

PARANAMANCO

When Paranamanco broke out of her mooring lines and flew off into the night, I was hardly surprised. I remembered the words of the old navigator I'd interviewed a few months earlier, shortly after the AnimalCity project had been abandoned. I took the recording cube of our conversation out of a drawer and played it, wondering if I'd have the time to listen to it until the end...

“An entire herd? Can you imagine it? Twenty or so wild AnimalCities floating like medusae in space. The smallest could have served as the capital for any empire; the largest... No doubt you observed Paranamanco while orbiting in the transit satellite before landing here. You flew over it for several hours, skimming over the outgrowths we incorrectly call dwellings; maybe you even strolled along her avenues, with their disorderly striations carved by meteor dust. You may believe that you've seen her, but she continues to elude you, as a result of her size, her topography with its folds and strangeness. There are entire neighborhoods which no one has penetrated yet, alleys that are not shown on any map, buildings of flesh waiting to be explored.”

The old man stopped to finish his glass. On a corner of my desk, the cube reader wove the image of a tavern, purring busily. I don't like mute objects. We created them to fill our solitude with their omnipresent company, not for them to fall silent and echo the waves of our own silence back at us, amplified.

“If you've got the heart for it,” the old man said, “buy a recent plan and then have them drop you off anywhere in the city. You know the rule: when you find a street that hasn't been identified, you can name it as you see fit and register it with the land titles office. There's a bonus for each discovery, but it will hardly cover the cost of purchasing the 160 microfilmed volumes of the plan. Yet, how many people do you think are wandering about like that, shoulders bent under the weight of the microfilms and the viewer? Several thousand?”

He shook his head and glumly contemplated his empty glass, which was starting to crackle with an unpleasant odor. After the last swallow, the glass walls, deprived of humidity, decompose rather quickly, obliging drinkers to order another round immediately.

The strident ring of the communicator shrilled through the apartment. I cut it off and went back to listening.

“You have your own opinion of Paranamanco. It's undoubtedly incorrect, but mine is no better. It was a living organism before we decided to make it a city. A creature like that never really totally dies. Certain outlying neighborhoods rise and fall like respiration that is barely perceptible; the hollow filaments that we plan on using as transportation tunnels or sewer mains are sometimes animated by nervous shudders, like the axons of a failed brain.

“No, Paranamanco isn't completely dead; I've known her far too long to be wrong about that. Before I landed on her surface, I observed her in the middle of the herd, in deep space. Then I explored her for months, looking for the control points of her nervous system. I planted thousands of needles randomly in her flesh before discovering her pleasure centers and mounting her like an elephant driver, armed with the whip of my electrical discharges. I forced her to follow me here, by trial and error. Once in orbit, I moored her, practically all on my own.

“You should have been there when we landed! Paralyzed by the cloud of tugs hooked to her circumference, she deployed her corolla of multicolored filaments and whipped the air, trying to trap the metal birds that flew within reach. She was magnificent and dangerous, a real carnivorous flower. No one could have forced her to obey if I'd dropped the reins.

“Of course, those who supervised the project had taken their precautions. Paranamanco was the first AnimalCity that we'd moored and, to date, she's still the only one; the others are parked between the asteroids, waiting for the authorities to reach a decision. The idea of using a life form like this as an inhabitable zone on the surface of a colonized world is interesting, but it's not to everyone's liking. Many colonists would prefer us to build them something more conventional. Some categorically refuse to settle in a dwelling whose walls are made of living organic tissue.

“We all make the mistake of judging the AnimalCities by their appearance. A city is just a city, the imbeciles say, nothing surprising about that. That's stupid, even dangerous. These creatures have

nothing other than the most superficial points in common with the human species. Their architecture, their existence depends on rules beyond our knowledge, even though it does appear easy to apply our own rules to them. We can use them, but we can never understand them. Take heed: this is important!

“Everyone was walking on eggs at that time. The head honchos came here to supervise the operations and prevent any possible problems from causing too many waves.

“Finally, they gave the explorers the go-ahead. That’s when the problems started...”

With a sigh, I pour him another drink. I’ve learned to recognize those points when stories wind down if they’re not fueled—with alcohol, compliments or, occasionally, forgiveness. It all depends on the storyteller. The old man wasn’t looking for absolution; he just wanted to drink.

“I went there too.”

He gazed at his glass in the light of a mood lamp and noisily drained a good half of it.

