

Part One

It is the powerful joy of spring that is ripening. In the radiant sky, the sun is setting. The green dome of giant oaks and tall beeches is transpierced by oblique sunbeams. Life is exalted by their flame. The grey and brown trunks light up. The mosses and fern glisten, sprinkled with pink, yellow and blue, at the hazard of sparse florets. The violets emit perfume in gusts. In the fiery foliage, the birds chirp. The undergrowth rustles; parting the brambles and furze, the quadrupeds sniff the descending freshness. Life is swarming urgently in the underwood.

As broad as a river, a stream of sunlight cuts through the forest. Once a fire born of lightning, was propagated by the complicit fury of the wind. On the ground thick with ashes, fertilized by light and the infiltration of water, the splendor of nurturing plants has blossomed.

Axor and Pilta are grazing side by side. From time to time, the stag pauses, raises his head or readjusts his antlers and contemplates his hind with his moist eyes. Seductively, he rubs his damp muzzle against Pilta's neck. She resumes grazing, greedily.

Pilta shivers. Axor straightens up at the same time.

Ten paces away, in a thorny thicket, two yellow eyes are focused on them. Seeing that he is discovered, Raram, the jaguar, emerges entirely, yawns nonchalantly, blinks his eyelids, swings his spotted tail several times to the right and the left, yawns again and takes a step forward. Axor and Pilta, their gaze suspicious, brace themselves on their legs. It has been a long time since Raram was last seen. Some said that he had emigrated to hotter climes. Previously, he swore to accept the truce. He promised not to kill without Klevorak's permission—but his memory is short and his humor as sly as the claws he conceals in his silken feet. He loves blood. The charnel-pit is a long way away. Perhaps, forgetful of the law, he prefers fresh venison?

Suddenly, however, with the same gesture, Axor and Pilta lower their heads into the grass again, and raise them up placidly, their muzzles overflowing with succulent stems. Raram has laid his ears flat along the two sides of his flat face; he listens, purring dully, spits angrily, and coils up in a thicket. Axor cheerfully scratches the new velvet of his antlers against the trunk of a young ash tree.

Like Axor and Pilta, like Raram, the people of the forest have heard. With little hurried and comical bounds, the entire tribe of rabbits regains the edge of the trees. Lull, the hare, ever timid, has preceded them, calling his doe. Roebucks jostle one another, trying out their young horns. The white cattle in the large herd get to their feet heavily. At a slow pace, pausing to chase away a fly or collect a perfumed tuft of grass with a sudden bite, they too move off—and with distracted gazes, they follow the furious gallop of Konnionk, the wild sow, enraged by her undisciplined piglets, which she scolds. Thus, everything that lives steps aside, to make way for those who are coming.

Because the sun is lower, the shadows are beginning to elongate, and ruddy glimmers brighten the green carpet, which they light up in places. Grey and nimble, two weasels race away and disappear. The cattle stop chewing the cud; at a lithe trot, Herta and her wolf-cubs have crossed the clearing. Konnionk shakes her little ones, which are squealing loudly, by the ears.

At first, there was only the confused rumor of the forest. Then something like a distant rumble gave evidence of the approach of a herd. Soon, the rattle of hooves became distinguishable, with the murmur of voices and the breaking of branches. Now there is the cadenced rhythm of galloping, and cries are echoing in the air—the calls and laughter of the sovereign animals.

The forest-dwellers along the triumphal path have paused. There is no fear in their gazes. Even the goat-kids are not huddling close to their mother. Entirely brave, Tutul's young nibble the thyme, and wrinkle their mobile noses mockingly at Volp the fox, who pretends not to see them. And in spite of the frightful odor she emits, Pilta remains beside the she-wolf, careless of her drooling fangs. Who, at the approach of the Dominators, would dare to violate the law they have imposed?

The gallop is more sonorous. The ground shakes. Necks extend. A confident curiosity is in their gazes. It's them! At the edge of the luminous clearing, the triumphant herd of Centaurs—the six-limbed people; the sovereign people; the children of the sun—surges forth. As they pass by, noses sniff, muzzles extend, hackles rise. On both sides of the avenue into which they have raced, a murmur of welcome greets them.

