

## *At Least the Colours Are True*

Ort. Two weeks after his birth, she had named him Ort. She had not thought, then, that he would only bear that name for three years. That after three short years, she would never see him again without a mask. Only a few hours a day, then a few hours a week. That she would only ever call him by his brazen name.

Mina was to see her son the next morning. She still had to go over her text. Memory had never been her strong suit: as a little girl, she had dreaded the recitation of verses like the plague. Her mistakes during the chants had often earned her blows from her teachers' rods. But this was different. She had to know her part perfectly. And every week, conscientiously, sitting in her cramped lodging, she forced the words to take their place, in order, in her mind and in her mouth, until everything was flawless.

“Ort.” It was a pretty name. Mina had never had the courage to give it to any of the three sons she had borne afterwards. Ort would remain for her the name of her firstborn. She never stopped thinking of it when she thought of him, while knowing it must on no account cross her lips. Never. What mother would have wanted to deprive her child of eternal life?

*What have I done that the gods should choose me thus to bear the Red?*

Mina came from a pious but modest family. Humble folk, but with nothing to be ashamed of. Mina could look a priest, or even a Guardian, straight in the eye without shame. Her father and her two brothers had died as heroes in the Holy War against the monotheists. Her mother, secluded in a monastery, devoted her life to the Dyad.

But Mina herself had accomplished nothing. She knew she was unremarkable. An ordinary little seamstress. Respectful of the gods, but with nothing of the saint about her: a woman of the people, like thousands of others in Iroumé. How could the gods have chosen her to bring an Eternal into the world — one of the Five Primordials?

*The Red. I carried, gave birth to, nursed, loved the Red.*

At first, she had suspected nothing. She had barely been surprised when, on her son's small head while he was still a baby, fiery hair had begun to grow. There had never been any redheads in her family, but they were not so rare in Iroumé; Mina remembered that at school, as a little girl, she had had a red-haired classmate — Cédia? Sodia? But apart from that, Ort was an ordinary child. Lively, affectionate, adorable — but, this was obvious to her, ordinary. No, she had suspected nothing until Ort's third birthday, when the Guardians had carried out his examination.

All children went through it: it was a simple formality. When a little one passed the age of three, he was taken to the nearest temple. Guardians came, in their grey tunics. The local priest watched the high clergy, terrified and admiring. The Guardians shut themselves away with the child in the Thinkery, at the back of the temple. They came out after a few minutes, blessed the little one in the name of the Same and the Different, and handed him back to his parents.

It had gone like that for all the children Mina knew. Not for Ort. The Guardians had kept him a good hour in the Thinkery, and on coming out they had seemed joyful, almost euphoric. Euphoric Guardians — imagine that!

*That was when they told me they had to take him at once to the Areopagus, on the third hill of Iroumé. I knew Ort was special.*

Mina had brought her son. For the first time in her life, she had entered the gigantic building. Its immense columns of metal and marble supported turrets and domes by the dozen, in what seemed a miracle of the Light. Followed by two silent Guardians, she had seen the spacious corridors flooded with coloured lights, which were reflected in countless mirrors and made one's head spin. She had seen the statues of the gods, present everywhere; the marble ones, immense, set on pedestals in the great halls; the clay ones, tiny, placed in every corner of the rooms, on window ledges, behind furniture, and which she even sometimes found in the pockets of her clothes or coiled in her son's hair, without ever seeing the hand that had put them there. She had walked through the Hall of Names, on whose walls all the names of all the gods, in all languages, had to be written and rewritten every day by an army of silent Guardians. She had strolled through the gardens and breathed in the scents of the sacred flowers — arnille, joliane, vivreon, estioroule — with their sometimes delicious, sometimes acrid and sickening, sometimes simply repugnant perfumes, each of which had been created by the Guardians to honour a particular god.

Mina and her son had stayed a week at the Areopagus. Ort had spent his days with the Guardians, who took turns examining him. In the evening, Ort and she had slept together in an immaculate room. Mina remembered the softness of the white silk sheets, and her little one's anxiety, which she calmed with kisses, caresses, stories.

*The Boy with the Three Flutes* was Ort's favourite tale; and she felt his small body relax, nestle against her with a shiver of anticipated pleasure, every time she agreed to tell it once again. “Once upon a time, long ago, in the province of Sitoï, there lived a little boy who loved to play the flute more than anything...”

