

THE MASTER OF *Winter*



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Les Entraves de l'Hiver

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THE MASTER OF *Winter*

*«Love without eternity is called anguish:
eternity without love is called hell »*

GUSTAVE THIBON
L'ignorance étoilée, Fayard, 30 novembre 1983

*To Mom,
no words will ever be enough to express how much I love you.*



PROLOGUE

His breath short, he no longer had the strength to stand.

Kneeling on the ground, he was waiting for his executioner. All the barriers were now activated. Through his blurred vision, Jack observed the glyphs that constellated his skin. Blue and shiny, they muzzled his powers, spread a dull, intolerable pain, in his whole body.

The Master of Winter abhorred his Sleep. Yet, arrived on this very day of the year, he expected his Guardian with a impatience hardly contained.

Let's get over it.

Even before he could see him, he knew he was there. Like every year they met, he had borrowed a different appearance, but this uncompromising look remained the same. A man of a forty years slowly approached him, too slowly. The pain at its climax, the Master of Winter bowed his head. A feeling of frustration growled in him to the idea that the Guardian interpreted this gesture as a sign of deference. It was none of it, he just didn't have a choice.

"Your time is over" declared the Guardian. "Go back to the Sleep."

Immediately the pain began to recede, and Jack was seized by an irrepressible languor. His whole body became heavy, the eyelids were already closing, his spirit saturated with melancholy that was gradually numbing.

One day, that would stop, he promised himself.

One day, he'd never go back to the Sleep again.



CHAPTER I

A faint glow pointed in the dark room. The light on the wall grew in intensity, revealing a complex illustration engraved in the rock. The lines were gradually filled with a bright white. In the perfect silence, a profile was drawn on the granite wall. The sketch swelled and a sleeping silhouette sprang of the stone.

Trapped in the Sleep, he regained his curves of flesh. Magic poured into his veins, bringing him back to life. Suspended in the air, curled up like a fetus, it took him a few more moments to come out of his

Then came the consciousness.torpor.

The brutal, sudden, immediate consciousness.

Jack Frost opened his eyes wide, flitting his eyelids. A long inspiration helped him extricate from his lethargy. Quickly, feelings came in. He fought the despair that had gripped him at the time of Sleep, against the loneliness that had rocked him like a mother during those months in the shadow. He shook his head, driving away the pain and suffering, and then welcomed the renewal.

Slowly, the Master of Winter went down, his barefoot anchored on the cold ground. A quick look in the room taught him that, without any surprise, nothing had moved during his absence. The body still numb, he tested the muscles of his arms, tamed the tingling of his legs. The sensation in his movements was exhilarating. With a critical glance, he looked at the back of his hands and forearms, the pale shackles were already taunting him.

Jack approached the console, patted the rough bark. The moss lingered there tickled the pulp of his fingers. Then he smiled, because this year, he would be ready. The thrill of excitement rolled down his spine and galvanized him of a new euphoria.

Finally.

He rolled his shoulders, bowed his head, spread his toes. With a smile on his lips, he enjoyed the feeling of freedom, the ease of his gestures. Chasing the last numbness of his body by tonic moves, he evolved in the room, reclaiming it.

Each year, the same background welcomed him. The room summarily furnished contained only the rare trinkets accumulated over the centuries. A sofa to daydream, a low table with a few ornaments full of memories, and a high shelf gathering the meagre possessions of a long life. Everything was dimly lit by ice candles always broadcasting a bluish halo

An oppressive feeling grips Jack at the sight of the glyphs on the granite wall. Usually, he avoided it, fleeing this permanent reminder of his limited time. But this year, the Master of Winter tamed his fear and looked with fierce determination the features of this prison which he abhorred. He had a plan.

Confident, he turned away to join the only adjoining room: his workshop.

The bluish shades of the Awakening Room gave way to orange tones. The heavy heat that reigned there hit Jack head-on, creeping into each of his pores. The Eternal Fire was purring, eager to be solicited.

Jack activated the bellows and placed the glass paste in the oven to make it malleable. The gestures came back with ease, the habits took over. Usually, he fled the high temperatures that hurt his body as well as his magic. However, the one generated by the forge gave a different feeling. It belonged to this process of creation which the Master of Winter so cherished so much.

He grabbed his cane and took the pasty glass. For a few seconds, he was hypnotized by the incandescent variations of red and orange that adorned the material. The bright colors caught him. His mind wandered, barely for a few moments, in a colorful spring setting. He imagined the trees in bloom dancing lazily at the whim of the wind; the petals flying and swirling; the gentle song of the birds at the first light of day; the breeze of a warm wind on his cold skin. All pictures that had never come to life before his eyes but through a television screen.

He sighed.

Using a damp paper, he wrapped the material and manipulated it to smooth it out and then round it. Like a goldsmith, Jack loved his creations. When the form appealed to him, he placed his lips at the other end of the cane and blew. Suddenly, he breathed air while rolling the tool under his fingers, again and again, giving the glass time to dig. The exercise required effort, and a film of sweat covered his skin. It would take him a few days to recover all his strength and endurance.

The sphere was done. All that was missing was the final touch, the delicate part. Jack took a laborious inspiration, breathed, and magic poured into the receptacle. The center of the globe was filled with swirling yellow smoke. With sharp and precise gestures, the creator cut the orb with a powerful clamp, then he levitated it with his hand.

Jack loved to contemplate his creations. In his early days, the first Galobas were far from so beautiful. It had taken him time and practice. Satisfied, he sent bursts of wind to cool the object without bursting it. The orb finally ready, Jack seized it with precaution, then returned to the Awakening Room, near the console. He looked at each base and removed the accumulated dust. With great care, he placed the Galoba on the first support. The yellow mist swirled and slowly flowed away. The image evoked a miniature tornado contained in a glass sphere. He would have to build a new one tomorrow.

Winter was coming.



Invisible to men, Jack crossed Le Parc de l'Orangerie to enjoy his first outing of the year. He rose in the air and slipped his fingers on the bare branches of the trees to interrupt the circulation of sap as the frost approached. Small buds had already formed, ready to hatch at the first temperature rise. After repeating his gesture on some plants, he continued his walk on the ground. The function of the Galoba was to initiate this process. However, Jack also loved being in direct contact with nature, transforming it with his hands. Of all the Masters, he was the one who intervened least on the fauna and flora, asleep for the most part.

During his walk, he got excited by all the sensations that struck him : the smells of grilled meat from the hot dog stand, the mulled wine widely consumed at this time of the year, the heady perfume of the young lady who passed by him, or the delicate scent of the sun's rays against the wet bark of bare trees. He enjoyed all this olfactory charge.

Every waking day was rigorously counted, and the Master of Winter savored every minute of it, to make up for all that he had missed during his Sleep. For this, Jack did not hesitate to use his powers to penetrate the minds of people in search of their memories.

Exceptionally bright at the beginning of December, the sun shone on the glasses of a businessman Jack encountered. The soft rays of the sun highlighted the naked curves of this sleeping nature. As people were aware of the dark period ahead, they seemed to want to store up this luminosity, this heat, and retain it a little longer.

“enjoy”, he thought

The proximity with humans was an inexhaustible source of amusement. Jack loved to see them evolve, constantly fascinated by their complexity. When he thought he had decoded the cogs of their mind, they ended up surprising him with an unexpected behavior.

Catching sight of a group of young people sitting on a blanket near the Temple of Love, the Master of Winter approached them, intrigued. The temperatures were cold and he was surprised to discover a small band of students ready to endure the freshness of the day to spend time together. In recent years, the mobile phone was booming, humans worshipped this tool and would have made green with envy all deities having ever existed. Jack squats behind a teenager whose glasses were constantly sliding down his nose. A checkered grid with various colored shapes invaded the screen. What could this strange game consist of?

Absorbed by his part, the teenager didn't notice the heavy glances that his comrade, seated opposite, threw at him. Without realizing the presence of Jack, however, the young man's body reacted to his proximity; the thin down which covered his neck sprang. Almost unconscious of the gesture, he tightened the collar of his coat around his neck.

“ Why such an obsession with a small box?” he whispered.

Of course, the teenager didn't hear him. No one could see or hear him without his decision. What was the point ? He was just Jack Frost, the Master of Winter. Humans didn't need to know what was going on behind the scene. As long as the seasons were passing, as long as spring followed winter, why worry ? Why seek to understand ?

Jack finally stood up. A smile at the corner of his lips, he sent a targeted gust of wind to the player's phone at the young lady's foot. Obsessed, the teenager hurried to retrieve him. As her hand was about to land on the object, she met the girl's hand. The boy raised his head, crossed his comrade's bluish gaze. He scraped his throat and lifted his glasses up his nose.

“Sorry, it slipped”.

“No problem” she answered, blushing.

Jack smirked. It was up to them now.



Night was looming. Jack invoked a stronger wind to observe people bundle up in their coats and rush to their homes. The message was clear : winter was on its way.

Like every year, he gave in to an old habit. Jack stood in front of a window and observed. In the light of the candles in the old time, in electricity today, families always reproduced the same rituals. There were those who ate together; the lonely ones who nibbled, their gaze in the void ; the parents who argued once the children were in bed ; or worse, those who succumbed to total indifference, removing their mask of false happiness.

During the evening, Jack traveled from house to apartment, from ground to floor. He gorged himself on this animation, taming the habits of these curious humans. For only a few moments he was them, living their lives by proxy.

These annoying humans who had only one breath on this Earth and who, too often, ruined it. He liked to imagine what he would do with an existence that he could dispose of as he wished. Jack looked down on his hands. Soon, the white stigmas would gradually glow with an insolent pale blue. But not yet. He still had some time.



CHAPTER II

“Mathilde, are you alright ?”

Eyes closed, her head buried in her hands, the young woman waited for this sudden pain that seemed to want to pierce her brain to end.

“Mmmh” she muttered.

A few endless seconds passed before the sensation fades. Barely enough to allow her to raise her head and open her eyes.

“Is everything okay ?” Amanda asked again.

“Yes, sure”.

Mathilde took back her pen and tried to follow Mr. Cardan’s course.

His monotonous presentation on ethics in the medical field passed over her head. However she tried to make a good figure for the remaining fifteen minutes.

The hour finally ended, closing the day.

“Can you give me your notes, please ?” Mathilde begged as they went out.

“Maybe...”

“Come on. Be nice”.

Amanda held out her leaves, ostensibly raising her chin.

“Thank you. You’re saving me”.

“I know, I know”.

She emphatically released her frizzy hair from her shoulder and sent a bright smile back to her friend.

The sky remained stubbornly grey, and, no without any surprise, dull weather welcomed the girls as they left the building. Although winter was Mathilde’s favourite season, she enjoyed a cool day with a ray of sunshine.

“Mathilde ! Amanda ! Over here”.

Attracted by the call, the girls discovered Nicolas and Louis, slumped on a bench.

“So ? How was the ethics course ?” Louis asked.

Due to his fragile health, Professor Cardan had been absent from the back to school, depriving students of many hours of lessons. The search to find a replacement had been unsuccessful and the students, left to themselves, had only their syllabus for only teacher.

Mathilde lifted her eyes and immediately regretted this gesture which accentuated her pain.

“Boring as hell !”

“Told you so...”

“I think he even gave me a headache” Mathilde groans as she fell heavily on Nicolas’s lap.

“Watch out ! Damn, what’s the plan ? Break my legs ?” he grumbled.

“If you didn’t monopolize the whole bench...” Amanda replied.

“You can come on my lap, if you want” Nicolas suggested.

Amanda laughed and then punched him in the arm.

“Hey, you’re bullies, today! What’s going on, you need some attention, or what?” he railed while Mathilde settled between Louis and him.

“ There ! I was waiting for this one” Louis claimed.

"You know how he is" Mathilde replied, lying her head on his shoulder. "Have you heard from Florine?"

To the evocation of his girlfriend, Louis's brown eyes were adorned with glittering stars. Since Mathilde knew him, she had never seen him so bitten by a girl.

"Yeah, she got her theoretical license".

"Awesome! We should go to karaoke to celebrate!" Amanda said.

"Fuck, no, Amanda. You're such a pain with your karaoke", Nicolas railed, lighting a cigarette. " You need a rehab, damn it".

The beautiful young girl hurriedly tore the cigarette from his lips and crushed it under her Doc Martens.

"Watch your mouth, and rehab yourself from cigarette before moralizing people. Asshole".

The tone rose between Nicolas and Amanda. It was to the one who would get the last discussion. Louis and Mathilde attended, smiling, at this usual spat. Sometimes they bet on the one who would blow the other.

" I got to go. I have to stop by the family before I go to work" Mathilde declared, rising up from the bench.

"Oh, great" Amanda ironed.

"Do not stay longer than necessary" Louis said slipping a comforting arm around her shoulders.

Mathilde nodded and took a deep breath. Then she waved her hand, a poor smile on her face and she turned around.



As far as she could remember, Mathilde never knew her house without a noise, not to say a racket, to fill the space. The television was shouting too loud; the twins Jacqueline and Thadée were fighting; Jeanne was singing loudly, persuaded to be the future big star; Diego was shouting in the crazy hope of getting a little calm. Could we really have silence in a sibling of twelve children?

Mathilde was convinced that this was one of the major reasons why her two older brothers, Pierre and André, left the family nest as soon as they graduated. As for her, the third child, she didn't had the strength to wait. That's why she rented a miserable studio to follow her caregiver cursus away from this anxious family.

Past the entrance hall, Mathilde crossed the door on the right and entered the living room. Not surprisingly, the old worn-out sofa was empty. She saw Simone, the three-year-old girl on the ground, with her face only a metre from the screen. With a reprobate pout, she shook her head before exclaiming: " Hello, little doll".

Absorbed by the cartoons, Simone jumped to the sound of her elder's voice. She pivoted and welcomed Mathilde with a broad smile.

"Mathiti !"

She straightened herself with all the grace of a child and rushed into her sister's arms. Her pretty blond curls bounced with each of her clumsy steps. The genetics that governed the appearance of the siblings had always surprised Mathilde, who had given up understanding why some of his brothers and sisters were blond and others brown. André, in all his impertinence, even wore a red hair that she had often secretly envied. As for her, as well as her brothers Diego and Thomas, she composed with smooth brown hair.

"How are you ?" She asked to Simone.

"Good, Good".

It was always in that moments when that she felt guilty. She had the impression of abandoning them. Pierre and André gone, she became the eldest in the house. Diego and Jeanne were two years younger than her. Sixteen was a bit of a stupid age, a selfish age. And yet, they did their best. But, just like Mathilde, they began to tire and desperately sought a little freedom.

Simone in the arms, Mathilde turned off the television before heading towards the kitchen. Their mother, Evelyne, prepared the meal for the little ones with Judith, the youngest nine months old, on her hip. The aromas of garlic and onion saturated the room and the young woman thought that she would need a good shampoo to get rid of this tenacious smell.

"Hi, mom".

She approached to kiss her, but her mother just gave her the cheek without even taking her eyes off the pan. After this exchange, Mathilde laid a kiss in the smooth hair of her sister who seemed to say hello with her babbling.

"How are you ?" Mathilde asked, trying to chase away the frustration brought up by this total disregard.

She installed Simone in her high chair and presented her with a small Minnie figurine found on the table to occupy her.

"You stay for dinner?" her mother finally asked.

"No, I'm not staying".

She never did. Otherwise she would have been incapable of leaving at all. His mother would ask her to take charge of the meal for the eldest, Diego, Jeanne and Philippine. Then, without her seeing it coming, she would find herself giving the bath to Judith, watching over Jacqueline and Thadée's bath, ensuring that Thomas did his toilet properly at the sink. All these things she had repeated hundreds of times until she lose herself, out of breath.

When Mathilde felt her will weaken, when the pleading gaze of her younger brothers and sisters shook her heart, she remembered that it was not her responsibility in this house, she was not the one in charge.

