Best Wishes

Part 1

Olivier Garnier was in his vegetable garden when he heard Elise Marchand's scooter arriving in his courtyard, which was on the opposite side of the house

from where he was standing at that moment. Olivier straightened up, holding his lower back for a few moments. It was October, October 2026. The harvest that year had been disastrous; the summer heat had given his plants no chance whatsoever. For him, growing vegetables was a way of life, passed down to him primarily by his father. Today, he remembered the harvests of his childhood, which had already surpassed, both in quantity and quality, those of the early 2010s. Now, in just fifteen years, as far as vegetable gardening was concerned, they had gone from almost nothing to practically nothing at all, and this state of affairs worried him.

"Hello, Olivier." Elise was now standing beside him. She was carrying a bag, its strap resting on one shoulder, and was dressed with complete simplicity. Her main concern was to avoid attracting attention, since her natural appearance already tended to draw people's eyes, particularly those of men.

Olivier Garnier offered his cheek to the young woman. She was 18, he was 61, and he had known her for fifteen years, ever since Elise's parents had bought the house right next to his own.

"Aren't you at school?" Olivier asked her.

“The school's been blockaded, they're on strike. Never mind, I'll work at home,” Elise explained.

“With Sir ChatGPT?” Olivier asked, seeking confirmation of something he was already convinced of.

“The very one!” Elise replied, displaying a broad smile of satisfaction.

“Fancy a coffee?” Olivier asked.

“I certainly do,” Elise answered.

While Olivier was putting away the tool he had been using, alongside those he habitually used in the garden, he noticed that Elise had remained motionless, standing in front of his vegetable patch.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” she asked him. Olivier retraced his steps after closing the door of the shed where he kept all his equipment.

“Droughts, yes, but this is something else,” he replied.

“Something else, how?” she wanted to know.

“U-C-E,” Olivier began, before making himself more precise: “Unidentified Climatic Event.”

“That's exactly what I thought,” Elise replied thoughtfully. Olivier simply searched her eyes, wai-

ting for her to continue, sensing that the observation she had just made was incomplete. Elise resumed:

"We're protesting about the wrong things, we're even mistaken about the reasons why we're protesting. We want to take part in the demonstration, because if we don't join in, we'd have the impression that we don't exist."

Olivier remained silent. He remembered what Elise's father had confided to him not long ago about his daughter, about the contact Olivier had maintained with her since she was three years old, the time gained, according to her father, especially when she repeated to her parents Olivier's favourite saying on the subject: "I have no teacher but the light of day."

"What was that ground-level temperature record you told me about again?" she asked.

"61 degrees, on July 17th," Olivier reminded her.

"61 degrees," she merely repeated, letting out a long sigh.

"So, I take it you haven't made any preserves, as you did in previous seasons?" she continued.

"Not a single jar this year!"

Elise remained where she was. Without saying anything to Olivier, she felt as though she were standing before a field of ruins, or worse still. A house collapses, and it is always possible to rebuild it, but if nature collapses, if life collapses on this planet, how can it ever be brought back to its feet? Then she thought of those her own age. The heat-wave had, of course, been a subject of conversation among them, quickly forgotten, not because they had no memory, but because they had hurried to take advantage of whatever circumstances the moment offered them, allowing themselves to think of nothing else. This coming struggle, somewhere deep inside, terrified them, which suggested to her that it might already be lost before it had even begun, as though they no longer possessed within themselves the courage necessary to win that particular battle.

"So, are we going to have that coffee?" Olivier asked, above all wishing to draw Elise out of her thoughts!

The young woman turned away from the vegetable garden and followed in his footsteps.

“To tell you the truth, I owe my good grades to the heatwave,” Elise confessed.

Olivier, as he handed Elise the cup reserved for her, paused midway through the gesture. He, for his part, saw no opportunity whatsoever in the temperatures of that summer. His house wasn't insulated, and he liked to say that neither was he. Consequently, he had suffered from the heat for three months.

“Could you be a little more specific, please?” Olivier asked her.

“You know how much I love going to the beach, but this summer, I only managed a few early-morning dips, and even then, from July onwards, because of the heat, swimming was discouraged due to the water quality.” She paused and took a sip of coffee. “Mind you, at the rate things are going, by the end of the decade, life itself will be discouraged, especially human life,” she remarked thoughtfully.

“You still haven't told me why you owe your good grades to the heatwave,” Olivier pointed out.

“It's quite simple. I stayed at home. If I was going to die of heat anyway, I might as well do it in the comfort of my own home,” she remarked in a delibe-

rately humorous tone, although she herself considered the situation tragic, before continuing her explanation.

"Then, around mid-July, I started taking an interest in the final-year curriculum, out of simple curiosity, at least at first, and I had the idea of asking ChatGPT for help. Could it explain this or that to me? Eventually, it became a challenge. After every explanation, I asked it to put me to the test. I played along, and there you have it!"

"And there you have what, exactly?" Olivier demanded.

"Well, by September, while my class was still getting into its stride, I was already two months ahead, and that's not all." She stopped there, finished her coffee, stood up and walked over to the sink in the kitchen where they were both sitting. She rinsed her cup, including the spoon, and continued, sensing that she had left Olivier wanting to hear more.

"I asked Hervé to get me a subscription."