*After a week, the examinations were over. They were sure of their conclusion. They explained why we had come, what they had discovered. They told me that, beyond any doubt, my son, the one I called Ort, was an Eternal. A Primordial. They revealed his brazen name to me: the Red.*

Mina had seen the Red long before. She was a thin teenager, her hair still almost blonde, and that day she was wearing the white apron of the virgins, brought out only for festivals. The great Jubilee was being celebrated. And she had seen him. An old, bald, stooped man with a peppered beard, dressed in bright red, surrounded by masked Guardians, who had been placed beneath a thick glass bell. He had greeted the crowd from atop a chariot, drawn by a dozen horses, crossing the city during the afternoon of the Jubilee. Mina had been able to look at him for a few minutes, raising herself up as best she could in the midst of an overexcited crowd. The air, that day, was filled with a smell of incense, sweat and grilled meat. A little later, she had also seen the Blue, that one even closer, and thought she had glimpsed the Black in the distance, but she had missed the other two Primordials, who had turned into other quarters of the city.

*If anyone had told me that one day he would come out of me. The eternal Red.*

She saw her son — the Red — less and less often. Their meetings were a piece of theatre, the most codified imaginable. Right after the Guardians' verdict, she had had to begin wearing a painted mask in her son's presence. Thin pinkish lips, a clean nose, soft eyebrows, a small magenta dot on the forehead: such was the face of the Mother of the Red. For a long time now, she no longer truly decided what she was to say or do in her son's presence. Her speeches and her bows were written down to the smallest detail by the Guardians. Strict rules governed their conversations.

Countless eyes watched her during the rare hours she spent with her son. Mina knew it, but she did not need this surveillance to obey. She was prepared for any effort to guarantee her son the eternal life to which he was entitled, being the Red. The other humans would have only a half-existence as ghosts in the afterlife. They would be memories, memories of memories, vague traces, sometimes simply names; for some — those condemned to erasure, or the monotheists who deliberately deprived themselves of the gods' favour — they would be nothing at all. But for her son, it would be different. The Red was eternal, truly alive forever, and her son, if all went well, if the rituals were respected, if the gods were satisfied — her son was the Red.

The only spontaneous gesture she allowed herself in her son's presence, and which she knew was addressed less to the Red than to Ort, was the one by which she squeezed his hand in hers, putting into that contact more strength, more tenderness, more overflowing love than the mother of the Red was probably supposed to. Did the Guardians notice? No doubt. And, no doubt, they let her have this single weakness, which, she knew, she would also soon have to give up.

*This week's text is really difficult. I need to go over it again...*

Written in long elegant characters on thick white paper bearing the letterhead of the Areopagus, the text that had been delivered to her the day before by a Guardian began, as often, with the grand salutation: "Red, untouched colour of flames and blood, of fatal skies, of dusks and dawns, immutable essence of the sensible, I salute you, I, your mother." Then came the text of the week,

which dealt with the Red's imminent birthday. In a few days, it would be twelve years since she had given birth to her little boy, whom she had named Ort — a little boy whom she now had to help make eternal, by earning, through her constant work, her submission to the rituals and her prayers, the favour of the gods.

*“Red, my son, the vermilion era, the era of tender calm and wise thoughts, is drawing to a close. As the Guardians have told you, as your heart must now feel, you will soon enter, Red, the era that eternally succeeds it: the scarlet era, the era of sighs, of awakenings and limitless wishes. And today, I, your mother, come to speak to you of what awaits you...”*

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“...and it is to my mother's wishes that the whole of sensible things and essential tendencies bind themselves, and all conspire to contemplate you, and to grasp your modes, your breaths, your infinite shades.”

Sitting on a bed with vermilion sheets, one leg folded beneath him, the Red listened to his mother finish her monologue, his gaze fixed on the window that looked out on the garden-greenhouse. A ray of sunlight warmed his very pale face and made his long red curls gleam. His mother's speech over, he saw the masked face draw closer to him. His mother was wearing a garnet dress, full and structured, the collar of which rose to her chin. She sat down beside him, and as usual, took hold of his left hand, which he had left lying carelessly on the sheet.

“How are you, Red? What did you do today, and yesterday, and last week?”

“Everything is fine.” The Red sensed he had to say more. His days were all alike. Five hours a day, he stayed in the Thinkery of the House of the Red, where the Guardians had him practise meditation. Sitting cross-legged, he had to visualise, one by one, all the shades of red. The rest of the time he was made to pray to the gods, learn poems, and above all, mathematics and logic.

“With Viso I went on with the conic sections, then Ark had me look at — again — syllogisms. We went up to twenty-seven premises.”