Since her parents wanted a large family, it was their duty to assume.

Aware that she would no longer receive a word from her mother, she abandoned her to her tasks and went up to the chambers. A whiff of nostalgia bound his chest to the groans of the stairs. She knew every squeak by heart, and childhood memories came to her mind, when she and her brothers searched to come down quietly to watch for Santa Claus.

“We’re about to make the tree!” Thomas yelled, as soon as he saw her.

Coming out of the toilet, he pulled up his pants and rushed towards her.

“Hello Tom”, she insisted.

“Hello Mathiti. We’re about to make the tree”, he repeated, full of joy.

“Really ? Who said that ?”

She crouched down to help him put his shirt back in his pants. Thomas was approaching the age of eight, but, unfortunately, he hadn’t all the attention needed to learn the small gestures of everyday life.

“Dad said it”.

“OK, OK”, she capitulated.

Reassured that the information came from their father, the young woman drew a more serene smile. Although he was not present, he still respected his commitments. Forced to provide for everyone, the head of the family had two grueling jobs and wasn’t often at home. So the children were left with their mother’s neglected care.

“This week-end, he said” Thomas insisted.

“Can’t wait to see that” Mathilde replied with a joy she didn’t completely feel.

She quickly calculated the date: December 12. She couldn't help but think that they were making an effort this year. Last winter, the children had a tree just for Christmas Eve.

After greeting the rest of her siblings, Mathilde hurried out of the house without bothering to say goodbye to her mother.



“Hello, Monique !”

Mathilde passed through the front door in a good mood.

“Good evening, Mathilde. How are you ?”

“Wonderful, when I’m here”.

“You’re the first surface technician I meet who comes to work with such optimism” the reception clerk said, a smile on her face.

“Well, what do you want me to say ? I love the residents”.

“And they love you too!”

Mathilde joined the dressing room to change. When it came to leave the family cocoon during her studies, financial concern was quickly established. Fortunately, she found this housework in a nursing home. A real bargain.

“Good evening, Mister Frederickson”.

The eighty-year-old man was reading a book on a bench. As Mathilde passed, he raised his head and adjusted his glasses on his nose.

“Good evening, young lady”.

With a smile on her face, Mathilde pushed her wagon down the hall to begin cleaning the floor.

Rest homes scared most people. They saw it as the end of life and people with reduced mobility who sometimes lost their minds. This decline was disturbing. I sent the inevitable back in the face: one day or another, it would be our turn. Mathilde, for her part, liked to evolve among old people. She enjoyed spending time with them, trying to improve their daily lives in one way or another. The “older”, as they were called, had so much to teach, often incredible stories to share. The nurse’s apprentice loved to be the listening ear they could confide in.



Outside, the night had settled comfortably in the streets of Strasbourg. The streetlights illuminated sporadically the sidewalks. Mathilde wound the zipper of his coat up to her chin, put on her red gloves and pushed her cap of the same color on her head to preserve herself from the small sharp wind that had risen.

As she moved away from the building, her attention was drawn to a silhouette. In front of the window of a resident’s room, stood a young man who watched the interior shamelessly. Mathilde frowned, divided between indignation and apprehension. Who had been able to evolve in the property without being worried? Who was that pervert who took such pleasure in spying on seniors without their knowledge?

Angry and determined to argue, Mathilde approached the man. As she approached, she distinguished her atypical white hair and was surprised to see that he was barefoot.

“Hey ! What are you doing here ?” She asked, a comfortable distance between them.

Mathilde had to repeat herself so that the intruder would deign to shift his attention to her. He planted his large blue eyes in her own and blinked his eyelids several times, as if he were suddenly coming out of a dream.

“What are you doing ?” she repeated, angry.

The stalker, confused, continued to stare at her, then looked behind him, as if expecting to discover someone.

“Yes, I’m talking to you ! Do you have any family here ?”

“You see me ?” the young man finally asked.

Mathilde, exhausted, lifted her eyes.

“I see you, I even hear you and I’m asking you for the third time what you are doing here. It’s a rest home and the visits are over. You shouldn’t be here”.

She tried to determine whether he was making fun of her or if he was as lost as his face seemed to indicate. He wore a white T-shirt, whose light-weight view made the young woman shiver with cold, and classic jeans. Was he a homeless man? Although a suspicion of guilt pervaded her mind, this didn’t detract from the fact that he didn’t have to prowl near the residents’ windows.

“Can I help you ?” She tried again.

Still confused, the young man continued to blink as if it were the last duty of his body. Then, suddenly, he disappeared. Mathilde cried out and retreated a few steps. Nervous, she turned on herself, scrutinizing the surroundings bathed at night in search of that white hair which she would have sworn not to have dreamed. What had just happened? Without asking for anything else, she rushed away from the retirement home to her apartment, determined to cast this strange moment out of her mind.



CHAPTER III

She saw me. She saw me. But, how could she see me?

The question was revolving in the head of the Master of Winter without he could find a satisfactory. He didn't understand the feelings debating inside him. He had never been surprised in any way. And yet, that night, a young woman caught him and crossed him. Him. Silly girl.

Flying from roof to roof, he observed the clear night sky where some pale stars appeared. Jack sometimes regretted the time when electricity didn't exist, that time when the stars reigned supreme over the celestial vault.

He finally reached the tiles of a row house which he knew very well. Skillfully, he suspended himself along the ledge and invoked a wind to keep himself in the air, at height of a window that opened onto a dimly lit room. The owner of the place, an old lady of seventy-three, knit in his armchair. Jack knocked at the tile.

The woman turned sharply to the window. A broad smile spread over her false teeth, she straightened herself up from the chair, much slower than in her young years, and came to open the frame.

“Jack ! It’s nice to see you. Come in”.

She stepped aside to give some space to her guest and he flew to the middle of the room before landing feet on the ground. Like every year he made a quick tour of the room, caressing the trinkets which he knew by heart.

“How are you, Denise ?”

“Like an old woman”, she said, falling back to her seat.

Amused, Jack smiled and stared at his friend for a few moments. Some wrinkles marked the contour of her eyes, her hands bore new age spots and it seemed to him that she was thinner than last year. Yes, she was getting old. All the humans were moving in the same direction, a direction that he would never take, condemned to watch every soul he met die.

“You’ll be my little Denise forever”, he stated, kneeling in front of her.

The old lady put her green eyes in his. They had lost none of the spark that had illuminated her gaze all her life. She tapped Jack’s cheek with her wrinkled hand, letting the scent of vervain float. After being around Denise all these years, he doubted that he would ever be able to breathe this smell without thinking about her.

“You know how to talk to girls”.

This thought brought Jack back to the rest home incident. He straightened his brows, grabbed a wooden chair and sat down in front of his friend.

“I need to talk to you about something”.

Jack recounted the events of the early evening, and Denise’s face showed an astonishment that echoed his own feelings.

“She saw you!”

“And talked to me”.

“But no one has ever been able to see you without your consent. I don’t understand”.

“Neither do I!” He claimed, rising from his chair.

“You should have seen her scold me. Who does she think she is, really?” she said taking over her knitting work.

Jack pinched his lips.

"I do nothing wrong".

"This is voyeurism, Jack".

"I don't watch moments of intimacy. I resume my observations to the living room, the dining room or the kitchen".

"Still, it's voyeurism", Denise insisted, without taking her eyes off the knit.

"Whatever" Jack resigned, not willing to continue this frustrating conversation. "That doesn't tell me how that girl could see me".

"Maybe you wanted to be seen, for once".

Denise's tone had softened, and her words made their way to him. Did he really want to be seen?

"All these winters spent watching, without contact with humans, or so little... You're not quite like us, but our closeness has left its mark on you. You feel so many similar things. Is it so surprising to want to interact?"

"You are childish and fickle. Why would I want to mingle with humans?" Jack replied whose interest suddenly turned to a photo frame. "Liar. Loneliness weighs on you, I'm sure. You need interactions".

"I've got you", Jack declared shrugging shoulders as if his answered resolved the matter.

Her friend's gaze was filled with indulgence. When had she grown so much? The Master of Winter remembered the little girl with her pigtails, her nose full of freckles and her smile missing two teeth.

"An old woman who is only good at knitting and rehashing dusty memories. You don't need that in your life, Jack" she replied bitterly.



The heat of the forge burned his skin while Denise's words came to his mind. The rest home incident had never happened and was spinning in his mind like a heady song that cannot be undone. What was special about that girl? Why her rather than anyone else? He had to get to the bottom of it.

Jack stirred the metal in the hot coals to soften it a little more. He passed his forearm on his brow covered with sweat. The proximity to the heat weakened him, as always. It drew from his reserves of water, so precious for the magic he exploited.

However, on that day, the task was worth it. He pulled out the glowing iron from his bed of embers and placed it on the anvil to beat it. Then began the creation. Jack modeled two fine bracelets. Their material came from Mount Musa. It took him three years to locate the right metal vein in the rock, and another year to extract it. But patience had paid off. With each hammer stroke, Jack recited the incantations in the forgotten tongue. The runes were subtly engraved on the polished surface. In total, ten symbols adorned the two bracelets along their entire length.

Jack contemplated the jewels with growing excitement. They were neither beautiful nor elegant, but it was not their primary calling. Before bathing them in water to freeze them, the Winter Master checked their size.

Once the ornaments had cooled, Jack took them. He observed them with a satisfaction that puffed up his chest. Impatient, almost feverish, he put a bracelet on each wrist and appreciated the weight and freshness of the metal against his skin. A step ahead of him.



A new evening fell upon the city. It was strange to realize that we were talking about the rise of the day, but about the fall of the night. Why couldn't a night bloom? Dawn? Or emerge? When evening came, humans rushed into the comfort and security of their homes. Perhaps it was the darkness that frightened them, the danger that hid there. Their fertile imagination created monsters hidden in the darkness and the inner darkness of Men gave them life, perpetrating the same atrocities that terrified them.

Jack was walking along the Jewish Street, observing the Christmas decorations that invaded the windows and avenues. All you had to do was to look up and marvel at the swarm of dazzling little stars that stretched over your heads. The atmosphere was becoming more and more colourful every day. On the streets, the scents of mulled wine and cinnamon tickled the smell. Impatience won the children at the view of the enigmatic big bearded gentleman. These magical moments even managed to reach the adults, the "old ones" who let themselves be drawn into the magic of Christmas.

If the illuminations and the arrival of the holidays emboldened the greatest number, Jack saw in them only the approach of the end. Of his end. Each new decoration was another step towards Sleep and the Master of Winter hated this eternal counter-current: while the general enthusiasm grew, his fell back into free fall. He hung on to the bracelets that set his wrists. This year, he could rejoice like everyone else.

Then, without realizing it, his steps carried him to the rest home. He stopped at the wrought iron gates and thought of the young woman. Was she there? Was she a relative of a resident? A staff member? Jack would have liked to be able to say that he was indifferent to the answer, and yet he was getting closer to the building, driven by an irrepressible curiosity.

Methodical, Jack went around, inspected every window on the ground floor, and then went upstairs. As he passed a new window overlooking a corridor, he saw the girl. Taking care not to be seen, Jack had all the time to detail it without his fluffy coat and the red hat she wore when she had surprised him the day before.

Dressed in the clothes of the maintenance staff, she cleaned the floors. She scrubbed the mop conscientiously in every corner of the corridor, leaving behind an immaculate surface. Her brown hair was brought back in a loose bun on the top of her head and her amber-colored eyes illuminated her harmonious face.

“Mathilde, I’m sorry to interrupt, but Mrs. Doussalat has another crisis. She’s calling for you”, a nurse announced.

“I’m coming”.

Mathilde stored her broom near the cleaning trolley before running in the hall. Intrigued, Jack went around the building, then hid behind the window that opened onto the room where the young maid entered promptly.

“Annie, what is it?”

An old lady in a dressing gown waved nervously on her bed.

“They took him! They took him away from me!”

Annie was assaulted by her uncontrolled emotions. A raging line blocked her forehead. Her eyes — which seemed to be watching a scene from another time — were filled with tears. Two nurses tried to control her without harming her, but the boarder didn’t notice them. As Mathilde approached, they backed up and she came to sit at the edge of the bed.

“Who did they take, Annie? Tell me”.

“My Edgar. They took away my Edgar, Mathilde. He didn’t do anything wrong, you know”.

“I know. It’s not fair, they had no right”, Mathilde softly claimed, stroking the back of her hand.

Annie shook her head vigorously, her chin shaking. Hearing Mathilde comfort her made her feel better. Jack would have liked to know the story of this lady. So much emotion and so much passion came from her words...

Humans had this propensity for feelings: passionate love, visceral hatred, unspeakable joy. They seemed to have little temperance. And that fascinated him.

“No, they had no right! We had a whole life to spend together. They stole it from us, those dirty Krauts. They won’t take it to heaven”.

“You were stronger than them, Annie. You won. You survived and you had a wonderful life for both of you”.

With her gaze still empty, the old woman nodded. A tear rolled on her wrinkled cheek.

“Yes, it’s true. I won”.

Mathilde helped her to lie down, adjusting the cushion to ensure the comfort of her protégé.

“We beat them hard, those bastards, didn’t we?”, Annie asked, already falling asleep.

“Yes, we did”.

“I better get some rest, tomorrow I have to clean the house and make some madeleines.”

Quietly, Mathilde and the nurses withdrew, forcing Jack to change the window again.

“Thank you for your help. She’s always much more receptive to you” one of the nurses said.

“She needs to be listened to and comforted. I haven’t done much, I assure you”, Mathilde argued.

“We already tried to do it your way, but she prefers you” the other nurse specified.

Mathilde blushed, not knowing where to put herself. She pretended to have some work to finish and escaped.

The scene Jack had just witnessed reinforced his suspicions about this instinct of protection which seemed to animate the young woman. A human who cared about his elders, that was something to be intrigued about. Often neglected, the elderly were a burden to younger generations who preferred to turn their heads and remain deaf to the needs of men and women at the end of their lives.

Mathilde left the residence to return home. The Master of Winter continued his spinning from the sky, carried by the wind. Even at the height of the roofs, it was not difficult to follow the red dot that was evolving in the mazes of the city of Strasbourg.

A red cap, really, what an idea!

Mathilde walked energetically with her eyes fixed on the ground, her shoulders bent. Could she be blamed for avoiding attention? A woman, still at that time, was likely to suffer the worst abuse for the single crime of being the “weak” sex, simply because she had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jack could not blame her for running towards the security of her home, the monsters hidden in the darkness were much more than chimeras for the carriers of the double chromosome X.

It was only once the young woman arrived at the foot of her apartment and the front door closed that Jack turned away. He returned to the boarder’s room, Annie. Her vigor? and her words had aroused his curiosity. Jack’s fragmented life did not allow him to take part in history, he was only passing through it, barely.

The old lady was now slumbering in the white sheets of her nursing bed, her peaceful features did not suggest anything of the excitement that had seized her earlier in the evening. With delicacy, Jack put two fingers on her forehead. The coldness of his skin caused a chill in Annie, which stirred slightly, as if to drive out an inappropriate insect. This faculty was a precious support for the Master of Winter, his spontaneous incursions into human’s heads enabled him to fill his gaps and to keep himself informed of the World during his absence. If Denise had been there, she would certainly have found fault with his actions. But after all, what did she know about this life that no one would want? Moreover, although he frequently indulged in these intrusions for his informative side, he made a point of not interfering in the personal or intimate life of his test subjects.

Tonight, however, he allowed himself an exception.

Jack closed his eyes and propelled his consciousness into Annie's mind. He had to concentrate not to lose himself, not to forget himself in this mass of images that attacked him. A sweet melancholy tinged most of the reminiscences of the old woman and Jack was attracted by a more vivid memory than the others. He focused on it and the dream defied in his own memory as if he had experienced it himself. Annie's voice became his own.