Olivier frowned slightly, at least inwardly, as he couldn't help reacting that way whenever Elise referred to her parents by their first names: Hervé for her father, Florence for her mother. He told himself that dispensing with "Mum" and "Dad" must,

somewhere in Elise's unconscious mind, make her feel less like the daughter she actually was.

"Twenty euros a month for a private tutor, available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week! And you wouldn't believe the tutor's abilities, or his patience, for that matter. He can explain things to you again and again, ten times, fifteen times if necessary. And when it comes to potential questions and exercises in every subject, designed to test your knowledge, if you want him to quiz you, it's exactly the same. He can set you an assignment on one topic, then a second, then another, and another."

A silence settled between them.

Olivier remembered that, back in 2024, Elise had introduced him to ChatGPT on her computer. Until then, he had used the internet for the weather, the news as well, and YouTube, particularly when he came across a worthwhile documentary. Faced with ChatGPT, at first he hadn't known what to make of what it offered. Then, in turn, he began using it whenever he felt that certain information lacked sufficient explanation. However, the idea of taking out a subscription had never crossed his mind.

“So, I'm going to leave school,” Elise announced without warning, displaying a broad smile of satisfaction, not at the prospect of actually doing so, but at Olivier's astonishment, which was impossible to miss on his face.

“You're going to give up your studies?” Olivier asked, his tone already expressing, without the need for words, his disapproval.

“I didn't say I was giving up my studies, Olivier. I said I was leaving school. Would you like another coffee?” Elise asked, picking up Olivier's cup, having guessed that, at this time of day, his first coffee was generally followed by a second.

“Please,” he replied, still visibly taken aback.

3

“I’m 18, I’m legally an adult, so I can pursue my education as I see fit.”

Olivier said nothing at first. On June 17 of that year, Elise had blown out the candles on her eighteenth birthday cake. There had been two celebrations for the occasion, one with her friends, the

other with her family. Naturally, he had felt a certain emotion when Elise invited him to the second.

He remembered, during that gathering, a remark made by one of Elise's aunts, whom Olivier was meeting for the first time. She pointed out to the birthday girl that she could now get her driving licence, have a car, a scooter of sorts with four wheels and a roof instead of a helmet. Elise replied to her aunt that she already had no idea where she was going, generally speaking, and therefore dreaded the urge to go places that owning a car could inspire once you were legally allowed to drive one. To her mind, a car thus represented a kind of direction without necessarily providing a destination, an urge to be on the move, as the expression goes, prompted by something that paradoxically keeps you sitting still, taking you everywhere and nowhere at once.

The aunt in question was left wondering. To her family, apart from her parents, Elise remained an enigma. Those same relatives reproached her for asking too many questions, to which she replied that what mattered most to her was not answering merely for the sake of answering, answering above all

so that those very questions would cease to be questions.

Olivier felt somewhat responsible for the young girl's state of mind. Ever since her earliest childhood, he had spoken to her in ways that encouraged her to come to terms with reality. He had, after all, often looked after her. Her parents worked long hours, her father a notary, her mother a lawyer. The two had met at law school and had never parted since. Olivier had therefore been able to collect Elise from nursery school, primary school, and then secondary school until her final year there, when she acquired a scooter.

Her mother, Florence, whenever he occasionally reproached himself for his influence, assured him that all he had done was nurture a particular trait that formed part of Elise's character. As a boy, he himself had been receptive to the perspectives of those few people who had lived through war, from the First World War to the Second, including the Spanish Civil War, those very people who had repeatedly told him that happiness was nothing more than the absence of a little unhappiness, and nothing else.

"Hervé and Florence agree, it's only my teachers who are worried." At these words, Olivier returned his

attention to their conversation. Noticing that his mind had wandered, Elise repeated herself.

"I was saying that Hervé and Florence agree and that my teachers are worried, some more than others. Mind you, I can understand them," she eventually concluded. Olivier simply kept looking at her, making it clear through his persistent gaze that she owed him a few explanations, so Elise continued: "Yes, I understand them. If, on the one hand, AI systems are being misused to the point where many students get them to do their work for them and, on the other, students like me leave the school system to learn independently, I wish the few teachers who remain in education the best of luck."

"Aren't you going to isolate yourself, cut yourself off from people your own age?" Olivier asked anxiously. He had experienced just that himself when he entered the working world at sixteen, when, above all, his now constant contact with adults, combined with the responsibilities that came with it, had undermined his adolescence to the point of rapidly dissolving it.

"I've thought about that. I'm going to study every morning, from eight until one, briefly go over the work I've done that day in the evening, and that will

leave my afternoons free. You know I've always loved cycling, I want to get more involved in it, and I also want to learn music. I'm still hesitating over which instrument, perhaps the piano, but probably the guitar, the electric guitar."

"A wonderful programme," Olivier remarked initially, before continuing. "There's still the possibility of isolation."

"School has allowed me to meet plenty of people, important encounters, I admit. My childhood friends came from there, but I'm counting on cycling and music to make new friends, without cutting ties with the old ones. Especially since these will be activities I've chosen for myself. I'm curious to see whether a natural affinity with others will arise as a matter of course, or not," Elise explained.