“There is knowledge worthy of the Red! May your mind seize hold of it, and contemplate these truths as immutable as your essence!”

*Whatever I say about my lessons, she always answers like that. Squeezing my hand, very hard.*

The Red ordinarily accepted these replies. Today, they frustrated him. He went on, a smile on his lips.

“Then Viso and Ark taught me how to refute the principle of non-contradiction. It's really very easy to refute. I'm very glad to have learned that.”

“More knowledge worthy of the Red! I, your mother, rejoice that you grasp such eternal truths.”

*Ha! If only she knew! You can't refute the principle of non-contradiction, Ark has told me at least a thousand times. It's the most important thing in logic. She really doesn't understand a thing, I don't know why I tell her any of this.*

The Red felt his mother's grip on his hand tighten further, and that contact, which usually did not displease him, suddenly exasperated him. He abruptly pulled his hand away, and went on telling her about his week, in a loud, high-pitched voice. Like one fulfilling a duty. Folding his arms, so as not to take any more risks.

“Oh, and then this morning I finished my game of *lenet* with Cigba. It had been going on for two weeks. He had taken three of my four castles, and I was about to lose. But three days ago, on waking up, I had an idea: there was a flaw in his defence, near the stream. A minor sixth structure, well hidden. I hadn't seen it all that time, but it suddenly came to me in bed, just after I opened my eyes. I exploited it, and I won in a few moves, taking his throne directly. It's the first time I've beaten Cigba!”

The Red had no desire to keep talking like this to his mother. He knew she had never played *lenet* in her life. It was a Guardian's game. But above all, the Red had something else on his mind, which was occupying him almost entirely. The unknown young girl, in the slit dress.

*I don't understand. Why hasn't anyone spoken to me about her? There must be, what, a hundred and fifty people in the House? I know them all. I'm sure, absolutely sure, that she just arrived, and no one introduced her to me. I don't know her name. I don't even know what she's doing here.*

It had happened the day before yesterday. He had been walking in the garden-greenhouse, at the spot where the stream flows between the rose bushes. He had sat down on the small stone bridge, to look at the fish in the stream. There were coral red ones with white spots, purple ones with a ruby tail, and even a big brick-red one with a moustached face, whose left fin had been half torn off.

A noise had suddenly drawn him from his contemplation. Looking up, he saw her. She had just picked a red rose, and was breathing in its scent through her mask. She lingered there, a few metres from him, for long seconds, before disappearing down a path. On her mask, which seemed turned towards the distance but was facing him, was figured a face with fine features, a small mouth painted cardinal red, and no eyebrows. But what had stayed in his mind, and had been haunting him for two days, was her dress. Her dress! A vaporous dress, of carnation gauze, slit up to mid-

thigh, which revealed at each step her body — a strange body, the memory of which obsessed the Red.

He had never seen a body like that! All the Guardians were men, and the women he came across in the garden-greenhouse or in the House were all elderly and camouflaged in loose clothes that did not let much show. But a young girl, a young girl's body, and clearly visible at that — that was new. The legs revealed by the slit were extraordinarily slender, then they widened, and the whole thing narrowed abruptly at the waist. Mentally going back over, once again, the body of the unknown girl, the Red thought of what was happening beyond the waist: the trunk blossomed out, then the dress opened on a wide slit whose contours made two prominent globes appear. All this passed and re-passed through his mind. He really did not want to think of anything else. He would have liked a painting of it in his room, instead of the pictures of red roses and crimson skies that filled his walls.

*Yesterday I went back to the garden, perhaps ten times, even between two rounds of lenet, and I didn't see her. Will she come back? I should ask the Guardians. But still it's strange, because normally they should have introduced her to me. They always introduce me to the new people in the House. Or perhaps it was someone from the Outside? Who came in by accident? The trouble is, I don't even know her name. Or it was a dream. I've dreamed of her so much these last nights... I'm not sure of anything anymore... perhaps she never existed...*

The Red drew his mother towards the garden-greenhouse. They passed the beds of amaranths and the great hawthorn bushes, as far as the rose paths, which the Red made his mother walk down at a brisk pace. With his eyes, he searched, hoped for the unknown young girl. Several times he thought he glimpsed her, before realising it was only a gardener, a bush, a shadow — a flight of butterflies.

He was incapable of concentrating on what his mother was saying, answered her questions distractedly. Then he could bear it no longer:

“You know, it's funny, the other day there was someone new here, whom the Guardians hadn't introduced to me. She was walking among the rose bushes. Funny, isn't it? I know everyone here, normally...” A silence. “She was a little taller than me, and she was wearing a strange dress, not at all like yours.”

