges, the spans and the dizzying stairways, at the summit, against the blackness of the sky, gleamed the golden sphere of the Royal City, surrounded by its votive banners, all turned white now. Just below could be glimpsed the myriad of golden domes of the Palace, patterning the layout of the monumental terraces of Kob'Ooh'R where Ta reigned alone henceforth.

... She does not sleep. In her illustrious bedroom whose size makes her solitude even more apparent, she is there, eyes open, sitting in her bed, her back against the pillows rumpled by her insomnia. A veiled light reveals that everything around her, fabrics and furs, is white. She does not want color anymore. She is alone. She tells herself this. Every day. Every night. Alone facing the bustling race. Alone with the Reign. Alone. To is dead.

She sighs. How would she express her suffering today? She is beyond tears. She barely had any time to herself to weep her mourning. The moon has gone through many phases since the upheavals that brought her to power. From one day to the next, without transition, she had to get to work to maintain the realm, to reassure the people, to pull together the nobles of Kob'Ooh'R and Kob'Iam.

She tackled everything right away, tirelessly, fixing the most pressing problems, containing the still possible panic because the disastrous retreat that interrupted her sister's reign had greatly disturbed the race and fears were surfacing in all their minds, alarmed by events never seen before.

For Ta the days flew by in the work, one task after another, so that she could not find one single moment free of urgent solutions to be applied here, there and everywhere. Therefore, she got used to thinking fast, sorting out and making quick decisions. Her actions took on a rigor that the sluggishness of Opak's reign had made necessary.

Too many days had passed, left to themselves, before the new Ooh'Rou applied the often cruel remedy of her determination and her action.

She influenced the realm with all her will. She projected her thought, in advance, ahead of what was often being prepared in the shadows and what Opak had always tolerated ponderously. She anticipated, devised, prepared.

It was a crushing responsibility! During these long lunar cycles, each one repeating the series of the same emergencies that required unflagging vigilance, Ta had many times thought, resignedly, that the aggravation would never stop. This was her fate, forevermore! Because she had not accepted, from the start, secretly in her heart, to give everything, to do everything that was in her power for the whole race to make the transition to the new age gratuitously or for her to assimilate the impulses needed to create in her the indispensable changes to enter this age without passing away...

But now, on this night, there was a pause in the Queen's work. So unexpected, so precious in its sudden emptiness that Ta did not dare waste it on sleep. She wanted to live it.

She felt again her own body, her presence, living, breathing. She listened to her breath. Once again she knew she was there! Like a spellbound twin she followed the course of her thoughts. Once again she knew she was thinking!

Thanks to this—because basically there were fewer emergencies than yesterday, because all her work had repaired the breaches of power—she could, much better, choose and sort through her thoughts. She could, much better, tune them to the mysterious rhythms of the great will that governed all things before her and by which alone she would be free to govern as far as she proved able to respect and direct the constructive harmonies.

She sighed, like before, but almost with contentment. She settled delicately into this suspension of activity. She stretched her slender hands in front of her and let her back sink lazily into the pillows. This sudden relaxation of her body, instead of carrying it off to sleep, by slowing everything down it clarified the flow of her thoughts.

In this peaceful rhythm all her perceptions took on their former finesse. Again, like when she was just Princess Ta and she escaped to Kah'B'La, the holy mountain, she rejoiced thanks to the play of her senses, investigating the world and bringing back the fruits therefrom.

Thus were reestablished her liaisons with the various palpitations of life. Listening, breathing the air, tasting the nocturnal essence on her lips, brushing her cheeks with the tips of her fingers, examining the details of her room, she located herself, a conscious island around which the storm had finally died down.

She took back possession of herself, of her room, of this time. No more need to confront.

Little by little, therefore, she let her attention drift outside. Nothing got in her way. The bay windows were open, the shades parted. It was the mild season. It was not raining but the sun was still veiled. No one was surprised by this: the Spring Festivals had not taken place this year. The crises and sorrows that struck the best of the race were still too close. An evil spell enveloped Opak, the disastrous, whom her sister Ta wisely kept locked up. The people had bestowed devotional trust in her new reign and they patiently waited for her decisions, her decrees and her changes. Nothing was like before. Ta, then, when the time was right, would know what to do.

The young queen knew the thoughts of the people perfectly well. But at this moment she was enjoying the silence, the emptiness of this black night. She was savoring the austere presence, more meaningful for her than the buzzing of devoted crowds, the demands of petitioners or the chattering sycophants who constantly surrounded her, annoying her sometimes to the point of nausea by the incessant activity that they thrust upon her and demanded back from her in return.

Rest, at last! This night was a haven. Ta could reflect, conscientiously, at her leisure, almost voluptuously. She stepped back, mentally, to get a better look at what had happened.

Alone like this she was Ta. No longer the hectic ghost being harassed on all sides by an impotent people who had been unable to act alone for a long time and continually needed to be poked and prodded.

She contemplated in retrospect. She measured the exact extent of the work. Her first reaction was great amazement.

It suddenly seemed to her that since her accession to power she had lived for only one torrid, breathless, numbing day, a whirlwind of screams, clashes, speeches, always on parade, constantly present before her people who were there, waiting, everywhere, all the time.

Awful obligations! One single day of long-suffering eternity. Until her meager slumbers, always haunted by images that were just episodes from the long day!

Ta's eyes stared into the night outside beyond the windows. She saw, gradually, like in a black mirror, the people's game replayed over and over without realizing that she was once again absorbed in herself. Everything she had observed voluntarily, like everything she had suffered unknowingly, had built up in her consciousness until it formed a sum that she questioned all the time, a measure that she classified, forcing herself to assemble the facts, the reactions of the same nature, early signs of events that she always had to try to see coming, to know the inner essence in order to use it or oppose if need be.

Often, what she had reaped like this remained unknown to her. She did not know what to connect or compare it to. She had to make a guess. With a shudder she examined these faceless enigmas.

What embryo was going to hatch from these sealed shells? What kind of springtime would it be? Where would the sunbeam come from that would cause the awakening, the appearance and then the growth?

Sometimes she guessed and she prepared herself accordingly, sure not to forget and to recognize the thing at the right time.

Sometimes also she accepted certain of these unknowns. Her intuition guided her. She did not know what would come, but she welcomed it in advance, convinced of sensing a future harmony or an aide that would show up at the right time.

Thus, she often felt like she was secretly making mysterious pacts, entering into covenants with positive forces that were offering themselves to her discreetly.

This discriminating function engrossed her and even though it took up all her time, it pleased her, aroused her intelligence as it devised a combination of personal actions in order to bring these elements together into the main themes of her pre-established plan. But she rejected other elements. She was merciless. Her decision came down like a cleaver!