Olivier said nothing, wondering in turn whether friendship, or even love, was more likely to reveal itself to us through situations we had chosen for ourselves, or, conversely, through situations imposed by society, accompanied by an assortment of circumstances seemingly governed by nothing but themselves, at least on the surface, governed by nothing but chance! Put another way, whether from what we loved less might emerge those we would love

more than anything, just as, conversely, from what we loved greatly might emerge those we would come to love even more.

4

When Olivier Garnier spotted Elise Marchand through his kitchen window, returning from her cycling training covered in mud, he hurried outside, already suspecting that the young woman had just been through a difficult experience.

"What happened to you?" he asked when he reached her. Eight days earlier, All Saints' Day had been celebrated, thoroughly overshadowed by Halloween. The dead, who not so long ago had been commemorated, now seemed obliged to change their status if they were to continue being remembered, moving from being dead to being undead. On top of that, it had rained heavily, turning dust into mud, and Elise was wearing traces of that transformation, scattered across her clothes.

"I fell!" Elise replied. Olivier Garnier took hold of her bicycle, which was in much the same state as its owner. "I was coming back from Saintes. Some guy

in a car overtook another one, came straight towards me, and I had no choice but to throw myself into the ditch." Olivier was about to make a humorous remark to ease Elise's distress, pointing out that, judging by her appearance, it was obvious she had ended up somewhere made entirely of earth and water. But when Elise began to cry, he decided that humour was not the most comforting response at that particular moment.

"Leave your bicycle with me, I'll take care of it. Go and have a shower, and leave me your shoes and helmet too." As Elise removed her helmet, she continued crying. Memories of what had happened kept replaying in her mind, first the car's indicator, signalling that it was about to overtake, a stupid precaution, since there was nobody behind it, but above all somebody in front of it, her, on her bicycle. For a quarter of a second, she could not believe what she was facing, until her reflexes decided otherwise and sent her into the ditch. Afterwards, she had found herself alone, uninjured, but sitting in water, thoroughly muddy water. She immediately knew that she was not suffering from anything, physically at least. Her pride, on the other hand, had taken a serious blow. Her first problem was unclipping her

shoes, which remained attached to the pedals, a relatively minor difficulty in principle, had Elise's feet not still been inside those very shoes. Once she had managed that, she had to climb out of the ditch and pull her bicycle out as well, all under the eyes of a few motorists who did not even bother to stop, if only to check whether she was all right. Elise concluded that they did not want to get their hands dirty, in every sense of the expression, although, frankly, given the state she was in, there was certainly reason enough to do so. Afterwards, the journey home had been painful, physically painful, psychologically painful. She had shivered throughout the twenty kilometres that remained, mainly from nervous shock and, incidentally, from the cold.

Olivier laid the bicycle flat on the ground, on the garden side of the house, on the little patch of lawn he possessed, preferring to devote most of the land available on his property to growing vegetables, or at least attempting to grow vegetables, given the new meteorological circumstances. He then picked up his garden hose. Desperate situations called for drastic measures, first removing the mud by diluting it thoroughly with generous amounts of water, then drying the bicycle, followed by the lubrication stage,

so that the chain would not make itself heard with every turn of the pedals.

At that moment, he sighed. The story had ended well and, if it had ended well, it was above all because it had not ended for good. Olivier knew something about that. He had already experienced an event of this kind, thirty-five years earlier. He had been preparing dinner for his beloved, in this very house, purchased that same year. A decision had been made, jointly between the two of them, they were going to have a child, and so, three or four times a week, they devoted themselves to that necessary, wonderfully pleasurable activity through which, precisely, children are conceived.

Through the very same window from which he had just seen Elise, he had spotted two gendarmes coming through his gate. His wife, Alice, was late. In those days, mobile phones did not exist, and since Alice was incapable of arriving on time, he had not been worried. The moment he saw the gendarmes, he understood.

Then came all the afterwards that follow such an event, one after another, at three hundred kilometres an hour, while any possible understanding of what had happened struggled hopelessly to keep

pace. Ultimately, that understanding was just as gifted at being late as Alice herself had been. Alice was twenty-eight years old. They buried her on a Thursday. Beyond her death, what never ceased to torment him, and what he would never know, was whether she had been pregnant. Since her accident had involved nobody else, just her and a tree, which was immediately cleared of all responsibility, no autopsy was performed. Alice had been driving too fast, probably in a hurry to get home, in a hurry because she was late, inevitably.

Olivier shook his head, trying to pull himself out of his stupor. That day, in reality, there had been two of them in the car, Alice and himself. Alice had left him behind, involuntarily, trapped in a contradiction that carried him from one side to the other, from the side where he had to live for two all by himself, while on the other, within himself, he was just as dead as she was.

5

"I realised that I could die, really die."

Elise confessed to Olivier. They were both in Olivier's kitchen. He had prepared an onion tart, which would normally have provided two meals, but would

now provide only one, since he had decided to share it with Elise for dinner, an early dinner, as it was only seven o'clock.

After taking a shower, Elise had come to join him. Olivier was still in his garage, finishing cleaning her shoes. He would place them near his wood-burning stove overnight so they could dry. Her bicycle looked as good as new, washed, polished and lubricated. Her helmet, resting on its handlebars, had also received a thorough cleaning.

