

Chapter 7

“I feel full and satisfied!” Brother Novak exclaimed, patting his stomach with his hand and leaning against the back of the bench.

“I see you are!” Grand-père replied, pleased with his guest’s satisfaction.

Chiara had eaten up the tasty grilled *fish flambé* too and was as “full and satisfied” as Brother Novak, while Valentina was still eating her stewed apples.

Outside, the dark night hung over the gloomy-tree shadows.

“And now, to keep the cheerful mood, we really want to listen to some nice story.” Grand-père said, walking to the fireplace that needed poking up.

“Oh yes, a beautiful story is exactly what we need!” Brother Novak confirmed, smiling like a wolf.

Grand-mère went from one side to the other through the wall mat, as silent as a cat. Then she appeared and looked above, she shook her head and mumbled something, then disappeared behind the mat soon afterwards.

“You see? This is what a woman should be like: silent and careful, always ready to have guests over for dinner.” Brother Novak remarked, stretching vigorously before the fire “Then you can eat with friends, sing all together, tell beautiful stories and be happy!”

“Sure”, grand-père replied seriously. He was now comfortably sitting on the old swing-chair by the fire, after having filled his pipe and was now smoking peacefully puffing smoke circles in the air, with his bold head shining in the fire light.

Kateri came in carrying an armful of firewood. Red flames blazed up, spreading around, a strong resin smell.

“And this is what life should be like: good and simple.” Brother Novak repeated, stretching his skinny legs again with great pleasure.

“Tell us about yourself travelling north with your father!” Kateri encouraged him, in order to come straight to the point without his long preambles; then she took place on the bench beside him.

“Well, the north...what about it...the big, harsh and terrible north!” Brother Novak sighed with dreaming eyes.

“Come on, tell us about it!” Kateri insisted.

“Northern women have got plenty of things to do!” Brother Novak went on, tergiversating again “They have to look after their children – whom they constantly carry on their backs, safe and warm inside the soft furry amauts; they have to cook for their men and dogs; they have to keep the fire high and the light on; they have to sew bearskin clothes...sure, a bear’s skin! The bear, the big king of the big north! Bears are supposed to be stupid and cruelly wild, but they’re not; bears are not stupid and they’re not ferocious at all! I’m a man and I admit I behaved very stupidly and ferociously before a bear!”

“Why?”

“Come on, tell us why!”

Brother Novak, who had done and said all that he could to excite their curiosity, at last started to tell his story.

“I was still a young boy when my father, the strong Brown Elk, decided to take me with him to the North, to introduce me to the king of the Antarctica. We left when the long day started. It was a holiday and all the hunters were down at the village to drink and eat by the fires, while some Innuits were performing a propitiatory dance to the sound of drums. They told stories about hunting and about adventures on the ice caps; they bet and challenged one another for fun to fight competitions. It was very late when my father, who’d probably drunk too much, stood up and staggered outside. I walked after him, but we found it very difficult to proceed, due to the strong whipping wind. It was late at night, even though the horizon shone brightly. The few lichens, the reindeers behind the tepees and even the dogs, that were dozing beside the sledges, looked like ghosts. We groped our way down to our tepee and as the lights in the village went off one by one, I heard mysterious sighs rising from the bushes and felt my legs tremble with fear. We climbed over some snow hillocks and faced the fury of the wind along the entire icy route, to our tepee. It was right then, that something very tall and dark appeared out of nothing and moved towards us.

I couldn’t see much because of the sleet that the wind was throwing into my eyes, but I thought that a mountain or something similar was about to fall right on me...”

Brother Novak then held a strategic break, to make sure that he had grasped everyone’s attention; the kids were holding their breath with excitement, grand-père puffed like a steam locomotive and even grand-mère stood as still as a statue beside the table.

“And what happened then?” Kateri pressed him, with sparkling eyes.

“Impulsively, I grabbed the knife that I used to take with me, while my father, who had suddenly stopped, shouted with a thundering voice “Who’s there!” whilst shouldered his rifle; what a brave man, my father...not even the Great Spirit could have frightened him!”. Brother Novak continued. “Anyway, no answer came from the Big Shadow, that had now stopped right before us and seemed to be petrified. Probably encouraged by this strange and sudden silence, my father moved a few steps forward. I walked behind him, clinging to him like a leech. In this very moment, the big shadow moved...parting into two...two gigantic things that turned away and started running northwards! “They must be the two spirits, two evil spirits raised by the *Augakoks*’ magic dance!” I thought to myself, as my father shot all his bullets to hit the two giants shouting “I won’t miss you!”

He actually hit one of the two shadows, that emitted a frightful grunt and soon slowed down. The other shadow slowed down too, got close to the injured one, hugged it, picked it up and guided it away. They disappeared together behind the rocks, leaving us in a state of deep agitation.

The wind had taken the echo of my father’s shots down to the village and some Innuits came running to see what was going on. My father told them all the details of our mysterious encounter and was really astonished and disappointed when he saw them laughing their heads off. He got so angry that he came close to smashing their

faces, when the oldest among them stopped laughing and with eyes that still watered, explained “Your shadows are actually two bears.” “Two bears? And what are you laughing about?!” My father said with rage “Running into two bears at night is nothing to laugh about, I believe!” “Well, it would have been bad enough...” The old man replied seriously “If...if you had bumped into two normal bears. But these two are special ones!” “What the hell are you talking about?!” My father burst out again, grabbing him by his furry coat and shaking him like a plastic bag “or do you want me to smash your face first?” “The elder bear is blind and the younger one has been looking after him for a very long time .”

