

III

Not thinking about anything, still scared by the hellish vision, I went back to my room where Leonard had fallen into a chair, his arms dangling, his eyes popping out of his head and staring in shock at a really hideous face—which was mine. The monster that looked like me was purple, black—in a frenzy, for sure. I understood Leonard's fright. Let's be honest, I had never been handsome. I was always ugly, plain and simple ugly—really *ugly*! You cannot deny me this. But never was my ugly face hideous. And yet, this head that rolled on my pillow could inspire nothing but disgust, hatred and fear; my tortured nose looked like a dented snout; my naughty eyes with normally yellow pupils (faded yellow) looked no better flashing these red flames—then green. A swollen tongue pushed out of my open, slobbering mouth. I was a horror!

What could the wicked Tkoukrian Kmôhoûn have done *in me*?

That's why I was not sure I wanted to rejoin my body.

The guard François was more used to apocalyptic faces than Leonard, but was still a little uncomfortable and sounded hoarser than usual when he spoke:

"He's been like this for more than ten hours. He was calm and sleepy most of the morning, but he wanted to say something when Bid'homme was here—he couldn't *espress hisself* and he got angry like you see 'im. Doctor Froin said he didn't *parlyze* his tongue, that it's a case like he's never *abserved* and so on. And there you go, their *medicine*! I don't believe in *sleepwarkers* or *shippers**! The *sargeon*, yeah! They'll show 'im! Cut out where's bad. Everyone can see what's outside! (or even a *trumor* inside—that can be *fected* by the *estruments*!) But the workings that is right on the inside, I can't believe that a doctor can *look at 'em* in the body. Wouldn't he need glasses? That might work with the *Rangain* rays ** cept it's a damn joke!"

And thus the doctor was judged.

But Leonard was not listening to his dissertation. He wanted details about his patient.

"If only there was *sometin'* like it. If only he talked like a *phornograph*. It's too bad there ain't no *punited* damages for clumsy people who keep an eye on other people's patients!"

François was getting angry now. I could see what was going to happen and it was time that I stepped in if I wanted to stop a forever regrettable quarrel between these two eminent psychiatric aides.

I got over my horror and went to my body, suddenly afraid that I might not be able to reenter. But the Tkoukrian must have felt my presence: I was literally drunk in by my overly average organism that Kmôhoûn had not helped improve.

I felt him say to me: "*Aha! And none too soon! I couldn't talk! I didn't see any more writing—painting—whatever—in your damned brain: you took everything! I won't let you go away again until I have studied, learned and memorized whatever is necessary for earthly life—to paint them and write them for myself. I wanted to spout garbage at that agitated Bid'homme and that moron François...and nothing came out! Nothing but my thoughts and words of Tkoukra: I had a foggy memory of your language, but when I tried to use what I thought I'd understood—nothing—more nothing! I could use your larynx for nothing but angry moans... I was suffocating!*"

But I was not listening: I heard Leonard and François shouting names at each other; they were going to start fighting any minute now if I did not step in.

I said very loudly, coldly, with that flat voice that always freezes the most warlike champions for a second—especially when they are not expecting to be shouted at:

"Hey! What's going on? You're going to slug each other because the cat got my tongue! It was nothing! A simple nervous crisis that really upset me, it's true, but that is over with now. I hope, Leonard, that you'll calm down since no one caused this crisis—not François, nor anyone else. Give me something to eat; I'm starving. After that, you can go and do whatever you want; I want to be alone."

The two momentary enemies stared at me, dazed, *flattened*, as my guardian would say later. They moved away from each other, still threatening their fists so as not to seem to surrender too easily—

* Shepherds

** No doubt Röntgen: X-Rays.

mumbling meaningless insults and jerking their heads, chins stuck out, which perfectly illustrated their bitterness and daring and clearly warned their opponent to “never try it again” if they didn’t want to “taste some of this!”