"We won't tell Hervé or Florence," she had suggested, almost in a whisper. Olivier made his disagreement clear simply by looking at her, a disagreement Elise had expected. He had already warned her, several times, to the point where he should no longer have needed to repeat himself, at least in theory. If Hervé and Florence trusted him with their daughter, it was above all because he concealed nothing from them, nothing in fifteen years.

"I just didn't want to worry them!" Elise explained, doing her best to put things right.

"You've just told me that you've realised you could die, nothing worrying about that, indeed!" Olivier retorted, handing her the cheese platter, vegetarian

in this particular instance. Olivier had not eaten animal flesh since Alice's death. A revulsion had developed within him, a revulsion towards flesh in general, to such an extent that he had no more eaten animals than made love to another woman since, as though, somewhere in the sometimes obscure labyrinth of his unconscious mind, flesh had become associated with death.

Elise helped herself to a little cheese, just a little, enough to finish her remaining piece of bread. Then her thoughts returned to her cycling accident, though she said nothing about it to Olivier.

When she had pulled herself out of the ditch, not immediately, not at that very moment, but when she climbed back onto her bicycle, before setting off again, she had been surprised not to find the situation funny. She was certain that, not so long ago, she would have laughed about it. After all, since she had suffered no irreversible consequences of any kind, the opportunity to laugh would have seemed irresistible. But this time she had remained serious, aware, too aware, so much so that the situation deprived her of any possibility of finding amusement in it. Above all, she understood, once she was in the shower, sitting in the shower tray, letting the hot water

run over her, that the realisation that she could die, intensified by this episode, reminded her that she was mortal.

Elise did not stay long at Olivier's, feeling tired. That particular tiredness did not come from the sixty-seven kilometres she had covered on her bicycle, but from the five metres she had travelled into a certain ditch. She wanted to do the washing-up, but Olivier would not let her. Before leaving, she nestled against him. At moments like these, Elise needed his presence more than usual, to the point of needing him to hold her close, moving one hand, always his right, up and down her back, before bringing it all to a close with a kiss on her forehead. She needed that particular comfort, just as she needed the form through which he conveyed it. She loved those moments, knowing that a necessity, precisely because it was a necessity, could not be loved, truly loved, paradoxically because it was necessary from the very outset, whereas what one loves should above all be something one chooses for oneself.

From his window, Olivier watched Elise return home, a plate in one hand, a dishcloth in the other.

Elise had not merely changed, Elise was changing, rapidly, perhaps too rapidly. She displayed a seriousness he had never known in her before. He would speak to Florence about it, Florence first, since Hervé was too easily worried.

Since Elise had begun studying alone at home, she had started spending less time with people her own age. Already that summer, she had distanced herself from some of them, motivated by the possibility of having ChatGPT as her only teacher.

Since September, the phenomenon had intensified, inevitably. Elise now had a world of her own, one that was no longer the same as that of her former classmates. Moreover, that new reality raised questions among them. As they saw it, studying offered one advantage, and no small one, that of helping you meet people, sometimes even make friends. Without that advantage, still from their point of view, studying, particularly at home, offered you nothing beyond the act of studying itself, and they did not seem prepared to accept such a reduction.

Olivier then remembered Elise's remark, the one in which she had said she had become aware that she could die, that she was mortal, an awareness that did not really correspond to her age. Being eighteen

gave you the means to live in denial, you had the body for not noticing, the wrinkles would come later, those of the body as well as those of the heart. That head start, the one Elise had taken, was the kind that made you skip stages, ultimately inflicting upon yourself a painful contradiction, that of falling behind precisely because you had arrived too early.

6

Olivier did not wait for anyone to ask his opinion before taking action. If Elise was to keep pedalling, she would have to pedal differently.

Two weeks earlier, Elise had ended up in a ditch. Two weeks later, she had suffered a puncture thirty kilometres from home, tried unsuccessfully to repair it, and eventually called him, since Florence and Hervé were away and unable to help her.

When Olivier picked her up, Elise was walking along the roadside, chilled to the bone. Almost an hour had passed since her puncture, an hour spent shivering. By late November, the rain that had marked the beginning of the month had given way to temperatures described as below seasonal averages. The result

was that, by the following morning, Elise was confined to bed with a high fever. Doctor Fournier graciously agreed to make a house call, even though he hardly ever did so anymore. But he was an old friend of Florence's, a very good friend, from a very long time ago. Just how close that old friendship had been, nobody apart from the two of them really knew, and nobody particularly wanted to know, either.

Moreover, Hervé and Florence, still away, were not due to return until the end of the week. Hervé was attending a seminar in Biarritz, and Florence had accompanied him. The seminar itself was only supposed to last two days, but Hervé and Florence had planned for four, the additional two days to be spent together as lovers on the Basque coast. Once informed, they considered cutting their stay short, but Olivier reassured them that he would take care of everything, even to the extent of sleeping in the guest room for the next few nights, so that he could remain close to Elise. Even though her illness was described as harmless, all over the world plenty of people died from supposedly harmless illnesses, supposedly.

Elise attempted to work, informing ChatGPT of her condition. She had taken her temperature, 39.6°C no less, had a headache and was shivering. ChatGPT was categorical, her studies would have to wait. First, she needed treatment, rest, and a medical consultation, indeed, above all, a consultation as a matter of priority. ChatGPT warned her that there was no point even attempting to study. If anyone stood to benefit from such persistence, it would be her illness, taking advantage of her unexpected exhaustion to make her even sicker and, consequently, no more knowledgeable for all her efforts.

