

In the East



The Long Dream Road

Maria Pia Oelker



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In The East

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

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Maria Pia Oelker
IN THE EAST
The long road of dreams
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Chapter I

The white light of the moon that was rising above the grove of pale silver cypresses contrasted with what was left of the sunset that still lit the western sky, towards the plain and the sea.

Until a few minutes before, it had been an explosion of violets and oranges, of faint pinkish stripes, of anthracite tongues and golden-red flames. The sun had gone darting proudly and, as it vanished rapidly on the horizon, greeting with a last flicker the moon that was rising on the other side of the sky with her group of stars.

The prince watched them, as an admirer, yet powerless spectator.

He would have liked to catch those last rays of sunlight, to hold back those flashes of light, to feel invaded again by that fleeting feeling of happiness that seemed so intense to him every time, that it took away the sense of time, the memory of everyday things. And now he was trying to hold on to every last trace of that dying light with his eyes; the outline of the distant hills, which stood out pure and clean against the sky; every little detail of the large park, of the trees and of the tanks that darkness was about to swallow; finally, threads of the distant river that appeared here and there in the fields between rows of light poplars. The moon came to overtake the earth and to light up that world which the sun had made alive and strong during the day and over which the moon had no power to call to life with her pale light. The moon could only to console and protect, cradling its dreams and making other beings that were on the border between magic and reality come alive.

There, in the ancient oak forest that stretched almost infinitely behind the castle park to the most remote mountains that the eye could meet on the horizon, there were mystical creatures who enjoyed the silver light and lived in the its trembling shadows.

The prince had heard about it many times in his childhood from the old housekeeper, who had taken care of him since he was a baby in the cradle of lace that his mother had prepared him with her loving hands.

He thought he had loved his mother for too short of a time, and yet he had loved her very much in those short years spent together in the great halls of the palace, mostly empty for most of the year, which came alive only when his lord and king and father, deigned to come to visit and stay with them for a few weeks, gifting them his splendid vitality, his exhilarating noisy cheerfulness, exaggerated like his sudden wrath.

The prince had adored the king, whom he had known even less than his mother: he had taught him to ride and to go hunting with the falcon; he had told him the names of the stars observed together on serene nights and the world of ancient books. He had played with him and told him terrible war stories of ancient and fearless heroes with shining armor and a noble soul.

Never had the prince asked him why neither his mother nor he could leave the castle and the park when he was absent: although he was small, he already knew that was a forbidden question. One day he had questioned the queen, who was embroidering and reading at the window and she had smiled enigmatically: "Never ask why, it's a secret between your father and his fantasies. Don't ask anybody, because nobody knows it and don't even ask your father because he would whip you in his anger. This is my enchanted kingdom and the key is nowhere to be found except in the heart of the king. But he will never give it to anyone. You will be able to leave when you grow up."

" No, Mother. Not without you " he replied then.

But now he was just waiting for the right opportunity to do it really, definitely, and freely.

When would that opportunity arise?

He was sixteen now and he knew his time had come. That is all he waited for and all he prepared himself for.

His father had died three years ago and his mother a few months later. Shortly before she died, she had told him, looking into his fearless, bold eyes:

" The king took the key with him. However, I will never leave here. You can do it as soon as you are ready. "

" How will I know I am ready? "

" You'll know. Be careful though: don't let that moment pass you by or you'll lose it forever. "

" Can't you tell me, mother?"

" You are the only one who can. "

Now he was sure he had heard that voice that warned him "inside" and had to remain alert to not be caught by surprise.

Antonia, his nurse, once as dark as the crow's wings and now almost all grey, who had cradled him and fed him more than his mother, who had held his hand tight when he had been afraid of storms or cries of his father, who had consoled him for the queen's crying and had played with him in the long corridors and in the park; Antonia had told him many stories about the forest and its inhabitants, who sometimes went to the windows of the castle and the stables of the horses at night and danced and ran and called and rustled flying from tree to tree, without leaving footprints and vanished in the morning sunlight.

"If I stayed awake on full-moon nights, would I be able to see them?" He had sometimes asked, hopefully."

"No, they wouldn't come close if they knew someone was watching them."

" But I would be well hidden."

Antonia had laughed at his naivety " My dear little prince, they can also see what is well hidden."

" So how can I see them?"

- "You can't, you just can't."

" So, you are lying to me, because if no one can see them, the first one to tell these stories must have invented everything."

His reasoning made perfect sense, just as his father and his teacher had taught him.

"Someone met them," Antonia whispered.

" How did they do it? Tell me and I'll do the same."

" No, for heaven's sake. No." she had almost shouted, terrified" Whoever looked at them became half-crazy with fright. I couldn't let you do it."

That was certainly an exaggeration! She was a simple woman, good and dear, but a little ignorant. His master had taught him that those goblins, witches, evil birds, and other such things were only fables for children and local people. He didn't believe it, but he liked that Antonia still considered him a young, naïve boy, ready to listen to her.

He liked the fact she still considered him her child, shy and dreaming, playful and greedy for caresses and cuddles.

In reality he hadn't been so for a long time, perhaps even since his father had sent him away from his mother for the first time, to take him with him for a long week of hunting deer and foxes in the mountains.

He was then little more than eight years old and had never left the rooms of the castle, the flower beds of the park, full of colors in the summer and sparkling frost in the winter, the thin gravel paths that rolled up and wound between the meadows, fountains and hedges. Never had he gone to bed without first kissing his mother and listening to Antonia's fairy tales.

Thus, at first, he had felt completely overwhelmed, too tense and excited to really enjoy the company of his father and his knight friends, who also usually made him elated; he could not fully understand the instructions of the king, who had repeatedly scolded him bitterly, making him cry bitter and desolate tears, as if his head was stuffed with cotton wool. It was shrouded in fog like the peaks of the high wooded mountains, which he began to glimpse at, for the first time in his life, a few hours after leaving, on the eastern side.

From there, behind those high peaks, which sometimes rose black and terrible in the blue evening sky, sometimes shaded in the morning light, hidden by a floating haze, the sun and the moon came up, both filling his heart with wonder.

And they were a comfort to his little torments and juvenile pains.

"Is there a mysterious country beyond the mountains?" He had asked his father one day, when he had seen him rest and seeming a little more relaxed and helpful than usual.

His father had looked at him as if he saw him seriously only at that moment after two days of ignoring him and rejecting him, annoyed by his childhood weakness.

" Why do you want to know?"

" Because the sun and the moon always rise from there; now I know well that they are in the sky and not on earth, but ... "

His father was silent, though he continued to stare at him, as he jammed and blushed from the tip of his hair. He had begun to stutter, balancing from one foot to the other, then he was completely silent.

"Well? Go ahead," urged his father, impatiently, but also interested.

" I believe that such shining stars cannot but come from a world that is much more beautiful than the earth we know."

" Who told you that they are stars?"

" My teacher, but my mother also says there is a heaven in the sky and that God lives there with all his angels and good souls. Then I don't understand how both things can be true. "

" What do you think about this?"

" I have some thoughts, but I don't know ..."

"Come on, don't be afraid," his father encouraged him, smiling at last.

"I'm not afraid," he said proudly.

" Ah! Is it so? I'm happy. And then?"

" Perhaps the sky that my teacher describes when he talks to me about the sun and the other stars and the moon that revolves around the earth has nothing to do with the sky that my mother talks about. They are two different skies that have only one name in common. God and his angels must stand much higher and as we look at the sun from below, they observe it from above, facing the edge of the abyss. I therefore imagine the world they see, and we cannot because it is hidden from the mountains, must be wonderful, of gold and silver, where there are the colors of the rainbow and ... all the rest."

" What do you mean? " asked his father more and more curious and amused.

" Well, the clouds, for example. Haven't you seen how many colors they can be? They are black like the night when there is a storm, white as wool when the sky is blue and warm, red, and purple and orange at sunset and pink in the morning. And then there's the wind with its own colors."

" Really?! I don't think so."

" Yes, because the western wind smells of sea and rain and has the color of clear water and the north wind is cold and has the color of snow and ice of fountains, but that of the south is red with sand and hot."

" Interesting. And that of the east?"

" I don't know, I haven't thought about it yet. It's hard to say because I can't imagine what lies beyond the mountains."

" Yes. That's where we started. And I didn't answer your question."

" No. Why didn't you?"

" Because I've never been in that country and I've only seen it in pictures of the ancient books."

" Could I see those books?"

" Yes, there are many in the castle library."

" But it's closed, and the teacher doesn't want me to go there."

" I'll take you there when we get back."

" Really?"

The prince's eyes glowed with eager joy and his father told him:

" Come and shake my hand, as a man."

But when he held the small hand, soft and trembling like a nestling, in his ones, so big and energetic, he had suddenly drawn him to him and hugged him tightly, choking him against his strong chest, which smelled of leather, sweat and fatigue.

The prince had clearly felt something inside him, perhaps a snare or an obstacle, which was coming apart and he didn't know whether to be happy or scared. He started crying, but then he was afraid his father would find him stupid and boring and deny him his attention and affection again. Then, he bit his lips to hold back the sobs.

The king was fully aware of it and had lulled him with almost maternal love until outburst had faded and his son was calmer again, overcoming the nervousness and the gloomy loneliness of a child who lived such a clustered and unusual life.

The king knew it, was aware of his marital and paternal selfishness, was aware of his faults, but also knew that he would never be able to act otherwise.

Many of his friends and advisors had brought it up to him several times, with due caution and with the fearful respect, as everyone was aware of his irascible and proud, sometimes even vindictive and violent temper, but he had not wanted to listen to them. Better yet: he had listened to them with sincere interest, without showing it; he had agreed with them more than once, but then he had never really succeeded in putting into practice the good intentions they suggested and that he thus set for himself.

His love was always possessive, violently possessive. He could never separate the two feelings. He knew how to be generous with his friends and subjects, courageous and daring in warlike enterprises, benevolent with his son, sweet and affectionate with his wife, but his every gesture and his every feeling were burdened by the shadow of an exaggerated sense of possession. His subjects, his friends, his lovers, his children, his wife: everything was his, and he didn't want to lose control of any of it at any time.

He was tormented by the idea that someday he might lose someone or something of his possession and be left poorer, more exposed, more alone.

In truth, the great and noble father of the prince was even weaker and more defenseless than his little son, who sobbed abandoned on his shoulder.

The child trusted those close to him: his mother, his housekeeper, his father. Perhaps, even the servants and the old gardener. He loved them and didn't need to own them to be happy.

For the king there had never been and there could never be a different love. For this reason, he held captive the very people who were dearest to him, and what to others might have seemed a real mental cruelty was for him his greatest expression of interest and love.

He did not miss anything; that is what he stated proudly and annoyed to those who pointed out to him that life could not be enjoyed entirely by being permanently closed between four walls, even if luxurious.

But it was almost painfully conscious that his wife and son lacked the truest and beautiful thing: freedom. To come and go, to meet new people, perhaps met by chance on the road, to do or not do what he thought was good and right for them.

And he felt more guilt towards his son, who was growing up like a greenhouse flower, than he did towards his delicate queen, who had freely accepted that kind of life, only for his sake. Perfect, splendid in his shape and minimal nuances of color, but without any scent, without that complex vitality that animates the flowers of the field and wild herbs, as well as certain children of the people, whom he had come to know and meet in his travels , during his long hunting days or in the properties he owned.

The prince was as beautiful and fragile as a jewel, his delicate features like those of his mother, his young legs long and slender like those of a purebred colt, his hands still small but strong and elegant. The eyes alone, dark and deep, so strange and disturbing in their exuberant rebel force in that clear childish face showed that he had inherited something from his father's character, despite all the possible interventions, the continuous "attempts" to counterbalance it, shape it, smooth it. He was to be educated according to the firm and precise suggestions of the king.

He fully understood it now and was not entirely sorry. In fact, he had to admit that he was proud of it.

"I should talk about it with his teacher, but I won't. By God, I'm glad my son has some of my traits at least. Even though one day he may free himself, as indeed I myself did with my father."

He felt that after all this he could stand it, because now he knew that his son sincerely loved him and would always love him.

"So, father?" The prince said.

"What?"

"The mysterious country behind the mountains."

"Yes, you don't forget, do you?"

"No, I'm waiting for an answer."