A stride ahead of his people runs Klevorak, the king. He bears his illustrious head high, whitened by the years but unbowed. Scattered by the wind of his progress, the abundant tresses of his hair fly around his bushy head. Like wings of snow, his great beard floats on either side of his rigid neck. The wrinkled face with sparkling eyes has been tanned by countless suns. Beneath the flaring nostrils, a proud smile uncovers intact teeth. The torso stands up tall, as gnarled and hard as the trunk of a chestnut-tree. The bronzed skin of the arms is studded with the formidable roundness of their muscles, and the large hands with enormous fingers are twirling a young uprooted beech. In spite of his age, the brown coat of the lower body remains glossy; four limbs with robust hooves carry the chief along at a rhythmic gallop, and the tail that nervously swats his polished flanks is still thick. His piercing gaze strays alternately to the right and the left; his thick lips part slightly and with an amicable whistle he salutes the tribes of beasts who venerate the peaceful strength of the Centaurs.

Behind the chief, the herd races in a joyful tumult. In accordance with custom, Herkem has remained with half the herd at the Red Grotto; the rest are here. Above the others, Hark the Rude raises his scarred face, his striking beard and his broad chest, like that of a three-year-old bull. The other day, Spirr, the panther, in violation of the truce, killed a goat-kid. Hark; caught him ripping his victim apart in a thicket of laurier-roses. Drunk on blood, Spirr, spat and leapt at the centaur's throat, scoring his face with his claws. Hark grabbed him by the tail with one hand, whirled him around at arm's length and smashed him against the trunk of an oak. Spirr's mewling would no longer frighten the kids in the forest. Thrown in the charnel-pit, his cadaver served as a reminder to the flesh-eaters of Klevorak's inflexible law.

Hark's rival is Kolpitrū the Giant. Although Kolpitrū's height falls slightly short of that of the red-haired centaur, he surpasses him in the unusual power of his lower body, the depth of his thorax, and the volume of his arms, as stout as thighs. Without bracing himself on his legs, Kolpitrū can stop the humped black-maned aurochs Mumm in his tracks, seizing him by his horns. Between Hark and Kolpitrū there is an authentic jealousy. More than once, in the mating season, they have come to grips. Hark is the superior in terms of agility, but Kolpitrū is perhaps the stronger.

All around them, exchanging playful words, running, whinnying, rearing up to collect a leafy branch in passing, or half-turning, slipping their withers with the flat of the hand to challenge them to race, are Tregg the Gray, Horok of One-Eyed, Halkar, Yahor and all the rest.

With an irritated gaze, Sakarbatul the Beardless searches the bushes. The other day, Tregg assures him, a few fauns drunk on cherries mocked his polished chin, boating about their pointed beards. Sakarbatul has sworn to pluck the cheeks of the first capriped he meets. The whole herd knows about his plan, and in enjoying the comical combat in advance.

Among the males, Haidar is the most handsome. His torso stands up as straight and smooth as the bole of a young palm-tree; his evident flanks are like those of a greyhound; four white patches circle his gleaming legs, and the plume of his tail, the color of night, sweeps the fallen leaves on the ground.

Gladly, in their capricious course, the centaresses draw near to him, rubbing their moist flanks against his, and seeking the gaze of his brown eyes with theirs. Impudently, Mimitt tickles his shoulders with a juniper branch, and when he turns round, provokes him with bursts of loud laughter from behind the abruptly-drawn curtain of her hair. Disdainfully, though, Haidar shakes his black locks and the lustrous curls of his silky beard.

What do Mimitt, Bagalda and all the rest matter to him! Last year, perhaps, they pleased him; perhaps they will again next summer. In the present season, he does not care about them, any more than the old ones with flabby breasts, the toothless Hurico or the lame Sihadda, obstinate in disputing her weary bones with the charnel-pit. The ardor of the summer sun has not yet inflamed the males with the despotic madness of love. Already, however, one sole desire is warming Haidar's loins. With a kick he drives away the brazen Mimitt and Bagalda, and shoulders away the pushy Poltico in order to gallop side by side with the one who retains his gaze every day, all the way from the Red Grotto to the rheski field, and from the rheski field to the Red Grotto: Kadilda, the white centaress with the eyes of a gazelle.