She told almost no one about this project, figuring that she was accountable to no one. Only Ata-Réè, whose radiant devotion was guaranteed, did she sometimes trust. Besides, did she not guess everything! But she was too discreet to ask insensitive questions. Even if she already knew, she just smiled and stayed quiet. The harmonies that governed her were the same as Ta's.

The two women, therefore, were in perfect harmony. They looked alike and had the same worries. Faced with problems, they came up with the same solutions. But Ata-Réè offered hers only if there was need. Above all, she recognized Ta as her queen, the only Ooh'Rou of Kobor Tigan't.

Since her accession Ta had tried to play the role of regulator. It was necessary to keep up the pace for the Race to evolve. Not too slowly, of course. Numbness and idleness are harmful. And these are the particular flaws of the Giants. But not too fast either. For, hastiness in this peaceful people who enjoyed their routines would have created panic and therefore disorder and perhaps violence.

The Giants were changing.

They were changing already, before, when she was a happy, careless princess. And already, despite her youth, despite her obvious disdain for the affairs of the realm, she had seen this, keenly. Now she thought she had been wrong, warned as she had been, to stand apart.

Who knows? Maybe Abim herself, in her monstrous autocracy, had heeded these warnings?

Who knows if the tragedies could not have been avoided by using young, new measures like Ta devised so easily! Abim would have made her an Ooh'Rou right away since she, the Very Huge, had realized to her bitter disappointment that Opak was unable to govern.

The young, lonely queen shook her head sadly: Everything went awry! She should not have stayed apathetic. For, in the end, To is dead! And Amo, the bravest, he who is like the sun, is dead too. The Beautiful Being, the Stranger from Kah'B'La the holy mountain, isn't he dead as well? He disappeared without anyone knowing. Not a trace, ever. So, Opak went mad, Abim stopped existing, they closed the stone doors of her vigil room, the treasured Storytellers of Kobor Tigan't died off, one after another, an Inescapable exit, they left, their bodies faded away in the shadows of their homes... Ata-Réè, the last Storyteller came to Ta... It was necessary to start the reign right away. Without To...

All this, of course, was her own fault. Her remorse was not abating. It sharpened her prudence, her attention, her vigilance. She wanted to redeem herself in her own eyes. This, too, was nobody else's business. Who among the people had even thought that Princess Ta could have so soon prevented the

blows of destiny? No one, certainly. Everyone revered her, on the contrary, because she had galvanized them in those cruel hours.

She knew how to reassure them when they were all *just like* children, frightened by losses and strange calamities that came with them. Everyone adored her passionately because she herself had been struck and the last wave of misfortune deprived her forever of her only beloved, To.

She alone knew why he died. In truth, she alone knew the secret motivation. She let him leave. She really sent him to his destiny. She ordered it. She said, "Go!" had not the old man of Kah'B'La warned, "Beautiful children, never separate from each other!"

The young woman rolled her head wearily over her pillows. Always the same thoughts, the same remorse, the same regrets! The shudder before the sobs fluttered in her breast.

Come on, useless! She had no more tears. She forced her thoughts back onto a better course. This was the way she could mend.

... The people. The Race. The coming future. The indispensable changes...

Unusual currents were running through the Giants. They could not safely keep on living like this. The past was suffocating them. It was used up. Nothing could be drawn from it. Their tranquil habits were cracking all over. The absolute reign of women had stopped being the cradle of the future. It was, on the contrary, becoming the quagmire... O Ta, you know it, you who are the first white and manless Ooh'Rou, you who safeguard this hard passage from one age to another, you know it. But how to tell them, everyone of your race who, still so recently, communed in the Fertilization of the Queen, that formidable Ooh'Rou, splendid and golden, whose Chamber of Men contained the most beautiful males, Opak her sister who is languishing, locked up, at the mercy of her T'Lo's drug!

It was impossible to say anything. Nobody would understand. Action was needed. An action designed specifically for transformation and to be kept up over long and patient years. To cleverly replace the mores and customs that no longer really satisfied. To discern, before the people themselves, what would really no longer satisfy. What had stopped having correspondence in the present time and in their souls had to be destroyed. Always put something else in its place. Leave no empty holes. Replace. Compensate. Innovate.

Broad features were being erased while others, previously in the preserve of a minority, were developing, anarchically, looking to be adopted by everyone. They would be invasive and dangerous if Ta did not rein them in beforehand.

This was the case with the T'Lo.

In order to think better, she had just closed her eyes.

It seemed to her that she was not completely accepted by the Devotees of the T'Lo. She often felt reservations, resistance even among the nobles of this kind. They appeared to be attached more than others to the past, to ancestral legends, to old ways of doing things.

Ta disapproved of the use of T'Lo. She knew all the dangers, having seen them at work up close in the royal family. Opak's resignation, her sickness, her madness, came straight from the erotic exhaustion due to the abuse of the T'Lo and the psychic intoxication they caused. There was no example of a Devotee not becoming apathetic toward the end, but alas, the depraved nobles saw this as a refinement, a privilege. They had got used to dying in muddled ecstasy at the end of their exhaustion. "They're rejecting real life," Ta figured. This habit had to be abandoned since it was ravaging the best families.

It had not been the same for the Ancestors who suffered no psychic damage. This was a particularity that Abim liked to recall whenever she prodded Opak to be careful with her T'Lo.

The giants of Kobor Tigan't, over the ages, had become acclimated to the subtle poison that contact with the T'Lo distilled in them. Perhaps the latter were likewise evolving in their comfortable environment, somehow increasing their toxicity?

Wisely, the young woman thought that everything had its time and that a once inoffensive habit was becoming excessively harmful. Things have to change periodically. Often they turned into their opposite when they were no longer necessary but only a stubborn routine.

The Great Ancestors, at the end of their monumental exodus, which had decimated them before bringing them to the High Plains where they built Kobor Tigan't, formed an alliance with the T'Lo only to create servants and helpmates. Over the years, bonds of affection were obviously made between the masters and their humanimals. Gradually they stopped using them. They adopted them. They reveled in raising them. They desired them. Their tender nature blossomed. The devout admiration they had for

humans caused them to pay back hundredfold the slightest attention paid them. They were love slaves. They had no other mentality. They probably desired to become humans...

"There you go," Ta thought, "the utility of one era has been transformed into useless perversity! The usage is a poison. The T'Lo are not made to enter the coming time. They are vestiges. Without the care they are surrounded with they would already have disappeared naturally."

Clear signs supported her reasoning.

In the Pit under the palace, the Ananou, those T'Lo not yet domesticated, were they not dying off? Every day, or almost, their number decreased. One after another they sank into apathy before finally falling asleep, never to awaken. It had started just before the death of Abim. There had been moments of lesser carnage, but it always started up again, more or less severe, for longer or shorter periods. It had to be admitted that at some unimaginable point in the future, there would be no more Ananou.