"I told you: I've never been there personally. But someone who has seen it told me that far beyond the mountains there is a beautiful kingdom rich in water and fragrant pastures, with tall houses with red towers like fire in the sunset and silver domes like the light of the moon which so fascinates you. In spring, the valleys are covered with flowers and in autumn the leaves of the plants are the color of the sun. However, to be honest, I don't think it's really the country you're looking for. Perhaps it does not exist here on earth. Many books of ancient travelers speak of the rising of the sun and the moon to the east, ever further to the east. There is no resting point for them."

"So, are the things the master explained to me the truth, and not my mother's and Antonia's tales?"

"That is what I think," the king smiled.

"Too bad" the little prince breathed unnoticeably "the contrary would have been much better."

"I cannot believe it!" laughed his father noisily "A poet: I created a poet. Unbelievable. Hey!" he called near him his most trusted friends who, not far from there, were arranging their weapons and mounts, peeking from time to time at their friend and gentleman wasting time arguing with a child. "Hey, friends, listen to this: my son has the soul of a dreamer, of a poet. He sighs to the moon and conjures up fairytale countries. That's wonderful, don't you agree?"

Again, he laughed in a sarcastic not held back tone.

His son felt wounded and blushed violently. His eyes darkened completely, lighting up with a strange light, like the sulfurous glow of a flash.

"Father," he said in a firm, almost severe voice, "you don't need to bother showing me those books you are speaking of; I don't think I need it. I prefer my dreams."

The king fell silent suddenly and he too became red in the forehead and on his pronounced cheekbones. He did not reply to the prince, who had already turned his back on him, and merely waved his advisers away.

Everyone present, no one excluded, shook, and wondered why their lord did not whip that spoiled child, who had dared to reply so boldly, with a challenging attitude.

But in the evening the king, before retiring for the night, went to his son's tent and, after sending away his two servants, sat down beside him, shaking his hand without speaking.

"I'm sorry, father," said the little boy. "I know I would deserve a punishment for what I said. My teacher punishes me for a lot less, but you didn't have to laugh at me like that. You hurt me right here" he touched his thin panting chest "so strongly that I felt like crashing, like a tree in a storm."

His eyes shone and it was not clear whether he was holding back tears or a new outburst of indignation.

"Excuse me, son. I'm a bit of a rough warrior sometimes, but I didn't want to offend you. I have nothing against poetry and your mother loves it as much as she loves you and I chose her as queen; don't think I love you any less because of this."

"I was afraid you would not love me anymore."

"Nonsense," the king said bluntly.

"So, can you forgive me?"

"Sure, in fact I came to tell you a fairy tale."

"Do you also know the fantastic stories that Antonia tells me? With the dragons and the knights and the fairies of the fairies?"

"No, I don't remember those anymore. It's been a long time since my nurse told me on winter nights by the fireplace to quiet me down. But there is a beautiful story that is true and sounds like a fairy tale and that is the one I would like to tell you."

The prince nodded and his father, in an uncertain voice at first, then gradually more and more confident and casual, told him of the wonderful adventures of an ancient Venetian traveler, of his extraordinary discoveries and of the great, incredible kingdom of Khan, where everything seemed enchanted, where the flowers were as fragile as porcelain and their colors as delicate as butterfly wings, where everything seemed to move with the grace of bird flights and give off the intense and exciting, soft and penetrating scent of the rarest spices and herbs. In that distant kingdom where Marco Polo had stayed for so long to be able to tell tales of a thousand incredible inventions and the even stranger life of that people, perhaps could have been the land of the sun and the moon.

"There is a country in the East of the Indies that they call the Rising Sun Earth. Maybe that's what you're looking for. We could go together one day," he said finally.

"Father, it is not necessary for you to lie to please me. You said yourself that no traveler has ever seen it."

"Yes, sorry again, I didn't really believe that as a child you would be so wise. But did you like my story?"

"Very much, thank you."

"Do you want to give me a kiss then and make peace?"

"Yes, father."

The king smiled and, that night, for the first time in his life, he went to sleep fully satisfied with himself.

After all, for the first time he had much on his mind, thoughts that undermined what he had considered unshakable up to that point.

His little son, so fragile, sentimental, and sweet, but also proud and ardent, was truly an exceptional discovery.

He did not resemble any other boy he had ever known, nor his other children, whom his first wife had given him and who lived respected and honored at his court.

No one had that deep and disturbing look, that independence of judgment, that courage to face him openly, despite being only eight years old.

Now he intended to take him along more often, in his travels and in hunts, in his golden palace, filled with paintings and crammed with precious books; he wanted to teach him everything he loved most; make him an accomplice and trustworthy ally.

A real son.

Until that moment he had not been very worried about that child whom he sometimes did not see for months and at whom he glimpsed curiously during his visits to his mother.

How had the sudden and frightening idea to take him with him that time come to him?

He couldn't even tell. The queen had not objected, as he had feared at the beginning, when he had seen her frowning; instead, she had said she was happy with the idea.

" Won't you be lonely without him?"

" Not too much. I am always lonely, that doesn't scare me."

Was there a veiled reproach in her voice?

" Do you mean to say that I neglect you?"

" Should I not? You know well that it is the truth, but I am not reproaching you. I have my life here and that's enough. Your presence is always so powerful that its memory is enough for me for months."

The queen really deserved that title, he often thought, and even that day she had not disappointed him.

" Your child is still small, but wise, and he will not be a burden, in fact I hope you will like his company."

Now he understood what she meant, he really understood it. While the first moments had been painful and irritating for both of them and he had even been tempted to send him back with an excuse, now he understood fully.

He had been held back more by the spite of disappointment than by affection and now he had to thank that contemptuous arrogance that had driven him to go on without worrying too much about the evident physical and moral discomfort of the child, who found it hard to keep up with him during the long fast rides, who complained and fidgeted in his sleep and could not stand their rough heavy food without being sick.

He had scolded him furiously, when his inexperience had made some prey escape, he had humiliated him with sarcastic remarks about his almost feminine delicacy, and he had even raised his whip on him. And he had not rebelled, but he had never given up, he had cried sometimes, it is true, but never in his presence. His gaze, he remembered suddenly with a jolt of boundless joy, had always remained firm and full of dignity.

No, his son did not have the makings of a vile courtier: he was indeed a prince.

What a shame not to have realized it before!

Full of dreams and a poet, he vulgarly teased him that day and he had defended his right, and his freedom to be true to himself.

When, at the end of the hunting week, they had returned to the castle, the king had praised him in front of his mother with words that no one had ever heard coming from him, and that had made the queen smile with sweetness.

He had declared that he would stay longer than usual at the castle that year because the hunt had been excellent, and he intended to hunt again in the coming weeks. He also wanted to reopen and rearrange the library (why had the queen smiled mysteriously when she heard those words?) as well as to take care of many other needed improvements, which for years had been postponed and could not be avoided any longer.

He had not said that above all he wanted to be with his son and spend long enjoyable weeks with him. But many had guessed it and soon everyone understood it.

Meanwhile, there was the issue of the park.

The king used to get up early in the morning and go out for a walk in the castle gardens with his dogs sometimes, more often alone, or go on horseback along the banks of the river, on the solitary country paths, and did not want anyone to follow him, despite the protests of his advisers.

" I always have many people around me " he said, puffing impatiently when someone came back on the subject " especially when I'm in the city, that I don't want anyone here, I mean nobody, to follow me. I need a couple of hours of solitude to deal with everything else."

In reality, he had given orders that not even a gardener or any of the other servants should be at the time in the park. Obviously, no one dared to disobey him and, after so many years, everyone

was familiar with his odd behavior, so even those who found themselves having to be at work at that hour in the stables or in the garden, would be careful not to be seen. It was not easy to be forgiven by the king and escape his punishments.

Was the prince also aware of his father's wish?

Most likely yes, but he was sure the orders of the sovereign did not apply to the queen and to him. On the other hand, the castle belonged more to him than to others, because for many months a year it was his undisputed kingdom, where he dominated and ran about as he pleased, of which he knew every corner and every blade of grass. No one thought to limit his movements inside the property, and, except for the library and the apartment of the king, all other doors were open to him.

He had even visited the basements and the two towers that guarded the two opposite sides of the castle's facade.

The prince therefore considered himself free to contradict his father's orders and to continue his old habit of going down to the garden at dawn to feed the squirrels and the fallow deer, which populated the grove of silvered cypresses and holm oaks at the edge of the park. Since many years, the fence that divided it from the woods behind it had fallen in that spot and the timid little animals had begun to come at daybreak to drink at the fountain which was perennially filled with water and to eat what the little prince regularly found for them: apples and walnuts, stolen from the pantry, and oats and hay, which was given to him by one of the workers in the stable.

He knew that they were afraid of human presence and he stood quietly and motionless behind the trees watching them while they drank and ate gracefully, never completely calm, always alert, their muzzle and ears quivering, their big liquid eyes ready to catch the slightest change in shadows and lights.

Perhaps they had felt his presence, but they must have realized that he loved them and fed them and tolerated him without difficulty, also because he was almost impossible to notice.

When they returned to the woods where they came from, the prince stretched his legs running towards the pools in the park, making the doves that had come to quench their thirst fly away, watching for a while the large red and black fishes that moved slowly under the rays of the sun that was beginning to illuminate the clear leaping waters, creating a thousand rainbows from the jets gushing from strange animal heads or groups of pretty sea nymphs.

And so he continued his rounds through the garden, from one edge to the other, tripping on the gravel paths and skipping the low box hedges with great desperation of the gardener who often had to remedy the damage he caused, and spying, with his nose close to the bars of the top gate that led to the road to the city, the movements of the peasants who passed by with carts and animals to go to work or to the markets.

Then Antonia or some old servant would come to call him because it was time to go back to lock himself in the castle to attend his morning lessons.

It was the freest moment of his day and his mother, who was aware of it, had never stopped him from going out any time and in any season. The prince knew when the first roses were born or the leaves turned red, when the crocus and the violets in the ditches sprouted or when the ice formed its shining mirrors on the water of the fountains and adorned the mouths of lions and dragons spitting water with pointed icicles.

He watched the rain drumming on the bushes and rooftops of the stables or the sun rising slowly from the east, announcing another splendid and warm day.

So, one morning, the king happened to catch a glimpse of a small shadow lurking in the grove and then, immediately afterwards, hopping and whistling away along the path that led to the end of the garden, towards the orchard.

He was dumbfounded, unable to understand who that might be, and annoyed at having been so clearly disobeyed. He decided to wait for him next to the staircase that led to the terrace on the first

floor. He would have had to go through there anyway. Whether he was a young servant of the castle or a stable boy, he would have been clearly visible from that position.

He was most likely a young boy who had just been hired or the son of some old servant, and, for this reason, he certainly wasn't aware of his orders. He could not even imagine that anyone could deliberately challenge them, but he had to bring this to the butler to stop it from happening. He took note of it as he waited a little impatiently for the mysterious character to pass by.

After waiting fifteen minutes, he definitely began to get nervous and started striding back and forth on the broad pinkish stones of the courtyard, which formed precise and pleasing geometric patterns converging towards the low stairway that led to the rich garden. Italian. He still remembered when his father had restored that building to spend the long hunting season and when he had taken the queen there for the first time and she had been captivated by that harmonious, simple and elegant structure and had willingly consented to spend her days there, rather than at the city palace.

Ah, finally! The shadow emerged from behind the tropical flower greenhouses. The king frowned, preparing to abruptly stop the boy and teach him a lesson.

But as he got close, he was petrified by astonishment and indignation: it was his son disobeying him without the possibility of mistake!

But the prince's little face was smiling and happy, not at all intimidated, perfectly innocent.

" Good morning, father. Today will be a wonderful day " he said with a cheerful smile " I was in the orchard and saw the apples are already ripe, red, and yellow as ever."

" Yes, that is true. But leave the fruit alone: are you not aware of my orders?"

" What orders, father?"

" I don't want to meet anyone when I go out in the park in the morning. Nobody, is it clear?"

Why was he making such a big deal? The king felt a little ridiculous; thinking about it, he was being as capricious as a child and this made him even more angry.

" Yes, I know them, but I thought ... " the prince lowered his head mortified.

" What? That you could disobey as you please, that you are above others, even more important than you, who obey without questioning my decision?"