The Inuk finally explained “He walks him around and leads him down to the village, where people always leave some food for them...nobody would ever try to kill them here!” The old man said seriously and my father started to scratch his head thoughtfully. Two bears, you know? The younger one helped the other because it was blind. It was blind and its companion guided it around. My father had just injured the poor old and ill bear.

Brother Novak had stopped talking and in that heavy silence, he stared at the trembling flames that were surrounded by slowly melting braces.

Kateri roused herself, she stood up and brought in some more wood. Nobody was talking yet and Asa was sound asleep in front of the fireplace.

“Animals’ mutual sympathy is extraordinarily moving. Believe me, they certainly know what solidarity is!” Brother Novak declared.

“Sure, they really do.” Grand-père agreed, rocking himself in his chair “ I experienced it myself when, as a young boy, I went with the fishermen out to sea in Newfoundland. Whales arrived in crowds and placed themselves where the stream brought down shoals of fish. Then, at their leader’s signal, they arranged themselves in a circle, dived and fished one after the other, like timing their movements to the rhythm of invisible drums; one first, then another one and so on and on. They fished in regular sequence, can you imagine? They took turns! If one of the oldest whales was too slow, the one who was supposed to follow would wait respectfully, as all of them had the right to have their meal...all of them!”

He stopped talking, and his eyes sparkled.

“And I’ll tell you more” Kateri added “ In a school of whales there is always a spinster, that is a female whose task is to look after the babies right from birth.”

“And what is this female expected to do?” Valentina asked, listening eagerly from the floor, where she was sitting with Babik and Matteo.

“You know, when an adult female is about to give birth” Kateri explained “the *spinster* takes her where the seabed is safe enough and helps her through the bearing. Then, as soon as the offspring has been born, the spinster takes it up to the surface of the water...”

“And why, maman? Why does the spinster take it to the surface?” Valentina asked.

“She takes it up to make it breath for the first time...”

Grand-mère, meanwhile, had gone to the door and looked out in silence.

“It’s late.” Brother Novak said.

“Yeah, late.” Grand-père agreed.

They were all silent and thoughtful again for a while, until Brother Novak stood up with a smile, walked to the door and went out.

Grand-père, who had followed him, lingered long to watch the sky and looked somehow worried. When he walked back to the fireplace, grand-mère pulled the heavy oak door with strength, shut it firmly and bolted all the windows. Kateri arranged some sleeping bags by the fire and Babik and Valentina soon slipped inside with great enthusiasm.

“Shall we get in there too?” Matteo asked Chiara.

“Sure, what’s the matter with it?” His sister murmured “ We’ve slept in a sleeping bag already...you remember, don’t you? When aunt Paola took us to the mountains with her? Look at Valentina and Babik, they are warm aren’t they?” She tried to reassure him.

Matteo slipped into one of the sleeping bags beside Babik “It’s hard!” He protested.

“No, it’s not. Is it, Babik?” Valentina replied. Babik’s head nodded.

Kateri went to them, sat on the floor and asked “Would you like to pray to the Lord with me for a quiet night?”

“I always say *The Guardian Angel* prayer before sleeping...” Matteo murmured.

“How nice, why don’t you teach it to Babik and Valentina?!” Kateri encouraged him with a smile.

“Please, please I want to learn it!” The girl said.

Matteo sat up and started reciting his prayer with a solemn air, waiting until Valentina and Babik had repeated every single word. Meanwhile, Kateri gathered Valentina’s hair into a plait.

“Everything ok?” She asked

“Everything’s fine”.

“Good night then...”

“Good night.”

Chiara slipped into her sleeping bag and noticed that it was neither uncomfortable nor hard as she thought it would be, while Kateri disappeared behind the wall mat and switched off the light.

On the other side of the fireplace, the children were now chatting quietly. At once there was a soft rustle and Babik whizzed across the room and reached the cupboard, then he rushed back to his bed with an apple in each hand. Valentina replied with her usual excited chuckling and plotting. After a few minutes, Babik slipped out of his bed again, crossed the room and came back with two more apples. This time there was no reaction and Chiara smiled to herself.

The flame was getting weaker and weaker and now projected long trembling shadows onto the walls.

“How far we are from Italy...” Chiara thought, listening to the nocturnal silence that was wrapping the huge and unknown country in deep darkness. She felt bewildered, as her mind ran to her home, her country and her mother. She closed her eyes smiling and tried to sleep. But soon she was caught by the sharp image of Aigle Noir, with his pale face and proud eyes.

“I wonder where he is now...” She thought sadly “Will he have some place to sleep?”

She waited long before she could get to sleep, while out in the woods it was darker and darker.

Chapter 8

Chiara had fallen asleep and now she was dreaming of a tiring walk across a dark and desert barren land surrounded by high cliffs, where a powerful wind almost tore off her clothes. Although she wanted to run away, she found herself unable to move, her feet felt stuck in the icy snow; she also wanted to shout for help, but no sound came out of her throat.

Chiara managed to wriggle out of this nightmare with a loud cry which made her open her eyes “Where am I ?” She worried, trying to make out the details of the dark room. But it was all so terribly black...also the fire was off now. She reached out a hand and feeling the cold floor texture she sighed with relief “It was just a dream!”

She lay there without moving, listening to the soft whistling wind that hit the tree foliage. A more violent gust frightened Matteo, whose trembling voice rose from the opposite side of the fireplace

“Chiara...Chiara!”

“What’s wrong?” She answered.

As it occurred to him that also his sister was awake, the child started crying.

“I want mum! I want my mum!”

“Come on, darling...don’t be silly; sleep now. It’s still dark out there, you see? Good night now...” Chiara tried to comfort him.

But Matteo’s sobs increased “I...I can’t sleep, I...I’m scared!”