"So," Ta told herself, "maybe the T'Lo would also dwindle away? That would naturally solve the problem." They already seemed to be procreating less than before. The young Ananou born of the T'Lo and put back in the Pit after weaning were becoming rarer. In any case, the very old balance of births that had always compensated for losses was now broken. Ta did not think it would right itself.

From the start of the problem she had enacted severe measures.

She had secretly taken out the corpses during the night and forbidden it to be spoken of. No one came near the Pit anymore. The guards around it were Abim's old guards, enormous men who looked carved out of stone. The young Ooh'Rou made them the elite of her personal guards. Their chief was called Hé-Nark. He hardly ever left the queen and constantly kept watch at her door.

Ta loved to be surrounded by these men who followed all her orders. They were reserved by nature and extremely discreet and serious. They did not chitchat and their presence alone kept away the pests. These men were bound by a fraternity of habits and tastes. They were nourished by lofty sentiments and dedicated to the sun Ooh'R. They were a blend of warrior and priest.

The women, while admiring them, seldom accepted them in the Chamber of Men. Maybe they were too private for their liking? Possibly. Even the most authoritative of women avoided looking straight into their gray eyes because these superior males always smiled and nobody could say what their slightly ironic smile really meant.

From their long service to Abim, who demanded self-control, silence and incorruptibility from them, they had built a rock-solid character. Tough and callous towards anything that did not come from the royal power, they gave to Ta a feeling of safety and strength. They manifested the resolutions of her soul.

Their first public appearances with her had fascinated the crowds. There was a kind of revelation. Having been shut in with Abim for such a long time, they were practically unknown. In addition, they turned out to be very different from the other males.

At first the people naturally thought they represented the new queen's Chamber of Men. She had to deny it publicly but was not sure she was believed. On that day no guards had smiled and a haze of resignation veiled the eyes of Hé-Nark. But what did their feelings matter! The queen respected them and could congratulate herself for the choice. So, they had to settle for that.

But with respect to the Ananou, she also knew it would take very little for the secret to evaporate, even if the trusty guards said nothing, even if the people were docile and unsuspecting. An indiscretion was always possible.

Besides, did not intuitions have a role to play, which so often arouse sudden curiosity? Faced with what must not be seen, the wind of chance stirs up the one and only gossipy child of the whole realm.

Ta had caught snippets of nervous talk from the nobles concerning the Ananou. Since her ascension to the throne, they had made, as usual, requests for adoption of Ananou, which she, because of here disapproval, had not granted, postponing her answers.

The Devotees of the T'Lo, confident in the legitimacy of their rights, were astonished. Still, they had politely waited, figuring that Ta was behaving like this because of the troubled times and anyway it was not an outright refusal. Therefore, they remained on stand-by. But their feelings toward the new Ooh'Rou were mixed from then on. The situation was becoming unmanageable. It was in danger of reaching a critical point.

Now, the young queen was determined not to influence the extinction of the Ananou, which she saw as a sign of the New Age. Without them the Race would be able to purify itself. Moreover, these Devotees were only a minority. All the people had always openly opposed their practices.

Ta had promised, therefore, to lend out none of the Ananou to individuals. This would be a start. She would abolish the custom when the time came. She realized she could not wait too long. But, truth to tell, she did not know how to go about it and especially in what terms she should announce her decision.

At this juncture, Ata-Réè reported other conversations of the Devotees to her, one after another. The agitation was growing. Confused mutterings had apparently been overheard: “We don’t understand this Ooh’Rou Ta anymore. Isn’t keeping up the customs the surest guarantee of a quick return to a normal and happy life?”

She did not understand that life, to be kept up, needed change and that like in nature it was necessary to let some creatures die so that others, more in tune with the new intricacies, might take their place and play their role, momentarily as well.

Ta was so thoroughly penetrated by this New Age that she was surprised, annoyed and always saddened to see the reluctance of her kind. “They’re all going to perish if I can’t change them. They will become like my mother Abim, mineral masses, devoid of their humanity, stuck forever on terraces of dead stone!”

She had to prevent such a fate at all costs! A sudden desire to take immediate action reared its head. She controlled it, being perceptive enough to see that time would accomplish her plan and she need not rush things but on the contrary pretend sometimes to be in agreement with the others.

She had also agreed to see a delegation of the Devotees. The meeting was supposed to take place the next morning in the Audience of the Light. How much she wanted this night to never end!

They had taken a liking to meetings with Ta. She was not like her sister Opak who granted very few and so was hardly ever asked. The pressure of recent tragedies had raised all kinds of latent questions, too long neglected by the Race. Affected by the calamities, yanked out of their quietism, the Giants of Kobor Tigan’t were starting to discover their spiritual poverty. Their overindulgent lifestyle was fraying, uncovering the tatters of their secret being. Why, how, how long, what was the meaning of all this, what should they do? Swarms of questions! And the inability to answer them...

They had no imagination. They did not yet know how to make good use of the materials offered nor to try to put them together. They remained passive. So far, with a stunning surfeit of naivety, they had put up with the critical developments that made up all their glory and strength. But this was not enough!

They, too, had realized that this was not enough for a long time. And that Ooh’Rou Opak had not helped them, not governed but only lugged around her massive body among them in a daze without ever thinking about the slow movements of their minds. A bad Ooh’Rou, really! And her noxious influence was certainly responsible for the inexplicable deaths of admirable Amo, of To the beloved of the princess, and of He-Who-Comes-From-Elsewhere, known for too short a time, alas!

The traumatized Giants brooded over their regrets without doing anything...

But since then, at the top, an Ooh’Rou, unthinkable before, clean and white, was finding answers, even anticipating their questions, guessing them as if by magic. Right away, almost from one day to the next, they got used to talking to her and confidently awaiting all her explanations, all her decisions.

Women started repeating, like a chant, “Ooh’Rou Ta knows!” It sounded very precise, very affirmative. Afterward it turned into an expression they used to end difficult conversations between good folk. When an argument reached some thorny deadlock, they sighed and said, “Yes, but She knows.” Simply put, this meant they were leaving the solution of the problem to more capable hands.

This simple exclamation comforted them. They used and abused it. They really had dire need of such a queen.

With this thought, Ta, in her half-sleep, smiled faintly. Then the images in her mind became blurrier. Her breath became deeper. She was not really sleeping yet even though she did not open her eyes and her head nodded to the side.

Despite this restful state, her mind suddenly dove into the grievous problem that she knew she would have to confront very soon: Opak!

It had just sprang up out of the worries caused by T’Lo. She could not help thinking of the only one of them who was likeable: T’Lo Dê, Opak’s favorite who far surpassed all his kind in intelligence and, truth to tell, in humanity. This last quality was very easy to see in him. Besides, thanks to the compassion of the Beautiful Stranger, he had experienced a truly extraordinary awakening of consciousness. T’Lo Dê had been personalized.