His father stared at him sternly, he addressed him with a changed cutting voice, and he felt ever smaller and more distressed. The sun that had just warmed his heart was disappearing behind heavy black clouds.

" How come you are not answering? Come on tell me what you think. " and he shook him, grabbing the small arm left inert in his hands.

"I thought your orders did not apply to me or my mother," the child whispered.

" Your mother is exempt, but do you really think you are dispensed from obedience? It's unbelievable: a little brat who thinks he's superior to anyone!"

" No, Father, I don't believe it."

" Thank God. What now?"

" I'm used to getting out of the castle at this time, my mother always allows me and I thought you weren't against it and besides... ." here it stuttered and couldn't continue; although he tried to control the tremor of his voice, he understood that he was too agitated to do it and was afraid his father would realize that.

" Go on " the king urged him, with a nervous tone that certainly did not help him calm down.

" Nothing, father."

" No, it's not true that it's all and I want to know what "besides" means. Tell me, or I won't let you go."

The prince then raised his eyes to his father's face, and he could not read any fear as he sought. Was his son so contemptuous that he didn't fear him even a little bit?

But in his eyes, there was not even a shadow of fear.

" I'm tired of playing riddles with a child. Come on, hurry up."

" I was hoping you wouldn't mind meeting me. I am not just anybody, that is ... " he corrected himself afraid to be misunderstood " that is, I wanted to say, not for you. Will you let me go now, please?"

The king gave up his grip, but neither moved.

They remained silent for a moment, then the prince asked:

" Father, what is the punishment?"

The king set aside the troublesome thoughts that had been bothering him since he had heard those last sentences of the young prince " What? "

"What punishment awaits me?" The son repeated.

" He doesn't joke " the king thought, almost frightened by that firmness " he is not bluffing, he really wants to be punished " And in a loud voice he said: " There is no punishment for you. Go inside to your mother."

"Why not? If I were the gardener's son, you would have punished me; I want the same treatment."

And he didn't move.

" Go away, I said. I don't want you around anymore. You're exasperating me."

" Father, what is the punishment? " the prince insisted for the third time.

Then the king did what he never wanted to do, especially not now that he had begun to discover the true value of his son: he struck him twice hard against his face and shouted: " Later I will deal with you and I swear that you will never want to be arrogant with me."

He sent him away badly and immediately regretted it. The knowledge that he was mostly in the wrong, in his whims without reason, in his inability to really speak with the child and with all those around him, angered him immensely; but he could not simply go to his son and tell him: " You are right, you are not like everyone else for me and there will be no more absurd bans for anyone."

He went back to the castle enraged and went up to his wife's rooms.

" Your son " he said to her without many preambles " will make me crazy and in the end, he will be punished severely."

"What did he do?" She asked quietly.

" He didn't respect my orders."

" He was in the park, right? He always does that and probably thought that there was nothing wrong with it."

" He knew it was forbidden to everyone."

" He thinks he is not equal to the others in my heart and maybe he felt it was the same for this father ..."

The king made a vague gesture with his hand, as if he wanted to drive away a boring fly that buzzed in front of his face.

" Yes, that's what he said, more or less."

" And you?"

" I didn't know what to say to him. Then he told me he wanted to be punished anyway and I hit him. I don't understand his reasoning. It overwhelms me."

" If in his father's heart there was no special place for him, he might as well be treated like everyone else."

"Do you understand him?" The king marveled.

" I think so. There are not many secrets between us, and we have always been so close ..."

" Yes, I'm sorry I wasn't a good father or ... "

" No " the queen interrupted " what you think just is not true. Not all of it at least."

" Okay, we can talk about this later, but I swore that I will punish him in such a way that he will never forget it. Now I regret it, but I'm not going to go back on my word and show weakness. It is my dignity we are talking about."

" I see " the queen smiled ironically.

" What do you mean?

" Nothing. Talk to him again. He will understand. If you want to punish him, if you really think this is right, do it. He will not love you less for this reason. Don't humiliate him however, please."

" I'll think about it. I would like to skin it for the way he has upset me with all his absurdities."

" Even a great gentleman can sometimes learn from a child; don't take it out on him if you're not happy with yourself."

The king looked at her questioningly, then kissed her and left even more uncertain and nervous than before. Is it possible that she also blamed him? It had never happened before.

The prince entered his father's rooms on tiptoes because he had never been allowed to enter the room before.

He looked around curiously and recorded many details that excited him and made him ponder on the fact that his father had to be very different from what everyone thought.

For example all those paintings so different from those that were in the art-filled quarters (dark and imposing family portraits or austere bishops and epic scenes) or the colors that dominated the room, alive and warm, almost cheerful, bloody and energetic, or the golden cage near the window overlooking the park, full of colorful little birds that he had never seen anywhere else.

Despite the fear that the punishment was going to be really terrible, he could not help thinking that he would have liked his father to invite him more often to those rooms and show him his treasures and the thousand mysterious things that he was looking at in astonishment.

The king heard him walk slowly, but did not turn to him, continuing undauntedly to look out the window.

" Father " the prince called him in a whisper " I am here.

" Come closer."

He took a few more steps but did not have the courage to stand beside his father.

" So? " asked the king briskly.

" The master told me that I would deserve to be locked up in the tower prison alone for a week, on bread and water, and to receive ten lashes."

" Ah! Really?"

" Yes, father."

" Do you think that would be right?"

" As you like."

" Yes, of course, but what would you think if someone else was to take your place?"

" I would ask you not to do it."

" Are you scared?"

" No " but his voice was weak and uncertain.

The king urged him: " Tell the truth."

" Yes, father. I am very afraid of being alone in the tower especially at night."

" And the lashes? Don't those scare you?"

" Even those, but I can deal with pain better. Loneliness in the dark makes me shudder."

The king smiled sweetly.

" Do you sleep with your mother at night?"

" No, but Antonia is in the room next to mine and I know she will come right away if I call her."

" Then no tower " the king decided "You will stay in your room; then I will instruct the teacher to whip you and the matter is closed."

" Yes, father. But I would like to ask you a favor, if it's allowed, since I'm still indebted to you."

" Let's hear it."

" Here it is: in the cypress grove in the morning the deer and the squirrels come, and I bring them food. If I can't get out anymore, how will they get by? Could you do it for me?"

" Do you think a king should do that? " asked his father, barely restraining himself from laughing.

" I don't know, now I am not sure of anything anymore. I'm sorry. But how will they get by?"

The little voice was very anxious, almost cracked by pain. Then the king decided to give in: " I will. But only if you come with me every morning and show me how it's done."

"Father," cried the prince, almost weeping with joy.

" Do we agree?"

" Yes."

" And I'll tell your teacher that he deserves me to punish him for all the nonsense he has been saying."

" No, father. I want those lashes."

" Do not insist again."

" Only if you promise the ban is not abolished solely for me."

" I promise, but get out of here quickly, before I get a chance to think it over and whip you myself."

The prince quickly moved away and, shortly after, the king saw him scampering through the garden and playing with his hunting dogs, which he had freed and now jumped around him mad with joy, affected by his unbridled joy. They did somersaults and jumps and ran over the meadows and then, suddenly, they all ended headfirst in the tank of the sea nymphs.

The king laughed heartily, while his son and his favorite animals came dripping out and the prince, harshly rebuked by one of his advisers who happened to be passing by, replied with a burlesque grimace.

" Extraordinary " he thought " priceless, I've never seen anything like it in my whole life."

But in the following days, even the teacher and the servants as well as the queen were amazed more than once and told themselves that they had never seen anything like it in their lives.

And it was not only about the food the king and his son brought together to the wild animals to amaze them; that was only the first of many novelties, one more unexpected than the other.

The king no longer claimed that the park and the garden be completely deserted when he went down in the morning. When he walked around with the prince at his side, radiant and talkative, who showed him his secrets and his discoveries, he often stopped to talk even with the gardener and the staff at work and they were astonished that he asked his son for his opinion and let him say whatever came to his mind.

Everyone in the castle loved that child and they were happy the king showed him so much affection and that, through him, he showed so much more humanity even towards others.

Sometimes the queen watched them from the window and had a mysterious smile that was full of meaning and, above all, of the hope that her son would one day be a good and just gentleman, as great as his father, although of a different kind of greatness. The prince knew by instinct when his mother was watching him. He would look up and when he caught her glancing, he secretly sent her an accomplice greeting.

One morning, when his father noticed him and asked him what he was doing, the child replied: "My mother was at the window and she smiled at me wondering if I was happy. I signaled her I was. "

" How do you know what your mother meant?"

" Words are not needed for me to understand her. Is it not the same for you? " he then asked naively.

" Oh yes. Certainly." The king cut him short; however he knew it was not true, that he couldn't be, because in reality he had never bothered to understand others even when they had tried to explain their feelings and their ideas to him; let alone if they did not speak!

On the other hand, there seemed to be no secret between his wife and his son and so he remained rather dumbfounded when he realized that not even the prince knew that the queen had a secret of her own, unknown to all.

When the king, who now took the prince with him everywhere, hunting and horseback riding, visiting the farms as in the council chamber when he gathered his collaborators (and often it happened that the child fell asleep in his place and he had to carry him in his room and never wanted others to do it for him), he decided to start arranging the library at the castle, as he had promised. The prince's tutor was taken by surprise. The king first made him understand that his son would then have free access to that room in the palace. The master didn't agree, but only his eyes of course betrayed his lack of consent: did the king pretend not to remember that he had given those orders himself years ago? He had obeyed then and would have done it now, but it did not seem natural and right that his lord put him in a difficult situation and belittled him in the eyes of his pupil.

"Life is not easy for a poor tutor" he sighed to himself, desolate, but determined to take back the reins of the situation as soon as the king returned to the city and everything reverted to its usual quiet.

The queen had asked the sovereign to be able to be with them when they reopened that room that had been closed for so long and he had naturally agreed, also because the prince had begun to hop around him all happy about that idea and would not leave him alone otherwise.

The key turned easily in the lock and anyone would have found that odd, but not the king, who never paid much attention to details.

But what appeared before his eyes were not details. The large windows were opened wide and the light of the late morning poured in, hot and overpowering to breathe life to that severe room.

There was no musty smell in there nor dust on the books or on the huge table almost totally covered with a large number of fascicles tied with blue and yellow bows, there were no cobwebs on the walls and on the oil lamps. Everything was in perfect order as if every day someone had taken care of cleaning and ventilating a room that, as far as he could remember, he hadn't attended for at least three or four years.

He looked questioningly at the teacher, but it was clear from his face that he knew nothing about it; and the little boy's face betrayed emotion and curiosity, nothing else. Moreover, it was unthinkable that a child could do this. How could this be explained?

He looked inquisitively at the queen who was beside him and she smiled at him with her usual somewhat cryptic expression.

"Was it you?" He asked her in a whisper, so she alone could hear him.

"Maybe" she nodded.

"So, no one respects my orders here?" He asked again in the same subdued tone and felt that he did not know whether to be angry or laugh.

"Everyone obeys you, but I believe I am dispensed from respecting them completely."

"Ah!?"

"Your bans are not always very rational, and I could not bear to have everything ruined in here."

"I should get angry," he said, his voice quite calm.

"Perhaps, but, as far as you are concerned, I am not just anyone to you, exactly like your son."

"I got it, I got it. You are two allies and plotted behind me."

Now he laughed openly and the astonished faces of those present improved his good spirits.

He called the prince and suggested: "Your mother knows this library better than anyone else, I think. Tell her to find you those books."

"Father, I would like you to read them to me, though."

"Okay, we agree. You will bring them up to your room and in the evening, I will come and read them to you. Or would you rather go to my apartment and read them with me until you close

your eyes and you fall asleep next to your father not afraid of the dark? By now we are completely crazy here ... " concluded ironically, but with a certain sweetness.

" It would be wonderful, Father. Your rooms are so extraordinary. Can I really sleep with you until you stay here?"

" I didn't say that, but until we are done reading those books."

" There are many " the queen intervened jokingly.

The king peered at her, feigning a threatening gaze, which she returned without difficulty, pretending not to understand.

The prince approached his mother with a sudden gesture and kissed her with emphasis on her cheeks and, immediately afterwards, just as quickly, he threw himself into his father's arms.