“You shut up now, or you’ll wake everybody!” Chiara said. “I’m going to sleep with you, ok?”

She stood up, and tried to reach the opposite side of the fireplace stumbling over the sleeping bags. Then, short of breath, she whispered “Matteo, where are you?”

“I’m here...” The small voice replied

“Here you are, take my hand and lie down.” Chiara tenderly consoled him. “Don’t be scared. I’m close to you now. Come on now, lie down and get some sleep.”

She gently brushed his forehead and let his hand down. Matteo gradually calmed down and fell asleep, while Chiara lay motionless on the floor, listening to his regular breath with her soul full of nostalgic thoughts.

“Where will mum be now...who knows...I wish I were on the beach with her, I wish I could bask in the sun, dive in the sea, play volley behind the huts with Francesca, Bruna and Mimmo and ride my bike along the seafront with my friends...will it be night or day over there now? Who knows...”

She was still listening with great attention, her arms around her knees and a sense of coldness in her heart.

“Why did dad want to take us over here with him?!” She thought bitterly. “He could have come on his own! What are we supposed to be doing here? We’re completely

useless in this place. Since he met uncle Luigi at the airport, he's got rid of us like bulky luggage!"

The wind was now blowing in occasional noisy gusts and in-between one could easily hear the river's foaming voice roar against the rocks. "I wish I were at home, in my beautiful white-painted room and in my warm and comfortable bed!"

She slowly released her hand from Matteo's hold, stood up in the dark and reached her sleeping bag. She slipped inside, numb with cold and tucked up her legs like she used to do as a child, whenever she felt sad or cold. The warmth made her feel better and she fell sound asleep.

Shortly later, however, she was woken again by a violent bang. She sat up, frightened; a faint light came from the wall mat and she saw grand-mère's huge shadow standing out on the wall. Outside, the house creaked and groaned under the sharp wind gusts and sounded as if a huge hand were shaking it up, ready to crush it and blow its pieces around in the woods. The violet light of a thunderbolt filtered through the window cracks and Chiara put her hands on her ears waiting for the thunder to clap. This happened after a while with a horrible uproar, and was immediately followed by hail cascading on the roof and against the walls.

"It's hailing!"

It all turned quickly into a furious storm that whipped the house, the clearing and the woods, making the river roar and causing the lake waters to dangerously stir up. Behind the wall mat, grand-mère raised her arms and started whispering a kind of unintelligible litany.

The kids had been woken by the thunder and now Valentina's trembling voice was calling in the shadow "Maman..."

The air was cold and an icy wind filtered through the bottom of the door like a wild beast, threateningly spitting its icy breath.

Grand-mère raised her praying arms at the pelting hail, whilst grand-père's potbellied shadow appeared and crouched down on the floor next to the his wife. He stayed there motionless like a fat Buddha.

There was a further, yet much closer lightening, followed by a piercing thunder that made the kids start in fear; their tiny frantic faces appeared in a quick flash in the violet light that violently lit up against the wall.

"Maman!" Valentina shouted.

Kateri came in silence, carrying an electric torch. She walked towards the children and said quietly "It's just a thunderstorm. It will soon be over."

"I'm so cold..." Valentina cried.

The thunder clap was followed by silence, which allowed all of them to hear a sudden choked whimpering and the subsequent furious scratching at the door.

"Maman!" Valentina cried holding her mother in fear.

"Don't be scared, it's just Asa." She reassured the girl.

"Let him in, please!" The girl implored.

"No, darling...I really can't do it. It would be very dangerous to open the door now. But don't worry, I'm sure he will find shelter in the woodshed or under the roofing."

She stood up and disappeared across the wall mat, but reappeared shortly later with a couple of traditional blankets. She carefully wrapped a blanket round each kid, then recommended

“And now you get down, warm and safe, and get some sleep!”

She went to Chiara and wrapped a blanket round her shoulders too. The three kids were now plotting together, shouting after every thunder clap.

Kateri sat on the floor beside Chiara with her own blanket round her shoulders, rested her back on the wall, and said

“I would say they are more amused than scared!”

“How long do you think it’s going to last?” Chiara asked.

“Pretty long, I believe. It’s like a blizzard. The blizzard usually comes in the middle of the winter, triggering off snowstorms...” She shook her head.

“This time it has brought just a hailstorm!”

“Do you think it’s going to do great damage?”

“It definitely is, I’m afraid. When it happens in autumn, it causes the temperature to go down dramatically and the river to rise. It uproots trees and posts, it’s a true calamity.”

“Has the power gone? Is this house going to be able to stand it?”

“Of course it is! Grand-père built it with his own hands, it’s made of solid oak wood...the wind will never have a chance with it!”

They were both silent now, listening to the noise of the storm that was now tormenting the forest. A metallic object suddenly bounced off the door, before rolling further down.

“This must be grand-père’s steel sheet. Kateri said. “ You see, the wind is a great street-sweeper!”

It had almost stopped hailing and the rain poured down thunderously on the roof.

“What’s she doing?” Chiara asked pointing at grand-mère, who was still kneeling down behind the wall mat.

“She is praying to the Great Spirit. Grand-mère knew that the blizzard would come; this is why she had already shut all the doors and windows.”

“Will Aigle Noir have found shelter...who knows?” Chiara murmured.

“Aigle Noir?”

“Yes. Well, I met him by the river.”

“Did he talk to you?”

“He did! And in Italian, unbelievable!”

“I know...I taught him some Italian...”

“He...he rebuked me because I was running on the bridge.” Chiara added, knitting her eyebrows at the mere recollection of it.

“Kateri laughed “He’s very intransigent, both with himself and with others!”

“Why did he stop coming to your school?”