I looked at my watch for the thirty-first time in a few minutes. I experienced each sudden movement of the needle as an aggression. The arms pressed against my chest didn't protect me from the wind which violently chased out and crept into the cracks of the old wooden door.

He was late.

I had never been a great follower of Time. He remained a traitor to me in all circumstances, shortening the moments of happiness and cruelly lengthening the moments of suffering and anguish.

Trying to change my mind, and for the tenth time since my arrival, I walked through the little shed in which I had hidden myself. A favorite place for our clandestine rendezvous, I knew every hook and cranny of it. From the stone walls saturated with moisture, to the windows so dirty that they had long stopped filtering sunlight, passing through the ground covered with straw, there was a singular atmosphere. From my earliest youth, I had always been able to find refuge in this old-abandoned building. A favorite territory for my childish games, that is now witnessing the fate of a young woman being played. I shivered not knowing if it was cold or fear. Where was he?

I cursed heaven for this wave of terror that had invaded the world, plunging it into a red hell of suffering; I cursed him, for this delay that was unusual; I cursed myself to love him so much, to love it so hard. What an irony! I, who had so often mocked the childishness of young people in love, now was caught in the net of this irrational feeling. I

endured it both as a punishment and as a blessing, a learned mixture that could drive you crazy.

Absorbed in my dark thoughts, I jumped as the door suddenly opened. The greyish sky didn't offer much brightness in the small room but brought a clear contrast with the silhouette that stood in the embrasure. I then took a deep breath, the first for an eternity, it seemed to me.

"Edgar" I whispered.

I rushed and threw myself against him without even slowing down my movements. He welcomed me, not without wavering at the impact of our bodies, and then hugged my waist with his protective arms. I smelled his comforting fragrance, accentuated by the rain that had been raging since the morning. I counted the seconds while reassuring myself that he was finally here, that I would not let Time empower us. I retreated, staring at him, then slapped him in the face.

"Where have you been?" I grumbled.

Thousands of tingling were running through my palm and I hid the pain it caused me. Edgar watched me gently, with indulgence. His cheek was pink, but he didn't seem to care.

"I knew you would be worried. Excuse me. The Germans came into the house unexpectedly, looking for Jewish fugitives. I couldn't leave without arousing suspicion."

The news blocked my breathing and weakened the solidity of my legs. I hung on to Edgar's arms. Would they never leave us in peace? Two years has passed living an endless nightmare. Absurd rules, perpetual searches, revolting restrictions of freedom, contempt, violence, injustice. Again and again. When would it end?

"How did it go?" I asked in a quavering voice.

"Bad. They didn't find anything. It frustrated them quite a bit."

"But there's nothing to be found!", I revolted, releasing from his embrace.

The rage that was rekindling gave me the strength to stand upright on my legs. It made me boil all over. Edgar shrugged his shoulders, fatalist, which made me more angry.

He took a step in my direction, an outstretched hand that I threw out abruptly.

“Don’t let them steal this moment from us, Annie. They’re so rare and too precious”.

Once more, he came closer and placed his cool palm on my burning cheek. I couldn’t resist.

“My sweet Annie” he whispered, holding my waist with his muscular arms.

Edgar was a farmer boy. An undervalued profession that subjected man to a life of hard work. A work that forges character, sculpts the body. He had never really realized it, but Edgar was beautiful. Divinely beautiful. How many envious looks had I caught on the faces of the young girls who came to admire him when he worked in the field in the summer, shirtless, the sweat beading on his skin? They all wanted him without even hiding it. But Edgar was mine and I was his. They could look at him, fantasize about him at night in their miserable cold bed, he was mine alone.

Delicately, I laid a kiss on his bruised cheek, silent asking for forgiveness, too proud to beg for it out loud. But my dear friend knew me better than myself. I felt his smile touch my neck, silent assent.

Impatient, I grabbed his blond hair to free him from my neck and reach his lips. I wanted him, I needed him to consume me. Without being asked, Edgar replied fervently to my kiss, intensifying it with his tongue. I groaned, he grumbled.

We got rid of our clothes with eagerness and the wind that had been chilling my bones a few minutes before became a breeze welcome to the ardor of our frolics. We were sweaty, we were passionate, we were one.

This was the last moment we shared. Three days later, the Germans arrested Edgar who had been denounced by a neighbor. A false and unfounded testimony that satisfied our oppressors, delighted to have a victim to put under their teeth.

Even now, during my restless nights, I live his arrest again. I came out of the bakery, a baguette of bread under my arm. At the smell of the crispy, fresh crust, my tummy was rumbling in anticipation of a meal with a piece of butter and jam. The street was more crowded than usual, and an apprehension won me over. Do humans have a sixth sense?

Sometimes I wonder, because that day, my whole being cried out that the worst was yet to come. Edgar was evicted from his house by two soldiers who were yelling at him in that language that we all hated. As if alerted to my presence, he planted his gaze in mine, his eyebrows high on his forehead, frozen in an expression of astonishment. Was he surprised to be arrested? To see me there?

"Annie !" he yelled, in a plea, in a statement, in a goodbye. As I set out to battle, determined to get my Edgar back, an arm turned into a vice around my shoulders.

"Stay still, kid. You want to end up in jail, too?", Marcel Asked, Edgar's father.

"I won't let them take him away".

"There's nothing you can do right now. Stay quiet".

His deep voice tempered my ardor and I decided to trust my father-in-law. After all, it was his only son, he wasn't going to allow them to take the flesh of his flesh with impunity. I stopped struggling but didn't let my lover out of my sight. Until the very last minute. Until they brutally put him in their dark van. Until they furiously close the doors. I didn't blink, my eyes burning, fighting against the tears that threatened to fall.

Edgar never came back. He was unjustly tortured for information he didn't have. Shot for being useless. They didn't let me see him. Neither when he was alive nor after his death.

Now that the years have passed, my skin has wrinkled, but it doesn't forget the caress of his hands. My eyes are losing their sharpness, and yet I still see the bewitching green of his irises.

My hearing is laborious, but if I concentrate a few moments, I can hear again the deep and smooth tone of his voice. I can hardly remember what I ate in the morning or the day before, but every moment we spent together remains as vivid in my memory as if it had just happened.

Jack withdrew from Annie's mind as delicately as he had entered it. Annie's face was full of melancholy. She must have relived the memory at the same time as him. It was not systematic, but she seemed so attached to Edgar that her subconscious must have plunged into his reminiscences with him. The old woman's emotions permeated her. So much love, so much pain. Far more than he had lived in all his long existence. All the beauty of human life resided there, in the ephemeral. The urgency of living that screamed in their guts and pushed them to feel everything with so much acuity, so much greed. Nostalgic and slightly bitter, the Master of Winter turned away and left the room for good.



CHAPTER IV

“Good evening, young people”, Mathilde said, leaving the rest room.

The residents uttered small exclamations, amused by her humor. A glance at her watch informed Mathilde that it was twenty thirty-four hours. It had already been more than half an hour since she had finished her service. However, abandoning her brooms and mops, she couldn’t resist the urge to spend some time with the boarders. To see them in this impersonal salon, slumped in their chairs, each in a corner to ruminate dark thoughts, had gripped her heart. So She set out to offer them a moment of entertainment.

“You’re still here ?” Monique wondered.

The operator blew on a steaming cup of coffee.

“I had a pressing desire to try my hand at belote”, Mathilde joked.

She pulled her red gloves out of her purse and put them on.

“How was it ?”

“I got my ass kicked!”

Monique burst out with a sincere laugh. Since Mathilde joined the team, the rest home seemed a little more joyful, a little more human. Even if she didn’t revolutionize the system, the surface technician brought a touch of kindness that did a lot of good to the residents.

"You're an angel!" Monique shouted while Mathilde was headed out. "Be careful on your way back home".

"Always".

At the entrance door, the young woman took a long breath. Away from the sanitized atmosphere of the corridors, she savored the cold air that tickled her lungs and caressed her face.

A movement on her right caught her attention and accelerated the beating of her heart. She looked up at the old willow next to the building and saw a figure. His figure.

So it wasn't a dream. Mathilde had to admit that in the days following this strange encounter, she had begun to doubt her mental health. But he was here.

Determined to get to the bottom of the whole thing, she moved in his direction.

This time, the young man looked directly at her, an eyebrow raised.

"So, you can see me", he said.

"I think that this point has already been noticed."

As in their previous encounter, Mathilde stopped at a respectable distance. Close enough to be able to talk and reasonably far enough to leave if the conversation took a turn she didn't like.

"Should I consider calling the police?" she asked.

The young man straightened up and left the canopy of the tree to expose himself to the light of the streetlights illuminating the property. A little mistakenly innocent pout on his face, he raised his hands, palms visible, like a fugitive surrendering.

Mathilde smiled at the masquerade and took a few seconds to notice his milky skin which, strangely, didn't make him look sick, but soft. His square jaw attenuated possible juvenile features. His blue eyes were much more intense and deeper than she had supposed. She looked away to avoid getting lost in it.

As he seemed less confused and more loquacious than when they first met, she carried on:

“What are you doing here?”

“I observe”.

The young man pushed his hands into the pockets of his relaxed jeans. The answer disturbed Mathilde. The idea of the perverse stalker came to her mind.

“And what do you observe, exactly?” she insisted.

“Life”.

Mathilde raised her eyebrows with surprise.

“You observe life in a rest home?”

Her interlocutor shrugged his shoulders.

“This is where life takes the most value. When we are at its conclusion, we can measure its quality, take stock, appreciate the knowledge and memories. There is still time to repent or even learn new things because it’s never too late. That’s all I love: to contemplate the last miracles being accomplished”.

His words resonated so strongly that they shook her. She should have been afraid or at least distrustful. She did not know this person and she met him for the second time in dubious conditions. Yet, in this very moment, she discovered in him a vibration that matched hers.

With his hands still in his pockets, he was standing casually in front of her, dressed in a white t-shirt far too light for the season and barefoot anchored in the ground without bothering him. His white hair danced with the wind as it rose. There was nothing threatening about him, she wasn’t afraid of him.

A violent squall drove in their direction. Mathilde grimaced under the assault. Instinctively, she plunged her fists into her pockets and plunged her neck into the heat of the collar of her coat. The young man frowned and mysteriously waved a hand in the air.

“May I ask your name? So, when the police come to question me about this philanthropic stalker lurking around, I’ll have an identity to give.”

Mathilde marvelled at her own poise. It was rare for her to joke so easily with strangers. The joke seemed to amuse the young man who unveiled a smile in the corner.

“I’m Jack”.

“Just Jack?”

The smile he wore went brighter.

“For now”, he said mysteriously. “What about you?”

“Me?” Mathilde asked, confused.

She realized that the strong wind had run out, which upset her without knowing why.

“What’s your name?”

“Oh. Mathilde”.

“Just Mathilde?”

Visibly delighted to appropriate the words of his interlocutor, the young man now displayed a broad smile that revealed his teeth.

“For now” she said Barely holding her own smile.

Jack laughed at the turn of the conversation and nodded, willingly gave her victory.

“You know that my name is Jack and that I am an inoffensive stalker. What can you tell me about you, Mathilde-in-the-red-hat?”

“There’s not much to say,” she said, embarrassed, fondling her headgear distractingly.

“I’m not convinced”.

He ended his sentence with such certainty, so earnestly, that the colour of the young woman’s cheeks came very close to the one of her hat

“I don’t know what to say”, she confessed.

Jack seemed to think for a few seconds before suggesting:

“Give me your favorite color, the feeling that dominates your life and your favorite drink.”

Mathilde was surprised by these atypical questions. They were banal and intimate at the same time. She leaned her head and tried to determine whether the young man was mocking her, but there he remained, well encased on his legs, waiting for the answers.

“Hum. So, my favorite colour is red”.

She pointed to her hat, then waved her gloved hands with a facial expression that seemed to suggest: “quite obvious”. The second question asked her a little thought, and she took the time to choose her words.

“I’d say it’s the impatience that’s been driving my life so far.”

She looked at Jack, watching for his reactions. He merely nodded his head, as if validating his remarks, but he didn’t seek to delve into the subject.

“And my favorite drink is hot chocolate”, she ended with a shrug. There was nothing wildly original or exotic in his answers. For Mathilde, nothing in her life was original. She constantly merged into the mass. Suffocated by a large number of siblings, drowned in the crowd of students, lost in the midst of an ever-growing population, she struggled to find her voice, her mark, her difference. She felt so ordinary. Her answers were ordinary.

She looked up to cross Jack’s eyes. He didn’t utter a word, but his gaze seemed to tell thousands of stories, confide secrets never shared before. Mathilde waited for him to resume the discussion, but both remained silent, observed, gauged, tamed each other.

“Well, Just-Jack-the-inoffensive-stalker, it’s time for me to go home.”

The young woman adjusted the handle of her purse on her shoulder and swung from one leg to another, a little confused.

“Alright, then. Seen you soon, Mathilde-in-the-red-hat.”

Jack greeted her with a nod and went towards the retirement home. After following the facade, he turned at the corner of the building. Mathilde followed him, without understanding what he was trying to do on that side of the house. When she arrived at the back of the building, just a few seconds after him, there was no one left. She looked around, in vain, then tried to calm the frantic beating of her heart.



Amanda joined the small group already installed, her phone brandished above her head. Louis and Mathilde were seated on the bench while Nicolas was on the floor, an elbow on the young woman's lap. Although each day was colder than the previous, the four students enjoyed spending their free time on this bench when the weather was dry. Arriving near them, the student recovered her breath before displaying an air of conspiracy.

“Lindsay on Instagram, are we going to talk about this?” she said, exhilarated.

Louis and Nicolas's eyes were illuminated with interest while Mathilde's look was veiled, matching to the shady sky of the day.

“Yes, I saw”, Nicolas replied.

“She's pretty confident”, Louis added.

As often, Mathilde didn't know what they were talking about

With little income and spending most of her money on food and rent, she couldn't afford the luxury of a smartphone and opted for a basic phone. She didn't know anything about the entire universe of social medias, and even if she didn't care, it regularly excluded her from conversations.

Amanda looked at her friend in the expectation of a comment, then realized her mistake.

Excuse-me, I forgot”.

“She tapped on her touch screen with frenzy and then showed it to Mathilde, who could discover the publication of Lindsay, a nursing student. Flooded with sun, the young woman displayed voluptuous curves in an elegant powdery pink dress, a smile illuminating her face.

Mathilde broke away from the vision of the photograph to look at her three friends who were waiting for her reaction.

“So what?” she asked, confused.

“So what?! Mathilde, did you look at her?” Amanda replied.

The young woman studied the photo once more, searching for a detail that would have escaped her, but all that jumped out was the happiness that exuded from the image, the obvious blossoming of Lindsay.

“Yes”, she said, unsure. “What’s special about it?”

“Did you read the comment under the photo?” Louis asked.

Amanda spared her a third inspection and read aloud:

“Lindsay Mehaudens, twenty years old. My wildest desire is to get into modeling. I am actively looking for an agency, thanks for sharing”.

“Yeah, she can dream...” Nicolas said, a cigarette between the lips.

“Nico !” Mathilde yelled.

“It will probably be more complicated for her” Louis explained. The mannequins size XL aren’t what we see the most.

“Well, maybe we should !”

“It makes me uncomfortable, all this fat”, Amanda persevered.

Mathilde frowned. Her friend had a strong temper and this annoying tendency to impose her ideas. Nicolas used to say what went through his head without a filter.

“What do you mean?” Mathilde asked.

“Okay, she’s taking care of herself and she’s fine, cool for her. But is she healthy? Isn’t she gonna get in trouble as she gets older?”

“And the anorexic women we show on the podiums, they are healthier, maybe? They send a healthy image to young women who identify with them?”

“That’s not what I said. I’m talking about the fat girls right now. Not the other extreme.”