She is so beautiful, Kadilda the blonde, Kadilda the white, Kadilda the virginal! Who could be insensible to her triumphant grace? Klevorak himself feels pride swelling his heart when his eyes fall upon the last-born of his blood. No matter how far the memories of the old ones go back, none of them can remember such a prodigy: a centaress white from the crown of her forehead to the tips of her fingers, her four feet and her tail. So fine is the skin of her face, her slender torso and her arms that the

blood comes to the surface there, putting a pink tint into her cheeks, at the rigid tips of her young thrusting breasts and the palms of her excessively soft hands, which are lacerated by brambles and prickly holly. When Kadilda capers in the meadow, her blonde hair undulating around her, one might think it a fleece of foam flying from waves. In all the tribe there is no one who leaps more nimbly over the trunks of fallen trees or importunate bushes, bounding into the air as Titt the skylark soars into the sky in the summer dawn.

Thus, for two seasons already, at the approach of the fecund ardors of the solstice, the males have pressed around her, coveting her with their avid eyes, filling their dilated nostrils with the voluptuous odor of her young body; of all those who are old enough for love, there is probably none whose words and gestures have not testified to the centaress the violence of his desire. Even last year, some preferred the fawn coat and skittish humor of Mimitt. This year, in the opinion of all, Kadilda is the most beautiful, and well before the torrid season, careless of the rest of the females, the males seek to rub against her and pursue her with their profound gazes.

Will Kadilda refuse herself again, as she has done for two years? Neither Hark the Rude, nor Karak, nor Kolpitrū has received the promise from her for which they hoped, and when she sees the handsome Haidar veer sideways and steer toward her, she increases her pace, parting slender hindquarters with her hands, she slips between the old ones, and to support Sihadda's unsteady gait she passes an arm round her waist, while obstinately veiling her face with the other in a sign of refusal.

With loud bursts of laughter, all those she has driven away mock Haidar's disappointment as anger creases his forehead, and they all congratulate the virgin. She keeps silent, annoyed to see gazes seeking her out, but as Papacal playfully tries to part her hair and stroke her with his stout fingers, she rears up; her face appears, all pink, and raising her hand, she slaps the insolent one in the face with a resounding blow. Then the centaurs' joy burst forth again, and they applaud Papacal's discomfiture.

There is the customary halt in the Grove of Thirst, half way to the Red Grottos, and the field where the somber rheki grows, the fern from which the centaurs draw the strength that is in their bones. Every two days, when Klevorak leads his people there, they never fail to stop in the grove. Not that his fatigued muscles command the halt; in spite of his age, he could follow the sun at a gallop for half its course without a drop of sweat pearling on his burnished brow—but he is a prudent chief. He knows that the young ones run out of breath and strength in a long ride. Most of all, he takes pity on the dolorous lassitude of the old females.

Scarcely have the oaks passed, the trunks more widely scattered and the eternal verdure of the holm-oaks mingles with the darker foliage of pines, than Sihadda's limp become worse and she begins to suffer from her old wound, while Hurico's hoarse chest begins to labor. With torsos streaming and foam on their flanks, both would gallop until they collapsed with exhaustion rather than confess that they are weary, but Klevorak call a halt.

The centaresses let themselves fall into the grass. Hurico lies on her side at full stretch; her tongue hangs out of her toothless mouth, and her rumbling flanks throb precipitately. Kneeling in front of her, Sihadda supports herself, holding on to the stunted trunk of a small oak; her eyes are closed and her lips taut, in order to retain her soul. It is as if, their effort having paused, the old ones feel the crush of fatigue all the more intensely. They have no voices with which to reply to the sarcasms of Hark, who mocks them, and pities the wolves whose teeth will soon break on their bones.