“I wasn’t looking to make my fortune. Capturing Paranamanco had already made me rich and, in any case, I’d never believed those tales of treasure buried in the AnimalCities’ entrails. No, I was bored. Setting out to hunt in deep space didn’t thrill me anymore. Any prey would have appeared minuscule to me after that catch.

“I’d started drinking, seriously drinking if you know what I mean. I set out on a whim one morning. I think I was even getting tired of the alcohol and I was afraid of what would come next.

“I chose to explore the eighteenth sector, starting out from the base camp established in the heart of the city. The instructions provided for a spiral exploration of the neighboring streets, followed by satellite reconnaissance of the outlying neighborhoods. At that rate, it would have taken ten years to map the main arteries. Paranamanco wouldn’t have been inhabitable for a century.

“It’s impossible to realize just how vast she is if you haven’t tried to cross her alone. She’s brimming with optical illusions, fake terraces and underground arteries. The guide satellites are of no use at all. AnimalCity skin is impervious to radio waves; even the remote-controlled units get lost. To bring her back to more human proportions, she had to be marked out with beacons filled with signs and pointers; the chaos of her alleys had to be corrected, the still wild neighborhoods had to be domesticated.

“So, I set out to identify the most direct route possible to the edge of the city. If everyone else had done the same, we could have completed the map in two years and taken charge of the terrain.

“It’s a game, you see. Draw a map and you control the territory. The more accurate your map is, the more efficient your control is.

“Do you know how a new world is opened up for colonization? There are the mechanical caterpillars that lay kilometers and kilometers of fiber-optic cables in a few hours. Release thousands of those machines on the surface of any planet and they lay out a grid of high-capacity lines and communication nodes, while clearing away the densest part of the jungle. It doesn’t matter how long it takes, you can rest assured that, after they’ve finished their job, there isn’t a single nook or cranny that hasn’t been explored. There’s always a telephone booth on the horizon. At any given time, you’re a 30-minute shuttle ride from civilization.

“I took one of those caterpillars with me...”

“I don’t know why, in fact, but they had no success with Paranamanco. They would either get lost or go completely crazy. They built closed lines that held them prisoner or wove electrified webs in which they hid, waiting for their prey. Apparently, some have even been found enveloped in a veritable cocoon, a prelude to an impossible metamorphosis. I’m only repeating what I’ve heard, but you know as well as I do what you have to make of this sort of tale.

“So, I headed off in the direction of the periphery with that caterpillar purring as it laid its wire. My belongings sat at the peak of its central ring, firmly moored by magnetic clamps. I walked ahead, hands in my pockets, as carefree as a Stanley who didn’t give a rat’s ass about Livingstone, while she crawled along behind me.

“About every ten kilometers, she’d stop to lay a new communication node, wrapped in placental tissue. It’s a curious sight, but you get tired of it quickly. After a day, I stopped paying attention. Besides, people say you shouldn’t get too close to those machines at such times. Now and then, their maternal love makes them dangerous. I made the most of these stops to stroll about the narrow alleys in the vicinity or I’d drink a glass to Paranamanco’s health. My supplies were supposed to last two months. That’s the main reason I’d brought the caterpillar along. With all the bottles, my luggage was too heavy for my old shoulders.

“After two days, we were navigating by sight between the constructions erected like pustules on

the city's bituminous skin. Most were empty and naked, with a faint smell of dried sweat. Others, encumbered by cartilage partitions or blood red drapes, would have driven an interior decorator mad. I didn't have time to visit them all, so I settled for glancing inside the closest ones, so I could map those I considered inhabitable.

"The road we were following sloped down gently before branching out into narrower and narrower catwalks that led to the peaks of the buildings. Often, a building would be superimposed over the main artery and we'd move ahead into a dark tunnel, out of the range of the observation satellites. In such cases, our progress would be jerkier, the caterpillar's headlights hesitantly sweeping away the dark. I'd keep my hand on its head ring, to reassure it.

"The farther we proceeded into the invisible levels of the city, the more uncontrollable my caterpillar's reactions became. Her dilated sphincters released bunches of embryonic booths, most irreversibly deformed, exuding machine oil. I'd kick their protective envelope into bits, to alleviate their agony and prevent the development of interference in the communication network. When we got back to the surface, the caterpillar returned to normal. I stopped in a clearing so she could recharge her solar batteries.

