

## Chapter 14

“Even though they’re very cunning, trout are really voracious and therefore always ready to bite!” Luigi explained, tinkering with his fishing lines. “If you use flies, worms and scoop properly, you’ll see how often they will bite! I believe that worms are the best type of bait when fishing in streams, whilst flies work very well on the surface of still waters.”

“Therefore you suggest we should use the scoop today, don’t you?” Ernesto asked, doubtfully.

“Of course I do!”

Chiara was comfortably sitting on the veranda with her injured leg on a stool and watched the two brothers’ preparations with great amusement, thinking to herself

“Who’s going to stop dad, now that he’s discovered the stream?”

“We’re ready to go!” Ernesto said walking past his daughter, while his brother was already out with his fishing-rods, lines, and baskets. “Are you sure you’ll be all right? Is there anything you need?”

“I’ll be fine.” The girl reassured him and thought to herself “Thank God, Aigle Noir didn’t tell him that I’d got lost...I cannot think of how much trouble they’d have been in, if they’d known the whole story!”

Then all of a sudden, she felt happily proud for sharing this little secret with him alone. Her eyes followed the two men who walked away, talking lively. “Dad looks a bit younger everyday.” She thought.

“Would you feel better with a pillow behind your back?” Kateri asked her from inside the house.

“No, I’m fine, thank you.” Chiara replied.

“Maman, where’s my bikini?” Valentina enquired, as she was getting ready for the swimming pool.

“I want the life buoy!” Matteo’s voice said.

“You can’t have it, I’m afraid. Babik needs it.” Valentina replied.

“But I can’t swim!” Matteo complained.

“Quiet, guys!” Kateri said, while Chiara, who was trying to sit more comfortably leaning her back against the chaise longue sighed “Poor Kateri, she’s going to have a really hard time today!”

At last, they all went out zealously.

“Take this apple, it’s for you!” Valentina told her.

“If you want, you can read this” Matteo added, laying a little magazine on the stool. Babik was the last one who hesitantly approached her. He opened his hand and let a small, warm smooth stone fall into her lap; Then he laughed and ran away.

“Thank you...”, Chiara said, moved by the child’s unexpected cuteness, but he was already far away, trying to tie his friend Asa to the fence.

“Is there anything I can do for you before leaving?” Kateri asked.

“I’m ok, don’t worry. I’ve got everything I need. There’s no danger that I may fall and break my other leg!” She laughed.

“Maman! Are we going?” Valentina shouted impatiently, standing by the gate.

“Would you like me to tell Jade to come over and spend some time with you?” Kateri asked.

“No, thank you. I’d rather read my book!” and although she would have liked to add “You know that girl can’t stand me, don’t you?!” She just asked “Why, is Jade camping here too?”

“I made her and Mademoiselle Constance come down here...I wanted them to have a few days off too, you know, before the regular classes start again!” Kateri explained.

“And what about Aigle Noir?”

“Well, he’s just like as if he were at home here! He worked in the Park as a guide until last year and he loves horse riding in the first place!”

“Maman! Are you coming or not?!” Valentina complained.

Kateri joined her and the group walked away, down the lane, with the sun rays playing funny light games with their hair.

Voices and steps faded away behind the bushes allowing Chiara to finally try and concentrate on her book. As for Asa, he had been wining in vain for as long as he could, hoping to gain pity from them and was now noisily yawning and stretching before the gate, ready for a nice nap.

Chiara kept trying to get into her book, but the scenes of the previous day were still whirling through her head. She thought about herself, lost in the woods; about Aigle Noir suddenly appearing before her eyes like a mirage and rushing down the slope to rescue her; she also remembered that breathtaking ride in the green tunnel of trees, holding him tight...

She didn’t have to look up from her book, to realize that Aigle Noir was there in front of her again and was staring at her in silence. He climbed over the fence and Asa opened an eye, recognized him, waved his tail to say hello and then fell sound asleep again. With her head in the book, Chiara pretended to be absorbed by it.

“How’s your foot?” Aigle Noir asked.

Chiara looked up and blushed as soon as she met his eyes.

“Much better.” She said hastily. “It just hurts a bit when I try to walk...”

“Fine.”

“The others have gone already...Kateri’s at the swimming pool with the kids, and...”

“I know.”

A heavy silence fell between them and Chiara tried so hard to find something to talk about, thinking to herself “God, if I’m not even able to start a conversation, he’s going to get bored and...I’m sure he’s going to leave!”

“May I sit down?” Aigle Noir asked unexpectedly.

Chiara nodded and Aigle Noir sat on the ground beside her, crossed his legs and stared at her with his big dark eyes.

“Would you like to learn how to ride?”

Chiara shook her head “I don’t think I’d ever be a good horsewoman...” She murmured.