“The issue of weight is not always easy for everyone.”

Amanda shrugged her shoulders, realizing that the conversation wouldn’t go where she wanted it to go. She had a guilty desire to make fun of a girl for a few minutes, not to launch debates on weight and beauty standards.

“We draw our names for the Christmas gifts?” Amanda said finally to change the subject.

Each year, the four friends wrote their names on a piece of paper and, each in turn, randomly drew a name to give a Christmas present. Although no one has ever mentioned it explicitly, the reason for this process was to spare Mathilde’s meager purse without making her uncomfortable. A benevolent attention which, however, only confronted the young woman with the sad reality. Intentionally or in spite of them, his friends always offered her a smile with a touch of compassion raised with a touch of pity.

Sometimes, she would have liked to tell Nicolas that the money he received from his father was only there to compensate for ties that did not flourish. She would have liked to have the courage to challenge Amanda and explain to her that life was not a succession of caprices too quickly yield by her mother. She would have liked to tell Louis that the more the years went by, the less she could bear his gaze. The one of the rich boy who graciously dispensed his friendship to a poor and lonely girl in constant need. But Mathilde said none of this – she never said anything – so she merely replied :

“Yes, that’s a good idea”.

Everyone wrote his name and the four pieces of paper were quickly mixed in the palm of Nicolas' hand.

"You first, Mathilde", Louis suggested.

Tightening her jaws, the young woman seized a piece of paper, which she opened discreetly.

Louis.

The three pieces of paper found their owner. Suspicious glances and other smiles flourished in the group. Each one was already thinking about the gift that they would offer. Mathilde, on the other hand, was cogitating about an inexpensive present. A puzzle that had enough to cause a new migraine.



With a short exhalation, Mathilde urged herself to patience. This aptitude, however familiar with her siblings, seemed to have deserted her that evening. While she painfully tried to help Thomas complete his duties, he didn't put in any goodwill.

"Come on, buddy, try again. Twenty-two plus thirteen. Twenty-two, tell me what it is."

"Two dozen and two units", the little boy said, laconic.

Mathilde was frustrated by his apathy. He knew his lesson, but didn't seem to bother to think and calculate.

"And thirteen?"

"One dozen and three units".

"If we add the units together, how many do we have?"

Thomas turned his attention to the television on, far from his exercises, gnawing away Mathilde's last scraps of patience. Sitting at the dining room table, the boy had an unobstructed view of the cartoon in the living room.

"Thomas, focus. Two units plus three units, come on, it's easy".

Mathilde tapped the pencil against the table in a repetitive motion, a meager catalyst of her nerves.

“Five units” he finally said.

“Progress ! And what about two dozen plus one dozen ?”

Another stall of the boy who burst out laughing in front of the incongruent spin of Bugs Bunny on the screen.

“Enough!”

Mathilde, red with anger, rose sharply, skirted the dining-room table which was open to the living-room and, without any more sweetness, tore the remote control from Philippine’s hands, seated in the sofa.

“Eh” the girl protested.

Deaf to the discontent of her brothers and sisters who had followed Philippine’s objection, the young woman turned off the television and took care to take the remote with her.

“Go to your rooms instead of jurking yourself in front of the television”, Mathilde yelled.

Philippine, Jacqueline, and Thadée, surprised at Mathilde’s unusual annoyance, executed themselves grudgingly.

“As for you, young man,” She raged against Thomas, who no longer dared to flinch, much more alert than a few minutes earlier. “You’d better to...”

Mathilde didn’t have the opportunity to finish her sentence. A violent pain seized her throughout her skull, like a vice that suddenly tightened. She was nothing but suffering and a black hole.

When the young woman regained her sight, she was on the ground, on all fours. Panting, she didn’t understand what had just happened. At her side, Thomas spoke words without her being able to hear them. His little wet eyes showed tears of worry.

“That’s okay, Thomas. I-I’m alright”

Painfully, she straightened herself up on one leg and leaned on her knee to give herself the impulse to get up. She tested her precarious balance, tried to look good.

“I’m gonna freshen up my face, will you be a big boy and finish this math on your own? I know you can do it.”

“Mathiti ?” The young boy worried, his voice shaking.

“Don’t worry. I’m just a little bit tired.”

Relieved without being completely reassured, Thomas, quietly sat down to complete his duties. Meanwhile, Mathilde went upstairs and locked herself in the bathroom, miraculously empty. She took care to lock the door, well aware that this wasn’t the idea of the century. If she falls out again, it would be more difficult to help her. Yet she longed for this moment of solitude with ardor. The neon light gave the bathroom a cold atmosphere that the young woman had always abhorred. The foul smell of the fragrance diffuser saturated the room with an artificial apple scent that irritated her senses.

There was nothing glamorous about her face in the mirror. She was far from Lindsay’s cliché, all sensual, all assertive. Mathilde tried to shave herself and to see in her pale skin and purpled dark circles the reason for this loss of consciousness. Overwork could have terrible effects on the human body.

She stared at her reflection, held on to her gaze.

“The holidays arrive in a few days, I’ll be able to rest.”

Once out of the bathroom, Mathilde quickly reassured Thomas of her condition and checked his homework. After a brief goodbye to her siblings, she rushed to the front door and set out for La Seigneurie, the rest home. The fresh air did her a lot of good. She took advantage of the twenty minutes of walking to regain her spirits and gather the little strength she didn’t have to complete this day with cleaning.

As her steps brought her closer to the property, the volutes of her thoughts flew away to Jack. She smiles as she recalls their crazy conversation of the day before. Who was he? What were the secrets buried in the depths of his eyes? It seemed as if they were just waiting for the opportunity to come out, to expose themselves. The words he had uttered in reference to the retirement home still resonated in her memory. Did he know how to read in her mind to advance words in perfect harmony with her beliefs?

A brief bell rang in her purse. Mathilde pulled out her phone and noticed a message from Louis.

Do you have plans for tonight ?

Mathilde barely held back the annoyance that threatened to break out. Were they doing it on purpose? Her friends never remembered her schedule and, even more, seemed to make it a point to forget her work as a surface technician. Was it voluntary? She couldn't have sworn it.

I work at the nursing home, like every night.

She had hesitated to remove this small pungent precision at the end of her sentence, but fatigue and wear had taken her away and the message left like that.

Oh yeah. Right. Will you meet us at home afterwards? We'll watch Deadpool with Florine and the other two. Tempted?

Was she tempted to watch a film with, on the one hand, a couple who would slipping in sweet words and would shamelessly kiss all the time, and, on the other, two friends who, after ten minutes, would declare war over an insignificant difference of opinion about the film?

I'll finish late and I'm tired. I prefer to rest. Thanks, though. <3

OK.

No insistence. Immediate resignation. The one that hurts a little if we look at it. Not that Mathilde liked to be desired. She really didn't have the strength to stretch her evening out into the wee hours of the day, but in some situations this lack of dedication on the part of her friends broke her heart. Of course she could count on them in difficult times, of course they sincerely loved her. Sometimes the young woman may have been missing something more. That attachment would make her special, unique.

The day before, she had the feeling of being different. She had perceived a heightened, genuine interest on Jack's part and wanted to prolong their conversation, however strange it was.

Twenty o'clock rang and Mathilde changed in the changing room.

She gathered her belongings and keys in her purse, her head buzzing with questions. A thrill of excitement rolled down her spine as she donned her coat, sash and red hat. Did she really want to meet him again?

Maybe he was just a serial killer watching for the right moment when she lowered her guard in order to satisfy his macabre urges in a dark alley. No doubt she would never see him again. Perhaps he was only the fruit of her imagination from the beginning.

Mathilde opened the door and walked a little faster than usual. She was in a hurry to get back to her apartment, nothing else. Arriving at the height of the tree, a brief glance revealed the absence of a certain silhouette. No provocative white hair, no insolent barefoot, no enigmatic smile. Mathilde went on, ignoring the point of disappointment that invaded her.

The wrought iron gates stood proudly in front of her and marked the end of the property. A streetlight illuminated the street across the street. A young man was standing underneath and seemed to be waiting.

He wore provocative white hair and insolent barefoot. He stared at the stars and hadn't yet seen her. She stretched out her stride, almost in spite of herself. Alerted by the sound of her steps, Jack turned his head and met Mathilde's gaze.

She smiled.





CHAPTER V

Nineteen and fifty. Jack was under the lamppost, waiting. He shouldn't have been here. He shouldn't have been distracted. He had a plan to put in place. A plan that he had been instigating for a decade and for which he would only get one shot.

And yet, he was indeed in front of La Seigneurie, watching for a red hat. He had to understand the enigma that Mathilde represented. This young woman, of an apparent banality, concealed more secrets than it appeared, he was sure of it.

While waiting for her, Jack played with his bracelets. Well aware of their presence, he had the impression that they weighed heavy. The weight of metal and its hopes. On his forearms, the shackles nibbled a little more ground each day and the pale white colour gradually gave way to the sententious blue. His feet and legs followed the same progression. At the end of December 24, all would converge to his heart for the final blow. The Master of Winter raised his head to the stars.

The same ones he questioned after making the decision to end the infernal pattern of his life. He asked them for the solution, the way to go. And they gave it to him. Although he didn't regret anything, he had paid a heavy price. To hold the information that would allow him to change his destiny, he had

to give up a precious memory: his past. Jack no longer had neither the slightest reminiscence of who he had been nor the origin of his powers. How could we determine where we're going without knowing where we're from? But the Master of Winter held on to this certainty: if he had chosen to abandon this memory, it was because it was worth the risk. With these convictions, he didn't deviate from his purposes.

A sound of footsteps tore him from his dreams. Across the street, at the fence, stood Mathilde. With a smile on her lips, she stared at him. So, she wasn't afraid. Jack was amused by her obvious temper. Most humans felt a certain discomfort in his presence when he made himself visible. Their subconscious seemed to alarm them of his different nature and push them away. Obviously, this was not her case.

"Well, look who's there ! Just Jack !"

"Good evening, Mathilde-in-the-red-hat".

The young man broke a bow as a salute, a smile on the corner of his lips.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of your presence?"

"I've decided to bring to light the inoffensive stalker", he declared, spreading his arms.

"Oh I see. What a plan !"

"Exactly. I intend to restore the truth about these misunderstood stalkers who have only the desire to observe life in all innocence."

"This is a noble cause!" Mathilde cheered.

Jack liked the young woman to play his game, for the simple pleasure of the discussion, accepting the second degree without any questions.

"Isn't it? I intend to find an attentive and compassionate ear, especially among the red hat fetishists!"

He crossed the deserted road and approached the young woman. It had noticed that she had been cautious during their previous meetings and he didn't want to push her to the limits.

“Red hats are the best”, Mathilde said, smiling.

“Of course ! I know what I will do with my evening. What about yours ?”

Mathilde looked at his watch and seemed to think for a few seconds.

“I think I need a hot chocolate”, she finally replied. “The tastiest in Strasbourg are at Marie-Henriette, a small, unpretentious tea room in the Kruteneau district. You’ve heard about it?”

“I must admit that I haven’t” Jack confessed, intrigued.

“Their secret is the homemade marshmallows they add to the drink,” she specified with conspirator accents in the voice.

“This looks absolutely delicious.”

“It is. That’s where I go”.

“And they stay open so late ?”

“Yes, they offer small restaurants in the evening, it allows them to get more customers”.

Mathilde paused, watched her shoes, which had seen better days, before returning her gaze to Jack’s. An obvious disorder seemed to be raging in his iris.

“I don’t know where you’re gonna run your campaign, but I think this tea room might be a good start”.

Jack raised his eyebrows, surprised. Had she really invited him to have a hot chocolate with her? Although he had witnessed these kinds of scenes countless times, he had never taken the trouble of going on a date.

“But you do what you want”, she hastened to add. “I go there. And you do what you want”.

Obviously embarrassed, Mathilde turned her heels and set out.

“I think it’s a great idea”, Jack said. “Besides, you made me hungry with that marshmallow thing. I never miss an opportunity to embark on culinary explorations”.

And if this assertion was true, he never ate in the company of anyone or in a public place, not by being visible, in any case. His heart beat in his chest, a little surprised, considerably troubled, but resolutely enthusiastic. This young girl piqued his curiosity and stirred a feeling in him that he still couldn't determine.

Mathilde froze and turned to smile timidly at her interlocutor.

"Let's go, then", she said, almost like a question.

"After you".

As they advanced towards their destination, Mathilde turned her attention to Jack's shoes and frowned. He noticed that his bare feet had not escaped the young woman during their previous encounters. The Master of Winter feared an interrogation, but she merely shook her head, as if seeking to drive away inconvenient ideas, to his greatest relief.

The tea room presented by Mathilde was two blocks from the rest home and Jack discovered a British-style storefront. The window display was framed with white stripes and vintage decoration. «Marie-Henriette» was drawn on the tiles in refined calligraphy. When Mathilde pushed the door of the establishment, adorned with a Christmas crown, a fine bell rang and the sweet hints of sugar reached Jack from the inside.

"Good evening, welcome to *Marie-Henriette's*. A table for two?" a waitress asked as she came to meet them.

The employee took a curious look at Jack's hair, but was polite not to linger on it. He was used to this increased attention whenever he made himself visible. Not to mention that he was wearing a simple white shirt. He usually took care to wear seasonal clothes. However, a complete change of dress in front of Mathilde would have raised far too many questions. So, he endured this inspection without flinching, trying to drive away the nervous tingling that was devastating his spine. The persistent discomfort he felt reminded him why he preferred to remain essentially invisible to the eyes, far too curious, of humans.

The table at the back of the living room offered them an intimacy that Jack appreciated. The decoration had been tastefully chosen. From pastel-coloured cushions to bells that held sweets, to draperies and dimmed lamps... The whole gave a very successful rendering.

“So, what do you think ?” Mathilde asked taking the menu on the table.

“It’s not bad”, Jack conceded, his gaze frozen on the little fir tree that adorned the display.

He quickly turned away, ignoring the restlessness that the decoration aroused in him, and preferred to concentrate on his interlocutor. Mathilde went through the menu without really reading it and handed it to Jack.

“I don’t know why I look at it, I always take the same thing”.

“Want some change, maybe ?” Jack suggested, an eyebrow raised.

“Not this time”.

Jack turned his attention to the menu. Everything looked delicious and the Master of Winter had a guilty inclination for food.

“Have you made your choice ?” the waitress asked, approaching them.

“ A hot chocolat “Normandy” with marshmallow, please”, Mathilde ordered.

Jack took a few more seconds before speaking quickly, uneasy: “A hot chocolat “Rêve d’enfance » with marshmallow. I would also like a scone and a banana split”.

The waitress meticulously noted their order, punctuating the dessert statement with a nod.

“I’m coming right away”, she said in a smile.

“A little angry ?” Mathilde asked.

“I love to eat”, Jack explained, relieved to be left alone with her.

“Yes, I noticed”.

“ You come here often ?”

“No, it’s pretty rare, actually”.

“Not enough time ?” Jack assumed.

“Not enough money”.

She played with the folds of the napkin, suddenly nervous. Did she regret inviting him to drink a hot chocolate? Jack swallowed quietly. He was much less comfortable than he let appear. This exchange and the social conventions to be respected absorbed all his concentration.

“Tell me a little bit about this word that governs your life: impatience. Why?”

The question seemed to take Mathilde by surprise.

“I don’t know... I... I just said it”, she faltered.

“I don’t believe you”, Jack said, smiling.

The arrival of their order offered a reprieve which she seemed to appreciate. Jack watched each dish with greed. Were they desserts or works of art? He hesitated.

“Enjoy !” the waitress said before leaving.

Jack grabs the flowery cup in which small pink candies danced in their hot chocolate bath. Spreading a wave of cold through his hands, he completely cooled the drink and carried it to his lips. The liquid was soft and spicy on his tongue. Then he took his spoon to catch a marshmallow and let it melt in his mouth.