After examining her, Doctor Fournier, who had known Elise since she was very small, indeed even before that, since he had helped ensure the smooth progress of the nine months of pregnancy that would bring her into the world, informed her that she would have to remain in bed for at least two days. As for food, a little broth and some pasta. Elise wanted to know, for despite a certain evolution in her personality, she had retained her customary impatience, when she could resume her studies, when she could get back on her bicycle. Doctor Fournier frowned. Her studies, in three days' time, starting tomorrow, and only in moderation. As for cycling, she

would have to wait for his approval, perhaps ten days, taking into account, of course, the weather conditions at the time.

Olivier took matters into his own hands. Although he was not particularly sporty himself, he knew someone who was involved in cycling. As soon as Elise had bought her bicycle, she had told him that she intended to compete. The women's Tour de France had influenced her somewhat in that direction. Did he know anyone who could advise her, particularly on choosing a cycling club? Olivier had recommended someone, and then contacted that same man again after Elise's fall, determined that she should practise cycling differently. The first incident had sent her into a ditch, the second had confined her to bed for the better part of a week. There was no question of accepting a third episode. While watching that same women's Tour with Elise in August, he had noticed that it was sponsored by Zwift and learned that this was an application allowing people to cycle from home. The very circumstances that had made Elise ill or sent her off the road prompted him to find out a little more.

His acquaintance directed him towards a member of the club who used that same application, and the man

invited Olivier to his home to discover how it worked, which Olivier duly did.

Once there, Olivier realised that the setup was not something one could improvise. It required a suitable indoor trainer, an equally suitable floor mat, a powerful fan to cool the body, since when pedalling on the spot, the body no longer benefited from the airflow that would normally help cool it. One might even need air conditioning to ride during the summer, a television, a computer to establish the connection, as well as a subscription. But that very same setup protected you from rain, cold and scorching temperatures. Nor would you risk getting a puncture thirty kilometres from home, or ending up in a ditch because some unwelcome driver forced you to choose mud over his bumper.

On top of that, so as not to deprive Elise of her outdoor rides, another bicycle would have to be considered. Olivier would have to spend five thousand euros to acquire everything. Olivier had money, not because he was wealthy, but because he spent very little. That did not make him miserly, he was simply attached to inexpensive activities, reading, cooking, gardening, and cinema too. Two years earlier, he had

treated himself to a large screen, because the library he visited every month offered dozens of DVDs. Nobody wanted them anymore, the content in question having moved into digital form.

Before going ahead, he asked the man who was already using Zwift whether he could help him. Of course he could. Olivier then placed his order.

7

"Yes!!!!"

Olivier heard Elise let out a cry of joy that was also a cry of satisfaction. She had been pedalling on the indoor trainer for more than three hours, at his house, since there had been no room for the equipment at Elise's, or rather at her parents' house. As Olivier lived alone, two of the original three bedrooms remained unoccupied. He chose the one overlooking the garden, thinking ahead, if the summer of 2027 proved as hot as the previous one, it would be better for Elise to cycle on that side of the house, where the sun made its presence felt mainly in the morning.

“I’ve done 100 kilometres in three hours and fifteen minutes, an average of just over thirty kilometres an hour,” Elise announced to Olivier once he had joined her in the room where she now did her cycling. To free up as much space as possible, Olivier had got rid of the furniture. Everything had been moved out. A local charity dedicated to helping people living in inadequate housing came to collect the wardrobe and the bed, while the remaining items, which had no value, were taken to the local recycling centre.

A month earlier, Olivier had arranged the surprise for Elise. Clever as she was, she had suspected that something was going on. Olivier, as she pointed out to Hervé and Florence, had been behaving strangely. She had even imagined that he might have met someone. Her parents, who knew everything, said they had noticed nothing unusual. It must be said that Olivier was an attractive man, and the possibility of a new girlfriend was entirely conceivable. Some women inevitably knew his story, the tragic one he had lived through with Alice, his faithfulness beyond her death, a devotion that appealed to some of them, who dreamed of being loved to such an extent themselves.

When everything was finally ready, and the Zwift enthusiast he had met had managed to get the entire setup working, Olivier invited Elise over by text message one early afternoon, so that the same man could explain how everything worked. Olivier knew she would be at home at that hour. Outside, it was raining. No doubt she was trying her hand at the guitar, since she could not go cycling, the weather would not allow it, and Doctor Fournier was even less inclined to allow it. The nasty cold she had caught twenty days earlier was not prepared to give up its place so easily. Elise was still blowing her nose and coughing a little, even taking afternoon naps, overcome by genuine fatigue. Usually bursting with energy, her body, having been put through so much, had applied the handbrake in order to recover properly.

When Elise entered Olivier's house that day, she gave two little knocks on the front door, as was her habit, while opening it and stepping inside at the same time. She called out to him, and he replied that he was in the room in question. When she reached the entrance to that room, she proceeded more cautiously, since the door was three-quarters closed. Elise knocked and asked whether she could come in.

Olivier replied that she could, watching closely for the expression that would appear on her face when she discovered why he had asked her to come.