“Don’t you have horses in your country?”

“No...not many. There are many in the Maremma... I’ve never seen any though. I know that there are riding schools, where one can take lessons... Then there are race horses...” She muttered and felt really awkward. The more she talked, the more it occurred to her that Canada was a really boundless country, if compared to her small and bare Italy. Therefore she added hastily

“...But we have beautiful historical towns, full of grand monuments and also lots of warm and sunny beaches!”

“I’d like to see your country, I really would.” Aigle Noir admitted.

“Do you live...alone?”

Aigle Noir shook his head and in his eyes Chiara recognized the dark flame that she already knew so well.

“No, I don’t” he said “But I don’t spend much time with my family, to be honest.”

“Why’s that?”

“This is my real home.” And opening his arms wide, he embraced the trees and the far-away mountains too. “My people were born in the woods.” He said.

“Have you got any brothers or sisters?”

Aigle Noir’s face darkened and Chiara thought “ok now... he’s definitely going away, and forever...”

But she obscurely felt that she had to insist, to help him release the distress that his big eyes sometimes revealed.

“I’ve got two brothers and one younger sister.” Aigle Noir said all of a sudden, with a plain voice.

“And, what do your brothers do?”

“They both work in New York.”

“In New York?”

“They built skyscrapers before. Now they clean the windows.”

“And aren’t you happy with them having good jobs?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Why?”

“Because they are slaves to the whites, who only make them sweat!”

“They don’t earn a good salary, you mean?”

“Not at all, they earn a lot of money actually. However, they spend it all on cars and whisky. Everyday they risk their lives and in spite of this, during bad times my people are always the first to be fired!”

“What would you like them to do?”

“I wish they could live with dignity, like our people used to in the past. Without masters and above all, without imitating the whites.”

Aigle Noir’s face showed rage and despair together. Chiara paused, then in a bold way, said in a low voice “And...what about your sister?”

Aigle Noir made a wry face “My sister’s lost.” He said in a hollow voice.

“Why?!”

“You wouldn’t understand...”

He bent his head on his chest and looked completely isolated.

“What does your sister do?...” Chiara ventured.

“She’s on drugs!” He shouted.

The bitter sound of his voice caused Asa to raise his ears. The dog stood up and looked in their direction and only after making sure that everything was ok, turned round and round on itself and fell asleep again.

“It was thanks to them, to the white people, that she started with that crap. They still sell it to her, you know.”

Aigle Noir went on talking, his voice full of anger “In the past, white people came and took possession of our prairies, our woods, all our resources. They threw us into the Reservations, to live a miserable existence, like bitchy dogs. In the past, you came over here and brought us your disgusting illnesses, that were previously unknown among my people and killed our children and our old people. You blew our people’s brains with alcohol and today...today you’re destroying the rest of us with drugs. When it comes to Native Americans there’s no peace, there’s no justice or anything. Nobody cares for the life of a savage!”

Chiara stared at him in astonishment, without knowing how to curb his rage.

Suddenly Aigle Noir stopped talking and turned pale. Chiara waited a long while before whispering “Drugs exist in our country too...”

“And do the police chase after pushers in Italy? Are these criminals properly punished?!” Aigle Noir asked, with eyes that were flashing with anger; without waiting for an answer, he shouted “Yesterday, my people sentenced to death anyone who had caused anybody else’s death. He, who has no respect for life, only deserves to die.”

Chiara shrugged her shoulders “I’m afraid there’s no way out...” She murmured.

“But I do want to find a way!” Aigle Noir said with dignity “And I’m going to fight for it!”

“What do you do? Do you work or do you study?”

Aigle Noir shook his head “I used to work and I studied as well. With Kateri.”

“And now?”

“And now nothing more!”

He jumped on his feet, reached the fence in a few steps and climbed over it before Asa’s sleepy eyes. Then he raised an arm in greeting without looking at the girl and disappeared behind the cottage.

“Here we are. He’s offended now. I must have said something wrong that hurt him...”

Chiara thought regretfully. “Why did I ask him all those questions? What was I thinking about when I asked him whether he works or studies?! This is none of my business after all...And now he’s gone and I won’t see him again. I’m sure I won’t meet him again.”

And she felt deeply upset.

## Chapter 15

“Maman, look! Brother Novak’s here!” Valentina said, pointing to a big yellow hydroplane that was mooring in the still lake waters.

Kateri brought up her hand to protect her eyes from the sunlight and exclaimed: “Sure! That’s Brother Novak!”

With the elegance of a big-water bird, the seaplane curved and stopped beside the little pier, right next to the boat that was going to take them on a trip to the Montmorency Waterfalls. A minute later, Brother Novak jumped off the hydroplane carrying a big case on his shoulder and as he saw them, he walked over to them, smiling.