"It was during one of these breaks that I realized we were no longer alone.

"Our trail was easy to follow; all they had to do was keep sight of the wires. Yet, I'd never have thought that someone would have bothered to tail us, the machine and me. We weren't carrying anything valuable, apart from my booze, and I'd have willingly shared a bottle. And don't for a minute think we were surrounded by unknown creatures drawn from the depths of the city. Our trackers were human and they weren't making much of an effort to hide.

"I could have set a trap for them, ambushed them in any alleyway. They'd had a dozen opportunities to do the same earlier, so... I stopped the caterpillar and waited for them, a bottle of alcohol in my hand. I know the rules.

"They, on the other hand, didn't. They took so long to show their faces that I was three-quarters drunk by the time they arrived. I no longer clearly remember what they told me that evening; the next morning, all my bottles were broken and my skull was buzzing. Luckily, the girl made good coffee.

"There were two of them. A guy and a girl. About your age. I had him pegged right off: taciturn, with the long, slender fingers of a pianist. She was something completely different. A china doll, skin and bones, the type who has never turned anyone away and has decided it was time for things to change. Apart from that, she was as silent as he was.

"After a few cups of java, I felt up to chewing them out for the loss of my bottles prior to hearing their side of this. They let me shout out my drunkenness before speaking with me. Good idea! I was too angry to do anything but vent my spleen. Plus, yelling almost drowned out the buzzing in my skull.

"They had a map to show me. Not a buried treasure map, that wasn't their style, or one of those esoteric diagrams that the so-called Paranamanco fortune-tellers specialize in. They're supposed to be able to read your future in the topographical maps of the city, you know, and show the future colonists the best places to settle. If necessary, they find the settlers a neighborhood where the layout of the streets corresponds to the lines on their hands. Utter stupidity.

"My two followers were a different sort of bright spark than I'd possibly come across before. They both worked in the department that tracked the data transmitted by the orbital satellites. The computer had highlighted anomalies in the aerial photos taken of Paranamanco, inconsistencies in the routes taken by certain streets, the type of detail that neither you nor I would have noticed but which the machine regularly set its sights on. They'd each been looking on their own for months, without joining forces, then they decided to pool their observations. They found the solution almost immediately.

"A fragment on the map of the city was repeated identically forty-four times. A single fragment, but because of this duplicated element, the computer crashed every time it tried to reconstitute the Paranamanco jigsaw. Discouraged, the girl had drawn a map indicating the locations of the famous fragment.

"Once the coffee had its effect, they rolled their map out to show me. Forty-four spots were spread over the disk of the city, with no apparent symmetry or regularity. Yet, their pattern looked familiar to me. I got out my own map, the one showing the animal's nerve centers, which I'd drawn during my deep space exploration. Mine was cruder, but there was nothing haphazard about the resemblance. Strangely, mine was offset by one hundred and ninety degrees from theirs; a semicircle, as if the two phenomena were of equal importance, but opposite in meaning.

“The route taken by the caterpillar was heading straight toward the closest spot, which is why they decided to follow me. I believe they suspected my intentions were the same as theirs. As the first one to explore the creature, I was supposed to know more about her than anyone else. They thought I already had an inkling as to what the identical sectors hid, that the government had some secret goal when it had Paranamanco land and that it was exploring her through me. I didn’t disabuse them. They wouldn’t have believed me anyway.

“When we set out again, the caterpillar was carrying three packs instead of one, which didn’t seem to affect her all that much, and I had an audience to whom I could recount my memories of deep space. They knew how to listen, that much I can say for them, a bit like you, but then you’re paid to listen so it doesn’t count. The guy, Geoff, never said more than a few words at a time, and settled for moving ahead at his own pace. From time to time, he’d look back to see if the girl was still following. I’ve forgotten her name, but it will certainly come back as I talk.

“We were a good day’s walk from the interesting zone, which gave us time to review a fair number of hypotheses and invent a few new ones. The most curious thing was that, seen from the satellite, there was nothing particular about the duplicated fragment: three or four streets, completely ordinary outgrowths for buildings. Same old, same old. I could have walked through them without noticing a thing. Geoff thought it was some sort of visual illusion and that we should expect something else, underground tunnels maybe, or vast rooms filled with strange machinery. He fixated on that idea: the AnimalCities were once used as spacecraft by a humanoid race and had outlived their creators. This made for a good story, completely valid, when you have twelve hours of walk ahead of you and nothing other to do than survey the streets and christen them as you see fit.