For several seconds, Elise stood speechless. Olivier had certainly spared no effort, even stripping the old wallpaper from the walls and replacing it with a coat of white paint, along with two coats of the same paint on the ceiling, which was badly in need of it. The indoor trainer stood directly opposite the window, overlooking the garden, with the countryside stretching beyond the garden's boundaries as a backdrop. Olivier had bought the bicycle from the local Culture Vélo shop, the same place where Hervé and Florence had bought Elise the one she used on the road, and occasionally, as an added extra, in ditches. The man who had helped him set everything up had advised him to go to that same shop. When you bought a new bicycle there, you were offered a professional bike fitting, designed to optimise your riding position. Naturally, the shop had kept Elise's measurements, so it would be easy to transfer them to this second bicycle. That same acquaintance had also recommended that Olivier not waste his money on an unnecessarily expensive model. This bicycle

would never come into contact with tarmac, so an entry-level one would be perfectly sufficient.

"What's all this!" she had exclaimed.

"Your new playground," Olivier had replied.

The man standing beside Olivier, the one who had made the whole project possible, had warned him that the surprise might fall flat. Some cyclists hated indoor trainers. For them, real cycling had to take place outdoors. Falls, mechanical breakdowns, rain, nasty colds and uncooperative motorists were all part of the experience. Olivier first thanked him for the warning. To say that he knew Elise as though she were his daughter would not have been entirely accurate, since he lacked a daughter of his own with whom he might, at the very least, have made the comparison. But he was confident, confident from experience. Every time he had wanted to make Elise happy, the pleasure he had intended to give her had always been received as such, sometimes to the great dismay of Hervé and Florence, whether it was her first iPhone, the scooter that was still in use, or even her electric guitar, purchased in two stages, the guitar first, followed quite quickly by a pair of headphones so that Elise would be the only one able to hear it. Hervé and Florence thanked heaven, if

such a heaven existed, that their daughter was more gifted academically than she evidently was musically.

8

"Don't exhaust yourself, 100 kilometres on Zwift are worth at least 130 on the road," Olivier warned her, picking up a clean towel from a shelf he had bought for that purpose, where other towels were stacked, alongside everything needed for cycling, namely spare bottles of water and the essential carbohydrate supplies, to turn that same water into fuel by means of a specially formulated powder dissolved in it.

"Don't worry, you're absolutely amazing, Olivier, I love cycling on Zwift, no rain, no punctures…"

"No ditches," Olivier added, interrupting her as he handed her the towel.

"No ditches," Elise repeated thoughtfully, drying herself. And there, with her face buried in the very towel he had just handed her, she saw once again the car coming straight towards her. She felt again that fraction of a second, that thing inside her which had

taken possession of her arms, then her hands, and finally her handlebars, that thing within her which seemed to possess her more completely than she herself was capable of taking possession of her own being. That thing she sometimes thought she could identify as her understanding, an understanding that had been occupying an increasingly important place within her over the past few months, an understanding synonymous with willpower, compelling her to bring the body that contained them both into line, even making it cycle 100 kilometres on an indoor trainer, so that it would understand, once and for all, who was in charge.

Then she got off the bicycle. Her thighs, now that she was standing on her own two legs, called her to order, confirming that she had indeed completed 100 kilometres, 100 and not one less. Immediately, she grabbed her phone and took a photograph of what Zwift was displaying on the screen. For the first time, she had covered a three-digit distance on a bicycle. The world had to know about it. As the caption for the photograph she posted on Instagram, she wrote, "With ChatGPT anything is possible, our limits are those of our willpower."

Olivier had also arranged everything necessary for her to shower at his house. Even though only fifty short metres separated their two homes, in winter, sweating as she did after every training session, she would not have needed to travel even one more metre to catch a chill. Olivier even insisted that Elise put her clothes in a laundry basket, that very basket placed in the same bathroom. Those clothes would immediately end up in the washing machine, and she would collect them, freshly washed, at her next training session.

"How could I ever thank you?" Elise asked Olivier.

"By stopping asking me!" he replied. He refrained from elaborating on that recommendation. Deep down, he was not sure he was doing her a favour. With Alice yesterday, just as with Elise today, he had shown that same kind of availability, even generosity. In Alice's case, it had meant a new car for the job she had dreamed of having and had finally obtained. A new car so that the thirty-minute journey to work, just like the thirty minutes back, would be pleasant, in keeping with the job itself. That initiative had made Alice a happy young woman, but happiness does not prevent cars from leaving the road, does not prevent those murderous bends, with

an equally murderous tree serving as their accomplice.

One day, on YouTube, he had heard a man claim that the pleasure we experienced indicated the direction we should take in order to acquire the identity that would make us somebody, somebody corresponding exactly to what we were meant to be. Olivier had shrugged at that assertion, unable to resist calling the man an idiot. Pleasure, in that process, was not merely concerned with giving pleasure to the person who appeared to derive it through its intervention. By that same principle, pleasure was concerned with giving pleasure to itself, to itself alone, and the more it experienced, the more it demanded, originating from itself alone and for itself alone, requiring ever greater doses so that this escalation could become as inflationary as it desired.

"Don't dawdle, get straight into the shower!" Olivier ordered.