Humbly, Ta had to admit that she had secret respect for him. She tried hard not to show it.

But she wondered if it was not because of him that she was delaying the necessary elimination.

Now she was afraid that T'Lo Dê had caught the same illness as his primitive brothers, the Ananou. Indeed, over the past lunar cycles he had become morose. Sluggish and apathetic, he spent most of his time lying around, alone, in a corner of Opak's room.

If anyone entered, he became even more lethargic, pulled up his knees and half hid behind cushions. He had absolutely no interest in the former Ooh'Rou and never mingled with the other T'Lo who continued to surround and caress her. He even seemed afraid of the violent outbursts and when a fit sent the madwomen into spasmodic howling, he went half crawling in search of help from the nearest guards. Hé-Nark had often witnessed this and had spoken to Ta in his discreet and detached manner. He was the one who suggested to her that the T'Lo was certainly going to have a baby.

So, there would be two births because Opak's pregnancy was reaching its end.

The heart of the young queen beat grievously at this reminder. With her older sister being half-crazy what kind of child would it be? And above all, who would this child be? Was it only from the seed of Amo? Nothing was less sure...

For a long time she had prepared herself to face this ordeal. Ata-Réè would help her. But afterward, once the infant was born? It would no doubt go to join the other sons and daughters of Opak in the Royal Nursery. And if the child, born after so many troubles, bore the sign, the Sign that Abim refused to reveal the exact nature of? A Sign come from Ooh'R the Sun...

Ta has fallen asleep without realizing it. For a long moment she will be very calm.

Outside, little by little, the night is starting to change. Clouds drift in that are now massed into a milk-white ceiling. The air is astir. Winds pick up. The awnings over the windows billow as if they are taking advantage of Ta's sleep to put some clandestine commotion into the formerly calm room.

At first vague, the ocean scent from the Great Va-Hôh, the cursed west, is strong now. It is no longer the black night. Something else is looming. It is like the invisible witnesses of an imminent event are gathering.

But the young woman dreams... She has difficulty moving in the sparkling water falling from very high up onto her who feels neither the weight nor the moisture. It is the big waterfall on the other side of Kah'B'La, the one that sprang out after the disappearance of Angel, the Beautiful Angel. Ta is trying to get to the heart of the element. There is something attracting her there even though she does not know its nature and it is almost impossible to see anything in the midst of all the shimmering. Nevertheless, she strives. She has the feeling that something urgent is soon going to pull her away from this task. She has to find out before they call her back! Abruptly, she runs into the unknown mass that is there in the water and that is glittering broken reflections like a giant gem. Ta cries out, "Angel!"

And her dream breaks off... A loud thump. It is her heart. A dark thump. It is the night, the usual grief. From deep down in the dark To is rising up, imploring, calling her! He is running towards her. Without ever moving closer. Without ever reaching her. She is riveted to her throne. She cannot speak. She cannot do anything for To. Nothing but suffer. Nothing but pant, endlessly, in the lamentation of this double torture... Her heart is pounding...

Ta jumps to her feet. Someone is knocking on her door.

It is Ata-Réè, who enters, preceded by Hé-Nark. His skin looks gray. Despite his self-control he is an emotional man. He must be upset. He salutes and steps back. But his eyes say much.

Ata-Réè whispers hurriedly, "Ooh'Rou, Opak's time is starting. I was there. You have to come now."

She has already thrown a coat over Ta's shoulders. Even in her haste the gesture is soothing, affectionate, imparting the strength that the young woman will have great need of.

Ta thinks, "The ordeal has come." But now she is determined like every time she has to act. Refusing any reply, she rushes off with her assistant. Hé-Nark is waiting in the hallway. She stops to touch his arm. His whole body shivers like always, even when her dress barely grazes him.

"You understand, right?" she asks.

He nods.

"You will never say anything about this night without my order." She hammers out these words. She touches his arm again.

He confirms, "I'll never say anything. You know this very well, Ooh'Rou."

She stares into his eyes. Yes, she knows. She is content with him. “Well then, come with us,” she orders.

The guard follows them silently down the hallways that wind around towards Opak’s rooms. At their approach the other guards step aside, bowing their heads as the queen passes by.

She swings around to Hé-Nark, “You are responsible for their silence. See to it.”

He smiles. No one will dare speak as long as he is around. His authority is not empty and everyone respects it. He is the Chief, their Leader.

Opak’s ransacked rooms are no longer those of a queen but of a madwoman.

Contrary to their habit, all the T’Lo were together in a single room far from their mistress. They seemed to have gathered there spontaneously. The lurking anxiety is causing them to look upon everyone and everything with frightened eyes. Some have tears on their cheeks. What is happening to Opak is unnerving them. Their sensitive organism quivers, like a reflection, at what goes on in the nearby bedroom.

When Ta gets there, she barely glances at them. Still, she gets the feeling that T’Lo Dê is not among them. But she does not have time to check. The emergency is elsewhere and too much time has already passed with nobody helping Opak. She can hear her breathing, hoarse and shaky.

She catches the smell of sweat and blood. In order to approach her sister, lying on a pile of gutted pillows, she has to kick her way through the jumble of clothes, jewelry and plates of unfinished meals.

Ata-Réè quickly leans over, clears the way and helps her queen.

Opak dozes, moaning, totally nude. Her huge belly glistens like ripe fruit. Strangely, she has strung a bunch of her jewelry along her left leg: bracelets and necklaces on which she has threaded rings, winding them from her ankle up to her thigh.

“Step aside,” Ta utters briefly to her maidservant.

While her assistant politely does what she is told, the young queen swallows her disgust and leans over her sister who seems to be unaware of her presence.

It has been a long time since she has seen her so close. She is struck by all the details of her degradation. Her body, not so long ago celebrated for its harmonious shape, is deformed by fat. Her once so glorious, coppery orange skin has turned pale, riddled with blemishes. Her face is barely recognizable. The erotic abuse of the T’Lo has left its stigmatic marks. Indeed, her temples are deep, mauve hollows that blend into the wide, dark rings around her eyes. Her nose also bears this mark. Other similar stains are starting to mottle her cheeks.

Ta lifts one of her hands to look nervously at her nails. They are mauve too. In furious bitterness she wonders how the families devoted to the T’Lo can consider these marks of the highest nobility, the elegant legacy of a privileged class.

She shakes her head sadly and shares with Ata-Réè, “How far she had fallen! She won’t live much longer.”

“That’s right,” the maidservant says. “Her time is up. She has turned away from life. Everything is too much for her now. Except, of course, her T’Lo... But look, for the child, nothing is moving forward. It’s going to die if this continues. She doesn’t want to make the effort.”