Mina's breathing grew louder, she let a few seconds pass, swallowed, then, in a calm voice, asked:

“Was she pretty?”

“Yes. Well, her mask was pretty. Her lips were painted cardinal red. She also had funny legs, very thin.”

“I was talking about her dress.”

The boy blushed. “Yes, it was a pretty dress, with holes in it. I had never seen a dress like that.”

“Would you like to see her again?” Mina tried to put all the gentleness in the world into her question.

“Yes, that would be interesting. She wasn't like all the people I see here. I wonder if she'll come back today.” And, having said this, he drew his mother into the paths, openly this time, in search of the young girl.

*Yes, it really would be funny if she were here again. With the same dress. Or perhaps even another dress. A dress that's not red, for example, a dress the colour of the sky, or of clouds. If she were here, I could ask her her name. Maybe she knows who I am, and maybe she'd obey me, because I am the Red.*

The Red felt a confused shiver run through him. He imagined himself drawing close to the young girl, brushing the gauze dress, then, without knowing why, he was ashamed, and his pale face turned crayfish-red.

He had to talk to the Guardians about the young girl. After all, he was the Red. And he was so important that this house was specially designed for him. Everyone here was only there to serve him.

*I'm important, but I can't do anything. Wherever I go, there are Guardians watching me. Every moment of my day is settled. I decide nothing, except what move to play in lenet.*

He felt unwell. He pushed away violently his mother's hand, which was reaching for his, and plunged into the rose bushes without paying her any attention. He wanted to do something not dictated to him by a Guardian, something of his own. Pull up a rose bush, take a spade and shatter the panes of the greenhouse, or even strike a Guardian with it, just to see. Or leave the House.

*They say I could die if I went outside, but why should I believe them?*

His mind returned to the young girl. Maybe she lived outside the House? He had to find her again. He was going to ask the Guardians. If she lived on the Outside, perhaps she could take him with her? Or, failing that, tell him what the Outside was. He knew of it only what the Guardians cared to reveal...

He suddenly noticed that he had left his mother alone for some time already. She would soon have to leave, and would not come back before the following week. He went back towards the house, to say goodbye to her. But what was the matter with him? He was overheated, on edge.

*Maybe this is the scarlet era my mother was speaking of in her speech. That too — I need to know more about it.*

“Mother! Before you go, I'd like to ask you... I'd like to talk about the scarlet era, the one I'm about to enter...”

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“...and as his mother was leaving, he questioned her about the scarlet era, and what it meant.”

“Perfect.”

“Then he went off to meditate, and he must be sleeping now.”

“Thank you, Sart, for your report. Would you like a glass of irlican?”

It was not every day that the Ephor invited a young Guardian to share a drink. Sart accepted. The old man stood up, opened a painted wooden cabinet, and poured, from a half-empty bottle, a few centilitres of a thick yellowish liquid into the bottom of two glasses. He held one out to his companion. The two of them began to sip.

“Between us, Sart. More generally. How do you find our Red lately?”

“Everything seems to be going correctly. He won his game of *lenet* by exploiting the flaw arranged by Cigba. The nocturnal suggestion worked as expected, even if it took three nights of whispering to put the idea into his head. There have been faster Reds... The game ended thirty-six hours behind the Calendar — a minor and acceptable delay, it seems to me. We introduced the First Love two days ago, and he seems to be reacting to her appropriately. Disturbed sleep. Anxious behaviour, he seems to want to find her again. He spoke about her to his mother, mentioning her lips, her legs, and her dress.”

“He didn't say anything about her breasts? He needs to take an interest in her breasts.”

“No, he didn't say anything, but he may be thinking about them. We will have to check. To be safe, we can amplify the First Love's neckline slightly for next time, and lengthen her dress to make her legs less visible.”

“Yes, do that, but in moderation. In any case, for some details, there is sometimes nothing to be done. It is already good that he is reacting correctly to the First Love. There have been, in our history, several Reds who showed no interest in women, and our predecessors had to make concessions sometimes embarrassing from a dogmatic point of view. The most important thing, for the next encounter, will be the perfume. Don't forget master Drindolo's rule: ‘perfume is the key to the door of memory...’”

“...it opens and closes it at will.' Yes, of course. The First Love's perfume has been ready for months, the Areopagus's alchemists assured me. We are keeping it outside the House to make sure the Red can in no way smell it before the second encounter.”