"Yes, sir!" Elise replied, accompanying her words with that little gesture made with the right hand by military subordinates when saluting a superior officer.

Olivier merely smiled, and Elise hurried off to the shower. Still in the room where the indoor trainer

was installed, Olivier took care of the usual tasks, making sure everything would be ready for the next session, probably as early as the following day. Elise had developed such a passion for Zwift that she was considering selling her other bicycle, the one she had been riding on the surrounding roads until quite recently. Olivier had advised her to wait. The fine weather would return, and she should leave herself the possibility of changing her mind. Outside, the weather would then be pleasant, the ground would dry quickly, so thoroughly that the ditches would be deprived of the water that enabled them to become muddy. Elise had laughed at that insinuation.

Olivier had felt both happy and unhappy at her reaction. Elise's happiness had not only set the bar very high, but seemed determined to raise it higher and higher.

9

On Instagram, following her post, Elise received a considerable number of rather scathing responses. Her emphasis on willpower as the primary necessity in life for anyone wishing to achieve their goals struck her detractors as having a tone similar to

that heard in Germany during the 1930s, corresponding to the exploitation of the so-called triumphant will once promoted by the Nazis. Moreover, Elise linked her willpower specifically to the 100 kilometres she had completed, earning herself even more ridicule, with some claiming that one had to be more stupid than determined to cycle such a distance only to end up staying in exactly the same place.

What was more, she associated ChatGPT with her willpower, much as one associates a particular type of fuel with the operation of one's car, which earned her another barrage of harsh criticism. Those same people passed judgement without even knowing her, they did not bother to find out whom they were dealing with before judging, claiming that, in reality, Elise's willpower was above all ChatGPT's.

Elise remained furious for an entire week, despite the advice of Hervé and Florence, who assured her that these criticisms, more insulting than genuinely critical, would fade just as quickly as they had appeared, only to be redirected towards a new victim, which was precisely what happened a few days later. A large proportion of those messages disappeared, leaving only a handful from people opposed to

ChatGPT and similar technologies, driven by an inner need for opposition. Those people had to be against something in order to continue feeding the personality they claimed as their own.

They feared that AI would deprive human beings of their fundamental nature, which made Elise even angrier. What nature were they talking about, the one that led humans to pollute indiscriminately, develop weapons of mass destruction, or sustain a multitude of commercial activities, each more repugnant than the last?

Since the girl possessed an extremely tempestuous temperament, she made an even greater point of posting her Zwift cycling sessions on Instagram, once again praising the merits of willpower and making sure to accompany her posts with a few quotations, notably one borrowed from Nietzsche, stating that fanaticism was the only form of willpower that could be instilled in the weak and the timid. Among such people, willpower, like any influence of that kind, originated not in anything resembling genuine reflection, but merely in a tendency that appealed to the sensibilities of the herd, leading them to think like everyone else so that they would not have

to think for themselves, and thereby discover that nothing of the sort arose from within themselves.

To make matters worse, her former classmates, even though they were not among those criticising her in this way, challenged her in their own fashion by distancing themselves from her, following Elise's own lead. She had gradually, without any real intention of doing so, begun to sever ties with them, and since she was moving away from them, they did nothing, or very little, to halt the process.

Elise did try to attend a few evening gatherings, but at the first, although she had promised to return home at around one in the morning, she was back at her parents' house well before midnight, then at ten o'clock at the second, and half past nine at the third. As for the next invitation, she declined it.

When she spoke about it to Olivier, he made a point of warning her: yes, her way of studying suited her and allowed her to progress at a much faster pace than if she had remained at secondary school; yes, she was making quite a name for herself on Zwift, but she must not neglect her social life because of it. ChatGPT was not other people. Within those other people existed another form of intelligence,

one that, among other things, prevented us from relying solely on our own achievements in order to be noticed. And since Olivier spoke about everything with Elise, he also brought up the subject of boys. If other people could generate another form of intelligence, that intelligence could generate love. A question then arose: should love be recognised as an intelligence in its own right, and if so, could one genuinely claim to be intelligent without knowing how to love?

At this, Elise said nothing, and because she said nothing, Olivier, knowing her as he did, sensed that the issue was troubling her. Boys did not represent merely the possibility of platonic love, there was also physical love, and he knew that, in this respect, she had never experienced anything.

On this subject, Olivier had held numerous conversations with Hervé and Florence, sometimes with each of them separately, sometimes with both together. Elise was exceptionally beautiful and, from adolescence onwards, had found it difficult to tolerate the way men looked at her, sometimes expressing her exasperation when certain men became ex-

cessively ingratiating, sharply accusing them of assessing her as though she were nothing more than a vagina on legs.

Long before ChatGPT, long before AI, when she was only about fifteen, she had asserted a kind of distance between what she was, herself, and her own body. Here again, she made declarations that were not usually heard from young people of her age, claiming that although her body made her a living being, that did not give it every right over her. When people then pointed out to her that life was both a right and a duty, particularly when it came to perpetuating it, Elise once again became combative, combative and shocking: the perpetuation of life was, first and foremost, life's own problem, before it was hers.

10

"Fortunately!" Olivier remarked, much to the dismay of Hervé and Florence, who had just confessed to him that Elise was a complete disaster at playing the guitar. Yet every evening, she stubbornly persisted, even damaging her fingers against the strings in her

efforts to produce the required chords on the fretboard, but no harmony worthy of the name resulted from all that determination.