“It’s absolutely delicious”, Jack commented. “You were right”.

Mathilde watched him attentively, even with curiosity. She seemed to observe him in every detail.

“I’m glad you like it, I would have blamed myself for praising you so much and that you’d finally be disappointed.”

The young woman was fingering the surface of her cup.

“You don’t drink ?” Jack asked.

“It’s always too hot”, Mathilde explained, a frustrated pout on her face.

“Give me your cup”.

Sceptical, Mathilde looked at Jack's hand. Careful, he took care to conceal his shackles, revealing immaculate skin on his arms. She handed him the cup which he grabbed with two hands. As he had done with his own, he invoked the gel to bring the drink to a cooler temperature. Then he returned the cup to Mathilde, whose astonishment only increased. This little game amused him greatly. Juggling on the thin barrier between rational and magic. The mechanism of humans was so laughable! They always preferred to establish a logical reason for any inexplicable phenomenon rather than to consider a possibility beyond their control. Obviously intrigued, she carried the drink to her lips and drank a sip. Her eyebrows, at first high on her forehead, gathered. Mathilde dard a look full of questions on Jack. He made an innocent appearance and suddenly found an interest in his scone, of which he took a generous fork. The cream was creamy, rich and sweet as needed.

"Care for a bite?" he asked, trying to distract her attention.

She shook her head, still lost in the marasmus of her inner questioning. Not eager to step forward in this field for the moment, Jack immediately adds:

"You didn't answer my question, Mathilde-in-the-red-hat; Why impatience?"

The young woman breathed a long sigh.

"You won't give up, will you?"

"Indeed, I won't", he replied, mischievous.

Mathilde turned her attention to a play of light that decorated a section of the wall of the room before returning to plant he gaze in his.

"I eager for my life to start" she finally declared.

Jack merely nodded, silently urging her to continue.

"I don't want to be dependent on anyone anymore. I don't want anyone to be dependent on me either. I feel like I'm suffocating all the time, trapped in a life I can't stand anymore".

"And what do you need for your life to start?"

The Master of winter was intrigued. Without knowing it, she made remarks that reminded him of his own situation.

“The right moment. When I finish my studies, and when I...”

“The right moment doesn’t exist”, Jack interrupted.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about”.

“On the contrary, I know exactly what you are talking about. There is never an ideal time to take charge of your life. Only when you decide to act to change it. If you wait until everything in your life is auspicious to start, you risk missing out. Start your life when you want, Mathilde.

He had every intention of conducting his own as he saw fit, and now.

Mathilde meditated on his words. Lost in distant thoughts, she carried the cup to her lips and then drank another sip. She gently blinked her eyelids, seemed to return to the present moment. Jack couldn’t decipher the look she placed on him.

“You’re so wise, ô great Master Yoda!” she finally claimed.

Jack could not contain his laughter.

“Too serious for a hot chocolate, isn’t it?”

“Definitely too serious”, she smiled.

“Alright”, Jack conceded. “How would you feel about giving me a detailed review of this wonderful ice cream?”

He approached the dish of Mathilde who, after two seconds of hesitation, dipped a greedy spoon in the vanilla ice cream topped with melting chocolate.

“So ?”

“So...” Mathilde said, her mouth still full. “I think I am doomed. This ice cream is far too good, it can only be an sin !”

The Master of Winter loaded his spoon with the famous dessert. The opposition of cold ice cream with warm chocolate always had a special flavor. He loved this contrast. Then came the vanilla aroma, the real one, the one from the pods, and not the synthetic one that was found more and more frequently. The chocolate, as well as the drink, was spicy, which tickled the palate with unctuousness.

“I think you’re right. It’s damnation”.

He immediately took another spoon. Food was not fundamental to Jack, the magic that circulated in his veins provided for all his needs, but the Master of Winter never refused the pleasure of discovering the culinary ingenuity of humans when he had the opportunity.

The radio which played background music began a well-known Christmas melody whose first notes made the sound of bells resound. Mathilde’s head began to nod joyfully and her lips spoke in silence.

“Sing”, Jack suggested.

Mathilde straightened her face as if she had been caught. She had apparently not realized that she had let herself go.

“Come on, sing”, he encouraged her, amused.

“Certainly not. I don’t want to make myself a fool”, She grumbled, putting her hands on her red cheeks.

“Who cares ? I don’t ask you to shout. But you seem to like this song”.

*Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell rock
Jingle bells chime in jingle bell time
Dancing and prancing in Jingle Bell Square
In the frosty air.*

Jack intoned the song, having fun to come across lyrics that he might have appropriated. Mathilde laughed, hid her eyes behind her fingers, laughed again, and timidly followed Jack in his stride. Time was passing and the Master of Winter felt more relaxed, daring even. The more he learned about the girl, the more eager he was to discover more. It was rare for a particular human to provoke such curiosity.

Without disturbing the other customers with excessive vocalizations, they took pleasure in letting themselves go during the few minutes of the melody. The experience was unprecedented for Jack. Unprecedented, but pleasant.

”

“Yes, I really love this song”, Mathilde confessed when the song was over.

“Any particular reason ?

“One Christmas, I must have been seven, my brothers and I discovered Home alone and Home alone 2, thanks to our father. We watched them over and over again, until we overdosed. The part that always made us laugh in Lost in New York, is the moment when Kevin arrives at the pool of the New York hotel to create a little bomb in the water and loses his swimsuit much too big for him”.

A nostalgic smile was painted on the lips of Mathilde who, eyes in the wave, relive the scene.

“We were young. And the idea of imagining the naked boy in the pool was a constant source of laughter. The song that plays at that time is Jingle Bell Rock. Dad, Pierre, André and I, we pushed the furniture out of the living room to dance to this music until we lost our breath.”

“These are wonderful memories”.

A touch of jealousy piqued Jack’s heart. This kind of anecdote was the perfect example of everything that was denied forever. He buried his resentments far into his head and concentrated on the young woman.

“It was a long time ago. An eternity, it seems”.

The tinge of bitterness that was reflected in her words didn’t escape the Master of Winter who decided, however, not to insist.

“And you ? what’s your favorite Christmas song ?” Mathilde asked.

“Tchaikovsky, *The nutcracker*”, Jack answered, confident.

“A song ! Not a ballet”, Mathilde replied, drinking her last sip of hot chocolate.

“That’s what I like. I’m not very fond of songs with lyrics”.

“And yet, you know *Jingle Bell Rock* by heart”, she said with a hint of malice.

"Everybody knows that song. It's just like *Last Christmas* or *All I want for Christmas* is you. We can hear them every year on the radio, in every shop, in every tea room", he said, sweeping the room with his hand.

Mathilde nodded, giving him the point.

"Still. Tchaikovsky, isn't it a little bit old?"

"It's timeless", Jack assured.

"That's unusual for a boy your age."

The young man smiled, enigmatic. His age, he had long since stopped counting. For a second, he imagined Mathilde's expression discovering this detail. The idea amused him. His attachment to *The Nutcracker* was, after all, not that surprising. Jack still remembered the first performance he had attended in 1892 in St Petersburg on December 18, exactly. He kept a vivid memory of it, the ballet had captivated him, upset him and this feeling had continued in the following days, until his Sleep.

"And witch song do you prefer?" Mathilde insisted.

"I've got a few".

"Come on, choose on".

Mathilde leaned her head to the side and her insistence snatched a smile from Jack.

"Coffee, then, with the Arabian dancers. I have always been bewitched by the sounds of the clarinet and bassoon in this composition."

Mathilde nodded, concerned.

"Mmh, mmh, sure".

"You don't know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

He was staring right into her eyes, half a smile on his lips.

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"Come on, choose on".

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Mathilde nodded, concerned.

“Mmh, mmh, sure”.

“You don’t know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

He was staring right into her eyes, half a smile on his lips.

“Yes, yes. Of course. It’s perfectly clear. Tchaikovsky, I listen to his music every night before bed time. Bassoon, clarinet and everything. Perfectly clear”.

A complaining moan escaped Jack. Decidedly, the good references were lost.

“Fantasia from Disney, you know it?”

“Yes”.

A glimmer of interest reignited in the young woman’s pupils. Everyone knew Disney. Jack refrained from raising his eyes.

“The fish dancing in the cartoon... You see?”

Jack detected the precise moment when the understanding was made in Mathilde’s suddenly illuminated gaze.

“Oh yeah, I see! I love this moment. Indeed, it’s a very nice melody”, she approved.

Jack shook his head, half amused, half disappointed.

At the time of the bill, he insisted on paying for everything. He put a hand in his pocket and subtly waved his fingers.

“Keep the change”, he said while paying to the waitress.

The tip was generous, but the money wouldn’t last. Within a few hours, the notes he had created would melt and then evaporate. A subterfuge to which he lent himself on rare occasions.

Outside, the temperatures had dropped again, forcing Mathilde to bundle up in her coat. While, for them, time had suspended, the moon had continued its trajectory in the navy blue vault. They continued their lively discussions

in the streets of Strasbourg, as if isolated in their own bubble. Arriving in front of Mathilde's building, Jack realized that she had taken him home.

"It's your place ?" Jack asked as if he've never been there.

"Yeah" she confirmed, swinging on her heels.

"You're not afraid I come stalking you?", he teased.

The young woman shrugged. A amused smile played on her lips.

"I live on the third floor. I don't worry".

If only she knew...

"I enjoyed the discovery of Marie-Henriette. You were right about hot chocolate"; Jack said.

"Oh.. well. My pleasure" She stammered, burying her face in the collar of her coat to the nose.

"I'll leave you, now. It's late, you must be tired".

As if to prove him right, Mathilde yawned against the back of her gloved hand.

"Good night, Jack".

Her greeting sounded almost like a question.

"See you soon, Mathilde-in-the-red-hat".

The young woman frowned slightly, with an uncertain smile floating on her lips.

He waited until he heard the door lock to vanish.



CHAPTER VI

Mathilde rose with a radiant smile and a light heart. The water in the shower seemed deliciously hot, the oatmeal in its almond milk, tasty. Outside, the white blanket that extended into the sky seemed luminous. Caught in a sudden desire for coquetry, the young woman looked in her few possessions for a combination of clothes that could present her to her advantage. When she made her choice, she dressed with jeans – a sure bet that matched everything – and a soft snow-white high-collar sweater. Even if she was not accustomed to she drew a fine line of black kohl on top of her lashes and applied a touch of mascara. The reflexion in the mirror made her lean her head to the side. She smiled. Before putting on her shoes, she sent a message to Louis asking for a favor, and then, once ready, she set out.

Not surprisingly, her friends were on one of the benches that adorned the lawn in front of the university. They took this little corner last year and Mathilde often thought that their names should have been engraved on the wood of the file.

“Hello there! How are you ?” she said.

She gave Louis two kisses. Nicolas, distant by nature, made her only one kiss without taking his phone out of his sight. Amanda rewarded her with her usual hug. Mathilde approached Louis

again and gave him a little nudge.

“Did you bring it?”, she asked, impatient.

The young man poked around in his schoolbag, then handed her a small black flash drive.

“It’s good because it’s you. I did it in a hurry before leaving the house. Next time, let me know the day before”, he grumbled.

“I’m sorry. I had written to you yesterday, but the message didn’t leave” she lied.

“What is it?” Amanda asked.

“The music of a ballet. I’m not sure... *Nutcracker*, right?”

“Yes, from Tchaikovsky”, Mathilde said, observing the little flash drive as if it were a Christmas present.”

Amanda let out a funny little laugh.

“Since when do you care about ballets?”

In other circumstances, Mathilde would probably have noticed the point of cynicism in her friend’s tone, but the young woman was too absorbed by her contemplation to care.

“I don’t know”, she lied again. “I thought about the Disney cartoon Fantasia and wanted to deepen my musical knowledge”.

She punctuated her explanation with a radiant smile. She would have liked to rediscover this music without having to ask her friend, but without an Internet subscription, it was impossible for her to do research on her own.

“I don’t see what makes you so euphoric’, Nicolas cut. Between your lazy family and your job at this stinking little old house, there’s nothing to be happy about for cheesy music’.

Nicolas’s words showered Mathilde, whose spirit took a slight blow in the wing. What purpose was this remark, if not to hurt her?

“Excuse him” Amanda intervened, whom her friend’s glare had not escaped.

She passed a comforting arm on her neck, then she added in a low voice:

“His father just told him that he would celebrate Christmas in New York with his new conquest... without him”.

Mathilde watched her friend over her shoulder. With his eyebrows furrowed and his leg agitated, he raged a puff on his cigarette.

Contradictory feelings swelled in her and the young woman struggled to order them. She could understand this feeling of abandonment. Nicolas' father travelled many times during the year and didn't take his son with him most of the time. Did Mathilde have to pity him? She thought she was on vacation as soon as she discovered a new tea room at the other end of Strasbourg, or when she could afford to stroll one afternoon in the Orangerie Park... And, although their social conditions are different, was that a valid reason for him to vent on her? Why was it up to her to excuse him?

Mathilde felt a dark weariness pervading her.

“Yeah, sure. I understand”, she finally said.

“You're the best. You know that, right?” Amanda claimed, hugging her a little harder.

Mathilde took a deep breath and formed a pale smile. She hung on to the flash drive which she held between her gloved fingers.



Thanks to the absence of Mrs. Walraff, a teacher of materials handling, Mathilde had time to return home to enjoy a more tranquil afternoon. She had to trick to avoid a trip to the mall with the rest of the gang, garnering general disapproval. Her friends didn't understand her frustration at the idea of strolling around the galleries, looking at the shop windows, feeling the weight of her wallet far too light.

Back in her studio, the impatient young woman turned on her old computer. The quality of the sound was not optimal, but she would settle for it.

He had to learn patience until the poor carcass woke up and agreed to open the audio playback program. Once the USB key was inserted and the hardware recognized by the machine, Mathilde started the music. The first notes resonated. Sitting on her desk chair, she crossed her arms in front of her keyboard, then put her cheek on it. She increased the volume to its maximum – low in truth – and closed her eyes.

Peacefully, Mathilde let herself be lulled by the melody, deep blue eyes invaded her mind and a shiver ran through her spine.



Mathilde had redoubled her energy in his household at La Seigneurie in order to devote a little time to the residents. She stopped in the room of Archibald Sanquer, a retired plumber who received few visits from his family. Everything in the room breathed sobriety. There were few decorations on the furniture, as if the tenant had not yet had the opportunity to settle or didn't plan to stay.

"How are you today, Archy?" she asked softly, lining the blankets of his bed.

The small bedside lamp that diffused a dim light revealed a man with fine features. Although his skin was pale and wrinkled, the beauty of his young years lingered on his face.

"I'm bored", the old man said, tired.

His mind still sharp and alert, Archibald had been placed in a nursing home because of health complications and reduced mobility, which kept him frustrated. Mathilde looked contrite and compassionate.

"What would please you?"

“Go back to the active life”.

Mathilde approached the bed and straightened the cushion slightly to offer the resident more comfort. She smiled sadly. The man’s request was unfortunately beyond her reach.

“If possible, I mean. Can I bring you something tomorrow? A book? A magazine?”

The boarder stared at Mathilde with gratitude.

“You are a good girl. I thank you for your kindness, but you have better things to do than to take care of a useless old man”.

“I assure you it doesn’t bother me. Tell me”, she insisted.

“Come back another time and chat for a couple of minutes with me. It’s always very refreshing to talk to you”, he said, tapping her hand.

Archibald dug himself up a bit in bed and Mathilde understood that the conversation ended there. She turned off the bedside lamp before leaving the room.

“Goodnight, Archy”, she whispered, almost too low to be heard.

Before leaving for good, Mathilde wanted to visit Annie. She went through the entire building to her room. When she arrived, the door was closed, so the young woman took care to knock slightly.