When we had finished lunch, the Tkoukrian and I, and Leonard had taken away his fading anger and heavy contempt that had crushed François, (when he was in the room and when he wasn’t), the intruder inside me forced me to take pity on his hardships of the day:

“Ah! I had a hard time of it! I was hungry and thirsty—feelings I knew all too well on Tkoukra!—but I couldn’t ask for anything. Plus, I was tortured by that awful puppet you call Bid’homme. He’s the one who should be locked up! Compared to him, you seem more reasonable! Would you believe that he abused me, tortured me himself? I guess because I didn’t answer him? I didn’t understand what he was saying to me anymore, but I was almost sure that my silence was too much for him. François held me down and Bid’homme pried open my mouth and tried to grab my tongue, which slipped through his fingers—naturally!—but it still hurt a lot. I bit him, too, and as hard as I could! After that, he grabbed me by my hair and beard, tore at them like a Devil and knocked my jaws together! Seeing it was no good, he took me away to a big, empty, sad room and he ordered me to be thrown into an ice-cold bath. Then they shot a painful jet of water into my mouth. My teeth are still shivering! Ah! The coward! We will get revenge! Do you want to?”

The poor Tkoukrian! They really tortured him well in *my* body! I felt the shooting pains in my head; my jaws were shaking and a bad fever burned and froze my blood in turn.

“Kmôhoûn, we will get our revenge sooner than you think. That scoundrel Bid’homme is done for!”

I’m sure the Tkoukrian gloated. He dropped the psychic tongue and said aloud in my voice, *“Bravo! The Enemy Force! The Enemy Force!”*

He, too, knew the Enemy Force, just like Mabire and myself? Of course! He had read—is it right, read?—the two words in my poor little brain, where my return just *rewrote* it in signs that were like letters, images, sounds... I cannot express myself anymore—everything I had ever seen, heard and thought in my life!

Kmôhoûn continued: *“Ah! I was very happy that you came back, Veuly! You are so useful to me that I feel—no kidding—a real friendship with you. I promise I will never drag you into anything that you’ll regret; or if I do, it’ll only be the result of my tainted past forcing me to.”*

“I feel a lot better!”

“Don’t worry ahead of time! I am thankful to you and I will hold myself back. I will tame myself!”

Oh! This was even scarier than the rest! From now on, I was going to be guilty of all the horrors that the past or present evil nature of Kmôhoûn the Tkoukrian might force him to commit! For a minute, I liked being a poor mental patient who was irresponsible for his actions! But this selfish joy of a coward and rascal did not last long. If the dangerous intruder whom I harbored was going to make me the *acting* witness of infamies that would hurt my loved ones—Irene—my people, my friends, (it’s the same thing!)—those poor innocent devils who do not care about semi-nasty, not to say hateful beings—how desperate I was going to be!

I would put up a fight, ha! The fight of a lunatic who had crises!

I am going to live in a trance from now on! Ah! Kmôhoûn, I want nothing to do with your friendship if it cannot keep you—a Tkoukrian bandit, a primitive anthropoid? —the son of a worse star than this one—whatever you might say—from using me for your own ends!

Why didn’t you try to incarnate in some tyrant? They are very weak despite the power that you think they have, and in spite of the abuses they commit. You could have chosen a headhunter from New Guinea or Mindanao, a Tuareg sheik, a Sioux chief, a Patagonian horseman, a bashi-bazouk, a warrior, anything! But that you came looking for me, specifically—me—a poor peon cobbler of verse, a failed bard like Sir Oswald-Norbert Nigeot (bing, bang, mechanics!), member of the Philosophers’ Club and my fellow prisoner—me, the dried up fruit of so many jobs, famous good-for-nothing whose only fairly glorious merit is to be absolutely harmless—you have to admit that this is beyond all cosmic understanding, O Tkoukrian from the Aldebaran constellation!