The centaurs spread out in the clearing. They take turns to slake their thirst at the spring, and then glean berries from the bushes. The plums still taste bitter, but the black cherries and strawberries are already tasty. Hark spots a small tree whose fruits are hanging down above head height. He takes a step back, leaps into the air, but falls back with empty hands. Immediately, Haidar takes up the challenge, measures the distance with his eyes and launches himself in his turn. There is a crack; to the acclamations of all, he holds a major branch in his hand, laden with blood-colored berries. Laughing, the centaresses jeer the red-haired centaur, who clenches his fists and mutters that the greyhound with the white socks would quickly give in to him at another game.

The old females have recovered their breath; they follow the jousters with their eyes and sadly remember the distant times when, under different skies, similar young males made them mothers. They also gaze enviously at the shiny fruits, and the spring murmuring a short distance away, but their limbs are exhausted. They content themselves with raising a few soft and half-rotten acorns to their

lips, the debris of last autumn disdained by the wild boars, the rancid taste of which deceives their thirst.

A voice makes them turn their heads. Kadilda the white is nearby. She leans over and hands them five or six branches with foliage speckled with red berries.

“Take them, Mothers,” she says.

They seize the branches and eat avidly; and while the sour taste caresses their dry palates, they are astonished by Kadilda’s action. Proud of their strength, the young centaresses do not think that one day they will be old, and willingly humiliate their elders with their sarcasms and the spectacle of their games. In revenge, the old ones do not stint in censuring them, and warning the males against their coquetry. Such is the rule. Kadilda has broken it. Because her action is benevolent, however, the centaresses are not scandalized, and they follow her with an approving eye as she moves from tree to tree collecting booty.

A burst of laughter crackles in the old ones’ ears. They raise themselves up on their arms and search the bushes. Their noses denounce the laughter before their eyes; the breeze brings an odor of billy-goat. From the thicket where he was hiding, Pirip the faun has just emerged. His broad ruddy face with the big snub nose is joyfully split from pointed ear to pointed ear. Beneath his bushy eyebrows, his little round eyes are blinking comically. His short horns barely protrude from the thick shock of hair that covers his head.

In each brown hand he holds a fistful of cherries. From time to time he bites into one with beautiful teeth, and gluttonously swallows them, stones and all. Then the red juice starts running down his chin and all along his tangled beard, his tawny torso and his hairy legs, doubled up beneath him. He has stopped chewing; open-mouthed, he is looking at something in front of him; now he takes two steps; the loud sound of his full-throated laughter resembles the staccato beating of goats. He stuffs another fruit into his mouth and crouches down again, his eyes fixed a few paces ahead.

The centaresses try to make out what he is looking at. Very pale, Kadilda moves away from the black foliage of a juniper. Pirip follows every one of her gestures; a glimmer ignites in his eyes, frissons run down his broad back, and from time to time, he runs and appreciative tongue over his thick lips.

The old ones exchange nudges with their elbows, simultaneously shrugging their shoulders. Like all of his brethren, Pirip is incorrigible. On an empty stomach, he is idle, dreamy and gentle; he squats down for hours contemplating water in a stream, the forms of clouds drifting across the sky and the complicated maneuvers of insects in the moss. For hours on end, sitting motionless, he blows into a bizarrely-punctured reed, from which a shrill voice emerges. But his ordinary nonchalance is only equaled by his folly when, under the influence of the season or the juice of the berries that intoxicated him, his spirits rise.

In the autumn, when the fauns gorge themselves all afternoon on grapes, delirium puts fire in their veins. With grunts of lust, they chase after one another and males and females, in furious embraces, roll in the bushes. Scornfully, the centaurs turn their heads away in order not to witness their impudent frolics. When Pirip’s salaciousness is roused, he is no longer capable of restraint, and there is no limit to the obscenity of the monstrous unions to which he might stray.

The centaurs do not deign to dwell on such thoughts, however, which are unworthy of sovereign animals.