Ta sighs, “It’s as if she doesn’t even know it.”

The young woman feels a weird kind of weariness. Who is right? Should we really fight it? This woman has chosen another path, the path of denial. Must we harass her because we are on a different path? Must we force her to snap out of it, to remember all the tragedies that made a wreck of her? Must we force her to play her final role as mother? And what is in her womb? Maybe a monster that we will have to get rid of? Maybe Opak feels like this child should never see the light of day...

But life forces are strong in Ta. Before making a final decision about what to do, she ends up shouting out, “Opak! Do you hear me, Opak?”

Success! An eye opens, just one, shiny, clear, sharp, right in front of her face. She could not help jerking back. It is staring so intensely at her. But does it see her?

She presses, “Opak, it’s me, Ta. Do you recognize me?”

The other eye is open now. Alas, this one is all hazy, clouded over, and then it slips to the side, away from the first.

Startled, Ata-Réè cannot hold back a cry. The young queen herself thinks she prefers the face with eyes closed rather than this unsupportable mask! What can one expect from a creature so far gone?

Nevertheless, she grips the shoulders of the prone woman, gently but firmly, to make sure her words get through. “Listen, Opak. You’re expecting a child. I told you every day when I came to see you. Do you remember? Now is the moment. Feel your belly! Your child is coming? We have to move you. You have to help it come out.”

She stops. The two eyes are closed again. A vague smile (one might call it ironic) crosses the puffy face. Suddenly her face turns red. It looks like her neck is swollen. Her head rolls from side to side. Opak is certainly in pain. But there is no sign that labor is starting—the birth remains at a standstill.

It is obvious that her huge, apathetic bulk is not sending to her brain the true meaning of the visceral labor that is trying to break out. The psychic drug of the T’Lo have destroyed her nerves.

Even still, a dim and distant suffering must be felt somehow because she starts mumbling, “Pain... I want my T’Lo...”

She straightens up a little, tormented, in the arms of Ata-Réè. Her eyelids crack open. Her eyes wander a little less. She is trying to make out the details around her and she reaches out aimlessly. It is Ta whom she touches and who responds to her squeeze.

“My T’Lo. Where are my T’Lo? I want...”

“No,” Ta says. “Not now. Later.”

Tears well up in Opak’s eyes.

Ta tries to comfort her, “You will have them later.”

“All?”

“Yes, all. And T’Lo Dê too. But right now, sister, you have to give birth to your child. It wants to come out. Help it!”

She was suddenly stupefied to see Opak shaking with laughter. But since it hurt her, she stopped almost immediately and cried out, “My child! What child? Opak has no child.”

Shaken again but this time with a sob, she resumed sounding reproachful.

“You shouldn’t make fun of me, sister. You know as well as I that Opak has failed in everything... You’re not mean, so don’t hold it against poor Opak. There will be no child this year. Everyone knows it just like you and they say nothing. My people are not mean.”

She broods a little, like she is about to fall back asleep. Then she lifts a finger in the air and declares, “This year, in which the greatest misfortunes fell upon us, the Sun Ooh’R did not fertilize the Queen of Kobor Tigan’t.”

The crazed laughter shook her again. She claps her hands. And once again the pain stops her. She starts choking. For an instant she just pants like a wretched animal. Then, between two gasps, she cries out, pleading, “My T’Lo... I want my T’Lo...”

“You will have them. Soon.”

Opak calms down, looks at her sister, leans back against Ata’Réè, “You’re not mean, Ta, it’s true. So, listen...”

Lowering her voice, with terror on her face, she pulls her sister closer by the neck as if to share a secret.

“Her, you know, the Very Huge, our Mother Abim, she guessed it! Before everyone. Before I even dared believe in my misfortune, she yelled at me ‘Shame! Shame!’ I was scared. Her anger is searching for me, always, everywhere, to cast me down... Abim is going to put you in my place! Yes, yes, it’s true. You will be the Ooh’Rou. I’ll be nothing. The Very Huge is fed up. Hear how she screams!”

In spite of herself, Ta pricked up her ears. Strange whispers can be heard outside. She smells the odor of the Grand Va Hôh that permeates the air.

“It’s the wind,” she says.

“No, no,” Opak shoots back, “it’s our Terrible Mother. Everyone will know. Oh, how loud she’s shouting! ‘Opak has an empty womb! Good people of Kobor, we have a Calamitous Queen!’ An empty womb, that’s it, the emptiness is hurting me, I’m destitute, my riches have gone, I’m all empty... Oh, it’s the emptiness that wants to come out. Oh, how big it is, how heavy...”

She starts beating her belly. The two women have to hold down her arms.

“Come, Ta, send me my T’Lo. I can’t go on without them. I need them. Get them here and you will be queen. You want that, right? You just have to take all my men, I don’t love them anymore. You’ll have the best Chamber of Men, a queen’s Chamber... My T’Lo! Just one. Send in T’Lo Dê. Oh, he doesn’t love me anymore... Listen and you’ll understand. My T’Lo take me far, far away, up on high, into the heart of Ooh’R where the lights spin with bright colors that pour out of all my T’Lo and enter

my belly. Then I climax, always, continually, I am alive and I climax. Here, you understand, look, everything's dead, it's full of the dead. I made them all die, me, the Calamitous... the corpses... a roomful! Amo, Amo, it's him! Oh, the Beautiful Amo. But yes, Ta, he's crawling with worms! And he still wants to come with me! No, no, Amo... Angel too is here in his net. Since I captured him on Kah'B'La, he's been dressed up like that. Him too, all decayed! And yours, my sister, your only one, To, he is here..."

Ta was struck with horror, but she cannot bring herself to interrupt the madwoman.

"To is not the same, he flows like mud on the ground... Look, they're coming! All of them! Give me my T'Lo who will take me away... Help! Oh, the dead, they're all pulling my life out!"

She sinks completely into a fit of dementia, howling, drooling. She writhes and twists, trying to break free of invisible restraints. Her agitation kicks off the labor again. She arches her back in the throes of pain. The child is starting to appear.

On the small head Ta sees a tiny lock of hair. Hair so thin, so pale that she cannot help thinking of Angel. The thought flashes through her like lightning. She knows—this is the child of Angel!

She does not say anything. The secret proof has just struck at her very heart.

She forgets everything, her fatigue, her torments, the atrocity of the situation where a poor, crazy woman does not even know she is bringing her son into the world, a son who is, without a doubt, glorious.

Ata-Réè has surely understood, too. Yes, their eyes meet, gleaming.

But Opak is still now, unconscious apparently. Ta makes her decision. The child has to be born. They cannot let the child perish. It is already showing signs of weakness. It does not matter if Opak has to sacrifice her own life. They have to force her and get this new life out of her unconscious belly.