No one could have foreseen such a move, which had no precedents in the memory of a courtier, absolutely not contemplated by any court protocol and, therefore, no one could prevent the boy from placing two kisses on the bearded cheeks of the king, who did not know what to do for a moment before masking his embarrassment with a strong laugh.

" You are a born conqueror " he joked with his son " but a little too wild to be a prince. I will have to take care of your education more."

At that moment, he noticed the hostile glances the teacher had been throwing for quite a while and thought it fitting to correct his wording a little:

" You have a good tutor, boy, and I hope he's strict with you; but once I am at the castle, I want to be the only one to provide for your education as a future king."

The teacher nodded in reassurance.

" Father – the child intruded – Are you forgetting that I was not born to reign? I know that I have two older brothers."

"This issue does not concern you at the moment," the king replied dryly.

" Don't get mad, father, but becoming king is not what I care about. It is enough for me to stay with my mother and the others in this castle and be free to go to the sea or to ride up to the mountains or see the city."

" And your father? What would you think if I took you to live with me at the court?"

The prince paled visibly and did not know what to answer in order not to offend him, but at the same time wishing to defend his freedom.

" So?"

" I'd be happy, but ..."

" When the king expresses a wish, it is not up to you to reply, but " the teacher rebuked him severely, reassured in his authority and ready to resume his job, according to his irreplaceable judgment, in the life of the boy, who still needed guidance and character molding.

The king silenced him with a gentle but firm gesture of the head.

"I'm waiting for your answer, but if you'd rather think about it, I can have it later," he said with unusual patience.

" Father, I am happy when you are here and now that you have allowed me to stay longer with you, but ... " again he broke off, turning even more pale.

" They are already two butts" the king observed, mocking him " I better not hear a third one."

" I don't want to leave my mother to come to your court. I want to have my kingdom here" he concluded then in one breath, without looking at the sovereign.

"Anything you want " the king consented softly " but I hope that in a few years you will reconsider. And with your mother's consent, if she told you she was happy about it, would you only go to the city court for a few days?"

" If it pleases you, just because it pleases you, yes."

" Very well. We will come back to this subject again. Now have your mother give you those books."

The queen took the child by the hand and led him to a corner of the library and spoke to him at length, softly, before handing him two or three large volumes. The king saw the prince shake his head a couple of times as a sign of denial and then he thought he saw in his eyes traces of tears pushed back by force, but he never knew what his mother had said to his son, although he could try to imagine it ...

The prince still remembered those evenings spent in his father's rooms like an infinite spell. The king read to him for hours those incredible stories of ancient travelers who had explored the world, meeting mysterious people, sometimes amusing but more often disturbing, and strange fables that Antonia had never told him and that confused him a little with all those unusual characters and unknown cities with fascinating names, and adventures of famous heroes and knights.... His mother had been right to say that there were so many amazing books in the library ...

Not only, however, did father and son read and looked at astonishing figures, but they also talked for a long time and the father showed the child the treasures hidden in his rooms and taught him the game of chess and explained to him the mysteries of the stars, which they looked at from the windows together .

And during the day he would reveal the secrets of the wild animals and the birds that populated the forest and ...

The prince's memories were so many that when they began to flow into his mind, pouring out of the unconscious where they usually were buried, they were like a flood. They overwhelmed everything and he was no longer able to stop them nor the emotions that came with them and that were even stronger now than when he had felt them for the first time, because they are invariably accompanied by the regret of not having the possibility to repeat those unforgettable experiences.

When he was very young he saw his father as an all-powerful and overbearing being, who could not be disobeyed and was capable of punishing in a terrible way those who dared to contradict him; but now, he also remembered a very different father, the father he got to know in that and in many other memorable hunting seasons ...

The king then began to discover, every day and every night more and more, that his son contained within him at the same time the poetic spirit of his mother and his own restlessness, curiosity, and strong independence

Once, to say the truth, he had thought that this last characteristic was only his and alien instead to the queen, so submissive and ready to fulfill every wish of his even before it was expressed; now he realized, and precisely through the child, that she was indeed much stronger and more determined than he had ever believed.

The thing was a bit disturbing, to tell the truth, for someone like him who had been accustomed to consider himself superior and almost infallible, but also pleasant if for a moment he stopped to reflect that, if the queen's choices had always been free, so was the submission to her lord! This filled him with proud satisfaction and made him feel like a god.

One evening the prince had brought to his father a small book, covered with a simple red leather cover, very smooth and without those complicated ornaments that adorned the other volumes of the library and when he had confessed to him that he had never seen it, the boy had whispered , with a knowing air: "I had noticed it a few days ago and asked my mother what it was, because there was no title and she had blushed a little and had taken it from me a little too quickly, saying that it was nothing important and not suitable for me. But then he forgot it again on the table today and I took it secretly. Tell me, father, do you think it's an adventure book?"

The king had begun to leaf through it with growing interest and for a few minutes he had seemed absent, caught up in his thoughts, forgetting the presence of his son.

"So, father? Will you read it for me?"

"No," he said dryly.

"Why not?"

"It belongs to your mother: you have to ask her."

"I thought the library was just yours."

"I thought so too, but it wasn't. Your mother has taken care of the books in all these years when I left it closed and neglected and take care of it, and now it belongs more to her than to me. And this particular book is especially hers; I can't read it without your consent."

"I see; I'll ask her tomorrow and she won't say no."

"Don't be sure," his father warned him.

"She almost never does."

"Well this time I'll be the one to tell her to do it."

"Why, father? Don't I deserve an explanation? I was perhaps wrong in taking it, but I was curious: if you had seen how she blushed when she saw me in my hand. If I am wrong, I will apologize. She will understand and I will then be allowed to keep it."

"I am the one who does not want you to. Maybe when you're older."

His tone was now domineering, and it did not allow replies. The prince still did not understand and was a bit sulky; his father seemed nervous, not exactly restless, but as if he was just in a hurry to dismiss him and to be alone.

So that night he went back to sleep in his room for the first time since that beautiful understanding had formed between him and his father.

He was sad and despite Antonia tried to cheer him with her stories, she did not succeed.

He could not sleep and rolled around uneasily in his bed, rolling up his blankets and then kicking them away and sitting back in the dark, his heart beating so hard that he thought Antonia might hear him through the walls.

"Now I'll go to my father "he thought at times "and I'll tell him to keep me with him. I don't care if he does not want to read me that book, but I care to be with him, that I care about."

Then he was afraid to make him angry, going to him so without warning and, even more, he feared crossing those long dark corridors.

He laid back down and rolled up in the blankets again ...

For better or worse, sleep caught him by surprise and, when he awoke, it was already morning and the sun was high on the horizon.

He got up in a fury and just as quickly dressed. His animals had perhaps already left, disappointed by his lack of punctuality. And his father had perhaps waited in vain for him and was as annoyed by his delay.

He looked out the window, but did not see him in the park, nor near the stables. He ran out of his room still disheveled, with his shirt out of his trousers and his shoes with loose buckles. He flew down the stairs and into the garden and into the alleyway that led to his morning appointment, but he saw no sign of the king.

He came across him only when he was a few meters from the grove and then stopped running frantically and undignifiedly.

"Good morning, son, I think you're really late. You lingered a long time in bed, eh? " his father teased him.

"Have they already left?" the child asked.

"I'm afraid so and they were really sorry that a prince was not able to keep a commitment."

"I'm sorry, but I didn't wake up in time. It had never happened to me before."

-I'm afraid you'll have to explain that to several people this morning."

-What do you mean?"

"Well, apart from your four-legged friends, I'm waiting for your apology."

"Why, Father?" he asked in amazement.

"I don't think it's the right way to present yourself to your king. You didn't even greet me and are dressed in a decidedly unseemly way."

The prince blushed and instinctively tried to straighten his hair and adjust his shirt.

But his fingers were rather clumsy, and, without the usual help of the nurse, they could not tackle tying the many ribbons.

The king smiled involuntarily at this hindrance and tried to help him but was politely rejected.

"I think I'm old enough, father, to do it alone."

"Seriously? Even shoes?"

"Maybe a little help ... "granted the boy, when he realized he wasn't getting too far.

"I see you're more reasonable now. When you are decent and presentable, we will go to your mother and you will also have to justify yourself to her."

"I didn't do anything wrong... oh, yes! The book. Is this the reason?"

"Precisely."

"But father! I didn't think I was going to spite her."

"But she wasn't happy last night when I told her about it."

"Did you tell her everything?"

"Certainly, and now I want you to go and explain yourself to her."

The prince sighed resignedly, not at all happy.

Who knows why his father had betrayed him so? He wouldn't have expected it, after so many days of friendship and complicity. Why had he brought back that book to his mother's attention right away? And what mysterious and delicate secrets were written in that book?

"But," the boy observed, as he followed the king's rapid steps along the alley that led to the paved courtyard in front of the main façade and then up the stairs to the first floor, where the reception rooms and the rooms the queen used during the day were located "but I cannot understand: what was so important about that book to provoke all this chaos, to make me worthy of being punished by you and my mother?"

He had spoken in a whisper, almost a whisper, as if he were talking to himself, in a reasoning so complicated that needed to be expressed aloud to be better followed and grasped.

The king turned slightly to look at him and was struck by his son's almost suffering air. His excessive sensitivity irritated him a little and he decided not to answer. But then he realized the child, who was silently racking his brain, was desperately trying to recover his self-esteem and decided to wait for him and take his hand to calm him at least a little.

"You don't fear your mother is angry at you, right? I said she wasn't happy, not that she wanted to punish you."

"No, father, but I am so sorry to know that she ... that she is not happy with me. She always says that I am her treasure and that if she didn't have me her days would always be grey and sad. And now ... Oh, father, I'm sorry if I am making her suffer. I'd rather be placed in a dark cell."

"That is that is best for you" the king said jokingly.

"Yes, but my mother is also best for me."

"Seriously? And your father?"

Why did he insist on that self-centered question? Perhaps to elicit a little exaggerated and false praise from his son? Perhaps to feel reassured about his paternal role, that in reality for years and years had not worried him at all and that only now he was barely rediscovering?

"I am very happy to be with you, but you are never here, while my mother does not abandon me a second and I can tell her everything."

"Yes, I believe it."

"Can't you tell me why me taking that book would have made her unhappy?" the prince again ventured.

"Very well. Sit down for a moment next to me and I'll try to explain it to you. That book was different from the others, because your mother wrote her thoughts, her joys and her unhappiness, her

desires, and her regrets in the book. In short, she poured her soul, entrusting it to some poetry and to many long pages of confessions. Do you understand what I mean?"

"I know what a confession is, but my mother isn't bad and doesn't need it."

"No, not in the sense that you think; I wanted to say that she wrote the things that buried in her soul and her heart without lies, without fear that someone (maybe me) could read them and maybe scold her. You stole her secrets."

"But I didn't know ... " the prince stammered.

"Of course; but now I know, and your mother and I have discussed this a lot yesterday evening. I was rude to her because I should not have succumbed to the temptation to read those pages and because I could not hold back my anger I made her cry" the king concluded, without having the courage to look at his son, suddenly ashamed before the naivety and sincerity of the child.

"I'm sorry, father. We will try to fix it. We will take care of it."

"I hope so. I should have come back to her early this morning or stay with her tonight and let her know I was a fool to get carried away by my exaggerated jealousy, but I didn't and now ..."

He didn't add that he really wanted the prince to pay for everyone, because it would have been too much for his pride, but he knew that was what made him feel terribly guilty at that moment.

"Father, you will bring her a rose and you will make her smile. Wait."

The child ran back, rushing into the garden. He broke a rose sprig, one of the last of the season. He handed it to his father.

"Give her this. She loves them so much."

"I'd rather you took it to her. I don't know if I'll go with you."

"Why not? You don't want her to be sad like this."

His son's eyes were full of great wonder that made him smile.

"Okay, okay, you won. Let's go together. Give me that flower."

Feeling ridiculous, but unable to withdraw under the decisive gaze of the prince, the king approached his queen as an ancient knight who pays homage to the lady with his courtly love and honor, with a rose in his hand and his son at his side.

"Good morning mother " exclaimed the latter, running towards her to kiss her.

"Good morning, my boy. Was Antonia not able to reach you this morning to get dressed? You look a little messy, " she observed, smiling tenderly at him.