Before answering, Kateri drew her blanket around her shoulders, feeling suddenly very cold. Then she replied hesitantly “At the beginning, he was really eager for knowledge and for learning. Then, as he learned about the true history of our people, he felt betrayed. Something exploded in his soul...”

She stopped talking and Chiara held a long pause before asking

“Has he got no family at all?”

“He’s still got his father...a poor old alcoholic. Then he’s got two elder brothers and one sister who’s a bit younger than him...”

“What do his brothers do?”

“They both work in New York for a big cleaning company. They clean skyscrapers.”

“Skyscrapers?”

“Exactly. Iroquoian people do not suffer from acrophobia!” Kateri replied proudly.

“And what about his sister?”

“She left school after completing primary school and now is lazing about...she goes regularly to the pub, hangs around with bad people and apparently is on drugs...”

Kateri’s tone was now certain.

“Where can he be now?” Chiara muttered.

“Who?”

“Aigle Noir...”

“In some shelter, possibly in the woods...”

“How can he move about so quickly?”

“He knows everybody around here and everybody knows him. He can come and go asking drivers for a lift.”

“And what if he hadn’t found anyone this time?”

“In this case I’m sure he’s found shelter in some hunter’s hut or in some cave. He knows these locations perfectly well...he’s a creature of the woods!”

“I really hope he will come back to your school someday.” Chiara said.

“I hope so too.”

Upon these words, Kateri turned on the torch and after arranging the blanket round Chiara’s shoulders, like a mother would do, she added “Sleep now, darling. The hurricane is moving southwards and tomorrow the sun’s going to shine again.”

She moved a few quick steps away and disappeared.

Grand-mère and grand-père had disappeared behind the mat too and the house was dark again.

The rainstorm had now moved downhill and thunders now roared in the distance; A flock of wild birds flew past, grazing against the house and squeaking, but their calls soon dissolved in the forest. Chiara closed her eyes and let the cozy warmth of the apple- and-sage-smelling blanket pervade her. “The sun will shine again, tomorrow...” She thought with relief.

The kids were sound asleep and Asa was no longer whimpering.

“Aigle Noir must have found some good shelter...” Chiara thought and fell asleep.

Whilst everybody was sleeping, however, the lake’s swollen waters rose and gradually flooded the shores and the clearing, flowing close to the houses that surrounded the forest.

Thank God, grand-père’s house was built on piles. It remained undamaged, high and alert in the darkness, like a big brooding hen protecting her chicks under her safe wings.

Only Asa, who'd found shelter in the rubbish, under a steel sheet, realized about the flooding and grinded his disgusted teeth. Then, having understood that his little isle seemed safe from water, he calmed down, turned around and fell asleep, protected by his warm and comfortable fur.

Chapter 9

Disturbed by the noise of nervous steps and voices, Chiara opened her eyes and took a look around; the sun was already high and shining outside the door and she noticed some strange glittering, like an aquarium, reflecting on the ceiling.

“Chiara, Chiara! Come and look....the lake has flown up here!” Matteo shouted, running towards her in excitement, followed by Valentina and Babik who, like Matteo, were all wrapped up in furry coats.

“What do you mean by up here?!” Chiara asked, wrapping a blanket round her neck and walking to the door.

“Sure, because of the flooding!” Valentina explained, following her in excitement. On the door, Chiara was left gasping, as she saw that the clearing before the house had turned into a mirror of water, extending to the borders. The trunk-less trees looked like headless dwarves and the distant cottages were now like walnut shells.

“And now!? How are we going to leave this place now!?” The girl wondered, whilst noticing that Kateri’s big car was completely under water.

Looking in the same direction, Valentina remarked,

“Wow, maman’s car’s taking a bath!”

Babik, standing beside them, craned his neck and shouted

“Asa!”

Standing upright on his isle made of trembling steel sheets, Asa looked at them with imploring eyes. Shivering and numb with cold, when he heard Babik’s voice, he started whimpering.

“Asa, come on!” Babik called him.

The dog wagged his tail, moaned and stared at the muddy water for a while, but didn’t move.

“Come on Asa, come here!” Valentina and Matteo shouted too. But it was all in vain, as the dog kept staring at the cold water, grinding its teeth and not moving.

“How are we going to drive back to our dad’s?” Matteo asked, dismayed at the sight of the muddy expanse that rippled around the house.

“The forest rangers’ helicopter will be here in a few minutes.” They heard Kateri’s voice say.

Chiara turned and noticed that the woman’s coat was similar to the one that the children were wearing and that now she was busy preparing the table with mugs of hot milk and some large baked-bread slices.

“The helicopter?” Chiara marveled.

“Of course. Brother Novak has already called the forest rangers.” Kateri explained “Come darling, get dressed like the children...it’s getting pretty cold.”

She crossed the mat and came back bringing one more coat “Put it on...it’ll keep you warm enough.”

Chiara obeyed; it was a furry raincoat and was decorated with beautiful leather inlays. She liked it and while furtively admired herself in the small mirror over the fireplace, she murmured “I look like a Native American girl...”

Meanwhile, the three children were still standing on the doorstep and continued to call “Asa! Come on Asa, come here!”

The dog turned round and round on his tiny isle that was gradually collapsing. Suddenly, probably encouraged by the children’s calls, he plucked up courage and dived into the water, swam towards them with his eyes closed, and finally “landed” by the door, wet and numb with cold. The children laboriously pulled him out of the water and managed to lift him up. As soon as he felt the ground beneath his feet, the cute dog coughed, sneezed, wagged its tail and... shook itself vigorously, washing everybody down and raising a chorus of loud complaints.