The same determination fires them both up: Ata-Réè and her Queen work together, fervently. The child, save the child! Opak's tortured body lurches. But the fruit is plucked out of it.

It is time! The baby, a small male, is blue and not moving. But it cries shrilly.

Worn out, soaked in blood, disheveled, Ta is clutching it to her own bosom, her, the widow, sterile, the Ooh'Rou without a man.

Ata-Réè gently dries off the tiny creature. The baby cries and quivers. They can find nothing to say. They just look at what they are holding there without really believing it.

And then, as the baby starts kicking, Ta sees on the sole of one foot a mark—round, orange, encircled by rays.

Her whole body shivers. "The Great Child!" she utters reverently.

The Great Child! She has identified the solar sign, the mark of Ooh'R, the Gift of Ooh'R, that Abim refused to reveal. No possible doubt about it. On this child, born in such extraordinary circumstances, where life and death merged, on the borders of madness and sanity, is unquestionably put the mark of the Sun, which destines him to reign. So far only females bore the mark. They alone, the future Ooh'Rous, were called like this to their exceptional reigns. They had always been recognized like this.

But this time it is a male. The first to be chosen like this. Ooh'R knows, too, that the reign of women over Kobor Tigan't is coming to an end...

"I am the last Ooh'Rou," Ta says.

Ata-Réè leans over and kisses her shoulder.

The young queen calls in Hé-Nark. She hands him the child swaddled in soft sheets. "Carry him to my bedroom. Don't let yourself be seen. He won't make a sound. He's sleeping. Watch over him until I come."

Ta sends Ata-Réè to get some women from the Royal Nursery to take care of Opak. She has made the very quick decision to keep this son of Angel and Opak, The Great Child, near her. She has made a rapid assessment of the situation. Her conclusion is clear.

She does not want this child in the Royal Nursery. He would be raised there without education like all the others. That is not at all what she wants. So, she will care for it personally with the help of Ata-Réè.

For now, it does not seem the right time to reveal its existence. This would bring only more complications. The people are not prepared. She must do a little more beforehand, gradually set up new institutions that will allow her to make the whole race accept the future rule of a male.

During all this preliminary work the child will grow up. She understands that there will be a first stage in her plan when she will be at liberty to talk about him, to unveil his parentage and show him.

But nothing more. He will be welcomed. She had no doubt about it. The memory of Angel, the Beautiful Stranger, is still very vivid. When he was among them, everyone wanted to see him take a prominent position in Kobor Tigan't at the side of Opak before the disasters struck, for which she was judged responsible.

Now that she is alone in the room and Ta, shaking off these thoughts, goes to her sister.

Blood is still flowing. It is time for the women to come...

Very clearly, very calmly, she talks to Opak, "Listen and listen well. You've brought the Great Child into the world, He who carries the Mark of Ooh'R. Listen up. It's Angel, the Beautiful Being, who gave it to you."

Did she hear, just lying there? She is staring at Ta with big, tranquil eyes. A royal solemnity haloes her for a moment.

The affirming words ring out again: "It's the Great Child, yours. He whom you loved so much, the Beautiful Being fertilized you."

Everything shuts down. Her eyelids close. A gray mask, almost a death mask already, settles on her peaceful face. She is asleep.

Blood keeps seeping out. Too much for Ta as she grows impatient. When the Nursery women get there and immediately start panicking, she lays into them hard and coldly, then with Ata-Rée's support, supervises their work.

When the room is tidied up, the bed remade, Opak cleaned up and subdued by her weakness, the women are sent away. Thankful to be free so quickly, they hurry out without further ado. The contact of a calamitous Ooh'Rou is always fearsome. The less they see her, the better they will be. The young queen knows this. She figures they will not gossip much because the Giants do not like to tempt evil with careless speech.

Ata-Rée steps up to her. "You should lie down, Ooh'R. It's not yet sunrise. You're tired. And soon there's that meeting in which you'll have to be wide-awake."

"I know," Ta smiled at her concern. "You're right, but I still have things to do. It's not over yet. Stay here with Opak. Come get me if you need anything. I'm going to send Hé-Nark to you with the baby. As long as Opak is alive, she'll nurse her son. You're in charge from now on."

A hushed noise makes them turn around. It is the T'Lo who are coming back timidly to gather around Opak. They lie down, sit or squat without taking their golden eyes off her. But they make no move toward her.

Nonetheless, Ata-Rée's reflex is to chase them off, but Ta stops her, "Leave them! What are you worried about? That they'll bother her? No, look, you know how they are. They'll respect her and help her as long as the child isn't weaned. Until then, they'll keep their eroticism in check. Let's hope the same goes for her."

She sighs before continuing.

"You can watch her watch over her in peace with them. If you have to move Opak, ask for their help. You'll see, they're clever, they're quick to understand what you want from them. They only ever want to obey and they don't have a hint of maliciousness.

Ata-Rée replies, "It's true. Deep down, for devotion and loyalty they're almost perfect."

"Well," Ta concludes with half a smile, "they are T'Lo..."

All of a sudden a tiny little whine is heard nearby only to break off right away. Puzzled, they look at each other and listen. It seemed to have come from a cramped, dark room off the bedroom where they stored the cushions, furs and blankets.

"What was that?" the young queen wonders aloud. "It sounded like a small creature... but it can't be a child, right?"

She lingers for a moment, waiting for another whine. Then, with one of those flashes of inspiration that she is used to, she realizes that something as strange as the birth of the Great Child might very well be happening. She heads straight for the small room. As she goes she calls out, "T'Lo Dê?" Knowing perfectly well that he cannot answer since like all T'Lo he is mute.

However, they hear a rustling noise from the back of the big closet. Ta leans forward and asks nervously, "Is that you, T'Lo Dê?"

She can see nothing. Ata-Rée snatches up a lamp.

The cry erupts again, pressing, angry.

Ta mutters, “Yes, it’s a little creature. Not a T’Lo since it’s calling out. But what a forceful cry! How angry it sounds!”

The lamp throws dark, crooked shadows onto the walls: the corners of the piled-up cushions, lumps and slivers of blankets and covers, and the round head of T’Lo Dê suddenly visible. From deep inside this lair he is struggling to come out, but he falls back. His giving birth must have been very recent. However, in the light his eyes glitter with an extraordinary fire and his face has an expression of boundless pride. Too weak to move, with a touching impulse he holds out a frisky little being that looks contorted with rage and whose furious wails get louder at Ta’s approach.

She sees then, up close, the unbelievable: this creature born of T’Lo Dê is not an Ananou. It has only one sex—it is a girl whose head is already crowned with flaming red hair.

The young queen is dumbstruck. Her heart is pounding because she feels that another truth has just been made clear.

Furthermore, still susceptible to picking up thoughts, T’Lo Dê is already waiting for her to tell him what she has just guessed but dare not say.