The Ephor leaned back in his chair, settled comfortably, then swallowed another mouthful of the golden liqueur.

“So, if I understand you, on the whole, all is well.”

“Yes.”

“And yet, my dear Sart, I sense you are nervous. I am not offering you this drink for the simple pleasure of your conversation. I would like you to relax a little, and tell me what is troubling you. This House can only accomplish its purpose if all of us here work in harmony, in a state of active stasis. You, my dear, lately, are quite far from stasis. I have noticed you fidgeting during meditation. At this very moment you keep squirming, and give me the impression of a poor demented creature.” Sart's face would have seemed impassive to an ordinary person. From a Guardian's point of view, however, it betrayed great nervousness. A slight twitch sometimes animated the left corner of his lips, and his eyelids blinked more frequently than usual.

“It's true, Ephor. I should have come to see you, and opened up to you, on my own initiative.”

“What is the matter?”

“Well, it's not easy to explain, even less to admit, but for some months now, and even more in recent weeks, I have... I have doubts. I have tried to fight against them, but they keep flooding into my mind, despite my efforts.” Then, immediately, with an even more pronounced twitch, he added: “I know these doubts can stand in the way of my mission. I would understand if you decided to demote me or expel me.”

“Obviously your doubts stand in the way, since they trouble you to the point that you have tried to hide them from me for so long, but it is for me to decide whether that justifies a reprimand or an expulsion. Your opinion in the matter counts for little. You well understand that an expulsion would also stand in the way of accomplishing our common mission. The Red knows you now, despite the mask. He knows your voice, your smell, the way you walk, and replacing you with another Sart would seriously disturb his Bundle. You are part of his inner circle! It is likely I should never have brought you into the House, but the mistake is mine, perhaps more than yours. Now, I must decide on the course to take. For that, I need to know more about your doubts. I am listening. Above all, this time, hide nothing from me.”

Sart remained silent for a long moment, then went on, in an embarrassed tone: “I will do my best. You will forgive me if I take the narrative path to confide my doubts to you. I am incapable, at this stage, of laying them out analytically.”

“Go on.”

“When I was a child, like almost all children, and like the common people, I thought of the gods as quasi-human creatures, simply much more powerful, and immortal. I thought that the Same and the Different, the One and the Dyad, the Heavy and the Light, and all the gods, were more or less as the statues of our temples represent them. I thought they lived in the sky, and that our rituals, our prayers, satisfied them, as one can satisfy a parent or a friend. I believed that good pleased the gods and that evil angered them.”

“Yes, of course. I too, as a child, believed that. It is quite natural.”

“And, in adolescence, around the time of entering the seminary, I began to have doubts. This multiplicity of superhuman gods, and yet so human, began to seem suspicious to me. I even, for a few months, thought that perhaps the monotheists were right. That there was only one God, infinitely more powerful than humans, and radically different from them. At the time, that seemed more elegant to me, more logical. And I must admit that I cannot yet completely shake off a feeling of shame when I think back on my ruminations from that period.”

The Ephor made a gesture of smiling helplessness. “Many young people go through that. Generally, it doesn't last more than a few weeks.”

“Yes. It lasted a little longer for me, perhaps because of a certain slowness of mind, or because I didn't dare speak of it to anyone. Already, the same mistakes... Then, like many, it was the study of theology and dialectics, in the second year of the seminary, that saved me. I understood that the gods were not those celestial individuals one could displease, but that they were Universal Ideas, Eternal and Immutable Principles in which one could participate, through Instantiation and Contemplation. And that this was the function of prayers, of meditation, of rituals: to participate in these eternal principles, and thus to become a part of the Divine. I saw the superiority of our properly understood polytheism over the monotheist fables.”

The Ephor nodded, smiling, with a knowing look.

“At the end of the seminary, I started having doubts again. I wouldn't say that I then rediscovered for myself the Sixty-Seven Dilemmas of master Karounoï, but still, some of those problems, in a cruder and more intuitive form, were running through my head. This time, I opened up about it to my masters. They told me that only the Guardians had answers to my questions, and that they would not share such knowledge with mere seminarians destined for the priesthood. As much as the wish to serve the divine order even better, it was the desire to know, to drive out these doubts, that led me to the High School.”

“A more common path than you seem to suppose, my dear Sart!” The Ephor's smile became slightly more marked. Sart wondered if he was making fun of him, before going on.