It didn’t bother about the protests and went on shaking mud and water off its body, until its thick fur had regained its original foamy volume.

Then Asa moved next to the fire, stretched on the floor and looked at everybody as if he were about to say “You were comfortably sitting right here when I was freezing out there, weren’t you?”

Later, as Chiara and the children sat down for their meal, the dog walked towards the table, keeping its massive body not too far from the fire warmth. Grand-mère offered it a big pot full of milk and bread and for several minutes, they heard nothing but its voracious lapping.

Shortly later, their attention was caught by a noisy swash behind the door, followed by the arrival of grand-père . The little man was sitting...on his canoe! He spent some time anchoring the light boat beside the door, then walked in the house, with flushing cheeks and high waders on his feet.

“Everything’s ok; the helicopter will land on the platform, behind the shipyard.” He told Kateri with great satisfaction and she nodded, while Matteo looked at his sister in astonishment

“Will we be going on it too?!”He muttered.

“Of course, It will be great fun, believe me!” Chiara tried to reassure him, although her voice was rather trembling.

“You won’t be scared to go on a helicopter, will you?” Valentina teased him, casting him a mischievous glance “You’ll be an astronaut when you grow up, won’t you?”

Matteo gulped down his mouthful and replied, with all the dignity he could gather “I’m not at all scared!”

In that very moment, they heard a buzz in the distance and realized that it was the noise of whirling rotors that were rapidly approaching. Babik and Valentina ran to the door and shouted “The helicopter, the helicopter!”

Also Matteo slowly got up.

A big yellow Forest Ranger’s helicopter had appeared in the clear sky and was pointing straight down to the clearing. It was coming down at an incredibly rapid pace with the big whirling rotors shaking the lake’s waters, but soon it disappeared behind the trees.

“Has it crashed in the lake?” Matteo asked, shocked.

“What are you talking about! It’s just landed on the platform!” Valentina teased him. “Come on guys, follow grand-père!” Kateri commanded “Chiara and I will join you later and will bring Asa with us.” Matteo turned to his sister with imploring eyes and cried “Please, I want to stay here with you...”

“Wouldn’t you really like to fly with that big helicopter with Valentina and Babik?” Kateri came up sweetly.

“I...I don’t know.” Matteo sighed.

“It will be fun, believe me!” Valentina said, taking him by the hand. “The first time I was really frightened too. Then, however, when I found myself high in the sky, and saw the world below...I enjoyed it so much!”

“All right then.” Matteo had been convinced.

“Quick, quick!” Grand-père shouted, clapping his hands. He was sitting in his sparkling canoe, ready to go and eager to paddle away. Kateri lead the children and cautiously passed them on to her father, one by one. After placing them in the back seats of the boat, he slipped the mooring lines and head towards the lake, paddling slowly among the submerged bushes and tree foliage. From the back of the boat, that was still full of wood chips, Matteo’s big eyes watched the big bushes pass by. With his hands clinging to the sides of the boat, he wasn’t sure whether to cry or laugh, while Valentina and Babik let out little cries whenever grand-père bluntly veered to avoid obstacles, or made them bend their heads to pass under tree foliage.

Asa was still on the doorstep and watched the canoe go away with a puzzled expression which seemed to mean “You don’t want me to dive again, do you?! Remember I’m a snow dog, not a seal!”

“Asa!” Babik waved his hand, greeting the dog from afar.

Asa shivered and almost dived in again.

“Hold him by the collar!” Kateri said to Chiara, as she realized that the dog was really agitated, now that the canoe had disappeared behind the little pier.

Shorty afterwards, they heard the helicopter buzz again, as it climbed slowly again in the quiet sky and Chiara saw it emerge from the massive tree foliage, flying higher and higher with its whirling rotors, moving rapidly around the clearing and finally pointing straight southwards, while the kids’ tiny faces became more and more blurred.

“Hopefully Matteo won’t feel sick...” She thought maternally.

As usual, Kateri guessed the girl’s feelings, and said “There’s no danger, don’t worry. It’s a very short flight!”

Chiara nodded and walked back in the house with the woman. Together, they waited for the helicopter to come back, while grand-mère was cleaning the room scrupulously and in silence.

Some time later, the buzz was to be heard again behind the trees. It gradually rose and turned into a loud noise as soon as the big yellow locust reappeared.

“So soon?” Chiara said, turning pale.

“Our house is not too far as the crow flies...” Kateri remarked.

In that very moment, grand-mère, who had been busy poking the flame, walked straight to Chiara and staring at the girl with her deep dark eyes, suddenly said in Italian “The Great Spirit is everywhere. The Great Spirit will protect you!”

Chiara, feeling admiration and affection for the wrinkled old woman, kindly replied “Thank you grand-mère!”.

Grand-père was already waiting by the door with his canoe and Kateri said goodbye to the old woman, who saw them out without a word, simply watching them while they went on board. Then she lifted Asa, as if he were as light as a feather and placed him on the canoe, while the reluctant dog snarled and grinded his teeth. They left immediately afterwards, pointing straight to the pier. Chiara started at every gust of wind and every time a leafy branch grazed her face, whilst Kateri tried to keep the nervously snarling dog down in the back of the boat.

Grand-mère was still standing on the doorstep, with a hand on her forehead to protect her eyes from the bright light, whilst she watched the boat float away and disappear from her sight. She bent down, dipped a hand in the water and rubbed her wrinkled face. Then she raised her arms and silently prayed that the Great Spirit would protect the “*air travelers*” and when she had finished, she went back into the house and put on a pot.