"I got out of the bed like lightning. I was late for my animals. But my father helped me a little."

The queen looked at her master in surprise and waited for him to say something to relieve her nightly sufferings. Probably, however, he would have not said anything, and she would have had to hide her disappointment at the bottom of her heart, like so many others in the past.

"Your son " the king said instead " says these roses are your favorites" and clumsily handed her the flower.

"It's true."

"I'm sorry for the words I spoke last night. Sometimes not even a king can keep his impulses in check."

"Mother " the child intervened " really the fault was mine alone, because I secretly took what I was not supposed to take, as I was extremely curious."

His mother held him close to silence him and saw that the king had a strange look as he watched them.

It had been a long time since his eyes had been glimmering in excitement, a long time since he had had words like that, kind words, yet not conventional.

"Don't apologize, my darling" she answered her son, her eyes searching for the king " nothing can make me happier than having you close to me. Now " she added " go spruce yourself up before going down to breakfast with me. Perhaps your father will join us for once."

The king nodded.

When his son left, he approached the queen and grabbed her hand: "I'm really sorry," he repeated, "I hope you didn't feel too lonely tonight."

"I was, but no more."

"But not forgotten, right?"

"How could I? Do you truly believe that entrusting my torments or my expectations to paper will make me forget everything?"

"No, you're right. But you know the way I am, you've always known it and ..."

"I accepted this way of life. I have your child and I should not wish for anything else. I don't know if that's what you expect from me, but in reality, that's not what I feel."

"What else would you like?"

"It's not up to me to teach my king."

"I know, but I can't be different. I'm already surprised at myself for how I let myself be conquered by our son. Maybe someday...".

"Perhaps" granted the queen "I can wait."

The king was silent for a long time, then asked: "Is there anything else I don't know?"

"Do you think you have the right to know all the secrets of my soul?"

"Yes" he replied forcefully "There must be no mysteries for the king."

"Good: if the king wants to know them, he should try to discover them on his own."

"Are you challenging me? Be careful."

"You are the master of my life, but not of my mind."

"I could force you," the king began abruptly, but then immediately, in a flash, he saw his son again with pain in his eyes at the thought of bringing his mother sorrow and stopped. His approach changed.

"No" he admitted "I'm not, even if I want to. I can understand that you want to be at least a little independent of me or others, but I must confess that I would be happier if I could know all of your thoughts."

The queen nodded but did not speak. She knew her lord and knew difficult those words must have been for him.

The taste of a won battle is as sweet and intoxicating as the new wine, but she also knew that it was not a definitive victory, nor, perhaps, would there ever have been.

When her father had granted her in marriage to the king, she had not, of course, opposed the marriage, nor could she have done so because it had been set up by the family and because such a great honor could not be refused without attracting the resentment of the king and the court.

However, she had soon learned to love and respect him and, again, she had not rebelled when he had made her understand that his palace would also be her golden prison, since he did not tolerate the idea of not being able to control her actions and her life in the midst of the multitude of noble courtiers, who attended the court, ready for flattery and adulation, whose rules were solely those of amusements and assiduous courtship of the ladies (queen included). Thus, she would have to accept living practically as a recluse in her own apartments when he was not present. For this reason she had preferred to establish residence in that country castle where she felt freer than in the city palace, where a thousand eyes would have spied on her every minute and where the large rooms, suffocating in their gaudery, without that air and that light that flooded her "rooms" at all times, would have made her sad like a poor captive bird.

Besides, her king loved that castle a lot and when he came to visit, especially in the hunting season, he was always quite cheerful and open to generosity and courtesy. Everyone told her that at court it was never like that and she was therefore happy with her choice. Even for her son.

She did not want him to be forced to suffer the jealousy of the two older brothers, sons from the king's first marriage, whom she knew were not much loved by their father, and would not have liked the baby to grow up in a gloomy city palace when he could have this instead: the park and the forest,

the animals, the flowers and the orchard; he was a lively child and always on the move and, although a little too isolated, here there was enough space for him to live without excessive constraints.

Certainly, little by little she had tried to organize her life in a different way from what the king would have demanded. Despite the bans, for example, she had begun to frequent the castle library and the very fact of being able to spend part of the day there, in peace, immersed in those wonderful worlds that would otherwise have been forbidden to her, had given her greater serenity and ability to better withstand her recluse solitude.

And then there was her son, who grew up and surrounded her with an ever deeper and warmer affection.

And her poems.

A little out of boredom and a bit out of challenge, she had begun to write those diary pages, which had grown and ended up being vitally necessary.

Her husband had reproached her for her wishes for independence (albeit very minimal) and had even threatened to take away her child if she did not respect the pacts between them.

She had then fought like a lioness defending her child even at the cost of dying, and she had faced his furious gaze head-on, as the king tried to be master of her soul too. He had mocked her for her stupid and useless pages, written only to protect her from feeling like a ship completely at the mercy of the calm and the storm. In the beginning, she answered with the same tone and the same weapons, but then had to succumb to tears, which made her understand how desperately weak and alone she was, despite her efforts to build a protective mental armor for herself.

Then the king had left, perhaps satisfied to have once more won over his opponent and convinced that he had made it very clear who of the two was in command (which in truth was obvious) and what he demanded from her.

Thus, on the night when the little prince abandoned in his bed felt immensely alone and fidgeted uneasily in the darkness that was so frightening to him, even the queen had bitterly meditated on the high price she would always have to pay for the honor of being asked to marry the king and give him a son.

And yet, that that same finch that seemed so fragile and instead was as strong as a warrior, had conquered his father like no one before and had now brought back to her a different husband, who even knew how to admit his wrong and asked her to put up with him as it was, because he, in his own way, loved her and didn't want to see her unhappy.

"I too," said the queen at last, "sometimes I would like to know your deepest thoughts."

"What do you mean?" The king inquired guardedly.

"Why for example did you ask me to marry you one day? Was it just to have another child or did something in me attract your interest? And why was your first bride not a prisoner of your jealous possession mania? There are many things that I don't know and that in my long lonely days torment me, as their meaning escapes me. But " she added quickly, seeing the king's face was clouding over," this is not what I want to know now; don't worry, I won't ask you embarrassing questions today or ever. I just wish you would tell me what you think of the prince."

The king felt relieved at this last sentence: the queen had suddenly made it easy for him, when only a few seconds before the road ahead had seemed so steep and full of traps to make him shudder.

Nor was it easy for him to remove the veils that hid the faces of years-old ghosts. To discover one's own hidden desires, anger, disappointment, hatred, and love is not easy for anyone, and least of all for those who, like him, had been educated never to reveal their most concealed secrets even to their most trusted friends.

Being able to explore the hidden crypts of the mind can be a deadlier weapon than the sharpest sword.

He would have liked sometimes to reveal his utmost secrets to his queen, who, he knew well and was happy about, was worthy of his utmost trust, but had always backed away and that secret

diary had infuriated him so much precisely because he recognized his difficulty in not being able to confide in those who loved him despite everything.

But if she was questioning his feelings about her son ...

There was nothing sweeter and more disturbing in his heart than the thought of the child.

" What I am thinking or what I am feeling? " he asked her.

" Both."

" He's a boy like I've never seen in my life. I am fond of him though sometimes he seems a little wild. But there will be time to educate him to become a true king."

He stopped talking abruptly: the queen's eyes were already reproaching him for his lie. The prince was not destined for that role, they both knew it.

" And if not king " he continued " a true noble prince. I find that he is like you in many ways and like me in other ways. A perfect mix, don't you think?"

"I don't know if the king appreciates in him what is mine or what is his," she insinuated.

"I don't know either, but I believe your first guess," he admitted.

" I must therefore think that you are not really sorry for the thoughts that live inside me."

" Not entirely, even if sometimes I find it hard to understand them. But then our son too is like this: sometimes he is a child who has no mysteries, cheerful and naive, while sometimes he is an enigma and he baffles me. He has an adult pride and courage that frightens me, even if " he smiled tenderly at the memory " he is not afraid to confess that darkness makes him shudder. He can defend his positions even against the king, but he does not hesitate to admit his weaknesses, which makes him irresistible."

" Do you love him?"

" Yes " the king admitted. " And I'm sorry I didn't truly get to know him before. Luckily, I had that crazy idea of wanting to bring him alone to hunt. I don't even know how I thought of that, maybe it was a divine inspiration. Now I could not live without him, not even when he makes me angry and I would like to find the courage to punish him as he deserves; but it seems that with him I have completely softened and I cannot, no matter what I do, imagine his suffering without experiencing it myself. Think about the issue of the park: when he confessed to me that he was afraid of the cell of the tower, I pictured him alone, up there, trembling terrified by the noise of his own breath. To make a long story short, I wished to have him next to me at night to hold his hand and hold him as you do. I envy you this chance."

" Will you take him with you then? " asked the queen, in suspense.

" Only if you agree, but I won't do it if it makes you suffer. Do not think that I am cruel, as I sometimes the words I say may make me look like that."

" I never believed it; I ... I don't know how I would live without him, but if it was necessary for his education ..."

The king felt from her voice that she was trying to keep calm, but the tension was palpable.

" I repeat: only if your answer is yes. Maybe in a while, when he too will be old enough not to miss your embrace too much."

The queen smiled.

" After all " he concluded, I decided to spend more time here from now on. I am realizing that it is indeed a delightful place, much better than the city, and no one will be able to prevent me from leaving my state commitments in the hands of my ministers more and enjoying my son more. And my wife, of course."

" And your other children?"

" They've already had what was due to them and the oldest is seriously training to become king. Perhaps he hopes to replace me soon " the sovereign grins " but I don't think his time has come yet. He will not be a bad king; certainly not as forceful as me."

" What do they think of us?"

" Anything."

" Do you mean that you never asked him if they wanted to meet his brother and maybe come and spend little time here? After all, they are only two boys."

" No. They have their life at the court, and they must not mix with you."

"But why?"

"It's like that because that is my decision" the king cut her short.

The queen did not give up: " Perhaps they would like to come here to hunt with you."

" No. It is out of the question, do not insist " and this time even the queen had to admit that his decision was final.

She did not know the past life of the king in great detail, although, like everyone else, she knew that the first marriage had been a source of bitterness for him and his wife; married for political reasons, they had never been able to love each other. It was rumored that the queen had betrayed him for a long time with young nobles of the court, but then he too had had more than one mistress who had gladly consoled him with her graces. It was not unusual, and no one too surprised; the king did not have an easy disposition and the queen, well-informed sources always said, knew how to stand up to him, indeed, at times, she was sometimes even more stubborn and overbearing than him, and was ambitiously malicious.

When she died, everyone had thought that the king would no longer risk marrying again, all the more so because the descendants were already assured, and he would still enjoy a few beautiful complacent ladies without too many burdens and unknowns.

Instead...

The queen well remembered those terrible and anxious days in which she had been asked to reflect on the proposal that came from the court and how her father, in truth, had not given her many alternatives in this regard.

" It is either the king " had said " or the convent. Nobody will marry you anymore if you refuse the king, because he will take revenge on us, discrediting me and my family and because no noble of the kingdom would dare to aspire in the future to a woman the king had chosen for himself."

But she was not at all sorry to give her consent, because she had gotten to know him and thought his soul had the potential of being noble and generous, beyond appearances.

For nine years now she had shared her life with him, but she had never had the audacity to ask him anything more about the previous queen and why he absolutely did not want his two older sons to know her and visit her at her castle.

She had just caught a glimpse of them on their wedding day; obviously, they had been invited but kept to the side; they had seemed closed and hostile. Perhaps, only sad, and jealous like all the children who had witnessed frigid family relationships and who were forced to endure a stepmother.

They were still small, four to five years old, but with their mind made up and not at all willing to smile and welcome her like a new mother.

Moreover, the king had given neither them nor her the chance to try to build a more caring bond because the queen had been almost immediately isolated in her splendid prison and the two children had continued to live at the court with their tutors and military instructors, between servants and rulers who did not make them want for anything. But they were missing the affection of a father, physically always very present, but distant as far as everything else was concerned, and a mother to soften their grim existence.

" Too bad " the queen murmured " I would have liked to welcome them almost like my own children."

"They are not," the king" replied acidly. "I myself have never been able to really love them."