“What are you doing here?” Kateri asked him kindly.

“I’ve just brought some medicines. I’m going to the Wood Hospital!” Brother Novak replied.

“We’re heading there too, we’re going to see the Waterfalls!” Kateri said, while Luigi and Ernesto were stacking their complicated fishing equipment in the back of the boat.

“I’ll be back in a minute.” Brother Novak said, walking with his usual big steps towards the public baths, where the terrace was crowded with sunbathing tourists. Matteo was carefully watching the hydroplane that had gently landed onto the water and that was now surrounded by a family of ducks. “It looks even better than the helicopter!”

He exclaimed.

“Are we ready to go?” Luigi said, looking forward to testing a new type of hook, that was supposed to be almost miraculous with iridescent trout and salmons.

“Hang on a second, we’ve got to say bye to Brother Novak!” Kateri said, pointing to the lanky man who was rushing down the lane with his helmet and gloves already on.

“Would anybody like to join me?” Brother Novak asked.

“Me! Take me!” Matteo and Valentina implored, while Chiara, standing next to them, looked at him without a word.

“Ok then, Chiara, who cannot walk well, will go with Brother Novak on the hydroplane together with Matteo. The rest of us will go by boat.” Kateri decided.

“And what about me?!” Valentina asked, offended. Her mother stroke her hair gently and told her very seriously “You’ve been on the hydroplane many times already, while your cousins have never seen it before. Then...there must be a big cake at tea-time, and...”

“All right! All right then!” Valentina said, anticipating the pleasure of the double portion of cake she would certainly receive as a reward for her sacrifice. She quickly got aboard with Babik and Asa, who nervously grinded his teeth at the mere sight of water.

Ernesto anxiously looked at Chiara and Matteo who were walking towards the hydroplane behind brother Novak. He turned to his brother Luigi

“Are they going to be ok on there? It won’t be dangerous, will it?” He asked.

“Dangerous? What are you talking about?” Luigi laughed “It’s a piece of cake to get it going, it just slides on the water surface so smoothly! In winter these hydroplanes work with runners to take people and animals up to the Arctic Lands, you know; they are called *Bush Planes* and graze the ground to look for tracks. Come on now, the trout are waiting for us!”

They all got on board and left the shore exactly when the hydroplane started running fast on the water.

“Are you scared?” Brother Novak asked, turning back to look at Chiara and above all at Matteo, who was clinging to her arm without saying a word.

“No, we’re not.” Chiara answered,

“Y...yes...I am!” Matteo came up, staring with frightened eyes at the water that was rapidly flowing and foaming past the hydroplane’s sides. As they passed by, the tourists on their boats waved their hands joyfully and also Valentina and Babik waved their handkerchiefs, while poor Asa was still barking furiously.

“It’s wonderful.” Chiara stated, listening to the rustling of the waves hitting against the runners. “Isn’t it, Matteo?”

The child nodded, turning back to watch the boat get smaller and smaller. After engraving a wide twirl that left a deep rut in the water, the hydroplane headed for the woods.

“And now we’re going to fly!” Brother Novak exclaimed with his usual broad smile, as soon as the river came within sight. All of a sudden, the hydroplane rumbled under a bridge and took off, as if it were responding to some mysterious command, while Chiara and Matteo stared petrified at the water that was foaming and whirling through the rocks, the thick mass of trees and the velvety green.

“Look, a couple of deer!” Matteo shouted pointing at the two cute animals that started galloping away as soon as they saw the big yellow bird approaching.

“Hold on fast! We’re landing!” Brother Novak announced shortly later offering them another broad smile.

“Are we there already?” Matteo complained.

“What? Didn’t you say you were scared?!” Chiara laughed.

“Well, I did...but now I was getting used to it...” Matteo muttered. Then he suddenly stopped talking and looked astonished.

Brother Novak had started the landing procedure and they saw the trees running towards them, getting bigger and bigger, darker and darker, closer and closer.

“Help!” He shouted, clinging on to Chiara’s sleeve and shutting his eyes, thinking that, sooner or later, they would certainly crush against a tree.

“Don’t be silly! We’re on the lake!” Chiara explained. The hydroplane landed with a head wind on a sheet of quiet water surrounded by cane thickets, right behind a big farm with green-shutters.

“There we are.” Brother Novak said, opening the door and jumping onto the pier. He helped them get off and escorted them to the farm.

“This is the Wood Hospital.” He explained on their way to the building.

“And are the sick carried over here?” Chiara asked, surprised.

“Of course. Animals are treated here.” Brother Novak answered, walking ahead of her and carrying a big box on his shoulder.

“Animals?!” She insisted, without understanding.