As soon as the canoe emerged from the trees, a forest ranger jumped off the helicopter to rescue them, trying to keep balance with some difficulty, on a small makeshift platform, while the big rotors were still in motion. He gave Chiara a hand who, against her own will took it, whilst he laughed heartily under his big blonde moustache, when it occurred to him that Asa, crouching in the back of the canoe, was getting smaller and smaller and was whimpering from fear. The man said hello to Kateri with deference, whilst the woman hastily picked-up Asa, suspecting that the dog would rather swim the whole way back, than approach the horrible wind-spitting machine that ruffled his hair. The forest ranger finally pulled himself up and joined the group.

“Ça va?” He asked.

“Ça va.” Kateri answered.

Reassured, the man switched on the engine, causing the rotors above their heads to start whirling crazily. The helicopter took off quickly, climbing up in the air and tilting forward.

Grand-père, standing with his legs wide open to keep his balance on the canoe, waved his hat until the helicopter, after shortly gliding on the clearing, pointed straight towards south.

Chiara looked down and saw the vast water mirror that swallowed the wooden cottages. She noticed that the river had flooded the little isle and now it engulfed the small bridge that looked close to being carried away by the water. There was a thick mass of trees that seemed to have been beheaded by the hurricane and the leafy branches had a rust-stain colour...

Then the clearing disappeared and there was only forest beneath them, engraved with a few thin lines of road that were crowded with amphibious vehicles. A lot of

workmen had fixed lighting posts that had then been uprooted by the fury of the wind, other people tried to clear off the roads from the several trunks. Some tried to cut off tottering trees. In the clearings, lumberjacks were sawing, stacking and piling up wood.

Where the road bent and water deeply stagnated, Chiara saw a young man walking with difficulty in the mud.

“That looks like Aigle Noir.” She thought.

The forest ranger had spotted him too and pointed at him with a smile, he said to Kateri “*Votre sauvage!*”

“*On va l'embarquer!*” The woman commanded.

The forest ranger nodded and after tracing a wide circle in the sky, he started going down above Aigle Noir, who raised his head and hesitated, while they made him signs and rapidly dropped a rope ladder. Aigle Noir looked thoughtfully around him, then looked ahead, contemplated the long muddy road in front of him, trying to figure out how long it would take to reach dry land. Then he made his decision, grabbed the ladder that was swinging before his face and started climbing it, in a nimble cat manner. Kateri helped him climb onboard, whilst Chiara literally held her breath and Asa snarled for fear. The helicopter tilted frightfully almost hitting the tree tops. Aigle Noir crouched beside Kateri, trying to become as small as he could and Chiara noticed that he was soaked to the skin and blue in the face. Only his dark eyes blazed like flames under the long hair that was glued to his tired face. Without saying a word, Kateri took a blanket out of a case and offered it to the young man. Without saying a word, Aigle Noir wrapped it around his shoulders, then lowered his head and seemed to sleep. No one said a single word for the rest of the journey.

The asphalt ribbon of the main road soon appeared, the river ran back into its banks, broadened by the imposing meanders and became crowded with boats; sawmills, farms, cottages and small houses reappeared, fields emerged from underwater and meadows turned green again. Only a few uprooted trees and posts, as well as some dangling fences and the stripped garden flowers, revealed that the hurricane had been there too.

Then suddenly, at the very end of the road, the white-painted fence appeared, together with the carefully-mowed lawn, the bushy garden and the cottage with its rural arcade.

“Here we are!” Kateri said, joyfully.

The helicopter descended rapidly, landing on the small space in front of the garden, under the alert eyes of Matteo, Valentina, Babik, Luigi and Ernesto, who were waiting anxiously with their noses squashed against the gate.

Asa barked like crazy, which made the overall noise ear-splitting.

Aigle Noir stayed where he was, as still as a statue, hiding his face behind the blanket, while Chiara and Kateri got off the helicopter dragging Asa, in the utmost confusion. Everybody was now around them. Chiara was deeply consoled by her father's warmest hug and heard a puzzling whirl of voices all around.

“It's great to fly on a helicopter, isn't it?!” Matteo shouted in excitement.

“Were you scared at all?” Luigi asked him.

“It was the end of the world here as well!” Their father told them.

“Asa!Asa!” Babik called in a very loud voice.

When Chiara raised her head, the helicopter was already high in the sky and Aigle Noir’s figure was no more than a black spot.

She felt profoundly sad as she watched the helicopter fly away, back to the Reservation.

Chapter 10

In the surroundings of the vast Citadel esplanade, Luigi, Ernesto, Valentina and Matteo were watching the elegant performance of the Royal Regiment. The guards stood stiff in their scarlet uniforms, their faces hidden behind the tall black busbies. An officer marched ahead of the platoon leading the mascot - a white goat going in time with the band's music.

"They wear the same uniforms as the British Guards." Chiara remarked.

"Sure, they do. This is the only concession that Quebec's people give to England." Luigi laughed, while the soldiers' squad marched on, to the end of the esplanade and then down to the quartering, with a measured tread.

"Look, there's a castle over there!" Matteo said, pointing at a towering building with spires and green pinnacles.

"It's the Frontenac Hotel!" Luigi exclaimed.

"Is there any chance of visiting it?" Chiara asked.

"Not really. It's recently been turned into a luxury hotel."

"Why don't we go down to the old town?" Valentina asked, as she had been a bit bored since the Royal Regiment Guards had stopped performing.

"Why not? Good idea!" Luigi agreed with enthusiasm.

As Kateri, Babik and Asa were busy at school that day, Luigi had offered to be their tour guide and yet, he felt so awkward in this unusual role...

They slowly drove down to the old town, that gradually opened itself to them with its mediaeval city walls, its stone flights of stairs and its silent lanes, where they could admire austere monasteries and lively-painted little houses. Most of these had picturesque external stairs, almost touching small wrought-iron loggias and flower bursting balconies.