“In any case, no one knew anything at all about the AnimalCities at the time, and we’ve learned precious little since. The colonization of Paranamanco was interrupted and it won’t start up again anytime soon. As for the rest of the herd, it’s wandering carefree about the asteroids. If we knew how to kill a wild city, our problems would be resolved for the most part, but I doubt we’ll ever reach that point. I’m starting to think the entire operation is plain old stupidity, but no one’s asked me for my opinion in a long time.

“So, there we were, walking ahead of the caterpillar, because of the exhaust fumes, without even taking the time to visit the structures that surrounded us. We had the entire city to ourselves and the only thing that interested us was a block of three streets, which didn’t even have the excuse of being unique. At the time, that didn’t strike us. The idea only came to me on our way back.

“Imagine: today, there are almost one million colonists on Paranamanco, there’s noise, electricity, eleven official religions, an entire microcosm of the human species gathered on the surface of a flat organism that had the good sense to be inhabitable. I know it will take at least half a billion people for the place to even start looking settled, but at the time that the three of us were walking along unexplored avenues there was no one within a 200 km radius. Not a soul! I don’t think an ocean or a desert could give such an impression of solitude. Weirdly it wasn’t until the other two arrived that I even noticed.

“Then the wind started to blow down the empty streets and we stopped for shelter on a porch. The evening fell slowly. The buildings hollowed out unusual shadows, stretching in unexpected directions. I hadn’t had a drop to drink since the previous night, yet my usual hallucinations settled over the facades of the neighboring buildings. They were remodeling the scene that surrounded us. I desperately needed a drink and felt my nightmares swirling in around me, waiting for night to torment me. I didn’t have the strength to resist.

“We were approaching our goal. I suppose it was the first symptoms of Paranamanco’s influence, although the base doctor has talked to me about delirium tremens, with a knowing smile. People like that always have a better explanation than yours and there’s no way to make them change their minds.

“The next day the others decided, without consulting me, to leave me there for the entire day while they went out to do some reconnaissance. I’d have refused if I’d known, but that double dose of sleeping pills in the coffee would have put anyone out like a light. When I opened my eyes, I was trapped in an unbreakable cocoon of cables and the caterpillar, which had been reprogrammed, was vigilantly standing guard over me.

“I’d wanted to warn the base that a couple of loonies were holding me prisoner so that someone would come and get me. It seemed easy; I was surrounded by communication booths. The caterpillar had woven a delicious little concentration camp for one where transmission cables replaced barbed wire and booths replaced watchtowers. The only problem was that I didn’t have enough tokens.

“Before I even reached the base operator, my supply had run out. I was stupid enough to try to kick the box apart to collect its contents. My first mistake was choosing a freshly hatched booth; my second was forgetting the caterpillar’s maternal instinct.

“Possibly her reflexes should have been altered by the reprogramming, but that didn’t stop her from charging at me with the full speed of her segments, tearing her way through the cables she’d woven. We played a deadly game of tag, in which the neutral zones were the booths. Bit by bit, I was trying to draw her away from the breach she’d made in the network of wires that held me prisoner. When I thought it was a good time, I raced off toward the closest building, expecting to be caught and pulverized at any time. I’ve rarely been afraid, but I was that day.

“Once safe, I caught my breath before glancing behind me. The caterpillar hadn’t followed me at all; she stood motionless in the middle of her cocoon. On her back, the girl was waving in my direction.

“I turned around slowly, savoring my anger as it swept over me. I was preparing myself for one of those explosions that make novas look minor. In two days these two clueless young people had deprived me of my bottles, drugged me and forced me into a rodeo with a thirty-ton caterpillar. I had enough insults in mind to turn the air blue until the next day, perhaps even longer, if there was the least bit of an echo. Then I saw the tears rolling down the girl’s cheeks and I fell silent... What else could I have done?

“We broke camp in ten minutes. I cut the cable ahead of the anarchic section and made a splice directly on the machine’s hindquarters, short-circuiting the delirious skein that had imprisoned me. One more puzzle for the archeologists of the future. I allowed myself the luxury of using an iron bar to pulverize the booth that held my tokens and recovered them. I’m the first official vandal on Paranamanco. Don’t forget to mention that in your article.”

“Why were you in such a rush to leave?”

My voice rises out of the cube reader with an irritating fidelity, asking the right question at the right time.