The farmyard was crowded with pheasants, partridges and quails. Further on, on the edge of the woods, two ponies were quietly grazing the grass. A slender bearded man who came towards them, wearing a white flapping overall, called out “Brother Novak!”

“Comment ça va?” Brother Novak replied cheerfully. They mutually slapped each other on their backs, then entered the farm together, followed by Matteo and Chiara. The girl could now see what Brother Novak was talking about. The rooms at the front end were used as offices and consulting rooms and were equipped with white small beds, technical appliances and shelves full of surgical instruments; the rooms at the back end were full of marmots, beavers, foxes, and otters. All these animals were either bandaged on their paws, necks or backs.

“It’s a hospital for animals!” She exclaimed.

“Look! There’s a pricket.” Matteo exclaimed.

“He’s lost his mum and now must be weaned.” Brother Novak replied, passing by in a hurry with more boxes, followed by the man in his white overall, who ran after him, talking to him quickly.

Going from one room to the other, where the patients were quietly eating or sleeping, Chiara and Matteo arrived at the end of the corridor and through a large glass, they made out a wonderful red elk that was having a bath in the small lake.

“I really wish I had a camera!” Chiara said enchanted.

“It would be too far away, anyway...” A voice behind their shoulders said.

Chiara turned startled and found Aigle Noir standing right in front of her. She blushed, and murmured

“What...what are you doing here?”

“I am very often around here to help Doctor Steven.” Aigle Noir replied.

Then, in an excited voice, he added “Follow me, I want to show you something!”

He led them to a shut door from where a deafening noise came. He opened the door and they entered a vast room full of aviaries, with birds of all kinds that peeped, chirruped, croaked and fluttered, producing a terrible uproar. All alone, in a big isolated cage, was a golden eagle with a bandaged wing, staring at the bustling birds with haughty eyes.

“Look, that’s what I call being proud!” Aigle Noir said, moving closer to the eagle that threw a disquietingly dark glance at the visitors.

“What’s wrong with it?” Chiara asked, impressed.

“Some poacher must have wounded it, but it’ll be ok in a couple of days. Then I’ll take it back to the mountain tops to allow it to fly freely in the perpetual snow.” Aigle Noir explained, enthusiastic.

Chiara couldn’t help thinking that Aigle Noir and the eagle were very similar.

“Here you are!” Brother Novak exclaimed, approaching them. “Come on, let’s go again!”

“Where are you taking them?” Aigle Noir asked.

“We’re joining the others at the Waterfalls.”

“I’ll take them down there myself, if you don’t mind.”

Brother Novak turned to Chiara

“Would you like to follow him?” He asked.

Chiara noticed that Aigle Noir was staring at her intensely and in his expression she perceived a silent request. Therefore she answered promptly

“Yes. We’re going to follow him.”

“Ok, bye then!” Brother Novak walked away with his long Native American steps. Shortly later, they heard the hydroplane’s humming and Matteo ran outside just in time to see it taking up to the sky and disappearing behind the trees.

“And what about the two of us now?” He asked Chiara, reproachfully

“Follow me.” Aigle Noir said.

He walked ahead of them towards a horse stable, untied one of the animals and skillfully saddled it before Matteo’s impressed eyes. Then he told them:

“Come on, get on the horse.” He put an arm round Matteo’s waist and lifted him up onto the saddle, then he gently helped Chiara pull herself up behind her brother.

“And... what about yourself?...” Chiara hesitated.

“Hold on fast.” He recommended.

The young man pulled on the horse’s bridle to get it out of the stable, then walking under the windows, he informed Doctor Steven that they were about to leave. The doctor replied from one of the offices and the three young people went on across the meadow towards the river. Chiara was holding Matteo in her arms and could feel the child’s heart beating madly.

“It’s nice Matteo, isn’t it?” She said to reassure him.

“I’m looking forward to telling all of this to my silly friend Andrea, who’s always ready to show off just because he rode a donkey once.” The boy said, excited and frightened at the same time.

They rode up the river’s stream, under a green-foliage arcade. Aigle Noir pulled on the horse’s bridle and the animal clattered about softly on the damp grass showing to perfectly know its way.

Suddenly, right behind the bend of the river, the wind carried a powerful rumble towards them.

“The waterfalls.” Aigle Noir said. He made the horse climb up a steep path and follow down a slope, when at last the immense waterfall appeared through a mass of thick bushes. Water fell down from high above and looked iridescent against the light, drops haloed nearby bushes, whilst the rest of the fall rumbled behind the gorges, foaming downhill.

“This is simply great!” Chiara exclaimed.

“It is.” Aigle Noir agreed. “And these are even higher than the Niagara Falls! They are called the Poor Men’s Niagara.”