“I’ve already told you,” Kmôhoûn answered, *“and I was speaking metaphorically—if you’d like—that I was bragging a little when I said that I had done long and patient research before subletting a small corner from you.”* Nice sublet and Kmôhoûn had found some wonderful expressions in my “eloquence shop.” *“I was in a hurry and you were the first feeble soul I came across... so...”*

“But, poor wretch, did you stop to think that the body that you got into wasn’t free, that it was locked up in Froin’s institution? Now you have some idea of it after suffering Bid’homme’s pranks and learning all kinds of things by reading my mind like a first edition. So, if I don’t get out of here, the only part of this planet you’ll study will be the inside of a mental hospital, and for the rest you’ll have to trust my vision of things—my personal opinions!”

“How could I have known this when I come from such a different world? And honestly, it was so grim there that the conditions of my present life seem soft in comparison...”

“And Bid’homme’s practices?”

“Hey! I don’t suffer as much since we share the pains of our nervous system. If you knew Tkoukra, you would learn to adapt, like me, to a lot of things! OK! We’re friends now so I can tell you what life was like on that cursed star. Anyway, if I didn’t, my memories would be carved into our head in spite of me and then you might end up becoming crazier than you are, totally confused by the grotesque images you see inside yourself and you would blame them on a more and more incurable madness...”

In fact, since my return, I had glimpsed strange landscapes in my brain, hazy and muddled, which I was starting to worry about, scared of another attack of fever or dementia.

“I’ll give you the gist of it,” Kmôhoûn responded. “After that, the rest won’t bother you much when you see it. You’ll have the basics that will keep you from being surprised by anything! And so I need to talk to you about my cruel past life...”

“Good! Tell me something about your former planet...”

“It’s a red star that I saw for the last time shining strong, but very tiny, just when the Earth was fat in space like a knurl on one of Bid’homme’s spurs. This star is a chaos of blood-colored rocks. There are a few inhabitable valleys hollowed out between steep mountains; black-bottomed valleys with bloody walls under a charcoal sky, or copper depending on the time. The people there lead a life that would chill you to the bone. In those rocky deserts surrounded by the walls of impassable mountains are squeezed throngs of beings like I was, without homes, without shelter of any kind, under the long, abrasive, icy lashes of Northern winds...”

“Are they very different from the people of Earth?”

“No, not at all, they’re a lot alike, but dreadfully ugly, disgusting monsters—I felt that today—with animal manes, skin the color of mud and blood, claws like curved swords, made to rip and tear, and bulging, bloodshot, haggard eyes, sometimes full of cowardly terror and other times full of merry cruelty.

“The inhabitable parts of the star are sometimes so crowded with living beings that all the bodies can’t lie down in the narrow valleys; they can’t stretch out. For days and nights on end, they stay standing up, cramped and pressed together. Their bones stab into the thin skin and lean flesh of each other. At a certain point, blood flows. Then, the Tkoukrians go crazy, start struggling, get their arms free and tear each other apart with their sword-like claws; thousands upon thousands of corpses fall to the ground and rot so fast that, after a few hours, they are liquefied and form a kind of mud. Less than a day after the carnage, crops of beings like them, but weaker, spring up from the organic silt. The horde of the strong who have survived run through this pasture and devour the still warm flesh. They get so drunk on blood that the star itself seems to scream in space. But many of the newcomers escape the massacre and grow unbelievably fast and everything starts over again! Born under such conditions, the inhabitants of Tkoukra are sexless. They do not know the comforts of love and they live only to murder each other. They know nothing but hatred and fear. The worst thing is that in other existences, obviously before degenerating (?), they knew the joys of love and tenderness that are impossible for them in their land of bloody pulp. And the vague memory of sweet, satisfied hopes tortures them to death. Have you heard enough?”

“Oh, yes! Yes... because now the cruelties of Tkoukra are etched into my brain all too clearly, as you said.”

And I could not sleep that night, haunted as I was by the vision of the bloody mud star that I did not want to talk about, but that I knew about as if I myself was a Kmôhoûn with claws like curved swords, a Kmôhoûn with bulging, haggard eyes, shining with red and green fires.