In front of me, on the back wall of my office, the red warning light flashes in vain. I don’t feel like answering any call, especially right now.

“Geoff had disappeared in the unknown sector. The girl, Evalane (I knew her name would come back to me, Geoff called her Evie), well the girl had been afraid to continue their research on her own and had come back to release me so I could help her. Ten seconds later and she’d probably have found the caterpillar nibbling on a pancake-shaped cadaver. Bio-machines can be quite strange at times. That would have given my caterpillar an opportunity to lay flesh pink booths, with dial pads encrusted with eyes rather than keys. Just the thought of dialing a number under those conditions, fingers in eyes... Evie acknowledged that it was lucky for me that Geoff had chosen that particular moment to evaporate. How was I supposed to respond to that? I grumbled that luck had been smiling on me ever since they’d arrived, but the girl was insensitive to sarcasm.

“She had stopped crying, well almost, just a sob from time to time when she mentioned Geoff. I hadn’t realized she had a thing for him. When you live alone in space, you lose track of that sort of phenomenon. I had no idea just how important that was going to be later.

“There was nothing in particular about the area. It looked like so many other neighborhoods that they’d walked through before, without even noticing them. They had to backtrack and ask for a satellite location in order to find it. Geoff was disappointed and furious. He raced up and down the three streets, looking for a secret passageway, a hidden opening, without success. Then he started to explore the outgrowths one after another, coming back out a little more annoyed each time. Well, so Evie saw him go into a porch and he never came back out.

“According to the girl, there was nothing particular about the interior of the building: a labyrinth of cartilage partitions, a rough floor, made of folds of dead skin. Since no one answered when she called out, she hadn’t dared to venture too far in and preferred to return to camp, taking care to spray-paint her initials on the porch.

“We approached cautiously. Nothing moved, no sound filtered out to us, no trace of Geoff. I picked up the caterpillar’s remote control, as I pulled Evie away from the porch.

“‘We could get lost in that maze,’ I explained to her. ‘I’ll send the beast in to explore for us.’”

‘Good idea! Then we can simply follow its wire to make our way back out without getting trapped by those damn partitions.’

‘After she’s done a tour inside, there won’t actually be many partitions intact...’

“She blushed, which didn’t look good on her, and fell silent. The caterpillar rolled over to the entrance. Her segments proceeded into the building, one by one. We could hear the sound of fabric tearing, followed by irregular periods of silence. I glanced inside: the floor was strewn with cartilage, debris and booths that had been laid all askew, imprisoned in their placental pouches. Just the place for a large-scale communication center. I noted its location on the map, out of reflex, before carefully following in the caterpillar’s footsteps, accompanied by Evie.

“We made our way through the building diagonally, stumbling among the waste. A cloud of bone dust powered our clothing. We avoided coughing, for fear of giving birth to an echo we wouldn’t have recognized. I twisted my ankle and Evie fell in a pile of debris, from which she emerged like a ghost, bits of membrane hanging from her shoulders and hair like a transparent shroud. She looked like a ghostly bat.

“The caterpillar had stopped at the entrance to an immense many-sided room that had remained intact. Evie went around her body. I heard the girl cry out. When I reached her, she was kneeling next to Geoff who lay unconscious, feverish, lips clenched, fingernails dug into bloody palms.

“We didn’t see the fountain right away. We were busy trying to revive our lost team member and didn’t have the time to study the surroundings closely. The delicate murmur of the drops trickling in the basin gradually penetrated into my consciousness, like those dreams at dawn that announce an imminent return to reality. My worried mind was on the lookout for the slightest abnormal noise, but that wasn’t one, and I made no effort to locate the source. It was Geoff who pointed at it, as soon as he opened his eyes, asking us hoarsely to get him something to drink.

“Evie gave him a shot and poured the content of her canteen between his lips. I stood up to disconnect the caterpillar. On my way, I glanced about, without noticing anything special: the murmur came from a thin ribbon of water that welled up from the ground and filled a cavity below. It hadn’t rained in a week. I recall wondering where the water could be coming from. But I didn’t think it was all that important.

“As soon as Geoff could stand up, he rushed over to the fountain to drink, before we could stop him. The water didn’t appear to have any particular effect on him. He offered me some, but I don’t really have an affinity for that type of liqueur at zero degrees.