On awakening from his escapades, Pirip is the first to deplore his folly; he bemoans his aberrations, berates his ignominy; he would punish himself if he could; his contrite face begs pardon for his sin; his mood becomes mild and indulgent again; once again he becomes the humble brother whose staccato laughter cheers up the woods and whose inoffensive ecstasies stop a fluttering butterfly or a gilded fish in its course.

And because they are aware of the goodness of his heart, the centaresses feel sorry for him when they see him trembling, his eyes full of Kadilda. In the violence of his desire, he is capable of forgetting all prudence, of throwing himself upon the one he covets. The anger of the centaurs will not spare him.

Obligingly, Sihadda calls in a loud voice: “Pirip! Pirip! Pirip!”

At the last and most sonorous call Pirip shivers, as if emerging from a dream, and perceives the old females who, their lower bodies recumbent, are leaning on one elbow, watching him. He scratches

his forehead, wipes his hands on his shaggy thighs, and says: "Greetings, Dominatrices; what do you want?"

With the flat of her hand, Sihadda crushes a horse-fly on her flank and says, mockingly: "Rid yourself of bad thoughts, little brother. Instead of the centauress, look at Klevorak."

With a dubious expression, Pirip looks his adviser up and down for a few seconds; then, following her advice, his eyes seek out Klevorak. Motionless on his four feet, shod with hard hooves, the chief, with his head held high, seems to be challenging power of the wind in the clouds. With a negligent gesture, his arm is twirling a cudgel with which he could break the back of an ox. He is the image of strength.

Pirip's forehead darkens; his cheeks crease; the corners of his thick lips turn down, and a deep sigh elevates his bosom. The two old ones burst out laughing. Confused by having been found out, the crouching faun scratches the ground mechanically with his fingers, and murmurs: "Your speech, Sihadda, is like the benevolent shower of a cascade. Thank you."

And, shaking off the fruit-stones, leaves and stems with which he is covered, he gets up on his cloven feet. At first he quivers and stumbles, but two or three bounds restore his aplomb, and he draws away with his hopping stride.

Hurico shouts after him: "Go find Sitta. Next to her you'll forget the white centauress." Sitta is the tawny fauness with whom Pirip already has eight loquacious faunillons, noisier than a herd of bleating goats.

But Pirip is no longer listening to the old ones. A short distance away, a clump of irises looms up in the grass, and now a ray of sunlight, cutting through the foliage, illuminates the velvety splendor of the petals. Magical corollas sparkle with violet, mauve and roseate glints.

Fascinated, Pirip approaches the flowers, caressing them with his delighted gaze, kneels down beside them, and a melodious whistling escapes his slightly-parted lips, celebrating the divine beauty.

The centauresses have followed him with their eyes; with identical gestures, they touch their foreheads. For an herb that could be crushed underfoot, Kadilda is forgotten.

The entire herd is standing up. Klevorak's thunderous voice has signaled the departure. On the dry slope the centaurs disperse at unequal pace. The majestic trunks of the oaks, beeches and chestnut-trees are succeeded by a more cheerful vegetation. The impenetrable dome of the high branches no longer maintains the humidity of the soil, no longer interrupts the vivifying rays of sunlight.

Beneath their fecund caress, almond-trees with stunted trunks and bright foliage bloom, speckled with the white of pink snow of flowers, orange-trees with gleaming palms, lentisks, pistachios and arbutuses, ripen their berries, green as yet, soon joined by the silvery pallor of olive groves. A few tall parasol-pines and a few junipers with blue glints rise up here and there above the smaller trees. The stony ground is adorned with bright gorse, euphorbias and heather. In more sunlit areas, cacti expand their fleshy prickles, where figs, the wealth of autumn, are becoming greener.

Here and there, the earth is softer, alternating adorable meadows of violets and celery. Tangled vines climb up the blanched trunks of elms. The gusts of the breeze are charged by turns with all the scents of spring. And the centaurs, intoxicated by the perfumes, move at a slow pace, collecting a ripe fruit here and there.