"Look, a hackney coach!" Valentina exclaimed as they arrived at the harbour. "Can we go on a coach, dad?". Luigi was ready to please her again and once they had parked the car, they hired two coaches. Luigi and Ernesto went on the one in front, while Chiara climbed on the one behind with Matteo and Valentina. The two coaches left, drawn by the horses that slowly clip-clopped along the ancient lanes.

The two brothers, ahead of everybody, talked calmly, while the coachman wagged the whip close to the horse's ear so that the animal could perceive his constant presence. The hooves rang out on the ancient paving and Chiara leant against the back of the seat that smelt like hay, to contemplate the old houses and the many square gardens. Matteo and Valentina laughed and joked next to her.

The coach driver, a big white-haired man with a black helmet, was very indulgent and let them continue.

At the edge of a small square, Valentina noticed an ancient café, with bright checkered tablecloths conferring something of a Parisian look to it. The girl called

“Dad, dad, let’s stop here!”

Luigi turned round and smiled “Ok, darling...” He replied.

Making a lot of noise, they got off the coach right in front of the café.

“Bye.” Matteo said to the driver. The man took off his hat and cheerfully replied “Ciao.”

The two coaches crossed the square and disappeared round the corner, while the Italian party sat down with great satisfaction.

“I’ll have some cream beignets, some Chantilly buns and a strawberry and banana ice-cream!” Valentina announced, almost without breathing, her eyes full of lust.

“If maman knew about this...” Luigi laughed.

A young waitress came to take their orders and was quickly back with all sorts of good things that everybody greedily plunged into.

“They have public phones inside - what about calling mum?” Chiara suggested to her father.

“Good idea. What’s the time in Italy now?” The man wondered.

“It’s about 4 p.m.” Luigi answered, after looking at his watch “Come on, let’s go and make this call.”

“I want to talk to mum too!” Matteo said, walking quickly after them.

“I’m staying here...” Valentina came up, greedily admiring the beignets and buns that seemed to smile at her from the tray.

“You! Don’t move from there....and don’t eat too much of that stuff!” Her father recommended.

“Ok dad...” Valentina replied. She couldn’t wait to be left alone with that tasty mountain of cream, zabaglione, icing sugar, and marzipan. Enraptured, she gently touched the sugar coating of a hazelnut beignet with the tip of her tongue and closed her eyes, as she was wrapped up in a universe of taste and flavours.

In the bar, everybody gathered around Luigi, who dialled the number and was then connected, in just a few seconds.

“You see?” He exclaimed proudly “you see, it’s so easy to be put through to Italy!”.

And quickly he handed the receiver to his daughter.

“Hello...Hello...” She heard her mother’s voice say, loud and clear.

“Mum...” Chiara said and her eyes were full of tears “Mum...it’s me!”.

“Oh darling! I’m so happy to talk to you love, how are you? And what about Matteo and daddy?”

“We’re all right, mum. Canada is so beautiful, you know...”

“I’m sure it is, baby...but tell me, how are you?” She insisted.

“Dad wants to talk to you mum!”

“Hello?” The man’s voice thundered through the receiver “Everything’s fine over here, don’t worry Agnese! Hold on now, Matteo would like to say hello too.” And he quickly passed the receiver on to his son “Quick, or else this call’s going to cost us a fortune!” He remarked, winking at his brother, while Matteo talked to his mother. In a few minutes, the boy handed the receiver to Luigi “Grandma wants a word with you!” He said.

“Luigino! Is that really you?!” Grandma’s voice shouted

“Of course, mum, it’s me... You don’t need to shout anyway, I can hear your voice very well!”

“Oh my little mummy’s darling...how nice to hear your voice! But are you sure you’re fine?...” And she burst out crying. She was talking and crying at the same time and Luigi, unable to interrupt the flood of words and tears, exclaimed “Bye mum. I’ll pass you Matteo.”

The boy found himself standing there, with the receiver in his hand again. “Oh, my little one! How are things, love? You’re looking forward to coming home to your grandma, aren’t you?” The old woman cried and the boy kept saying “Yes. Yes. Yes...” Everybody around him couldn’t help but laugh heartily.

“Grandma likes crying very much.” Chiara thought to herself “What a wonderful idea I’ve had...a long intercontinental phone call to say absolutely nothing!”

Outside, Valentina had dismantled the mountain of beignets and now stood up feeling a bit numb. She moved a few steps around and waited for the others to come back. After plunging her hands in the basin of a gushing fountain, in the middle of the small square, she ran to the opposite side to admire a modern glass building that had huge windows that were crowded with crystal objects. The curious girl took a look inside and noticed a multitude of multi-coloured chandeliers.

“Since I’m waiting all alone ...I may as well get in there and have a look!” She thought and soon penetrated into the large shop, finding herself surrounded by myriads of lamps and chandeliers.

A bald-headed man sitting at the cash desk, stared at her inquiringly. Valentina found that his bald head under all those lights looked as shining as the moon in the sky. His look made her feel uneasy, so she walked rapidly away and found an escalator that silently took her to the next floor. She found herself in a big hall populated by huge ceramic dogs. Some of which were stood up, whilst others were crouched on the ground. There were also a few sitting solemnly on their hind legs and others about to snarl.

Valentina was literally enchanted by all those red throats, dangling tongues and shining canines and she carefully contemplated them, moving from one to another.

In an adjacent hall, hundreds of flower and fruit arrangements had been skillfully laid down on rows of tables. Looking around, Valentina noticed that there were only a few people passing by and that they were either very careless or very busy... and no shop assistant was to be seen nearby. She saw a tempting peach on top of a fruit pyramid, reached out and grabbed it, and then...bit into it! But the peach felt so hard and made a strange metallic noise against her braces “Ow!...it’s fake!” She exclaimed in disappointment, putting the peach quickly back down and tendering her aching mouth.