“When we asked him why he’d fainted, he replied that he’d knocked himself out against a partition. The explanation was so stupid that we believed it and considered the matter closed. Evie apologized for dragging me into all this for nothing. While we were getting into things, Geoff received his share of insults for leaving me alone with the caterpillar, but my heart wasn’t into that.

“We followed the wire back out. None of us tried to get away from the sector; we even decided to set up our camp at the intersection of two neighboring streets. Evie made some coffee. Without a word, Geoff held out her canteen so that she could go and fill it.

“I gave him a mild sedative so that he could rest for the remainder of the day and went out to explore the neighboring buildings, to form my own opinion.

“Evie was telling the truth; there was absolutely nothing to see in that sector. It was so similar to all the others I’d traveled through before that things were starting to look suspicious. I was caught up in the game, obstinately searching in vain. I palpated the city’s thick skin in hopes of detecting some sort of revealing pulse; I scratched esoteric maps in an old notepad, tearing the pages out as I finished them. In short, I behaved like an imbecile. Evie, who was watching over Geoff, called out to me from time to time, asking if I’d found anything and seemed to take no notice of my increasingly brief answers.

“The dark gradually chased me from the streets filled with thick shadows, in which it would be all too easy to lose my way. I gave up and sat down next to the electric hot plate where our evening rations were heating, along with an entire pot of coffee. Evie and Geoff glanced at me, but refrained from making a comment. Just as well. I couldn’t forgive them for breaking the pleasant monotony of my trip through the city and for their promises of hollow dreams. For the first time, Paranamanco had disappointed me and it was all their fault.

“I rolled up in my bedroll, as far from the caterpillar and them as possible, and tried to fall asleep. I’d had too much coffee for that to be easy but, with the help of the silence, I gradually felt myself dozing off, dreaming that the base would get rid of my two pests the next day.

“During the night, I dreamt the same dream over and over again. I was hitting my head against the reality of the city like a moth blinded by light. When I woke up, Geoff had disappeared once more and the entire neighborhood seemed to have gone mad...

“Heavy bunches of colored light bulbs hung overhead, large drops of luminous sap dripping down. A vine of telephone cables climbed up the outgrowths, rolling in abundant, baroque spirals along the streets, in an unnatural embrace. Neon orchids with electrifying scents surged from the slightest chink in the walls, shooting lightning that bounced off Paranamanco’s skin. In a few hours, the neighborhood had been transformed into a virgin forest.

“Next to the dead hot plate and the caterpillar, which had been definitively disconnected, Evie lay plunged in a sleep evidently filled with nightmares. The ground around her was spiked by long, transparent spears, shimmering with violet sparks. I had to kick them to bits to get closer to her.

“Geoff had made her swallow the rest of the sleeping pills and had pinned a laconic note to her sleeping bag before heading off. I knew what it said before reading it. But that didn’t stop me from going through it twice, just to make sure my hunch was right. Then I woke Evie, not without some difficulty.

“All around us, the scene gradually came to life. The sun was already high. The dense fiber-optic jungle shimmered perceptibly. I almost expected Geoff to appear, wearing a simple loincloth, leaping from vine to vine, hunting prey. But I knew we’d never see him again. And, deep down, Evie did too.

“Yet she refused to believe it, despite the evidence that surrounded us, despite Geoff’s note. She denied the facts. Hey, you try to convince a woman that her lover is capable of leaving her for a living organism that measures 600 km in diameter, a creature he had shared his dreams with...

“She wanted to search for him. I had a lot of difficulty convincing her to listen to me first. I’d known what was really going on with Paranamanco since the previous night, in part because of Evie. The water she’d used to make her coffee came from the fountain. Some of its power remained, despite the boiling, just enough that I knew what kind of trap Geoff fell into. Merely thinking that I could have suffered the same fate made shivers run up and down my back. It would have taken so little. I must be one of the few rare people whose life has been saved by alcohol.

“I told Evie that the liquid had slowly poisoned Geoff, that the first time we’d found him, unconscious, he’d most certainly just drunk from the fountain and that, feeling that he was about to die, he preferred to distance himself from the camp, to spare us the spectacle of his agony. The note he had left her was the fruit of a brain that was already damaged; she shouldn’t pay it any attention. Of course, she didn’t believe a word of what I said, but it was the best lie I could come up with given the time available.

“She insisted that I tell the truth. I was stupid enough to do so...”

TO BE CONCLUDED IN THE BOOK