She whispers, “She is from Amo, isn’t she?”

T’Lo Dê nods enthusiastically. Grateful love is ablaze in him. For the first time in Kobor Tigan’t a human seed has successfully crossed with a T’Lo. He knows it. He sits up. He smiles. He points out that the child is not mute. He, T’Lo Dê, has created what he loves more than anything in the world—he has created a human!

His joy brims over. With his long, delicate fingers he exhibits the limbs of his daughter to show Ta all her perfections. He spreads her tiny fingers, tenderly touching the webbing between them, but he holds up his own hand to show that hers are much thinner. He points to the amber skin and brings her up to his cheek to compare with his own pinker, less beautiful skin. As a comment, he shakes his head, sighs and smirks as if embarrassed for himself. Finally, solemnly, with the greatest signs of respect, touching them one by one, he indicates the two poles of his masterpiece: the hair of fire and the tiny genitalia, the simple sex of a girl...

Ta feels overwhelmed. This joy captures her heart. She sees the lamp trembling in the hand of Ata-Rêè.

But how to avoid thinking of the what comes after this incident? What will become of this hybrid? More human than T’Lo or more T’Lo than human? How will these two natures, the T’Lo ancestry and the human ancestry, be reconciled? There will be battles and tensions in this infant. No doubt the mighty blood of Amo will triumph over the humanimal blood by awakening its qualities of courage, kindness, uprightness and, above all, solar love...

It should certainly be raised as a human. It must be closely watched over and brought up.

The baby’s cries have not stopped. Ta is suddenly aware of them and surprised to feel so annoyed by them. She looks at the child. It really does seem to be lashing out against everything around it. Its limbs thrash about but with surprising determination.

Ata-Rêè looks gloomy. She gazes at Ta with her faraway look of a prophetess. “She’s going to be very mean. She’s going to do harm. Always and in every possible way. It’d be better if she’d died.”

T’Lo Dê turns green. It is his way of growing pale. He hugs his child tightly. But his baby finds a breast, takes it and suckles greedily.

“We will raise it here with the Great Child. They will both receive the same royal education. I’ll see to it myself.”

Ta has spoken and there is no going back once her decision has been made. She wants to honor the memory of Amo whom she has always held in particular esteem.

She addressed T’Lo Dê now, “Opak has brought the Great Child into the world while you gave birth to this girl. This is an historic moment for Kobor Tigan’t.”

Relieved and delighted, T’Lo Dê makes the typical deep bow of the T’Lo as Ta leaves the room.

Ata-Rêè bows, too, without another word. She knows, sadly, that she has to keep a close eye on her beloved queen because from this day forward a danger is growing here... A very powerful danger, she thinks as she glances one last time at the baby feeding almost savagely already and squeezing the breast in rhythm with its tiny, forceful hands.

She has gone back without saying a word to take her station at Opak’s bedside. Most of the T’Lo are dozing around her. They are as calm and gentle as always. T’Lo Dê stays to himself.

The young queen walks slowly back to her rooms through the maze of stone corridors. She meets nobody. The guards have gone. Hé-Nark has done his duty. Now he just has to bring the child back to Opak. He has to wait for the order. On the way, Ta feels the weight of her fatigue. The nights of insomnia have worn her down. What happened to her safe sleep in the arms of To? A tearless sob.

She gets to the door. Hé-Nark looks at her with his insightful affection. She bites her lip and distracts him. “The child?”

“He’s resting. He doesn’t cry. He’s a good baby, queen.”

“Yes, Hé-Nark, he is destined to great things.”

“I’ll watch over him just like over you. But if the same danger threatens you both someday and I can only save one, it will you, Ooh’Rou, whom I will save.”

Ta snaps back, “No, Hé-Nark, your duty from now on is first of all to the Great Child.”

She shows him the two solar marks.

The guard pales a little, then a brave smile brightens his face. “Well, I’ll save you both, no matter what happens.”

He leaves with the newborn whose little blonde lock of hair, all cleaned up and glistening like a silky snowflake, is all that can be seen.

The memory of Angel is suddenly so present, so palpable in the room that the young woman shivers with loneliness and looks around, disoriented, expecting to see some apparition jump out. But there is nothing but the wind blowing, twice as hard as before.

To get a little rest she has to close the shutters, whose awnings are flapping or plastered against the walls. Ta remembers how Angel was like an angry bird when caught in the vile net on Kah’B’La and had thrashed about...

Before closing them she takes a look outside. The cloudy night is agitated. The rippled sky is fraying. Is a storm coming out of Grand Va-Hôh? It would be a bad omen. She leans out to get a whiff of the weather? Far down below, like in a chasm where the remains of the black night have congealed, she gazes down the plunging perspective of the tiered cities. Halfway down, in Kob’Ram, the pink glow of the forges softens its halo. Ta loves the forges and the metalwork that is done there. She reminds herself to make use of the Blacksmiths. They are interesting people and creators. She will go get a closer look one of these days.

She will also get a closer look at the Royal Nursery. She should get to know the children there. They are the noble caste. She thinks, “They are my closest family. Opak has turned out to be a disaster. She was a great progenitor and in this sense truly royal. Her fruits were always, without exception, beautiful and healthy. But then the women in the Nursery, although they are sweet and tender, are completely incompetent to give the children any individual distinction. Me, I want them all different! I’ll have to keep them close to me. I’ll have to pay more attention to their couplings from now on. As soon as they’re old enough, the girls should have their choice from the Chambers of Men. To do like the Ooh’Rou!

“This might make the Nursery women laugh. Whims and unbridled freedom—they let the children do anything! Their naughtiest mischief is just looked at as something amusing. Because of this leniency, the kids get bored quickly. As soon as they’re adults, most of them turn into devotees of the T’Lo, more fanatical than others.”

She is thinking this, already sliding the stone shutters closed, when she notices down in the garden of Kob’Iam a light moving. It is a woman, then a man going out along with three of their T’Lo!

She cannot believe her eyes. This is contrary to all customs, to all discreet use of the T’Lo, which have always been respected so far. A T’Lo never goes outside, except during very rare ceremonies. Important funerals, for example, are one of these exceptions.

But here, now, these people are walking off their property! And they are—she cannot doubt it—going across other people’s property. Now they are going down, step by step, into the empty streets of Kob’Ram; With their T’Lo!

Ta goes to lie down on her bed. She will not sleep. She has too many worries.

Ata-Réè leans over wistfully. She is holding the son of Opak in her arms. She had to keep it because every time she put the newborn up to his mother’s breast, in her deep sleep, with a muffled groan, she rejected him. The T’Lo grouped around her jumped each time, overwrought, and started trembling as they looked at Ata-Réè. She knows they hate any kind of violence and very often they can see what is

coming. She could also read in their expressive eyes what they were trying to say. It was a warning against Opak's possible reactions—the infant was not safe near her.