“Why?”

Aigle Noir shrugged his shoulders scornfully “You know, what is American is always thought to be somehow bigger and more important...”

“Have you ever been to Niagara Falls?”

Aigle Noir shook his head, then pulling the bridle, made the horse get closer to the water, so much so that the wind covered them with waves of fine water dust.

“Do you like this?” He asked Chiara with sparkling eyes, in the middle of the waterfall uproar. The girl nodded, even though she was actually freezing.

Aigle Noir realized this immediately and made the horse move a few steps back into the woods, where the damp grass produced a vague sense of warmth. He didn't however stop there, he didn't stop at all until he found a warm and sunny clearing. Here he lifted Matteo from off the horse and put him down, then he helped Chiara, who clung tightly to his strong arms, whilst being caught by a feeling of immense tenderness.

“You'll be fine here...” Aigle Noir said.

“And how are we going to join the rest of the family now?” Chiara asked timidly.

“They must be down at the *Belle Rivière*.” Aigle Noir answered; “We simply have to cross the clearing, and get down past the trees.”

“I could try and walk...” Chiara attempted.

“No.” Aigle Noir answered peremptorily. “Matteo's going to walk beside me.”

Having said this, he helped her back on the horse and held the bridle again, with little Matteo tripping beside him, shouting joyfully every time he found an insect, a flower, or some animal's lair.

Beyond the clearing, they came in sight of the river again and further downhill, next to a quiet cabin, the *Belle Rivière* stood out, surrounded by trees. There were several wooden steps going down into the water that allowed anglers to apply themselves to their favourite hobby.

“Look, our boat!” Matteo exclaimed, pointing to one of the boats that was berthed to the small pier. He ran ahead and called “Hey, here we are!”

Valentina quickly appeared on the veranda, went down the steps, two at a time, followed as usual by Babik and Asa, all running to meet them;

“Why so late?!” She asked, reproachfully. “We've been waiting for you, we've got to cut the cake!”

As Aigle Noir helped her down, Chiara asked him whispering “You're...you're staying with us, aren't you?”

“I've got so many things to do.” Aigle Noir answered and then jumped back on horseback; but before leaving, he bent over her, and whispered “If you want, I can show you my people's camp someday, I'll take you to Bella Bella.”

“And who's Bella Bella?”

“He's a Chieftain.”

“How far is it from here?”

“It's about two hours.”

“I don't know if I'm allowed to...”

“I'm going to talk to Kateri!” Aigle Noir interrupted her; then he pulled the reins and trotted away, heading soon into the thick woods.

“Chiara, Chiara come and have a piece of cake!” Matteo and Valentina called her impatiently from the stairs.

Chiara, walking towards them, thought to herself “I’m going to see him again...”.

## Chapter 16

“It was very kind of you to bring me here!” Chiara told Kateri, sitting beside her on the red coach that was taking them to the Atlantic.

“It’s my pleasure; I’ve been looking forward to seeing how things are going at Bella Bella’s camp for so long!” The woman answered.

“Is it a Reservation?”

“Not really; it’s rather a small fishermen’s and hunters’ village. The Federal Government tries as much as possible to let these people live in their natural habitat according to their traditions. This is a small tribe that is not very likely to abandon old customs and we just help them survive. But they’re still very poor and in winter they’re all risk starvation.” She stopped talking. She had a frowned expression.

“There are only old people and children left over there... The young have already gone ...”

“Why don’t you try and convince Bella Bella?”

“We’ve tried so many times! But he’s so stubborn in his determination...he says he just wants to live and die the way his ancestors did...”

“It doesn’t make any sense to me, how some people are starving whilst others are living in plenty, just next to them!”

Kateri warmly put an arm around her shoulders;

“You’re such a nice girl.” She said “It would be nice if Valentina became just like you, one day...”

“If mum could hear your words!” Chiara murmured, blushing with satisfaction.

“She finds so many faults in me!”

“Mothers always demand very much of their children and I believe they’re right to. When grand-père taught me to shoot arrows, he always recommended that I should aim higher, if I wanted to hit the target.”

“Can you really shoot arrows?” Chiara marveled.

“Of course I can! And I can also do acrobatic riding, rodeo riding and I’m pretty good at shooting while riding at a full gallop speed too. I can also do many other things that our men can do...Probably because grand-père secretly wished to have a male among his grandchildren!”

“Girls must be really submissive among your people...”

“I wouldn’t call them submissive, actually. There has always been so much to do for the women of my people. You know, in the past every male in my tribe had to overcome so many obstacles in order to win his beloved’s heart and finally marry her! They had to be brave, clever, able to beat their rivals and even be able to steal goods that were to be brought as a dowry.”

“As a dowry?”