But the weary sun is gradually descending in a sky that is turning pink. Klevorak utters a cry to step up the pace. The ground beneath their hooves is sandy now. The olive groves, vines, almond-trees and cacti become sparser; above the yellow and green carpets of gorse the twisted trunks of pines loom up, with dark foliage. The gusts of the breeze have freshened; if the passage of the herd were less noisy, they would surely already be able to hear the powerful sigh of the sea.

Again, Sihadda is out of breath. Her foot is hurting more than ever today. Age is weighing upon her. The time is long past when she could leap over the backs of four males with a single bound. Kadilda encourages her. Soon they will reach the bend in the river. The old female can cool her bad leg there. Then the bank can be quickly rejoined.

With a clamor of cries, the centaurs move into the sandy dunes, urging one another on and climbing them at the gallop. Their hooves sink in, slipping on pine-needles. Even Kolpitrú feels sweat pearling under his belly. The old females' muscles stiffen; a kind of mist veils their eyes. Hurico's feet catch in a root; she stumbles heavily, and falls to her knees. The laughter of the young ones brings her to her feet with a thrust of her hips. Sweat inundates her meager flanks, sticking the sparse wisps of

her hair to her temples. She does not want to fall behind, and braces her legs as best she can—but even Klevorak is slowing down, and voices fall silent in the general effort.

At the top of the hill, on the heath that is now deserted, the chief stops and, one after another, the centaurs wipe their brows with their horny hands, while their hairy chests dilate in the beneficent breath of the evening breeze—and once again, their large eyes fill with the splendor of the familiar horizon.

At their feet, the dune descends in a steep slope. Amid the black trunks of pines, the water of the river gleams here and there, close by, subsequently making a detour to the right; its mouth is invisible because of the foliage, but facing them, beyond the last curtain of trees, the centaurs perceive the infinite splendor of the scintillating waves. The Red Rocks, where their brothers are waiting for them, stand up on the left.

An old tale, recollected since time immemorial, relates that the Red Rocks emerged from the sea and came to gather on the sand, like a monstrous flock. Or perhaps it was the Smoking Mountain from which the mysterious force projected them. Out there, beyond the sea, in the golden, purple and azure atmosphere into which the setting sun is sinking, the dark plume from which flashes spring by night overlooks the coast that limits the view.

Behind them, when they turn round, the animal-kings recognize, above the sylvan slopes that they have just traveled, above the darkness already extending over their flanks, the roseate summits of sheer mountains, which they once traversed when, chased by the menace of the cold, they followed the sun in its course in search of more clement climes.

“Hahahh!”

Klevorak utters the cry, claps his strong hands, and launches himself down the steep slope; in his wake, the entire herd precipitates itself chaotically. The descent draws them down as rapidly as the stones that the mountain pours forth. Piqued by self-esteem, even Hurico forgets her pains. They slip on their hind feet, get up again, and gallop harder. Pine-branches crack under the impact of torsos; gorse and heather are crushed under hooves; the sand scatters. Between the trunks, more widely-spaced, the water scintillates close at hand; a moist odor caresses the nostrils. One more surge!

The curtain of foliage vanishes; a little flat and muddy beach borders the bend in the river, which curves back on itself to reach the sea. In a few bounds the centaurs can cross it, in order to plunge into the final wood that separates them from the desired refuge of the Grottos.

Scarcely have they appeared on the strand, however, than a shrill cry escapes from the river. There is a seething in the water, and above the troubled waves rises the steaming torso of Gurgundo, the triton. Behind him surge those of his brethren. Instantly, the river is populated with flat faces holed by glaucous eyes and crowned with green-tinted hair, viscous torsos and flaccid bellies that terminate in sparkling tails. And the large hands whose fingers are linked by thin webs appeal to Klevorak, gesturing to him to stop.

The centaur hesitates. Every morning, Gurgundo hears some new lie, and believes it true until evening. His indefatigable tongue is as loquacious as the waves in which he was born. But today, a grimace of distress had lowered the corners of his habitually-laughing mouth. By his side, Glogla, his siren, is moaning restlessly, and when she sees the chief hesitate, she hauls her newborn, little Plax, out of the water, who screeches with all his might, frightened, struggling desperately and twisting his scaly tail without letting go of the dead herring that he is clutching in his webbed hand, on which he was sucking a moment ago with his toothless mouth.