“Enter”, a stifled voice announced.

Mathilde opened the door and passed her head into the embrasure.

“Good evening, Annie. Can I bother you for a few minutes?”

The old lady, whose health still excellent allowed her to go to bed without the assistance of the staff, was installed in a cream-coloured chair. When she moved here, the resident had gone to great lengths to keep this piece of furniture from her former home. A book opened on the knees and the glasses on the edge of the nose, she welcomed Mathilde with a radiant face.

“Good evening, sweetie. What a pleasure to see you! Come in, come in”.

She punctuated her invitation with encouraging gestures of the hand. Mathilde didn’t make herself pray and crossed the threshold

of the door, closing behind her.

“How are you ?” she asked, worried since the crisis the lady had had a few days earlier.

“I’m perfectly fine. Come closer, my eyes are not what they used to be”.

Mathilde obeyed and passed through the room in a few steps. In a singular contrast to Mr. Sanquer’s room, Annie’s room seemed to want to retrace the chronology of a full life. Frames loaded with old photographs played elbows on the shelves, small knick-knacks sat where there was still a little place, each of them seemed imbued with a story that it would have been delighted to whisper.

As she didn’t know what to do with her body, Mathilde sat on the ground, her legs folded under her. Annie offered her a pleasant smile and a soft look over her glasses, before returning to her reading. Even without sharing big conversations, Mathilde liked to spend a few minutes with the boarder. She could not explain the special affection she felt for her. Was it her eyes as gray as a storm, her dimple on the cheek that wrinkles could not remove, her kindness, or her fiery character that the years had not managed to subdue? Maybe it was all of it. The young woman had the feeling of finding a family member, a caring grandmother.

“You have the plums that sparkle, sweetie. What do you have to tell me?”

Lost in the void, Mathilde turned her head sharply, not taking the trouble to hide her surprise.

“Why are you saying that?”

Annie made a mischievous laugh, closed her book in a dull noise and placed it on the mahogany side table next to her.

“Would you believe I was born yesterday?”

“There’s nothing special to say” Mathilde lied with a shy smile.

“Oh come on ! Make me dream !” Annie insisted, giving her a small slap on the shoulder.

Mathilde thought for a few seconds.

“He, hum, His name is Jack”.

Pronouncing his name out loud, confessing this little something that was born in the hollow of her chest released a load of shivers along her arms. Annie’s plums sparkled with interest.

“We went for a hot chocolate last night, simply. We just talked.”

“That’s how it always starts!” Annie claimed, joyful.

“It means nothing” Mathilde denied, her heart pounding in her chest. “we just talked, nothing in particular. It was nice”.

“About what did you talk?”

“About music. He loves Tchaikovsky”.

Almost in spite of herself, a sweet smile blossomed on her face when she thought of that evening which had seemed out of time, out of everything.

“That’s a young man with good tastes”.

“Well, I’m not sure he’s interested in me”.

Annie raised her eyebrows, ready to answer, but Mathilde carried on :

“No, I assure you. He’s sweet, funny, atypical. But he had no words, no gestures for me that would suggest anything other than a vague friendship. Also, it’s not like I have...well, I feel...something. I don’t really know him”.

“You’re too hard on yourself. Sometimes we don’t see what’s right under our noses.»

Annie seemed to get lost in dreams that her words had awakened.

“Was it your case?” Mathilde dared to ask.

“Precisely”, the old woman confirmed with a nostalgic smile on her face. “Edgar has been courting me for a long time and I thought he was laughing at me. He had to block me in the corner of a house, imprison me with his arms and tell me straight in the eyes that he loved me so I could realize his feelings as well as mine”.

Mathilde had already noticed that Annie spoke regularly about Edgar. The young woman knew that he had died during the Second World War, although she did not know all the ins and outs of his death. On almost all the pictures that decorated the room, we could see Annie at various ages alongside a man who had aged with her. There were also children, then teenagers, adults carrying babies in their arms. Annie was regularly visited by her family, she was one of the luckiest boarders. Despite this, she hardly spoke of them, only of Edgar.

“How was he?” Mathilde wanted to know, changing position, sat on his buttocks and encircled her legs with his arms.

Annie placed a white strand behind her ear and smoothed her eyebrows.

“He was... he was... wonderful. Beautiful as hell although he never realized it, considerate, sweet, wildly romantic”.

A small chuckle escaped her, probably caused by a memory raised to the surface.

“How did you know? How did you know that you loved him?” Mathilde asked whose question was not totally disinterested.

“I knew it at the irregular beats of my heart every time he entered my field of vision. I knew it from the smile that flourished on my face without me being able to control it when we met. I knew it from the cruel lack that his absence was causing, a lack that was eating my guts out. I knew it when the fever was spreading when he hugged me. »

Annie embraced Mathilde’s hand gently.

“It’s a wonderful feeling”.

Timidly, the young woman nodded.

Leaving the building, Mathilde looked up. Not surprisingly, the sky was perfectly clear. As if it accepted all the variations of time during the day on the sole condition of being able to make the stars sparkle at night.

An ostensible throat scraping caught the attention of Mathilde, who turned around noticed a silhouette she was beginning to tame. She struggled to hide her enthusiasm as she went towards the visitor.

“Good evening, Mathilde-in-the-red-hat”, he first said.

“Good evening, just Jack. At this rate, you’re gonna end up enrolling as a permanent resident”.

She drew close enough to see a veil appear on his blue eyes which she couldn’t interpret. Had she said anything wrong? She felt stupid. Within a split second, Jack found his usual confident smile.

“How was your day?” he asked as they were on their way out of the residence.

“Oh? So, there we are ? We’re up with platitudes? ” How was your day?” , “What a wonderful weither” “What are you eating tonight?”

“I love platitudes” Jack said. “I like the habits that are established as faithful friends, pillars on which to rely.”

“Some would say it’s the door to monotony”, she argued.

“These people don’t realize how lucky they are.”

A certain melancholy enveloped his words and Mathilde burned to ask him to develop. She felt his discomfort. However, she didn’t want to push him to his limits, so she shook her head to drive away his parasitic thoughts.

“What a clear sky after a covered day!” We are lucky, she exclaimed. “I had hoped for some snow, it will not be for today!”

“Do you like snow ?”

“Yeah, I love it. The snowflakes that twirl at the whim of the wind, the immaculate white bed on the ground on which come to reflect some soft rays of sun. It’s always magical. »

“You’re a poet tonight”, Jack said.

Mathilde didn’t know how to take this remark, so she opted for the defense:

“Oh, come on, don’t make fun of me”.

“No, no. I’m serious. I think it’s pretty”.

He darted a sharp look on her and seemed to detail her face.

“Did you change something ?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your face... There’s something different”.

Mathilde turned her head to try to hide her pink cheeks. He was the only one, all day, to have noticed this little touch of makeup that she had applied the same morning.

“What’s wrong with my face?” she dared to ask, continuing to avoid his gaze.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. I just have the impression that you shine. That...”

He stopped talking, Bent his head, looking for the right word.

“Your charm is enhanced”.

He had finished his sentence and the heart of Mathilde pounded. She tried to not getting ahead of herself, Jack had stated this fact almost scientifically, but he had spoken of «charm». Did that mean he thought she was pretty?

The two companions continued on their way in the small alley. Suddenly, Jack grabbed Mathilde’s arm a little before the exit and pulled her a few steps further into the garden.

“What are you doing?” Mathilde asked, whose feelings fought between curiosity and a hint of fear.

Under the bare cherry tree, the tangle of branches fragmented the brightness of the moon, creating a unique kaleidoscope on the young man’s silhouette. Facing him, Mathilde watched him, intrigued, and she detected a glimmer of amusement in his gaze. What was his plan?

“What are we doing here?” she asked again.

“Close your eyes”, he commanded, mysterious.

“What?”

“Come on, close your eyes”.

“Why?”

Mathilde was a bit confuse. She had never felt fear in the presence of Jack and she still did not. However, that didn’t prevent her from remaining vigilant, trying to be cautious. A well-frequented tea room was one thing, a secluded corner in a wide garden whose area was to approach the hectare was

another.”

“Do you trust me?” he asked, smiling.

“What question is that ? Who do you think you are ? Aladdin ?”

Jack snaps at himself with an outraged air.

“Aladdin? Is that the best you got ? This ragamuffin ?”

With her eyebrow raised, Mathilde glanced ostensibly at her interlocutor’s barefoot feet. The young man waved his toes, as if he suddenly realized their existence, then darted a smirk amused on Mathilde.

“Touché”.

He dipped his hands into his pockets and displayed a determined face.

“Close your eyes”, he repeated. “I promise you won’t regret it”.

Mathilde rolled her eyes before closing them.

“Don’t open them until I tell you”.

“Yeah, I got it”.

She tried to rely on her other senses to guess what was going on. It seemed to her that the air was getting colder, that it was getting strangely denser. How long did it take? A few seconds? A few minutes, perhaps.

She felt a presence behind her back. A cold breath danced on her neck while a low voice whispered in her ear:

“Go on...”

She opened her eyes and discovered the glittering ground, as if a dust of diamonds had settled on the lawn. It took a few more lashes for the young woman to realize that it was snow.

“But.. what...” she exclaimed, too shocked to finish her sentence.

She turned and cast an interrogative look at Jack, who, with his hands in his pockets, contemplated the landscape with satisfaction. He had placed himself behind her, probably to offer her a clear view of the scene. Mathilde’s eyebrows froze with incomprehension. How was this possible? Of course, she had already noticed his talents for a few well-set tricks, but here... How to explain this ?

“Who are you, Jack ?” she asked without being totally sure that she wanted to find out.

Jack displayed an upset face.

“Leave the questions for later. Let’s enjoy this beautiful snow.”

“But...”

“Later”, he insisted.

Resigned, Mathilde nodded her head. She was able to decipher on Jack’s face that he would not talk any further that night. She turned her attention to the cotton bed which was spreading at her feet, she had dreamed of it since the end of the summer. As if she no longer trusted her sight, she leaned over and touched the shimmering surface with her fingertips. The snow squealed slightly in his gloved hand. So it was real.

Mathilde jumped when a projectile burst against her shoulder. She turned to discover Jack, with a wide smile on his lips. She displayed an offended face that had the merit of wilting the amused look of the young man. Feigning pain, Mathilde curled up on herself, stooped down and made at full speed a coarse ball which she sent in the direction of Jack. The jet missed its target by a few centimetres, so he regained its playful air, a perfect echo of Mathilde’s.

They launched into a merciless battle. She didn’t care about the snow that pierced her red gloves and froze her hands or her shoes, which, little by little, were filled with water. No, she thought of nothing but the present moment, a new bubble out of time, just for the two of them, having fun like children. Wasn’t that what they were after all... children?



CHAPITRE VII

Jack se tenait au bord du lac. Le soleil brûlant trônait dans le ciel d'azur. Pas un seul nuage à l'horizon. Dans cette partie du monde, dans ce climat si différent, les pouvoirs fortement amoindris du Maître de l'Hiver ne lui permettaient pas d'invoquer le plus petit cumulus consolateur.

Ses pieds s'enfonçaient dans la terre humide que l'eau venait lécher paresseusement. Il faisait chaud. Bien trop chaud pour lui. La perspective de plonger dans l'étendue turquoise ne lui procura pas le plaisir escompté, car la température de l'eau avoisinait les trente degrés, soit trente de trop pour le satisfaire. Pourtant, il se résigna et avança dans l'onde tiède. Une fois immergé jusqu'à la taille, il ferma les yeux, ravi de soustraire ses rétines aux rayons agressifs de l'astre insolent.

Il chercha la sérénité au plus profond de lui, s'astreignit à un état de méditation, de calme rigoureux. Dans un murmure emporté par le vent, Jack entama sa litanie. Tel un chant religieux, les mots de la langue oubliée sortirent de sa bouche dans un son guttural. Lorsqu'il fut prêt, et sans interrompre son incantation, Jack plongea.

Aussitôt qu'il fut immergé, le sol se déroba et il bascula dans les plaines aquatiques de Yarad. Jack laissa le temps à sa vision de

s'adapter sous l'eau avant de s'enfoncer dans les profondeurs bleu-tées. Il préparait cette expédition depuis cinq hivers, il avait étudié les textes subtilisés aux Tout-Puissants jusqu'à en avoir la vue trouble. La topographie de l'endroit n'avait plus de secrets pour lui, à tel point qu'il eut l'impression de connaître ces lieux mieux que la Salle d'Éveil. Il adressa, une fois encore, des remerciements muets aux Étoiles qui avaient accédé à sa requête. Ces astres ancestraux étaient réputés pour leur infinie connaissance, mais aussi pour leur empathie. Il avait compté dessus en plaidant sa cause. Et ces Étoiles l'avaient exaucé, lui révélant tout ce qu'il devait savoir et où il devait chercher pour accomplir ses desseins. Les plumes de la colombe sacrée recelaient une puissante magie – assez puissante pour confectionner un bouclier contre ses entraves.

Bien que l'oxygène ne fût pas pour lui une nécessité vitale, il se sentit quelque peu incommode de ne pouvoir inspirer une goulée d'air.

Profitant de la lumière qui perçait encore sous l'eau, Jack se laissa distraire quelques instants par la flore aquatique. Tant de couleurs...

Sans le toucher, Jack s'approcha, fasciné, d'un corail. Le rouge explosif le subjuguait tant qu'il eut un mouvement de recul lorsqu'un poisson jaune passa devant lui. Lui succédèrent d'autres variétés, il y en avait tant ! Bleus, orange, rayés, mouchetés. Une telle diversité qu'il aurait pu contempler des heures sans se lasser. Mais le temps lui manquait.

Il se recentra finalement sur son objectif, s'enfonça plus profondément et scruta la flore sous-marine, éclairée par un orbe de lumière. La magie sollicitée le fragilisait, mais il dut s'y résoudre pour s'orienter et avancer dans sa quête. La nage lui parut interminable et la température de l'eau continuait de l'affaiblir.

Alors qu'il pensait s'être trompé et allait faire demi-tour, Jack aperçut l'ouverture qu'il cherchait dans la roche. Ragaillardi par sa trouvaille, il nagea avec davantage de force, jusqu'à atteindre la cavité. Prudent, il observa l'entrée dans laquelle il pourrait s'engouffrer de justesse tant elle était étroite.

Le jeune homme s'accrocha aux murs intérieurs de la grotte pour donner l'impulsion nécessaire à son avancée. Il évolua dans un couloir sombre qui lui paraissait sans fin. Son chemin déboucha sur une cavité beaucoup plus large, une salle sous-marine ovale que la lueur ne parvenait pas à illuminer entièrement.

Je ne dois plus être loin, pensa-t-il, empli d'excitation.

Il fit le tour des lieux, laissa sa main glisser sur la paroi rocheuse afin de ne pas se perdre ou manquer un détail. Il ne croisa aucune âme. Aucun poisson, aucun crustacé, aucune algue. Indépendamment de la pression de l'eau, il régnait une ambiance pesante qui imposait une certaine déférence.

Finalement, le halo bleuté éclaira une cage. Jack s'en approcha, fébrile. Au centre de celle-ci, protégée dans sa prison d'oxygène, se trouvait une colombe. *La* colombe. Paisible, elle fit pivoter sa tête, comme pour observer le jeune visiteur sous un autre angle. Le Maître de l'Hiver cligna des yeux, les paupières ralenties par l'eau, peinant à réaliser sa chance.

Il amorçait un mouvement pour s'emparer de la geôle miniature lorsqu'une paroi de verre se matérialisa devant lui. Avant qu'il n'ait le temps de réagir, cinq plaques similaires vinrent l'emprisonner. Le jeune homme dépensa une énergie folle à tenter de la briser. Il donna des coups de poing qui lui blessèrent les phalanges, des coups de pied dont la collision douloureuse vibrait dans ses chevilles, mais rien n'y fit. L'eau présente à l'intérieur du cube ralentissait ses mouvements, diminuait la force de l'impact, et la paroi était bien trop épaisse pour céder.