“Sure. Young men had to bring something as a dowry for their would-be-fathers-in-law, usually they offered either rich leathers or horses, if they wanted to take their daughters as wives, especially if the girls in question were princesses. Sometimes, the

fur-bearing animals and horses, that a poor young man had been able to catch in the prairies, who then had also to tame, were not enough; and thus he had to steal other animals from some neighbouring tribe, running the risk of being killed.

“And did they go out stealing horses on their own?”

“Of course they did! How could they prove their strength and courage otherwise? Aigle Noir’s great-grandfather, for example, did incredible things for his fiancée, a beautiful Algonkian princess who had several suitors. One night, he even penetrated into the village where the girl’s richest and most relentless suitor lived. This man possessed wonderful full-blooded horses, that he used to sleep with, holding them tight by the reins, for fear of theft. Aigle Noir’s ancestor decided to show his audacity by stealing all horses right from under the owner’s own nose!”

“And how did he manage to do this?”

“He crept in as silently as only a worm would do and came very close to the owner, then he cut the reins with a clean cut, jumped on the most beautiful steed and galloped away, followed by all the other horses.”

“And what about his rival?”

“Obviously he was on foot then. When he finally found a horse, the enemy was too far to be caught.”

“And didn’t he take any revenge?”

“He tried to, but unsuccessfully. You know, Aigle Noir’s great-grandfather was strong and formidable. He was called Brown Bear, as the bear is the wildest yet cleverest animal in the prairie.”

“Did he look like Aigle Noir?”

Kateri smiled “In a way...yes. Also Aigle Noir is brave and generous and ready to sacrifice himself for the things he believes in. But Aigle Noir is definitely fairer and even if he could, he would never laugh at his rivals...”

She stopped talking, and her forehead became furrowed again.

“Do you think he’ll ever come back to school?”

“I hope so...I really do. I hope that Aigle Noir will finally accept the laws of history, that he’ll stop wondering along the paths of a past that will never return, to live his present life with courage. But unfortunately he’ll have to do this on his own; whenever I tried to help him, he rebelled against me. When I tried to explain to him the rules of human evolution, he thought I was trying to make him a slave to the laws of the white and ran away. And yet, all I wanted was to help him climb over the wall of shadows and misunderstanding that keeps our people apart; I just wanted him to help me make our people less unhappy. Aigle Noir doesn’t understand how important my job is when having to count on people of our own race that are able to reconcile the past with the present.”

A thick veil of sadness made her face look older.

“He’s probably thinking about it...” Chiara said slowly “I think he’s starting to understand...”

Kateri cheered “God’s ways are infinite!” She exclaimed joyfully. “Who knows, maybe he has chosen you, a girl from so far, to let some light into his heart!”

“Me?!”

“Of course you, you little one! The first time I have ever seen Aigle Noir show some interest in a girl, has been with you. Never have I ever seen him shiver” Kateri explained thoughtfully; “I don’t really know how to put it, darling...there’s a step, I think it’s in your Othello by Verdi, that explains precisely what Aigle Noir could be feeling for you in this moment. Othello tells Desdemona that she had loved him for his misfortune and he had loved her for her mercy. You know, I believe this is more or less what is happening to him, he’s feeling your compassion and this fact moves him deeply.”

“How many things you know...” Chiara commented, touched by these words.

“It was Luigi who initiated me to reading your great Verdi. He’s got so many records of Verdi’s work... every Sunday the whole house resounds with them and when he shaves, he sings along to the most famous *arias*.

His favourite air is the *Don Carlos*, that goes more or less like this *Dormirò sol nel mio manto regale, quando la mia giornata è giunta a sera; dormirò sol sotto la volta nera, là nella reggia, nell’Escorial...*” Kateri sang imitating a bass- baritone voice, which made people around them stop and look at her, first with some surprise and then with amusement. Then she started laughing heartily and Chiara followed suit.

Later, after crossing a narrow stony road, the coach stopped in front of a wooden bus shelter that had been corroded by bad weather. Kateri said “Here we are!”

They got off, the woman took a look around and added “Aigle Noir will be here in a minute. I’m going to leave you now, I’ll see you at the coach station...Please, don’t be late.”

She crossed the road and walked straight towards an old wooden building with the *bureau* sign on top, while Chiara looked around with some anxiety, wondering “What if he’s not coming?”

The coach was emptying very quickly and all the passengers, equipped with cameras and movie cameras, ran straight to the ocean that glittered in the distance behind bushes and dunes.

In that very instance, she saw him; Aigle Noir was the last one to leave the coach, getting off by the back door.

“What? You were on the coach too?” Chiara asked, whilst thinking “I hope he didn’t hear us talking about him...”

Aigle Noir nodded, then said

“Come on.”