Ata-Rèè, therefore, took him without forcing him to feed. Even though he did not suckle, he is quiet. He is sleeping, perhaps exhausted from the birth.

T'Lo Dê has come to see him, hugging his tiny daughter against his breast. She has drunk so much milk already that she spit some up, which barely wakes her up with her possessive little hands gripping the T'Lo's breast.

All is calm in the drowsy atmosphere. Ata-Rèè feels her body relax on the covers and cushions that support her. Still, she is not sleepy. Her thoughts lighten up and drift back to memories that are dear to her.

She hears a kind of ethereal music that floats in space, far above Kobor Tigan't. Tenuous sounds, wrapped in echoes wherever they fan out, bouncing back and forth, composing a multi-voiced speech open to all. A part of her rises up to engage with it, for this bath in harmonious waves from which she always comes out refreshed and that often takes the place of sleep for her.

But also, since this domain was opened to her by Angel, she thinks of the Beautiful Being come from Elsewhere, brutally captured by Opak who loved him to the point of violence.

Ata-Rèè recalls her one and only meeting with him. It still haunts her.

It was the evening of Amo's last day in Kobor Tigan't because he, the most beautiful of the Queen's men, left. And Angel, too, who went with him. Both of them together ran far away from Opak. Angel because he had never loved her but only put up with her, as a prisoner, despite (or probably because of) all the honors she heaped on him. Amo because he had loved her too much, tried to join with her through worship of the senses whereas she never wanted to do anything but consume him. So, this love that Amo bore, in the end, eclipsed her, its very essence carrying beyond the image of the Ooh'Rou to crystallize on the animating principle of her—the only Sun, Ooh'R.

It was another time, before Opak's madness, before To's disappearance, before Abim's death...

Tenderness washes over her heart because Mèè-Nê, the B'Tah-Gou, whose psychic heir she was, still had a little time left to live, even though she was already fading, stricken by that same rejection of life as all the other Storytellers. Her disciple, at her side, piously received from her the final transmission of knowledge. That night, they were both waiting in their cozy atmosphere. In the back of their house the resinous wood was burning low, wafting its scent...

They spoke little. For a long time it was easier for them to share their thoughts without words. They had both, at the same time, as usual, felt the visit coming. Their keen senses followed the approach. And they waited, patiently, fearlessly. Resigned to fate, they knew how to wait with all the practices of patience. They understood what could be changed and what could not. With this enlightened acceptance of the decrees of fate, they felt at great peace.

When remembering how the door opened on that night, Ata-Rèè's heart skipped a beat, just like then... The two men emerged without a word, outlined against the dark night by the dancing flames. They were holding hands. How dilated their eyes were! They were two very dissimilar men. Amo, heavy and muscular, tall like a human tree, his face hardened under the foliage of his flaming red hair; Angel was wispy—a body about to fly away—all curves capable of lightning quick reflexes, without any visible muscles, but strong in his nerves, with the pallor of the invincible.

These two should have fought each other in the turmoil of passions swirling around them! But no, they joined together to come here this evening. But it was only to go off in a better way and farther away.

Mèè-Nê's house in the Low City was their first stop after which they would run farther down, silently, escaping from the Ooh'Rou up on high by descending through all the other Cities. But who knows if it might not be their only stop? Because it was clear that the two men would let nothing, neither rest nor repose, stop them from reaching their final goal.

Amo left. And with him—for, he was the living symbol of it—the time of the fertility festivals went too, the broad smiles of the springtime men, the powerful rituals of the generative forces offered to the infusion of the sun.

Angel left as well. And with him was lost the contact with the celestial Elsewhere, which had been offered by this intermediary and which they had only glimpsed without forming an alliance.

On seeing them, one could not really tell which of the two was leading the other nor whose greater despair had convinced the other.

No matter! They left, permanently, both together, both of one mind. Their common decision united them. It was as if the wind was already blowing around them, uprooting them. Yes, soon, they would disappear, swept away by a storm of silence all the way to obliteration.

They could no longer live in Kobor Tigan't. They had become, through their trials and tribulations, too subtle in their desires to continue to live in the material density that belonged to the Race and the Place.

When they entered, there was an unusual freshness around them. The future, already, perhaps?

Something that was still holding steady a little, completely collapsed. The New Time had just secretly begun!

Amo stepped forward to say goodbye to Mée-Nê, his B'Tah-Gou. He was not coming to hear her talk tonight. He was going to topple the Standing Stone of Grand Va-Hôh by which the illicit power of Abim had endured. The Very Huge could only be affected through her Stone. He knew this. They could only topple her by toppling the Stone. Therefore, he would sacrifice himself.

Ata-Réè had stood up on seeing Angel. He went to her alone. An irresistible current streamed between them, emanations flowing back and forth, elated to discover, depressing to have to lose. Angel spoke, his long hand held out to the girl. He wanted to give her his own blessing: the gift that he had of hearing the voice of the ineffable heavens that watch over men and work above them.

He wanted her, like him, not only hear but to repeat, to communicate it to her circle, this multi-faceted vibration, this utterance of the clouds, these reflections of the birds, these voices of thunder and springs, outcries of lightning, stairways of echoing laughter, cascading, caroming pearls from chains of broken time, crackling souls in blue flames and the bated breaths swimming in the dark of night: Music, all the essential Music and the power to sing it to others!

Like that, Angel had sung for the girl, translating for her as he went along, the communication he perceived. And because he so badly wanted it and willed it so, she heard it at the same time as him. And like him, but from a clumsy throat, she sang in unison for the first and last time with him...

Since then, her gift had developed. The perception became clearer and more conscious. Her vocal chords became more flexible. Ata-Réè was then able to reproduce what she heard. Already, troubled but respectful, they say that the voice of the Beautiful Stranger comes through her. They listen. They are quiet. They sink deeply into thought. Their easily influenced hearts race. Images visit their astonished souls.

They do not know how to sing in Kobor Tigan't. Music is unknown to them.

Atta-Réè has decided to teach the young, budding B'Tah-Gous whom she has picked up and who live in the palace with her.

She is thinking about all this when the contact of the small, prudent hand, a little cold, makes her jump. She recoils but regrets it right away. T'Lo Dê has obediently withdrawn his hand.

He, too, knew Angel. He had just caught her thoughts and wanted to tell her that he, too, remembered him, missed him, was hopeful.

So much light flowed into those golden eyes, raised so pitifully toward Ata-Réè that without another thought to her own feelings, she laid a sympathetic hand on his arm.

And it felt so nice to stay there, communing silently in the same images that the Storyteller wondered what half-revealed beings were imprisoned in the mute destiny of the T'Lo...