" And yet you've always had them close, much more than our son and you say you love him."

" He is different ... You are different."

" Or maybe you're not the same when you're here and when you're at court; or perhaps release on them the old grudges of which they are only the victims."

" What do you know about it?"

" Nothing, it's true, but you can't be unaware of what everyone was saying about the king and his queen."

The king instinctively raised his hand to strike her, but immediately, repenting, he held it back.

"Excuse me," he whispered, "you're right, everyone knew and talked, more or less haphazardly. Do you want me to tell you once and for all the reason I hated the queen and now I can't love my children? Is that what you need in order to leave me alone?"

The king's voice sounded a little forced and not at all different than usual, as if he were begging her to free him from a nightmare and, at the same time, asking her not to let him go back to his old ways of suffering.

He was uncertain, poised between two opposed temptations.

" No, I don't want to know if this causes you pain. But if you want me to tell you how I feel about it, if I'm allowed ..."

" You know you are the only one who can do it."

" ... I believe that whatever happened, your children have nothing to do with it. They were entitled to your fatherly love and still are. And although many years have passed, perhaps it is still not too late to bring them closer to you. If you don't want me to get to know them or for them to frequent our son, do as you wish. It doesn't seem right though. As far as the rest it is your duty to fix it."

" Is this what you think?"

" Yes."

" Even if you had to lose something?"

" What on earth could I lose? The rights that I don't have and will never have? I don't care about that."

" All right. And our son?"

" He would never be king anyway."

" I could make him king, by my decree."

" I would stop you. It would be unfair and brutal towards them and would only hurt him."

The king frowned, deep in thoughts. He took a few steps away from the queen and went to look out at one of the windows that overlooked a small internal garden, which everyone called the queen's kingdom, because she did not let anyone else take care of it.

He observed in silence for a few minutes the lively plants of roses, asters and hydrangeas that adorned the flowerbeds around the pool, where mysterious water lilies bloomed, small hedges full of curious red berries grew as well as the bench where he imagined seeing his wife laughing and chatting tenderly with the prince, who was near her and drank eagerly every word from her lips.

"Come here, next to me," he said slowly, almost in a whisper.

When she was beside him, he squeezed her hand and, still without looking at her, continued: "Betrayal is nothing; cynicism without shame is what can completely destroy you."

"I am afraid I don't understand," the queen murmured.

" I knew my wife was cheating on me and I knew with whom and how and when. A king " he smiled bitterly " always has many zealous informants. But then neither of us expected love from marriage. I was free, she was free, this was in the terms of our marriage contract. When she learned she was close to death, she made me swear that I would respect the rights of her children, despite the hatred that had divided us, and I, stupidly, had no difficulty doing so: the two children were also mine and I loved them. I had not always been a perfect father, nor a bad parent. Only when she was sure she had achieved what she wanted, she revealed to me that neither was mine, that she had made me believe it by pretending from the beginning, taking advantage of me at will and laughing at me with her young suitors. I never knew who the father was."

" And the kids loved you?"

" I think so. Now I don't care anymore. I can't even stand their sight. I don't want you and the prince to mix with them. I can't stand watching people I love mixing with those who only remind me of hatred and malice."

" Please forgive me if I insist: you should try to see them with different eyes. None of this is their fault."

The king looked at her tenderly: "You too never give up, do you? I promise you I'll think about it."

Then he pulled her to him and kissed her.

The prince saw them, while he was at the door of the hall, and felt a slight hint of jealousy, perhaps the first of his young life, but he chased it away immediately, decisively. He came back and announced his arrival noisily. The parents, unaware, greeted him with a smile, welcoming him in their arms.

Later his father asked him to accompany him to check an old fortification guard. Located at quite a few kilometers distance from the castle in a north-eastern direction, it had been built close to a massive stone bridge and, from very ancient times, with its severe bulk, it reminded those who passed by there that its authority was impervious to any pleas.

In reality, it was no longer serving any practical functions and had remained little more than a symbol, but the king was strongly and ambiguously tied to it, since it was there that his father had once locked him up after he had rebelled, and there he had also learned to know, in solitude, the value of a true friendship, when an old childhood companion of his had left his noble home for him and challenged the king's vengeance to remain with him.

Even now, every time he returned, the sovereign felt a mixture of repulsion and love for that place, which had seen him quiver with anger, fear, resentment as well as physical and moral impatience with the petty rules of the court and that, at the same time, had accompanied each passing day with the sounds of the sweet surrounding countryside and had finally seen a warm and splendid relationship develop between two young people.

The king wanted his son to know what he had felt, imprisoned in that bare and uncomfortable fortress to look at the life that happened undisturbed out there, in the waters of the river, in the woods and the fields; about his long conversations with his favorite friend and their ardent dreams about the future. Unfortunately, those dreams had never really come true because life had soon defeated them both, one with death, and the other with a scorching betrayal.

Certainly, the king realized that the child was perhaps too small to be able to understand what he felt, and he knew he was likely not able to find the right words to explain himself clearly.

How can a man express his soul in words, his desires and his follies, his instincts of life and death and emotions that are stirred without a reason in the heart, maybe only at the sight of flowering grass swaying in the warm summer wind or a swarm of fireflies wandering in the night, or the scent of freshly harvested hay, symbolizing work, hard work and hopes?

The king ignored it, but he wanted at all costs for the prince to understand that.

They arrived on horseback, along the narrow road that came from the woods and opened up from behind the tower, not the main road that crossed the bridge and touched the base of the building, passing it on the right, before continuing towards the mountain and the pass that led to the state borders. That was the way the king himself had followed then, in his restless youth, escorted by his father's guards, in order not to have to cross the village, a little further down the bridge, lying halfway up the hill like a small flock of sheep, protected on one side by the fortress and on the other by the city, perhaps farther away, but even more oppressive than the shadow of the tower itself.

This is the only thing his father had granted him in his fury: to be able to avoid the derision of the people, who knew of his rebellions and certainly had to have at least partly shared them and that

now would put him in the pillory for his miserable failure, as always happens when a strong man falls and the weak take advantage of it by taking a petty revenge.

The king dismounted and held out a hand to his son, who jumped down with the agility of a squirrel; they moved forward holding the horses by the reins and the king ordered their companions to wait for them outside the tower, near the bridge.

They tied the animals to the iron rings set in the ancient walls and began to climb up the old stone stairs that led to the sentinel quarters in the look-out tower.

The father never left the boy's hand, although he wanted to run ahead.

The air smelled of dripping wood and stagnant smoke, though no one had been guarding the structure for many years. In the darkness, a bat brushed their heads in fear and the prince shook briefly, but immediately held his fear at bay. The king smiled in the dark and squeezed his small hand, sweating profusely with emotions and tension, which seemed to go from one to the other.

The king felt his heart beat decrease with every step and his breath becoming more and more frantic, certainly not due to physical fatigue; only with great effort could he control the urge to run up those steep stairs and go to open the first-floor window to breathe the clean air of the countryside. Had he been alone he would have done it and then he would have felt better immediately, free from the phobia that made him hate enclosed places and that even in his dreams often made him go crazy and scream. But he couldn't risk having the child trip on those loose stones only to fall downstairs. So, he tried to be calm and to talk to the prince, reassuring him that they were almost there and that they would see the light again and breathe again ...

In truth the boy was not afraid, trusting his father would protect him, and his emotion was not merely greed of discovery and expectations, but he felt that the great king was nervous and anxious, and he wanted to arrive quickly on top of the tower.

He spoke to him, yet not to him.

As if the words said were to be heard by an invisible being that only the king saw and heard.

Finally, they came to the first floor of the tower and the king opened the window: a flood of light hit them, and they narrowed their eyes for a moment.

The first to reopen them was the young prince who, despite being busy more than anything else to look around with his usual curiosity, did not miss the fact that his father had an odd look that he had never seen on anyone.

Not the teacher when he was angry and scolded him almost turning his face purple, nor the advisers when they listened to the king's orders submissively and unhappy, or to the servants when they were tired or came to implore help from the queen crying from the daily worries and troubles. His father had a similar appearance: his face was almost twisted in a grimace of pain and slightly beaded with sweat, his eyes closed, and his mouth half open as if short of breath, his head rather tilted forward.

The prince's gaze ran to his hands and he noticed that one of them was open and rested on the panting chest of the king and the other, clenched in a fist, had not yet left the bolt of the shutters, as if glued to it.

" Father " the child asked in a faint voice " are you fine?"

The king did not answer, and the prince was frightened to see that his face was getting paler and that two tears were now flowing silently, sliding down his cheeks until they were lost in the thick of his beard.

" Father, please, don't you feel well? Should I call someone?"

He was about to turn around and go down, despite the fear of retracing the dark stairs by himself.

" No " the king finally answered " just a moment."

He opened his eyes again, breathed deeply two, three times, the painful grimace disappeared from his face, the hand that clawed the window handle relaxed and he turned to his son, still dominated by the fear that his father might be ill.

"I'm fine," he said. "You don't need to be dismayed."

"Excuse me, but I thought something similar to what happened to the old gardener last year was happening to you."

"Hey, take it easy! I'm not yet at that point" grumbled the king "And then what do you know about these things?"

"I was with him when he felt sick and his face turned grey with pain, and he squeezed my hand so hard it made my fingers bleed. Forgive me, father, but you looked sick a little while ago."

"It's true I was sick, but not in the sense that you think."

"And how then?"

"I was thinking of an old friend of mine who died a long time ago. Do you know what dead means?"

"Yes," the prince nodded.

"For a long time, we lived in this old tower and shared food, hopes and dreams. We talked and sometimes fought and some other quarrel. We once fought and didn't look at each other for two or three days. He then withdrew up there " he pointed to the floor above their heads which was accessed by a trapdoor " and it was I who finally called him. At the same time, he had decided to reopen the trap door and come down. We laughed, I remember, and we were no longer able to stop ..."

"Why did you fight, father?"

"He insisted that I should ask the king for a pardon and I accused him of being a traitor."

"Why did you have to ask for a pardon? Isn't that what those sentenced to death do? And you are the king."

"Not then; my father was the king and I was the condemned person, not to death, but to remain shut in here for many months and then perhaps in exile. That was because I had stated the sovereign was not just and surrounded himself with incapable citizens, cruel to the people, only to feel flattered."

"Was it true?"

"Sure, do you doubt my words?"

"No, but ... It is serious to say such things to a king, it could cause your head to come off."

"Yes, but I did, and at first some of the king's advisors encouraged me, then they all left me except my friend, who wanted to follow me here."

"And then?"

"My mother interceded for us and we left safely, with our head still in place. There was no exile in a foreign country, but only in the castle where you now live with your mother."

"In the tower cell?" The child asked, startled.

"No " the king laughed, amused, despite everything, by the terrified face " No; we were in the castle and could not return to the city, but we were free to go hunting and receive some visits. It wasn't bad after all. The tower was worse. Then my father forgave us, and we were let back into the court."

"Father, can I ask you something I shouldn't?"

"Have you thought about it? If it is a question that you know is forbidden, you could be punished."

"I know, but I need to do it."

"If this is the case ... a man's duty is more important than anything else and we must also face the risk of being punished."

"I think so too and you too have been condemned by the king because you thought it was fair to say certain things ..."

"Exactly " the king went along, keeping a straight face despite the desire to smile at the solemn tone of the child " So?"

" Why, father, can't my mother and I leave the castle? Perhaps we are prisoners too for offending you?"

The king turned his face so that his son could not see his sudden blush. He wasn't angry about his question, but when he was taken by surprise. He didn't know what to say to him, being put on the spot like that.

He tried to compose himself quickly so would not think that he was angry or offended by his words.

"You are not prisoners," he replied, trying to gain some time.

" But we're not even free."

" What does that mean? If you asked me to come to the city, for example, I would say yes."

" It is not the same thing. I wanted to say that if my mother and I wanted to go to the sea alone we could not and if the queen wanted to come all the way here to see the river and the mountains up close you would forbid it. Why, father? Maybe we did things that upset you and now you punish us like that?"

The king was seized with panic, as if he were standing in front of an enemy army. How could he talk to a child of betrayal and wounded honor, of pride and jealousy? Where would he find the words to reassure him that his love for him and his mother was not in question?

" Do you trust me? ". he asked.

" Yes, father."