Klevorak approaches the river. Glogla, who reeks of fish and whose twisted rump inflames Pirip with desire when he glimpses it through the reeds, is devoid of charm for him. But none of the living beasts whose offspring are nourished on milk demands the help of the animal-kings in vain. And above all, Fauns and Tritons have the right to the particular amity of their brethren. The blood-bond between the three tribes is indestructible.

Klevorak moves into the water, knee-deep—for Gurgundo, so supple in the waves, is as nimble as a snail on land. And while the centaurs squat down on the sand or bathe their weary feet, tritons and sirens cluster around their chief; with broad gestures and loud voices, they harangue him all at once; the squeals of the sirens drown out the voices of the males, as sonorous as the breaking waves; the tritonneaux clutch at the centaur's legs, uttering shrill cries like those of seagulls. Impatiently, Klevorak whinnies and kicks out. The water splashes around him; the little ones fall over one another

as they retreat, jostling. In the reestablished silence, the centaur tells Gurgundo that the chief must speak for them all.

In a plaintive voice, the triton relates the misfortune that has just fallen upon his tribe: Neboum, the handsome Neboum, Glogla's own brother, who is capable of out-swimming a trout or a salmon, Neboum with the torso more viscous than an eel and the tail more glittering than a dorado, with the fingers better-webbed than a cormorant, Neboum, the fisher of red mullets, is dead, having fallen victim to a frightful fate.

While he was resting on the shingle, bloodthirsty aggressors have thrown themselves upon him. Capable in the waves of wrestling a crocodile, or putting a shark to flight, Neboum, surprised on land, was unable to defend himself. In an instant, he had been killed, before the eyes of his wife Pouzouli; she had seen the murderers gorge themselves on his blood and tear apart his lifeless limbs.

A dull roar rumbles in the centaurs' breasts. Nostrils flare, fists clench and hooves make the sand fly. Tails whip fuming flanks—but Klevorak imposes silence.

He suppresses the anger that is choking him, and asks who the murderer was. Whether it was Raram the jaguar, or the carnivorous tribe of the wolves, or the voracious hyena, he will pay with his life for the sin of having violated the strict law.

But Gurgundo shakes his head with the glaucous eyes. No, the guilty party was not among the beasts who have sworn the truce; even the most insane would not have scored the sovereign animals' own brother with his claws.

Klevorak's eyes flash; was it, then...?

His lips refuse to pronounce the name of the Impure Ones—but Gurgundo understands him, and reassure him.

No, they were not the murderers. Undoubtedly, though, the centaurs remember the Wild Beasts who, on encountering the rest of the teat-bearers, refused to bow down to the pacific yoke of the Dominators. Colossal were their heights, multiple their species. Once they had wandered the mountains and the forests, in numerous troops.

Only few years ago, there had been occasional sightings of the Mammoth with the rounded tusks, or the toad-elephant. Now, their tracks are scarcely ever seen any more on damp ground. What has become of the monsters of old? Because of their indomitable ill-humor, the centaurs had massacred many of them; such had been the fate of the Lions that they had exterminated in the Red Grottos. Many have killed one another in furious combats, or had recoiled before the six-limbed people. And when, from time to time, a wandering faun happened to glimpse them in the woods, he noticed before fleeing how much difficulty the giants had moving their weary limbs. Their breasts were heaving as if the air were drying them out; they sniffed the fruits and foliage languidly; and, as if Nature herself had rejected them, one often discovered their whitened skeletons among dry leaves or in the densest thickets—gigantic bones like those of fully-grown birch-trees.

Recovering their ancient ferocity, two Wild Beasts have attacked Neboum. Gurgundo describes the brown pelts of the aggressors, their drooling mouths, the enormous strength of their limbs, their height, superior to that of the centaurs...