Jack sentit l'énervement ainsi qu'une pointe de panique lui étreindre le cœur. S'il ne parvenait pas à sortir de ce piège, il demeurerait coincé durant les dix jours d'Éveil qui lui restait et serait rappelé par le Gardien au lendemain du réveillon de Noël pour une nouvelle mise en Sommeil. Tout ce qu'il avait accompli jusqu'alors n'aurait servi à rien. Les bracelets qu'il avait créés et les autres boucliers qu'il comptait encore fabriquer s'évanouiraient au moment même de sa disparition, car ils étaient liés à lui. Il n'avait droit qu'à une seule chance.

Il n'en est pas question ! rugit-il mentalement.

Décidé, il créa des flèches de glace et les projeta contre la paroi pour la fissurer. Certaines éclatèrent en atteignant leur cible, d'autres ricochèrent, lui entaillant le front. La douleur lui arracha une grimace. Que pouvait-il donc bien faire ?

Il se força au calme dans un premier temps et attendit que les battements de son cœur s'apaisent. Il visualisa ses Galobas qu'il aimait tant modeler et se remémora le vent glacial de saison, la neige qu'il affectionnait plus que toute autre chose, la poudreuse merveilleuse que l'on pouvait moduler de tant de façons.

Puis, Mathilde s'imposa dans son esprit et il en fut presque surpris. Il se représenta ses yeux couleur d'ambre si vifs, les cheveux châtain qui encadraient son fin visage ovale, le sourire qui habillait ses lèvres charnues. La bataille de boules de neige de la veille lui revint en mémoire.

Il devait avouer qu'il ne s'était plus amusé de la sorte depuis longtemps. Mathilde avait accepté cet échange ainsi que l'étrangeté de la situation avec tant de confiance, tant de simplicité, que cela l'avait touché, il devait bien le reconnaître.

— Tu es un vrai garçon de l'hiver, avait-elle déclaré sans se douter de la justesse de ses propos. Avec tes cheveux de neige et tes yeux couleur de glace.

Glace !

Ravivé par ce nouvel espoir, Jack remua légèrement les mains pour amener à lui le pouvoir de l'hiver. L'opération était compliquée : il était déjà fort affaibli par la température ambiante.

Il se remémora la conversation entretenue avec Mathilde chez *Marie-Henriette*. Elle lui avait confié attendre que sa vie démarre. Pour Jack, elle avait débuté à son Éveil et il entendait bien en prendre le contrôle absolu.

Un hoquet de soulagement lui échappa lorsque l'eau à ses pieds commença à se durcir. Le jeune homme se prépara à subir une forte pression et à vivre un moment pour le moins douloureux, mais il gardait confiance en son plan.

Le liquide continua à se solidifier à hauteur de sa taille, puis de ses épaules, jusqu'au sommet du cube. Comme le Maître de l'Hiver l'avait escompté, le volume de l'eau changée en glace prit plus de place et la prison vola en éclats. Jack ne perdit pas un instant et fit fondre le gel qui le détenait. Il se laissa quelques secondes pour recouvrer ses esprits. Avec de lents mouvements de bras, il stabilisa sa position dans ce vide aqueux.

La colombe, dans sa geôle d'oxygène, attendait toujours paisiblement. Le jeune homme observa l'animal, plus méfiant. Il n'était clairement pas en mesure d'affronter une épreuve de plus, la prudence était donc de mise.

Puisqu'il ne pouvait s'approcher de l'animal ou le toucher, Jack entreprit de geler le contour de la cage et créa un fil glacé pour la tirer à lui.

Aussitôt délogée de son socle, la prison d'air s'embrasa d'une lumière blanche éblouissante. Le coffrage céda. La cage vibra quelques secondes avant de se briser.

La colombe libérée demeura immobile dans l'eau, les yeux clos. Jack craignit de l'avoir tuée. Mais alors qu'il allait s'en saisir, l'oiseau ouvrit les paupières et se mit à grandir. En quelques secondes, il emplit la moitié de la salle aquatique. Ses plumes évoluèrent en écailles souples qui se soulevaient au gré des mouvements de la bête. Seul son poitrail conservait une parure duveteuse. Les pattes se palmèrent, battant l'eau avec finesse. Des branchies apparurent de part et d'autre de sa tête. Les yeux de l'animal, jusqu'alors inexpressifs, affichèrent une animosité évidente.

Méfiant, Jack nagea à reculons, un sentiment d'appréhension grandissait dans le creux de son ventre. Il jeta un rapide coup d'œil aux débris de la cage sur le sol et se demanda, en définitive, ce qu'elle était chargée de protéger.

Décidé à passer à l'offensive, le Maître de l'Hiver puisa dans ses maigres réserves et envoya des salves de lances gelées vers la bête. Avec une aisance surprenante, l'animal détourna l'attaque d'un

mouvement de nageoire. Furieux, il ouvrit son bec pour en laisser échapper un cri puissant. L'onde sonore se propagea dans l'eau avec force, aussi Jack dut-il se couvrir les oreilles.

Exaspéré, il tenta le tout pour le tout et se propulsa vers le buste du monstre marin pour récupérer les plumes qu'il convoitait. Mais il était bien moins rapide que son adversaire qui le chassa d'une pirouette, le fouettant de sa longue queue écaillée. Dans l'élan, il heurta violemment un mur de la salle et grimaça sous l'impact.

Confus, Jack secoua la tête pour recouvrer ses esprits. À peine s'était-il stabilisé que l'oiseau aquatique chargeait à nouveau dans sa direction. Le Maître de l'Hiver voulut esquiver le bec dangereusement pointé vers lui, mais ses mouvements étaient trop lents, désordonnés par la panique qui l'envahissait. La gueule de l'animal se referma durement sur le buste de Jack, l'emprisonnant dans un étau redoutable. La douleur jaillit, brutale, aiguë, lui donnant l'impression d'être coupé en deux.

La peur et le doute empoisonnèrent son cœur. La prise toujours plus serrée du monstre réduisait ses possibilités. Que pouvait-il faire ?

Il ferma les yeux. Combien de fois l'avait-il souhaité, ce sommeil éternel qu'il ne pourrait jamais obtenir ? Combien de tentatives avortées avait-il supportées ? Trop. Bien trop. Que cet oiseau marin l'emporte et que l'on ne parle plus jamais de lui, qu'on ne lui parle plus de ses devoirs qu'il n'avait jamais demandés, de ses responsabilités lourdes à porter, de ses années longues à endurer. Seul. Toujours seul.

Un battement de cœur. Des yeux couleur d'ambre.

Jack ouvrit les paupières. Non. Il n'en était pas question. Il ne se laisserait pas dicter sa conduite. Il était le Maître absolu de l'hiver. Il valait mieux que tous les Maîtres des saisons confondus.

Enhardi, il rassembla ses dernières forces. Si son plan ne fonctionnait pas, tout serait perdu. Jack propulsa une puissante décharge gelée dans le bec de l'oiseau. Celui-ci desserra son étreinte et recula

en poussant des cris stridents. Jack se précipita vers la poitrine du monstre afin d'en arracher quelques plumes, profitant de l'hébétude de son adversaire.

Sans demander son reste, il emprunta le tunnel en sens inverse, fuyant l'antichambre et la créature qu'elle abritait.



De retour dans la Salle d'Éveil, Jack rangea son trophée en lieu sûr dans l'atelier. Il s'en occuperait après avoir récupéré des forces. Dans son état actuel, il ne serait pas en mesure de manier le feu sans en pâtir sévèrement. Car si le Maître de l'Hiver vivait éternellement, il n'en était pas pour autant immortel, pas tout à fait. Vidé de toutes ses forces, il aurait replongé prématurément dans le Sommeil jusqu'à l'année suivante.



En début de soirée, Jack retourna à la Seigneurie. Presque par automatisme, il se dirigea vers les grilles de fer forgé, et ce rituel qui s'installait le désarçonna. Alors qu'il n'avait pas rendu visite à Denise depuis la dernière fois, il ne pouvait s'empêcher d'attendre une demoiselle au bonnet rouge une fois de plus. Mathilde, avec son caractère doux et enjoué, prenait peu à peu une place conséquente dans son quotidien.

Vingt heures sonnèrent sans qu'elle se manifeste. Jack ne s'en inquiéta pas outre mesure dans un premier temps, il avait compris qu'elle aimait passer un peu plus de temps avec les résidents. Toutefois, une heure de plus s'écoula et le Maître de l'Hiver attendait toujours. Intrigué, il arpenta, invisible, les couloirs de la maison de retraite, mais aucune jeune femme aux yeux couleur d'ambre ne rencontra sa route.

Jack hésita. Peut-être devrait-il revenir le lendemain ? À quoi bon tenter de la joindre ce soir ? Elle n'était pas importante au point qu'il se donne cette peine, après tout. La vie de Mathilde était tellement éphémère comparée à la sienne. Immuable, éternelle.

Le vent qui soufflait violemment dans les rues de Strasbourg lui fit du bien. Avant de partir pour sa quête des plumes, Jack avait pris soin de façonner un nouvel orbe afin de poursuivre la chute des températures. Les giboulées de neige étaient imminentes et le Maître de l'Hiver s'en réjouissait à l'avance. Chaque bourrasque claquant contre son visage estompait les séquelles provoquées par le climat chaud en début de journée, renforçait sa magie, ravivait ses sens.

Le bâtiment en vue, Jack redescendit sur le trottoir. Il aurait pu apparaître au beau milieu du salon de la jeune femme, mais cela aurait suscité bon nombre de questions qu'il préférait éviter. Il était évident que s'il voulait approfondir cette... amitié naissante, Jack allait, tôt ou tard, devoir discuter avec Mathilde comme il l'avait fait avec Denise en son temps.

Mais cette dernière était une enfant à l'époque. L'esprit des jeunes humains demeurait beaucoup plus ouvert à l'extraordinaire que celui, conditionné, des adultes. Mathilde se trouvait au carrefour des deux âges. Gardait-elle des réminiscences de l'enfance et la part de merveilleux qu'elle implique, ou avait-elle sauté à pieds joints dans le monde rangé et rationnel des grandes personnes ?

Repoussant ces questions à plus tard, il prit le temps de repérer l'appartement sur les sonnettes et les boîtes aux lettres avant de s'engager dans l'immeuble.

Peut-être ne serait-elle pas là. Après tout, elle devait avoir des jours de congé. Il était tout à fait probable qu'elle soit partie faire la fête avec ses amis. C'était de son âge. Jack s'en voulut de ne pas y avoir pensé plus tôt. Il réfléchit quelques secondes à ses options. Allait-il réellement frapper à sa porte ?

Décontenancé, Jack réalisa qu'il arpentait le couloir de long en large. Il n'avait pas l'habitude de s'embarrasser de détails et agissait toujours comme bon lui semblait. Alors pourquoi accordait-il de l'importance à ce que la jeune femme pourrait penser en le voyant sur le pas de sa porte ?

Décidé, il se dirigea vers l'entrée de l'intéressée et y donna des coups énergiques. Quatre inspirations plus tard, le battant s'ouvrit sur Mathilde. Le teint pâle, les pupilles ternes et le nez rouge, elle portait un énorme plaid sur les épaules, des chaussettes de laine lui réchauffaient les pieds et sa main libre serrait un mouchoir froissé.

En découvrant son visiteur, Mathilde écarquilla de grands yeux ahuris.

— Mais..., commença-t-elle sans parvenir à trouver ses mots.

— Mat' ? Qu'y a-t-il ? demanda une voix féminine depuis l'appartement.

Jack décela une lueur de panique dans le regard de Mathilde. Toutefois, avant qu'il puisse esquisser le moindre mouvement, la porte s'ouvrit en grand, dévoilant une jeune femme dont les cheveux frisés noirs encadraient sauvagement son visage rond à la douce couleur du café. Sourcils froncés, elle croquait à belles dents dans une part de pizza aux quatre fromages.

— Mais qu'est-ce que tu fous ? Tu veux être encore plus malade en restant dans les courants d'air ? la sermonna la fille, la bouche pleine.

Le visage de Mathilde se transforma en une moue perplexe, le regard oscillant entre son amie et Jack. Ce dernier jura intérieurement. Si Mathilde était à même de pouvoir le voir, il semblait évident qu'il n'en était rien pour la fille à ses côtés. Alors que la souffrante était sur le point de parler, Jack l'avertit d'un signe de tête.

— Ferme la porte, ordonna-t-il.

— Hein ? s'exclama Mathilde, confuse.

— Je te demande ce que tu fabriques. Tu vas bien ? s'inquiéta la seconde jeune femme.

— Fais ce que je te dis, insista Jack.

Les sourcils toujours froncés, Mathilde s'exécuta toutefois. Dès que le battant fut refermé, Jack choisit une tenue de saison avant de frapper, veillant à être visible pour quiconque. Cette anomalie le taraudait. Si son amie ne l'avait pas vu, Mathilde n'aurait pas dû être en mesure de le voir.

La porte s'ouvrit et Jack se composa un sourire qu'il espérait avenant. Si, contre toute attente, il lui était facile d'échanger avec Mathilde, il devait bien reconnaître se sentir moins assuré avec d'autres personnes.

— Bonsoir, Mathilde, la salua-t-il. Je suis venu vérifier que tu allais bien.

Le visage de la jeune femme conservait cette expression d'absolue incompréhension, et Jack réalisa que le moment de discuter avec elle était finalement arrivé. Avisant son changement vestimentaire, Mathilde fronça les sourcils. Alors qu'elle avait accepté de faire l'impasse hier sur les questions qui lui brûlaient les lèvres, il doutait de pouvoir lui demander d'oublier cet incident.

— Bonsoir. Et... vous êtes... ? intervint la jeune métisse, méfiante.

— Jack, se contenta-t-il de répondre.

— Amanda, se présenta-t-elle, avec une réserve manifeste.

Elle se tourna ensuite vers Mathilde, attendant visiblement une explication.

— Bonsoir Jack. Je... Je ne pensais pas te voir ici. C'est gentil de venir prendre de mes nouvelles. Entre, je t'en prie.

Sa voix était plus grave qu'à l'accoutumée et son nez bouché déformait la prononciation de ses « n » et ses « m ». Mathilde fit un pas de côté pour le laisser passer, imitée par Amanda.

L'adjectif « petit » paraissait faible pour décrire cet espace dans lequel toutes les pièces à vivre d'une maison étaient condensées en un seul et même endroit. D'un coup d'œil, il eut rapidement fait le tour des lieux et avisa Mathilde qui s'assit dans un coin de son cana-

pé-lit, juste à côté d'un jeune homme absorbé par son téléphone. Il ne semblait pas avoir remarqué la présence de Jack. La dénommée Amanda arriva à sa hauteur et lui flanqua une frappe sur la cuisse.

— Oh, il y a de la visite, malpoli.

Amanda se resservit une part de pizza dans le carton posé négligemment sur la table basse et s'installa dans le pouf, une jambe repliée sous elle.

L'ami daigna relever la tête, grattant distraitement sa barbe blonde naissante. Il darda un regard à la fois surpris et scrutateur sur Jack, qui, pour donner le change, hocha brièvement la tête d'un mouvement raide.

— C'est qui, lui ? Qu'est-ce qu'il fout là ? C'est quoi cette couleur de cheveux ? C'est chelou.

— Non, mais ça t'arrive d'avoir un filtre avant de parler ? C'est quoi ces manières ? Tu te crois où ? l'incendia Amanda en agitant sa part de pizza dont le fromage coulant menaçait de se répandre sur la moquette.

— Jack est une connaissance de la maison de retraite, intervint faiblement Mathilde.