" Then listen to me well: your mother is a good and beautiful queen and I love her. I married her for these reasons, and I haven't changed my mind. She never did anything wrong, nor did she offend me, just as you never upset your king and father. You are still too young to understand the real reason why you and she cannot leave the castle without my consent, but I swear to you on my honor as king that you are not prisoners. It is not the same thing as my imprisonment here. You have to believe me."

"Yes, father. How could I doubt your words? I know a king never tells lies."

The king felt something twisting wildly inside his chest, like a snake squashed by his boots.

" And then " the child continued " my mother always taught me that you are good and fair and that I should not take too much notice if you sometimes get angry, because you immediately forget ..."

" Ah! Is that what she says? I'll have to scold her then, when we get back because she should teach you to fear me and respect me."

" Please, father "the scared child tried to remedy the situation " I did not explain myself well. She always tells me that I must be obedient and not discuss your orders, nor those of the councilors and the teacher; but also that I must love you, because you are a good king and a good father ... oh, I don't know how to say, but here ... you must not reproach her."

" No, you're right, I'd be unfair if I did."

" And then my mother is really good and kind, you know, and if you were mean to her, I would defend her even at the cost of offending you."

" My child, you have guts! " the king teased, but with affection. "In short, would you even feel like challenging me to a duel and risk being locked up in this lonely tower?"

" Yes."

"Wouldn't you be afraid, little paladin?"

" Maybe. And were you afraid when you were imprisoned in here?"

The king stopped smiling but did not want to elude his question.

" A little, but I wasn't alone and that helped me a lot. Had I been alone, maybe I would have gone mad with anger and hatred. I would have tried to run away, and the guards would have killed me because they were ordered to shoot me if I even attempted to stick out too much from the window. Or I would have slammed my head against the wall to smash it in the days when I was overcome by the darkest sadness and loneliness. It is terrible to be locked in here and feel life passing by without you being able to grasp it. You can't run and ride in the woods and go hunting or attend court parties,

you can no longer see the sea and dive into its cold waters or meet friends when and how you want ... And then you think nobody remembers you anymore, because now you are no longer the powerful prince sought and loved by all, but a dirty and hungry prisoner, in complete disgrace. Sometimes I hated everyone, while at time I just hated myself and my inability to even try something crazy to stop that useless rat life. But there was my friend with me, and everything was more bearable with him at my side ...”

" I understand. I, too, sometimes want to escape from the gate and go behind the wagons that pass on the road and maybe go as far as the sea and see if its color is really blue as the master says, or if it is colored like the sky at sunset. Then I think I'd also like to follow the deer when they come back to the woods after eating my hay in the morning and never come back.”

" Why do not you do that? asked his father, still feeling that snakelike twist in his chest.

" I can't leave my mother alone. What would she do? And maybe you would send the guards to find me and, later, you would have me whipped.”

" That's for sure.”

" You see? My mother would die of pain and I would have no peace for eternity.”

" Seriously?”

" Antonia says that if we are responsible for someone's death, hell is waiting for us and then our souls will wander forever like ghosts doomed to never rest.”

" Yes, I understand. Better to resign then.”

"In fact," the prince nodded seriously." I merely look through the bars of the gate and dream, or I climb to the top of the towers and try to see the sea above. I thought I saw it once, but the master believes I have too much imagination.”

" And your mother?”

" I cannot tell you.”

" Why not?”

" I don't want her running the risk of being scolded by you.”

" I swear I won't.”

" Very well, then: she thinks the master is like a nocturnal bird who knows nothing about real life, the sun, and colors; he believes that there is no light stronger than that of the moon because he has never seen the sunshine. Once he suggested me not to pay attention to him and to do my own thing, listening to my dreams.”

" I thought so. Trying to make you rebel! " the king exclaimed in a fake threatening tone.

"Father, you swore," the prince reminded him anxiously.

"... And a king keeps his word, right?”

The prince nodded energetically.

"I'll take you to see the sea one of these days," the king promised unexpectedly.

The child jumped happily around his neck and his father held him against him for a while to feel that little heart beating against his and letting himself be pervaded, infected perhaps by that naive faith and that immeasurable love that lived in the child permanently and, certainly, happily.

No one, he told himself, could feel less than blessed to live with him.

The planned journey to the sea did not take place, in fact, until many months later because the day after the sovereign left for the city, called urgently by his advisers.

When the king left the castle, the sun had just risen, and the prince was just waking up in the big bed that he had shared with his father that night. They had been awake for a long time talking again about the stars that could be seen from the windows of the royal chambers and playing chess; the king had not even once mentioned the fact that the next day he would leave him alone for who knows how long because delicate and important business required his personal presence in the city. Once, even just a few weeks prior, he would have felt only a slight annoyance in having to abandon his favorite residence and resting in the countryside earlier than expected. Now he felt an acute annoyance, much

like the pain of an emotionally important loss. He did not know what to say to the prince and continued to postpone the explanation minute by minute, until his son fell asleep, very tired, reclining his head on his shoulder and it was then no longer possible for the king to offer any explanation.

In the morning he quickly wrote a note for the child, leaving it in full view on the long chest at the foot of the bed, and got out before he woke up and asked him where he was going at that early morning hour. He was afraid he would start crying and above all he feared he would no longer be able to leave him. He would have dragged him along with him, perhaps by force, if he didn't have to keep his word to the queen.

The prince woke up and instinctively looked for his father as he usually did since he had let him into his rooms and had made him lie down next to him, not to miss even a minute of his company.

He saw the empty bed and stood up abruptly: something told him that this was not normal. He rushed to the window and saw his father approaching the carriage that would take him back to the city.

" Father " he screamed leaning out of the window.

The king heard him and raised his head towards him, waving to him with his hand.

" Where are you going?"

" To the city."

" Will you be back soon?"

" You can count on it. Unless you want to accept my invitation to come to court."

The prince shook his head: he would have liked it, but not without his mother and the king had never mentioned the possibility that she, too, could leave the castle. He always said: if you come with me to the city" or" I'll take you to the sea" " you could come with me ...

" No, father. I will wait for you here and I will continue to look at the road that leads to the city from behind the bars of the gate."

" All right. I hope to be back here very soon. Don't forget to read our books and teach your mother to play chess and keep up your practice."

The king would have gladly continued to talk to the child, but he knew that if he did, he would never leave. Then he hastily waved good-bye and got into the carriage.

After a few minutes, the cloud of dust the coach had raised when it passed had already disappeared from the road.

The prince walked back to the bed and saw the note his father had left him. He opened it a little surprised and read it with impatience.

" My father " he confided to the queen later, showing her the note " says he is so sorry to leave us, but he will be back soon and then he will keep his promise to take me to see the sea. I must continue to study the stars and books that he left me, and above all to teach you the game of chess so that I can train and prepare properly to face him when he returns. And he also says that I can move into his apartment."

" I don't believe it."

" Yes, mother, look. This is his message."

The queen read it with a brief incredulous smile.

" Very well. I will order your clothes and games to be transferred to the king's apartment and Antonia will sleep in the yellow room for the moment. But you and I will be a little farther ... "

" Not much, mother, only a few dozen more meters."

" If this is what the king and my prince want ..."

" Thank you, mother. Do you know what I'm going to do? Sometimes I will invite you to my rooms in the evening and we will read and play together."

" Really? Careful: you are only a guest there. I myself have gone in the room very few times."

"But the king gave me permission, didn't he? And he didn't say that on his return I will have to go back to my room, so it's not like I'm a temporary guest."

" Can't argue with your reasoning " the queen laughed.

" But now " the teacher who was entering the hall intervened at that moment upon hearing the last words spoken by the queen " I think it's really time to resume your studies. The king wanted to joke and play with the prince, but now that he's back in the city, I think it's right to start living again according to the usual way."

The prince looked at him grimly without replying; it was not up to him to reply and he waited anxiously for his mother's answer.

" I don't think the king just wanted to joke while he was here, he never takes things lightly, much less, I imagine, if it's his son he is dealing with. But I also believe that what you say is right, preceptor, and I agree with you that it is better, despite everything, for the prince to resume his studies and his usual life."

" Mother! The king recommended to continue ... " protested the boy.

" I know, but you can do it during your free time from studying. After all, the winter season is not far away, and you will be home more. You will have time to keep the promises made to the king."

" My father assured me that he will be back soon," the prince again tried.

" Maybe he will; but state affairs are never so brief, and probably several months will pass before he is here again."

" I don't believe it," the child murmured, his voice almost trembling with disappointment and spite.

The queen stroked his hair and kissed him on the forehead: " I would like for him to come back soon, but I learned to be realistic and to wait patiently. Now, if you love me, you will listen to your good teacher and learn the useful things he wants to teach you. I will wait to be instructed by you in the game of chess as soon as you have some time to dedicate to me and in the evening, I will come to see you. Do you agree?"

" As you want."

" Shall we go then, your highness? " urged the master with a certain impatience, barely disguised by his flattering voice tone.

" I'm ready. Good-bye, mother."

" See you later. And remember that later, immediately after lunch, you will have to help Antonia to tidy up your things in the new room."

" Can I ask which room? " asked the teacher.

"The little room in the king's apartment," answered the queen.

The teacher raised his eyebrows, disapproving, but did not dare to criticize openly.

For the moment at least.

He intended to take up the subject again later and hoped to be able to make her understand his belief: he did not think it was a good thing for the child to believe the king had shown him interest and affection; it wouldn't last, everyone knew that the sovereign was fickle and inclined to anger. Before that he had never even bothered to look at his son and all that sweetness and submissiveness shown in the past few days would most likely not continue. He was sure of it and would convince the queen. And then the prince was now grown up and had to be kept in check; he had to lead a severe, orderly life, without giving too much weight to his whims and to his natural, bizarre inclinations. All that freedom to come and go from and to the castle and the park, those stories about wild animals to look after and dreams and stars and ... all the rest. The king had enjoyed his son as if it were an unusual pastime, but it had not been an educational experience, and something had to be done to remedy the situation. He believed he was the right person to do just that and, after all, the king himself had explicitly recognized this fact.

He would have induced the prince to limit games and forays and to commit himself with more order and stability to study matters more useful to his rank.

And indeed, the prince, from then onward, had not much time to look out the bars of the gate at the road that led to the city and to observe the night sky from the windows. His day was filled to

the minute by the hours that the master had set up for him and the queen had only partially succeeded in mitigating to give her and her son the possibility of enjoying each other's company for a few hours.

Early in the morning the child was still able to find his way into the park, but he had to return almost immediately for the first lessons, and he could no longer jump over the hedges and discover the secrets of the garden.

The tutor always waited for him with his severe demeanor on the study door and reproached him pedantically whenever he was even a few minutes late.

“ If your Highness does not respect what we agreed on, I will have to insist with the queen to take away your permission to visit the park in the morning ” he repeated obsessively.

The boy knew that his mother would defend him, but he feared that in the end the master would appeal to the king and, on that front, he was no longer so sure.

He had trusted his father and believed him when he had made promises, but apparently the master had been right in saying that the king had just wanted to amuse himself and his mother stating he should not believe the king would return soon.

And, although in fact they were not exactly the same, the prince always combined the two concepts, arriving at the desolate conclusion that he was not at all important to his father and that he would therefore not see him again for a long time. Meanwhile, he had to obey the preceptor, because his mother wanted him to, and bow his head to his every-day more despotic and senseless pretensions, at least in his opinion.

When the king, after a couple of months, finally wrote to reassure the queen, who had complained about the excessive severity of the master, and to point out that he would have supervised personally and checked, on his return, that his excessive involvement was not an issue, the Prince felt extremely disappointed that the sovereign made no mention of a set return date and even more because he rarely heard from him, except for the usual generic recommendations that every parent has for one's children.

Did the king no longer think of him? Had he abandoned him?

He thought about this for whole nights and during distracting gloomy days, which gave him insomnia and made him incredibly careless in his tasks, which caused him to be punished. But he no longer seemed to notice the humiliations inflicted on him or the severe threats of the tutor. His mother herself could not get anything out of him.

Sometimes in the morning he stood in the deer grove, motionless, for a very long time, even after his friends had left, staring at the fallen fence as if trying to understand what message was hidden for him. But he could not make sense of the thoughts that crowded his mind, garbled, and confused, and ended up getting lost behind timeless shadows without logic.