The murder was committed on the Shingle Beach, at the final bend of the river, where its waters mingled with the briny sea. Perhaps they are still there, with their victim...

That is sufficient. No more talk. Action is better than words.

In two steps, Klevorak is on the bank. He shakes himself, and says to Gurgundo: "Swim, brother, with all speed. Let those who want to see the blood of Neboum washed in the blood of his murderers descend the river breathlessly!"

And amid the joyful howls of his people, the old chief, his white hair bristling on his centenarian head, utters the war cry that once announced death to the Lions roaring in the caverns.

In a trice, the beach is empty. The gallop of the centaurs is swallowed up by the pines. Along the thread of water the tritons make haste in order to witness the punishment. Only the tritonneaux remain, under the guard of two old sirens. In the shallow water warmed by the last rays of the sun, they chase one another and roll around, with noisy laughter and loud clapping of their webbed hands, fighting over little crabs on the muddy bed.

Bearers of death, the centaurs hurtle forward. Only for a few seconds does one or another of them pause to uproot a young tree; in haste he rejoins his brothers, and all of them strip the trunks of branches as they run, fashioning clubs.

Haidar has remembered the carcass of a mastodon lying in a thicket of furze. He draws aside, rummages among the bones, and comes back brandishing a femur—a terrible weapon that several others envy. Kolpitrū's gallop is heavy; in his hands he bears a boulder capable of smashing the carapace of a rhinoceros with a single blow. Hark the Rude disdains such assistance, though; with a great laugh, he extends his hardened arms and puffs out his bulbous chest; the power of his muscles is the only weapon he trusts.

The ground flees beneath the hooves. Only one more dune to cross, and they will reach the beach that Gurgundo specified.

In response to Klevorak's voice, the centaurs arrange themselves in battle order. In spite of his age, the chief is in the first rank, with Hark, Kolpitrū, Papacal, Kaplam and Haidar, the most vigorous of the six-limbed people. Behind them come the other adult males, and then those whose limbs are weighed down by old age, or have not yet attained their full strength. The females follow them, under the guard of Tregg the Gray, Pocolo and Palkaval.

The nostrils of the young ones are quivering, and a frisson wrinkles their flanks. Since the defeat of the Lions, the centaurs no longer fight battles, so uncontested is their dominion; and the centaress Kadilda, when her nation took possession of the Red Grottos, was only four years old. So, while the old ones grind their teeth and the bellicose heart of their race quivers in their slender torsos, she is fearful of combat, apprehensive of the frightful odor of blood, and hopes vaguely that the approaching darkness might hide the murderers from the vengeance that is pursuing them.

Haidar utters a cry, and points with his finger at something on the ground. The centaurs stop, bend down, sniff and hold a discussion. Two sets of vast clawed footprints appear distinctly in the sand. Kolpitrū's entire hoof disappears in the smallest of them.

One glance is sufficient for Klevorak to recognize the enemy tribe. Gurgundo was not lying.

By means of the tracks, the centaurs follow the Giant Bears, crossing the final dune on their trail and descending with them toward Shingle Beach. The foliage of the pines no longer blocks the views. The avengers advance into the open. Perhaps, by making a detour to the left, remaining masked by the woods, they would be able to take the enemy by surprise, but the six-limbed folk are scornful of ruses; they only deign to attack head on.

Eyes search the descending darkness...

A long whistle halts the clatter of hooves. The murmur of the entire herd replies to Klevorak's warning.

They have been seen. Their hearts are ready.

Some way ahead, two colossal forms rear up over the beach. At their feet, frightful shapeless debris is detectable. The giant bears had fallen asleep beside their victim; the approach of the avengers has awakened them. They give no thought to fleeing. They gather themselves, swinging their enormous heads, mouths open, monstrous paws raised, and a rumble of menace escapes their breasts. Perhaps they do not know their adversary, and imagine that they can intimidate him.

Klevorak's voice cuts through the silence. To the murderers, he announces death. Such is the law of the centaurs. And the clamor of his people repeats in thunder the inflexible formula that imposes peace on earth:

“Those who kill perish!”