As she was already used to his authoritarian attitude, Chiara followed him without replying and together they made their way to the sea, scrambling over bushes, dunes, and crags. After about two hundred and eighty feet, the violet coloured ocean revealed itself to them, behind a rocky cliff that throughout the years had taken the most bizarre shapes due to winds and erosion.

Aigle Noir cast a glance onto the immense sea expanded before them, then said pointing to the rocks

“Over there is Bella Bella’s village.”

They started walking again along the precipitous stretch of coast, on their way to a huge toothed cliff emerging from the waves. They reached the top of a big dune and

there, Chiara saw it...the village of Bella Bella, a few torn and faded tepees in a circle, with the blackened stakes sticking out from the tops. Every tepee had a small garden in front, sheltered from the sea's winds.

"They must be really poor..." Chiara whispered.

"Yes...they are." Aigle Noir confirmed, with flaming eyes showing the darkest rage. They went down towards the village, walking along desert lanes. As desert and silent as also the tepees seemed to be.

"But...isn't anybody in there?" Chiara asked, looking around surprised. Aigle Noir stopped to listen and by gestures he asked Chiara to stop talking as well. All they could hear was some sort of buzz in the distance, an indistinct voice mixture behind the dunes.

"They're all over there!" Aigle Noir said and started running towards the buzz, followed by Chiara, who found it really hard to keep to his pace. When they reached the top of the rocks, they were faced with something weird; there was an old Amerindian wearing a typical magnificent dress that conferred him an imposing air. He had a large eagle-feather headdress on his head with long ermine tails that extended down towards his chest, framing his copper-looking face. He was standing on a rock, facing the ocean and brandished a tomahawk in one hand, and a long spear in the other, lifting both of them threateningly in the direction of a white and light-blue - holiday cruiser that was moored next to the toothed rock. A few boats, packed with tourists, were pulling away one after the other from the big ship, heading for the beach. At the cliff's feet, a small crowd of Native Americans – all with typical dresses and painted faces – looked at the ship in silence.

"That is Bella Bella." Aigle Noir said in a whisper. Chiara saw how pale and contracted he was.

From the closest boats meanwhile, some tourists were filming and taking pictures of Bella Bella with enthusiast exclamations. The boats stopped moving as soon as they got close enough to the shore, like waiting for something to happen.

Bella Bella quickly lifted his spear and his tomahawk over his head and shouted as loud as he could "

"Allez-vous en! Go away!"

Upon those words, the whole crowd at his feet shouted in unison

"Allez-vous en! Allez-vous en!"

And they all clenched their fists in the tourists' direction.

As the Native Americans' trepidation grew more and more intense, the tourists' cameras became increasingly frenetic.

"Allez-vous en!" Bella Bella shouted on, but this time his voice sounded less firm.

Then, one by one, the boats back-tracked and moved back to the ship, causing a joyful shout to rise from the group of *Redskins*.

Bella Bella, motionless on the rock, looked like an idol, having his silhouette against the sky.

The boats approached the ship and the cruiser passengers went up the stairs and cheerfully crowded the decks.

Bella Bella roused himself from his dream. He slowly let his old arms down and walked down the rock with very slow steps, while the small crowd underneath gradually dispersed and everybody walked back to the village chatting lively. Two young girls walked past Aigle Noir and Chiara and stared at them with smiling eyes showing off their beautiful traditional dresses that were decorated with ribbons and feathers. An old woman followed them and when she saw Aigle Noir, she offered him a toothless smile, telling him something in a language that Chiara could not understand. Everybody went back to their tepees except for Bella Bella who headed for the cliffs.

“Come on, let’s follow him!” Aigle Noir said.

Bella Bella walked at a regular pace with his arms hanging down, strained by the weight of the spear and tomahawk. He climbed up to the top of a cliff and sat down on a big stone facing the sea. Then he stuck the spear into the ground, grasped it with the right hand and leaned his head against it, thus showing his supreme tiredness.

“Is he sleeping?” Chiara whispered

“No. He’s waiting for the tide.”

“Why?”

“In a few hours it will be very high and the ship will leave.” Aigle Noir said, gloomily.

“Why did he send them away?”

Aigle Noir clenched his jaws and rage darkened his eyes again.

“He wants to be considered as a man and not some kind of freak!” He broke out.

“He doesn’t like them to come and take pictures of his poverty and laugh at his people!”

“Where does that ship come from?”

“From San Francisco. The first time it showed up around here and Bella Bella lifted his tomahawk, the passengers had been frightened and Canada came really close to having a diplomatic incident with the United States. Then, however, Bella Bella became a sort of attraction, as someone realized that tourists were actually fascinated by the idea of a *Redskin* threatening them to death from the top of a cliff, without actually running any actual risk. So it turned out to be like a bargain. Now, all cruisers stop here for some time and pretend to disembark passengers...Bella Bella shouts them away and they go back home telling friends about a *Redskin* trying to kill them with a tomahawk.”