One day he even forgot to come back for classes. They looked for him everywhere, but nobody could see him, crouched as he was behind a bush of laurel, deaf and blind.

His mother became alarmed and left the park in person to track him down. When, finally, he emerged from his hiding place, as if from a dream, unaware of the time and of the commotion caused, the master was beside himself with anger and the queen herself, already quite worried, was beginning to question if the king and the preceptor were right to ask her to be firmer with the prince. Was it possible that he did not understand that his whims did not make it easier for her to help him?

The result was that she agreed to an exemplary punishment and forbade the prince, to the master's immense satisfaction, to go out in the park from then on, until he would show greater commitment and sense of responsibility.

The prince wept and begged his mother in vain: he got absolutely nothing in return. And that was really the first time.

In the evening, opening himself up to Antonia, the child tried to explain his reasons to the nurse, but obviously even he could not fully understand what had prompted him act that way. The nurse rocked him in her arms, calming his sorrowful sobs and promised to talk to the queen.

But when she whispered: "But, my darling, you should also be more obedient with your mother and the teacher," he shouted: "Everyone here is betraying me!"

And those had been his real feelings for months, feelings he had never dared to confess even to himself.

"Who betrayed you?" asked the governess.

"My father first, today my mother and now ... now you too."

"No, Your Highness, not me," she said firmly.

"Yes, you too. I am obedient, I do what I can to please everyone and nobody, no one believes me."

"I believe you."

"It's not true."

"I believe you" repeated Antonia "I know you're right, but why did you behave like that with your mother today?"

"I didn't hear you, I told you. I swear. I didn't notice anything. Maybe I was asleep. I haven't been sleeping for many nights now."

"Why, Your Highness? This is not good."

"I was hoping the king would come back soon; he had promised me, and I believed him, but they were just lies. Everyone tells me lies and nobody loves me."

"Your mother loves you."

"No. Why doesn't she send away that master who hates me?"

"What are you saying? These are big accusations."

"But it's true. You don't see the look in his eyes when he looks at me and how happy he is if he can humiliate me in front of everyone, including my mother. And if I rebel, he tells my mother that I am irreverent and rude to him. And she believes him!"

His words ended in a scream broken by pain and burning indignation. Antonia was unable to answer him, but he did not need an answer (his day was filled with questions and answers) and Antonia's affection, even if it was not enough, was still excellent medicine.

Spring returned and the prince, who had not yet regained permission to run around the park before his lessons in the morning, suddenly realized that he did not care anymore that year to find the first flowery violets and to go and tell his mother triumphantly. And although he was still too young to be frightened by this unnatural disinterest, he instinctively felt that he didn't like it.

It was then that he decided to run away from the castle.

What about his mother? He was sorry to leave her, but for months now he had no longer spoken to her with the sincerity of the past.

And his father? He wouldn't even notice.

The only ones who would really feel bad would have been Antonia and the old gardener, but, after all, they too would soon get over it and would not miss him that much.

One morning he awoke before dawn as the sky was just beginning to turn its black cloak to a pearly grey, which in the east faded to a very light yellow; he cautiously went by the bed of the housekeeper who slept soundly after having long watched over him the night before; he opened the door quietly and hurried down the stairs. He was barefoot not to be heard by the early morning servants and he held in his hand, besides the shoes, only a blanket and the travel book his father had read to him many times at the time of their friendship.

He entered the stables. No one was there yet. Fortunately, the animals did not neigh when he arrived. He untied his horse, a young chestnut with a gentle face and a quick gait, he got it ready, arranged two travel bags on the sides of the saddle, filling them with provisions, which he had stolen from the pantry the night before and hidden under the hay. Touching it with his forefinger in front of its mouth to tell it to be silent and not to betray him, he led it outside. The alleys of the park were

empty, no one around, but he had to hurry if he wanted to have some distance over his potential followers.

As soon as morning came, Antonia would open the windows of his room to call him to his daily duties and give him time to calmly prepare for the first lessons. She would immediately notice his absence, and, in her simple mindedness, she likely would not wait to sound the alarm to help him out. She would likely scream, waking everyone up.

The prince smiled at the thought, but he could not scorn the nurse for this. With her, he was always very indulgent, because he loved her deeply.

He entered the woods through the fallen fence and jumped into the saddle. He walked quickly along the path that ran behind the castle and arrived on the road that led to the passes in less than half an hour. He slowed down his horse a little and began to look to the eastern horizon. The pale yellow was getting warmer and there were some touches of bright pink near the cradle of the sun. In a few minutes, perhaps ten, fifteen at the most, the sun would appear from behind the pass between the two highest peaks, illuminating the tips of the great towers of the palace and waking Antonia, the servants, and then, increasingly dangerous for him, the butler, his mother, and his teacher.

“He will scream to no end ” he thought with a grin ” and he will wear his shoes down by walking up and down the corridors and halls. He will get angrier and he will melt at the idea of having me in his hands to get revenge. They won’t have any power over me. No one will have any power over me anymore.”

The stablemen were not very diligent at that time of the year because almost no one went on horseback when the king was not there and the noble beasts were not let out until later in the morning, when the weather was warmer. So, he thought, more precious time would pass before they found out that his young chestnut was missing and connected the two disappearances.

The road began to rise rapidly, skirting the swollen river of muddy water. When the prince saw the old tower, he decided to stop. He forgot that he was in a hurry and that he absolutely had to get to the pass before it was late in the day and that the number of men and animals increased to the point of forcing him to hide in the thick of the forest so as not to be seen. He knew that there a barely checked secondary road that went to the other side and emerged directly within the borders of the neighboring state. He had once been told about it by a boy from the stable whose cousin was involved in salt smuggling. But he wasn't sure he could find it and he didn't want to run the risk of being recognized by someone and being brought back. He shivered in the cold of the morning at the idea of what would happen to him if ...

But the tower drew him in. He left the horse tied to a tree a little distant and well hidden, then he slowly opened the door and carefully climbed the uneven steps. Almost without realizing it, he found himself crying silently and the more he tried to get more strength, the more he sobbed, his tears running down his cheeks and nose. He kept rubbing his face with the sleeves of his clothes and felt increasingly unhappy.

“ I am a prince,” he told himself, and instead he was just a small lonely fugitive.

Finally, he arrived in the room where he had been with his father and opened the window on the river. He took a deep breath and calmed a little. He placed the ladder against the hatch above his head and, with some effort, managed to open it.

The upper room was lower, and the windows were simple square holes, slightly larger than his head, which turned into slits on the outside of the walls.

It was stuffy and full of cobwebs.

In one corner there was a recess dug in the thickness of the wall. A stone resting on the shelf of the niche had some letters engraved on it, perhaps the initials of someone who had been there. The prince picked it up to see if there was something hiding underneath, but only a small black scorpion came out with its tail raised as a sign of clear threat. The child instinctively withdrew, and the scorpion disappeared quickly up the wall.

The prince went back down and closed the trap door. As he approached the window, he saw that someone was crossing the bridge and heading towards the city.

He too wished he had the courage to do it; introduce himself to his father and tell him: “ put me in prison but keep me with you.”

But he was sure that the king would immediately send him home without even listening to him.

He would stay there. He would lock the tower from the inside, hide the horse in the nearby shed, and no one would notice his presence.

He could stay a few days and then ...

No, it was too risky. He absolutely had to cross the border that night.

He began to fear being there alone, but he also feared coming out into the open.

He curled up in a corner and covered himself with the blanket. He tried to read a few pages and eat a piece of bread.

After a few minutes, he had fallen deep asleep.

He woke up by late afternoon and he heard many excited voices talking under the tower.

He looked cautiously and immediately withdrew, flattening himself frightened against the wall beside the window.

His father was down there.

He hurriedly left the room, taking refuge upstairs. He closed the trapdoor and sat down, heart pounding, in the darkest corner. He wished he was as small as the scorpion he had discovered under the stone of the niche. A few minutes later, he heard the king's steps up the stairs and his voice calling him.

His voice did not sound irritated, but he was not going to answer.

Perhaps they would be convinced that he had stopped there for a while and then walked away up the mountain. It was his only hope.

His father opened the trapdoor and went upstairs.

He hid his head in his arms, curling up even more in the dark.

The king knelt beside him and took him in his arms.

"Here you are you little devil!" He exclaimed.

He did not dare look up and felt his head explode as if a hammer pounded inside his brain every second that passed.

"You are not answering me?" The king asked again.

His hands around his knees clenched convulsively, turning purple in an effort to resist his father's hands that tried to pry them loose.

“ Do you want to stay here a little while longer? Do you want me to come back down and wait for you to calm down and talk to me man to man?”

He nodded affirmatively.

The king got up and left him alone.

After a few minutes, the prince decided to go down to face him: he would not return to the castle, he would rather throw himself into the river.

His father was at the foot of the ladder still leaning against the trapdoor.

“ Father “ said the child, trying to keep his voice steady “ put me in prison for the rest of my life and have me whipped if you want, but don't send me back to the castle. Please.”

“ Why did you run away? Where did you think you were going? “ asked the king.

“ Past the border.”

“And what would you have done?”

“ I do not know. Maybe I would have become a stable boy. I don't want to go back to the castle anymore. “

“ You already said that; yet it seemed to me that you had revealed to me one day that you could not live far from your mother.”

"She no longer loves me as she once did," the prince noted bitterly.

"She was upset by your escape."

"She didn't have to betray me." He fell silent for a few seconds, then concluded

"You didn't have to betray me either."

"I never did it," observed the king.

"Oh yes! You promised you'd be back soon and instead you forgot about me immediately. You left me alone with the teacher and my mother did the same thing."

"You're too old for these whims."

"They are not tantrums, but nobody understands me. Everyone thinks I am just a little fool who doesn't want to study and who can make fun of himself. I ... I won't explain to you, father, but if you send me back to the castle I will escape again and again and eventually throw myself into the river."

There was no trace of tears in his eyes, nor any emotion in his voice.

He was tired, exhausted, as if he had no soul.

The king began to worry about that unnatural tone.

"You decide where to go. Calm down now. I didn't come here to punish you. I want you to stay with me. Take it easy."

He held him in his arms and felt him stiffen as a statue. He cradled him for a long time, talking to him in a whisper, caressing his head and shoulders, until he felt his tension loosen a little.

"Do you want to come with me to the city?" he asked then.

"I don't know."

"So?"

"I don't want to go home," the child repeated, for the umpteenth time.

"Do you know what you running away means?"

"Disobedience to you, my mother, and the teacher."

"Exactly. I left everything to look for you and this is serious, don't you think?"

"Yes."

"You were bad, and you made your mother and Antonia suffer; she cried like a cut vine, and many other people did as well."

"You too?"

"Me too."

"I'm sorry," the child remarked flatly without any emotional inflection.

"Now you will come with me and you will no longer discuss my orders."

The king took his hand and started to walk away. He clearly felt that his son at first opposed a certain resistance, then, suddenly, he gave up, as if he had no will or life.

He looked at him and saw that his face had suddenly become completely expressionless, with his eyes fixed into emptiness and his mouth half open.

Then he looked out the window and shouted to his entourage to return to the castle and spread the news that the prince had been found and that he would stay with him alone for a few days more, there in the fortress. Someone objected that it was not possible, but the king silenced him impatiently. He ordered his personal servants return with the necessary supplies. For the rest he didn't want to be disturbed by anyone.

They were left all alone.

The king took the prince's inert hand again and made him sit beside him on the narrow wooden bench near the window.

"A king does not tell lies" he reminded him "and you must believe me if I assure you that I have never betrayed our friendship. The affairs of state are long and complicated and have not given me time to come back to you or write to you."

"Yes, father," said the prince in a flat tone, after a long time.

" You don't believe it, do you? But now I'm here and I'll stay with you for as long as you want. We'll ride to the pass and if you want to go there, I'll leave you free. We'll talk again like we used to and ... everything else. You decide when it's time to come back."

He felt the boy's body shake.

" And if you don't want to go home, I'll take you with me to town. All right?"

" Yes, yes, father. Please. " He almost clung to his arm.

The king let him do it and he gradually relaxed.

Why all that sudden hatred, that exaggerated repulsion for what until yesterday had been his home, his golden kingdom?

He would find out, but not immediately.

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