She walked on, lightly brushing past all those beautiful crystal, wax and plastic fruits, thinking to herself “They look much better than real ones anyway...”

As she walked ahead into another hall, her attention was caught by a set of victuals. She saw pink piglets that had been skillfully arranged on crystal trays, each one with an orange stuck in its mouth; then she noticed variegated partridges, golden turkeys, tasty sausages and trout in a mayonnaise sauce ...

Valentina stopped right in front of a really big-boiled carp that had been arranged on a glittering crystal-tray, garnished with lemon slices and she thought “Is this edible or another fake?”

She reached out for it, but then dared not to touch it, as the carp’s eye seemed suddenly to be watching her. She moved a few quick steps back and thought “It’s alive...and it is staring at me!”. Pervaded by some obscure terror, she turned back to walk away from there, but found herself in a hall full of mirrors. There were thousands of mirrors of all shapes and sizes, some of which were supported by pedestals, while others leant against the walls in piles, bundles and one ontop of the other...

Valentina looked at herself in one of them and saw her image reflected and multiplied in hundreds of other mirrors. She liked it, so she started to move her hands and make faces, to mime anger, joy and sadness. Then she stood on her tiptoes and danced, lifting her arms up like she were holding a flower garland. A thousand Valentinas moved and danced with her, getting further into the mirror jungle, when all of a sudden her image shattered and became a monster, reflected by concave, convex, mat, obscure, and translucent surfaces...

As soon as she had recovered from the scare, she really wished to go back outside again, but again she found herself in another hall. This time, the room was full of see-through glass pets. She looked around...nobody seemed to be there, but the sound of a till, made her feel better “There must be a shop-girl somewhere and she’ll show me the way out!” She thought, walking in the direction of the noise. However, she found herself back in the dogs’ hall again and it suddenly seemed to her that all those animals were staring at her with very angry eyes and with ravenous jaws ready to bite her. The frightened girl started running everywhere, as fast as she could, surrounded by all sorts of mirrors, until she made out an exit. She ran breathlessly towards it but...she hit against a glass wall. On the other side of the unsurpassable barrier she could only see an escalator.

In order to control the fear that was growing inside her, she started singing softly with a trembling voice, like she had once been taught by Kateri “Whenever you’re in trouble, breathe slowly and sing. This will help you calm down and get yourself more easily, out of trouble.”

“Frère Jacques, frère Jacques...” She sang, with a small trembling voice and then, in a very low voice, she sounded “Maman...maman...”.

The thought of her mother drove her to despair and tears started falling down her cheeks. With her head lowered, yet being careful not to wet her new shoes, she was absorbed in contemplation by a small puddle that was being created on the floor from her tears “Maman will soon be here and she’ll take you home.” She tried to reassure herself “Don’t be scared, maman’s going to find you.”

Right in that moment, two blonde girls of about 7 or 8, both with a pink satin ribbon in their hair, approached her from the opposite side of the hall walking hand in hand, their image reflected in thousands of mirrors.

Valentina stopped crying and held her breath. The two girls, still hand in hand, stopped in front of her and asked in unison “Why are you crying?”

“I...I can't find the way out anymore...”

“Come with us.” They walked up to her, one on each side, took her by the hand and led her away among bushes and mirrors.

“Do you know the way?” Valentina asked shyly.

The two guides nodded proudly and added “We own this place!” Valentina let them guide her with docility down never-ending escalators, across shining crystal halls and basements crowded with statues and beside shop windows full of vases. Until they came to a door that saw onto the street. “Here's the way out.” The two girls said and they walked away, as softly and mysteriously as they had previously appeared.

Valentina gently pushed the door. She found herself on the street and looked around, disoriented. It was actually a fire-exit, opening onto a dark and unknown narrow road that was animated by old craftsmen's workshops.

“There must be a cafe right here... a café and a square!” She thought before rushing to the end of the road, where she had seen some faint light, but terror was about to catch her again. After having past a few steps, the end of the road opened to an esplanade...but neither flowerbeds and fountains, nor cafes with plenty of tables, were to be seen there.

“Dad, dad!” Valentina cried in panic. A policeman noticed her and moved towards her “What's the matter?” He asked her kindly.

“Please, please...bring me back to my daddy!” Valentina sobbed.

“Don't worry now and tell me what happened exactly.” The man said, taking her by the hand.

“Dad...dad was sitting at the café, with my uncle and my cousins...I...I went for a walk and now...now I can't find them anymore!” She answered in despair.

“What did the café look like?”

“It was a big...a big ice-cream shop, with tables outside and...and orange-checked tablecloths.” She sobbed again, “and there was a ga...garden with a fountain in the middle...”

The policeman's face brightened up.

“I see... It must be the Grand-Marnier. Come on little one.”

Still holding her hand, he crossed a short gangway overlooked by junk shops and through that, they came onto the square.

“There you are, your café!” He exclaimed.

A group of people started waving their hands as soon as they spotted her “Valentina, Valentina!”

“Dad, dad!” The girl shouted, flying across the square under the policeman's smiling eyes.

She was overwhelmed by hugs and thousands of feverish questions that she answered very vaguely.

“I had just gone for a walk in the square, and...” She went on talking to Matteo in a low voice “and then I got lost in an enchanted house, where I was put a spell on...” She whispered mysteriously.

“A spell?! What are you talking about now?” Matteo exclaimed, shrugging his shoulders, yet he felt a shiver down his spine.