Rage made his voice tremble.

“And why does nobody explains this to Bella Bella?”

“What for? To make him feel like a laughing-stock in the hands of white people? No way. It would kill him!” Aigle Noir exclaimed and added vehemently “Come on, let’s go away from this place!”

As they were walking away, Chiara turned back and saw that Bella Bell was still standing there, grasping the spear with a hand and leaning his head on his chest.

“And if...if he already knew about it?” She said timidly.

“What he certainly knows is that he’s vanquished, like all his people.”

Aigle Noir responded and took her by the hand pulling her vigorously away. Chiara followed him, walking unsteadily through the stones. Aigle Noir suddenly turned to look at her, realized that she was exhausted and stopped; then she took her hands, held them tight, and whispered "Forgive me."

Quickly he swept away the sand from a big stone and gently made her sit down on it. And when he spoke again, his voice sounded calm and sad.

"Bella Bella's life's tough. Fishing is his people's only resource. In winter, the few men of the village go hunting. Bella Bella's specialty when he was strong enough was the red-fox hunting. You can't imagine how tough it is to catch a red fox! Once, Bella Bella covered bait with coloured feathers...it was perfect, from a distance it looked like a fat pecking partridge! And the red fox fell for it!"

"Poor animal..."

"Bella Bella has never killed for fun. Only out of necessity. What you see around here right now is grass, plants, meadows and leaves, but when the winter comes, everything will be covered with snow. In order to defeat starvation, they will have to follow long inland tracks and place traps in the snow. Then at night, they will find nothing but wet wood to light a fire inside some natural holes. There is nothing but roughly roasted meat to eat..."

"Have you ever been hunting?" she asked.

"A few times. I hunted furry animals that Bella Bella would then swap for flour, sugar and clothes in spring...When someone is able to catch an elk, Bella Bella sighs with relief, because this means plenty of food for many days. However, elks are sacred animals and they can only be hunted when people in the tribe are starving. The elk is sacred because it is the image of the Great Spirit. Once, Bella Bella was out hunting all alone in the mountains, when he was suddenly attacked and chased by a superb elk; of course, Bella Bella tried to run away, but the elk kept running after him and the faster he ran, the more excited the elk became. Bella Bella climbed a tree, but the elk looked up to him and stood there, waiting for him to climb down. They both remained there all night!"

"And what did Bella Bella do then? Did he kill the elk?"

"Bella Bella remained up the tree until the following morning, together with other hunters, Black Wolf and his son found him and chased the elk away."

"And did nobody make fun of him?"

"Why should have they done so? Since then, his people have thought even higher of Bella Bella because he respected the elk. Bella Bella only kills out of necessity!"

"And now he's so old...what does he live on?"

"He knows he's not going to live much longer." Aigle Noir said solemnly.

"OK, but the others, children especially...they have a right to a better life." Chiara insisted.

Aigle Noir's face was as dark as a thunderstorm.

"What kind of life should they expect to have?" He broke out in rage "A life with alcohol, drugs, delinquency and no dignity at all?!"

But Chiara didn't give up "Not far from here there's a school, there's modern civilization, there's someone trying to defeat all those terrible diseases and to foster culture..."

Aigle Noir shook his head doubtfully.

"My grand-father also still lives in the old farm where he was born!" Chiara went on stubbornly, "But now his place is fit up with electricity and running water, with a fridge, a telephone and even a TV set! He always says he still wants to be a farmer, but in his small garden he's experimenting with new strawberry varieties that give fruits in every season. You know, I find this a balanced attitude... acceptance of positive progress, that is the side of progress that is able to improve people's lives, reducing their strain and setting them free from necessity!"

She stopped talking, impressed by her own vehemence and looked at Aigle Noir's face with anxiety. The young man was now in silence and looked down. He stood still for a long time, then sighed

"Let's go now, Kateri must be waiting for us."

He helped her up and took her by the hand again. Together they crossed the village, that was now swarming with life in and out of the tepees. Passing by one of these, they noticed an old toothless woman sitting on the ground, surrounded by bowls full of ribbons and beads. She was smoking a pipe and skillfully threaded the beads in a necklace. Aigle Noir bent down and spoke to her. Although the woman nodded, she didn't distract herself from the work.

"I've just asked her to make an amulet... for you." Aigle Noir said, with an almost broken voice "When are you leaving?"

"In two or three days I think, it depends on the availability of seats on our flight."

Chiara answered. A sudden pang in her heart made her realize how sorry she was about leaving that place.