Prise par un soudain éternuement, la jeune femme se réfugia dans un mouchoir pour soulager son nez encombré. Elle se releva ensuite pour le jeter.

— Ah, OK ! Et quoi, tu torches le sol ou les petits vieux ? s'enquit le garçon en plaçant ses coudes sur ses genoux, les mains jointes.

— Putain, Nico ! s'insurgea à nouveau Amanda.

— Mais lâche-moi, je pose juste une question.

Il décocha un regard frustré à Amanda. Jack ne put s'empêcher de noter la tension émanant des deux étudiants et se demanda quelle était leur relation. Le comportement de ce Nico lui passait au-dessus de la tête. Des petits prétentieux comme lui, il en voyait treize à la douzaine et avait depuis longtemps compris que ce genre de coq qui parlait à tort et à travers ne cherchait qu'à se faire remarquer pour compenser un manque affectif. Toutefois, le Maître ne

savait trop comment réagir. Observer était une chose, interagir était par contre inédit pour lui. Par égard pour Mathilde et afin de ne pas susciter plus de questions, il décida de tout simplement ignorer l'énergumène.

Son attention se reporta sur la jeune malade en train de se laver les mains. Il avala les trois pas qui les séparaient et se pencha légèrement.

— Je tombe mal, peut-être, suggéra-t-il à voix basse.

— Pas du tout. Je ne m'attendais juste pas à te voir... chez moi.

— Tu n'étais pas à la maison de repos, aujourd'hui.

Mathilde lui offrit un sourire amusé.

— Jack-le-voyeur-inoffensif prévenant ?

— Non. C'est simplement que...

— Je ne cesse d'en découvrir sur toi, enchaîna-t-elle sans lui laisser le temps de terminer sa phrase.

Le sous-entendu n'échappa pas à Jack qui afficha un rictus amer. Elle n'allait pas le lâcher, il le savait.

— Tu es blessé ? s'enquit-elle en faisant glisser le bout de ses doigts sur son front.

Jack se souvint de la flèche de glace qui avait entaillé sa peau. Il frotta la plaie, comme pour tenter de la faire disparaître. La cicatrice ne prendrait pas longtemps à se résorber, quelques heures, tout au plus.

— Si on vous dérange, dites-le, hein ! bougonna Nicolas depuis le fauteuil, son téléphone à nouveau en main.

Mathilde sembla se souvenir de la présence de ses amis et battit des paupières. Elle riva alors son attention sur Amanda et les deux jeunes femmes se lancèrent dans une conversation muette à coups de regards appuyés.

— Allez, Nico. Viens, on y va, déclara Amanda en se relevant du canapé.

Elle essuya ses mains grasses sur son jean et se dirigea vers la porte.

— Hein ? pesta Nicolas.

— T’as parfaitement entendu. Bouge ton cul.

Nicolas râla, mais se leva toutefois du fauteuil.

— Il est tard. Mathilde est fatiguée et doit se reposer, expliqua Amanda.

— Et lui, pourquoi il reste ?

— Je donne des nouvelles des pensionnaires et je pars, mentit Jack.

Il observa Amanda enlacer Mathilde d’une accolade bien trop vive, lui arrachant une petite grimace qu’elle ne remarqua même pas. Le nez plongé sur son téléphone, Nicolas lui adressa un faible salut de la main. Tous deux passèrent le pas de la porte, puis d’un mouvement souple la jeune femme se retourna avant de lancer un regard incisif et curieux à Jack.

— Ravie d’avoir fait ta connaissance. À une prochaine fois, peut-être.

Le Maître de l’Hiver se contenta d’un hochement de tête.

La porte se referma, laissant Mathilde et Jack seuls.

La malade se dirigea à nouveau vers le fauteuil sur lequel elle s’assit. Les jambes croisées, elle rajusta son plaid.

— Tes amis sont sympas, déclara Jack.

— Désolée, dit-elle en essuyant discrètement son nez avec un énième mouchoir.

— Ne t’excuse pas, il n’y a pas de raison. Ils sont... authentiques.

Jack s’avança pour prendre place dans le pouf occupé un peu plus tôt par Amanda, soulagé de se retrouver seul avec Mathilde. Les petites billes de polystyrène adoptèrent la forme de son corps dans un bruit caractéristique.

— Oui, c’est le moins qu’on puisse dire, confirma Mathilde en levant les yeux.

— Je suis désolé que tu sois malade, enchaîna Jack.

— Ne le sois pas. Ce n’est pas ta faute, réfuta-t-elle.

— Si nous n’avions pas joué avec la neige hier... Tes chaussures étaient trempées. Tu as dû attraper froid à ce moment-là.

— Ça ne veut rien dire. Tu étais pieds nus et tu vas bien.

Les mots pouvaient paraître banals et pourtant le regard appuyé qu'elle lui lança attendait des réponses. Le Maître de l'Hiver passa une main dans ses cheveux blancs.

— Jack, reprit Mathilde d'une voix douce. Parle-moi. Explique-moi.

Il releva la tête et planta ses yeux bleus dans les siens.

— Par où commencer ? demanda-t-il, un peu décontenancé.

— Par le début, je ne sais pas. Quel est ton nom de famille ?

Un sourire étrange se forma sur les lèvres du jeune homme. Voilà une belle entrée en matière.

— Je n'ai pas de nom de famille à proprement parler. Mais mon nom complet est Jack Frost. Je m'appelle Jack Frost.

Il laissa le silence s'installer, guettant les réactions de son interlocutrice. Il lui semblait presque voir les rouages tourner dans son esprit. Les yeux de Mathilde se parèrent d'une lueur curieuse.

— Jack Frost... comme... *le* Jack Frost ? tenta Mathilde.

Jack haussa un sourcil, amusé.

— C'est moi.

Il fit apparaître une rose glacée entre ses doigts et la tendit à Mathilde, qui observait la fleur gelée avec surprise. Son regard oscillait entre la création et le Maître de l'Hiver. Comme si elle craignait d'être piquée, elle s'en empara délicatement, la détailla sous tous les angles, avant de se redresser. Elle arpenta la pièce de long en large, ouvrait la bouche, hésitait, puis la refermait. La fleur glacée tremblait légèrement dans ses doigts, trahissant la nervosité qui devait la gagner.

— Parle-moi, quémanda-t-il, inquiet par son silence. À quoi penses-tu ?

— Je pense que c'est improbable. Incroyable. Hallucinant même. Est-ce que je suis en train de rêver ?

Les sourcils froncés de la jeune femme et sa moue dubitative arrachèrent un sourire à Jack.

— Je n'arrive pas à me dire que c'est rationnel et pourtant... Pourtant je tiens cette rose que tu viens de créer devant mes yeux.

Mathilde se rassit à ses côtés et arrima son regard au sien. Ses épaules tendues inquiétaient Jack. Allait-elle se trouver des explications improbables ? Allait-elle le rejeter ?

— De plus, je repense à ces deux soirs où tu avais disparu de manière étrange à la maison de repos. Je songe au chocolat chaud que tu as refroidi, à la neige qui est apparue subitement dans le jardin de la Seigneurie. Puis il y a eu Amanda qui ne te voyait pas sur le pas de ma porte tout à l'heure. Comment expliquer tout ça si ce n'est...

Elle reporta son attention sur la rose, la fit rouler entre ses doigts.

— Si ce n'est..., l'encouragea Jack.

— Si ce n'est en acceptant l'idée que tu es Jack Frost, souffla-t-elle du bout des lèvres.

D'un coup, les épaules de la jeune fille se relâchèrent. Jack prit une longue inspiration, savourant le nœud qui se détendait dans son estomac. L'acceptation de Mathilde lui procura plus de contentement qu'il ne l'avait imaginé.

— As-tu peur ?

— Non. Je devrais. Je sais que je devrais, mais ce n'est pas le cas. Est-ce normal ?

Jack ricana.

— Quoi ? Pourquoi tu te moques ?

— Je ne me moque pas. La situation m'amuse. Je t'explique que je suis une entité éternelle qui contrôle l'hiver, mais toi tu t'interroges sur tes réactions et cherches à savoir si elles sont normales ou pas. Je crois qu'on a largement dépassé le stade de la normalité, tu ne penses pas ?

Mathilde rit à son tour. La fleur de glace commença à fondre et, d'un mouvement fluide de la main, Jack la fit disparaître.

— J'avoue... tu as raison, acquiesça-t-elle, le regard rivé sur ses mains vides. Oh ! Le courant d'air, c'était toi ?

L'exclamation soudaine de la jeune fille lui avait valu un sursaut dans le fauteuil. Confus, il fronça les sourcils.

— La seconde fois que l'on s'est rencontrés, il y avait beaucoup de vent, j'avais froid. Tu as agité la main. Après ça, la bourrasque s'était calmée.

— Ah oui, ça..., se remémora-t-il. Oui, c'était moi.

Il se souvenait du visage crispé de Mathilde sous les assauts glacials du vent et n'avait pu résister à l'envie de soulager l'intrigante demoiselle au bonnet rouge.

— Raconte-m'en plus, souffla-t-elle, le regard avide.

La curiosité de Mathilde plut à Jack. Il réalisa qu'il avait craint qu'elle le rejette, qu'elle se ferme et ne veuille plus le voir. Peut-être changerait-elle d'avis le lendemain, peut-être mettrait-elle tout cela sur le compte de la fièvre, mais pas pour l'instant. Alors, il lui expliqua ses pouvoirs et mentionna les Galobas qui façonnaient la météo.

— Mais, que se passe-t-il pour toi en été ? Tu es toujours parmi nous ? Comment cela fonctionne-t-il ?

La mine enjouée du jeune homme s'estompa à l'évocation de cette partie de l'année qui le rebutait tant.

— Le 25 décembre au matin, je suis renvoyé dans le Sommeil jusqu'à l'hiver suivant.

Percevant la douleur dans le timbre de Jack, Mathilde déposa une main apaisante sur son bras.

— Qui t'impose ça ?

— Le Gardien, expliqua Jack, en fixant un point sur la table basse sans vraiment le voir. Chaque année, je subis le même rituel. Mes entraves s'activent peu à peu au cours de mon éveil.

Jack tendit son bras, le dos de sa main vers Mathilde. Sur sa peau, les glyphes d'une teinte bleu pâle qu'il exérait remontaient jusqu'aux coudes. Muette, la jeune fille glissa le bout des doigts dessus, jusqu'aux marques encore blanches comme de vieilles cicatrices sur son biceps.

— Le 22 décembre, reprit Jack, tentant d'ignorer la sensation du toucher de Mathilde. Les entraves de mes mains s'activent et épuisent ma magie. Le lendemain, ce sont celles aux pieds qui ra-

lentissent mes déplacements. Ensuite, le 24 décembre, le tatouage sur ma poitrine se complète, il bride mon cœur et termine de m'affaiblir.

Chaque mot lui coûtait davantage que le précédent. Il n'aimait pas parler de ces moments pénibles qu'il subissait année après année, et pourtant, bien que douloureux, le dialogue était également libérateur. Il appréciait de pouvoir se confier à Mathilde.

— Le 25 décembre, le Gardien se présente à moi pour la mise en Sommeil, continua Jack.

— Qui est-il ? intervint Mathilde, fascinée.

— Le Gardien est le Passeur des Saisons. C'est lui qui s'assure de l'harmonie de la Nature, du respect des solstices et des équinoxes, de la transition en douceur de chaque fluctuation du temps.

— Pourquoi retournes-tu en Sommeil si tôt ? L'hiver perdure encore au-delà de décembre, nota Mathilde, dont le cerveau semblait tourner à plein régime.

Un sourire aux lèvres, Jack s'amusa de la vivacité d'esprit de la jeune femme.

— Pour éviter que je devienne trop puissant. Ma magie croît à mesure que les températures chutent. Avant que les entraves ne commencent leur œuvre, je fabrique des Galobas d'une qualité bien supérieure à celles du début de saison et elles permettent à l'hiver de se poursuivre encore un peu pour finalement décroître, jusqu'à l'arrivée du printemps et son Maître.

— Le fonctionnement est le même pour eux ?

— À peu de choses près, nous avons tous les quatre un fonctionnement similaire.

Mathilde l'écoutait, attentive. Jack songea au Maître du Printemps, dont il ne connaissait rien. Les Maîtres des saisons ne se rencontraient jamais, ne communiquaient pas. L'ordre établi leur imposait de se succéder saison après saison, année après année. Sans jamais rien remettre en question. Tout le paradoxe des Maîtres des saisons résidait dans le temps qui leur était alloué. Ils devaient pré-

parer une saison sans pouvoir la vivre complètement, au risque de devenir trop forts et incontrôlables pour les Tout-Puissants qui souhaitaient les garder sous leur joug. Vingt-cinq jours, c'est tout ce qu'on leur accordait. Vingt-cinq misérables jours.

— Qu'est-ce que tu penses de tout ça ? demanda finalement Jack.

— Je pense... Je pense que ça explique beaucoup de choses.

Jack fut étonné du calme de la jeune femme et de la sérénité avec laquelle elle absorbait toutes ces informations. Mathilde partit dans une quinte de toux puis, exténuée, se coucha dans son fauteuil usé, la respiration laborieuse.

— Je suis vraiment désolé, répéta Jack, mal à l'aise.

— Ne dis pas de sottises, le réprimanda-t-elle, les yeux fermés, un sourire aux lèvres. J'ai passé un super moment hier. Je ne regrette rien du tout.

Il se releva du pouf et déposa une main fraîche sur le front brûlant de Mathilde.

— Mmh, ça fait du bien, ronronna-t-elle, à moitié endormie.

Jack récupéra les draps soigneusement rangés à côté du canapé et la couvrit.

— Ne pars pas, Jack. S'il te plaît. J'ai peur que tu t'en ailles et que tout ceci n'ait été qu'un rêve.

Les yeux clos, Mathilde avait agrippé un pan de son tee-shirt. Sa voix était traînante, son esprit à moitié dans les limbes du sommeil.

— Je ne vais nulle part.

Jack s'installa sur le bord du canapé. Somnolente, Mathilde chercha sa main. Cette proximité était nouvelle pour le Maître de l'Hiver et le destabilisa. Il était plus que conscient de la paume de la jeune femme dans la sienne, de ses doigts qui chatouillaient sa peau. Il observa ses cheveux châtons étalés en vagues sur le matelas derrière son dos et il se surprit à vouloir y glisser les doigts.

La respiration de Mathilde se fit plus régulière et paisible.

Avec mille précautions pour ne pas la réveiller, il se releva, adressa un dernier regard à Mathilde endormie avant de fermer les yeux et de se transporter à l'atelier.



La forge rougeoyait du feu éternel. Jack n'avait pas de temps à perdre. Le fer fondait paisiblement dans la vasque et, pendant ce temps, le Maître de l'Hiver alla récupérer les trois plumes de la colombe. Dans un récipient, il les enflamma.

Jack se prépara à la partie délicate. Concentré, il versa les précieuses cendres sur le métal liquide, récitant les incantations. Aucune erreur n'était permise. Une fois les cendres et le fer mélangés, il coula le matériau dans les moules avec mille précautions.

L'opération terminée, le jeune homme s'autorisa à reprendre une inspiration. Il y était arrivé. Une immense satisfaction l'étreignit. Lentement, le métal refroidit et Jack en profita pour faire le point sur ses Galobas dans la salle d'Éveil. Le lendemain, il pourrait enfin déposer l'orbe de neige et les villes se pareraient d'une magnifique couverture blanche.

De retour dans l'atelier, il vérifia son œuvre. Deux chaînes légères étaient prêtes à sertir ses chevilles. Sans perdre un instant, il les attacha à ses jambes pour en évaluer le poids. Certes, il ne pouvait ignorer leur présence et devrait s'habituer au cliquetis qui résonnait lorsqu'il se déplaçait, mais si son plan fonctionnait, le jeu en valait largement la chandelle.