“At the School, once again, I saw my naive conception — which I thought very learned and profound — collapse. I read Karounoï, and the commentaries of Missak, of Tchernai and of Maboli-Cizart. These books were forbidden in the seminary library, and the only — legal — copies are at the Areopagus and the School. I understood the absurdity of the reification of Principles. I saw that the gods, the Ideas, were so many fictions of immutability in a natural, moving world, where only the Here and the Now exist. I understood that even human individuals die, in a sense, at every fraction of an instant, and survive only indirectly, through the unity of their Bundle of experiences and memories. And I understood what the Guardians do with the Primordials, the five Colours: they create and maintain the only true eternity, the only form of immortality there can be, by ensuring that there always exist, in the Here and the Now, a few individuals, however rare, whose Bundle of experiences and memories is always similar.”

“And that is how you came to our House, one of the some fifty Guardians who toil so that our Red has the same series of experiences and memories as the one hundred and eighty-seven Reds who came before him, and the countless Reds who will follow, into infinity — you yourself replicating a good part of the experiences and memories of the Sarts who come before and after, thus participating in a secondary immortality. What more could you have wished for?”

Sart cleared his throat. “It is precisely on all those points that I now have doubts.”

“I’m listening.”

“I see difficulties everywhere, and I am no longer satisfied with the official answers. This conception now seems to me like a boat leaking on every side, that one tries to bail out, to repair, with no possible success, and into which the water keeps coming in and rising. First of all, I see clearly that our Red has his own experiences, which we cannot control. Even if we managed to govern exactly everything that happens in his field of vision, everything that reaches his sensory organs — which, as you know, is not the case! — the way he reacts would always escape us. The resemblance to past Reds is therefore incomplete, and perhaps even superficial. It exists only for our outer eye, too coarse to penetrate the subtleties of the Reds' inner life, the thousand quivering thoughts that constantly run through them.”

“Of course, Sart, there is no perfect resemblance. There never is. You know full well it is the same in the case of ordinary individual survival. Your Bundle of experiences and memories is continuous, but perpetually shifting. None of your memories remains exactly the same over the course of your life, and yet you survive.”

“That official answer no longer satisfies me. The fact that ordinary survival, too, rests on imperfect resemblances does not console me. After all, perhaps ordinary survival is no survival at all. Perhaps no one ever survives beyond a few seconds.”

“As you know, master Tchernai refuted that hypothesis...”

“... with the linguistic argument. But that argument now seems to me only a clever joke. The semantics of the word ‘survival’ do not matter to me. And then, even so! Even if we managed to achieve perfect resemblance, a true similarity of the Bundle. I have the feeling that we still would not have what we really want. Instead of an immutable eternity, we would simply have a slightly particular changeability, generating local configurations a little more stable. Why grant the slightest importance to that? A river that never overflows its bed still keeps flowing.”

The Ephor smiled at him. Sart felt ridiculous. He had just raised his voice. He had spoken like an exalted adolescent.

“I have the feeling,” he went on, trying to control his voice, “that once again, a conception I thought solid and satisfying turns out to be naive and shaky. Everything we do here is starting to seem meaningless to me. I have nothing to replace this conception with.”

“You would like a better answer? You don't think it would also end up, one day or another, seeming dubious to you?”

“Perhaps. But for the moment that's exactly what I need.”

“You could begin, Sart, by explaining to me what, in your view, would have any importance — if what we do here has none, if this local stability, as you say, is not enough for you.”

“I don't know. A true eternity, perhaps. I'm not sure I know what that would be. Sometimes I tell myself that even something truly eternal would not have any more value for that. Sometimes I fear that nothing can be eternal anyway, or perhaps, on the contrary, that all things are already eternal: that they are so in their very changeability, for it is true, eternally, that they are in time, and changeable, that they appear, then disappear. That every breath, every ray of light, every crackle of a leaf, every silence, is eternal in this way. This last idea makes me joyful, but almost immediately I tell myself that it is perhaps still only a trick my mind is playing on itself.”

“And that would be very serious, wouldn't it?”

Sart remained silent.

The Ephor went on: “Every thing, every moment, every detail, is exactly what it is, and nothing else. The fact that you, Sart, adopt or prefer one or another way of formulating what they are, will change nothing of it — could change nothing. But I fear that your doubts may be more dangerous to our mission than I could have suspected. We will probably have to replace you, although I see no need to hasten my decision. Nor, for that matter, to demote you. Meanwhile, stay here a while, light the coal stove, and pour yourself another glass of irlican — an ephemeral or eternal glass, as you wish. But you won't forget to put the cork back on the bottle.”