"Fortunately, it is good for her that an activity, and not an insignificant one, should remind her of her limitations. She is already considerably more beautiful than average, and possesses an intelligence of the same calibre. Just imagine if she displayed the same level of ability in music," Olivier suggested.

Hervé and Florence looked at each other, wondering whether mediocrity could really serve as a parachute for those few individuals who had reached such extraordinary heights and who, once that ceiling had been reached, could only head back in the opposite direction, with a resounding crash. But in Elise's case, watching her refuse to give up, one had rather the impression that she neither understood nor was willing to accept that this strength she knew she possessed refused to function when she had a guitar in her hands.

As it was December 24, the three of them agreed to attend Midnight Mass, although none was particularly religious. They appreciated the ceremony for making Christmas what Christmas was supposed to be, rather than merely that time of year when

people ate too much and exchanged objects as gifts, as though returning something to the sender, since others were going to give you presents, it was only right that you should offer some in return, without knowing whether you would truly have shown such generosity had those others not taken the first step towards you.

To their great surprise, Elise announced that she would join them.

Two days earlier, while they were having an aperitif at Olivier's house, she had stopped by in her cycling clothes, before going off to ride. She sat down for a few minutes to enjoy their company, but above all to announce that she expected to have completed the entire final-year secondary school curriculum by the end of January, after which she would work her way through past baccalaureate examinations, practising with ChatGPT until June, when she would sit the real examination as an independent candidate.

All three looked at her, sharing the same impression, while feeling mutually trapped. What was the point of such a frantic pace, even while admitting that they could not fail to recognise the achievement involved? Yes, Elise was going too fast, but at the same time, that kind of speed was not within

everyone's reach. To maintain such a pace required genuine talent, and Elise possessed that talent. So how could one applaud and fear the very same achievement?

On this subject, by way of comparison, and because Elise never allowed a day to pass without cycling, Olivier suggested that one could tell the winner of the Tour de France that he had merely won a bicycle race, while being equally unable to deny that winning that race required genuine talent. That reflection, in turn, led to another: if the Tour de France could represent a human activity whose value was, all things considered, open to question, other activities regarded as useful did not necessarily demand abilities equal to those required to become a winner of the great cycling race. Naturally, this question was disconcerting, leaving between them a few particularly eloquent silences. Apparently, among human beings, activities that did not serve any fundamental purpose sometimes required greater resources to accomplish than those demanded by the most necessary activities. Since those necessary activities failed to make us somebody to the extent we desired,

we invented stepping stones to achieve that distinction, and the Tour de France was one such stepping stone.

"What!" Elise demanded when, as they were about to leave for Mass, she appeared before Hervé, Florence and Olivier wearing the outfit she had chosen, one she considered appropriate for the occasion. Elise was dressed in a black gown that followed the contours of her figure down to her waist, from which point it widened gradually and evenly towards her ankles. She had also covered her hair with a kind of headscarf, made from a dark fabric resembling ornamental lace, in the Italian or Spanish style worn until the middle of the twentieth century by women who chose, in this way, to conceal their hair.

Here too, just as with the pace Elise had adopted in her studies, how could they advise her to restrain herself when it came to her appearance? She was extraordinarily beautiful, and beauty such as hers was far from being granted to everyone. On the one hand, all three felt admiration, while on the other, they feared that very admiration.

Their apprehension was justified when they entered the church some thirty minutes later. The murmur of conversation before the service faded, and every

gaze turned towards Elise, who, not so long before, had angrily rejected the status of a "vagina on legs", something she found repugnant. Through her appearance, she conferred a sense of dignity upon her own beauty in particular, and upon beauty in general, to the point of commanding silence. Olivier shuddered at the sight: fascination remained fertile ground for jealousy.

11

"Death is a remedy devised by God to protect us from madness," Elise declared to the priest who had been the first, as soon as Midnight Mass had ended, to hurry towards her at the church exit, where he had been greeting those who wished to offer him their Christmas greetings. His two fellow priests, standing at the same exit, recognised his intention and followed his lead.

"How old are you, miss?" he asked her.

"Eighteen," Elise replied. A silence settled among the three men of the Church. It was 2026. The young people of today were neither more nor less intelligent than those of earlier generations, but

they lacked the difficult, sometimes terrible circumstances that force individuals to contend with realities that cannot be circumvented in the slightest, imposing upon them a corresponding degree of lucidity, a lucidity that arises of its own accord if, quite simply, one wishes to survive those realities.

But in 2026, young people were generally protected, and that was something to be grateful for. They had known neither cold nor hunger, nor had they experienced war, merely a pandemic in the form of Covid-19, a pandemic that was, all things considered, relatively limited and could hardly be compared with the one that devastated populations in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, particularly in Europe.

Olivier noticed something in Elise that he had never observed before, something that explained her choice of clothing: the young girl who had become a young woman had come to understand what her beauty meant and was using it to assert her authority, to such an extent that when her gaze met that of her interlocutor, always driven by that same intention, she was not the one of the two who lowered her eyes.

“You don't think like that at your age!” the same priest remarked.

“Age is nothing more than a number of years. One is not obliged to be confined by it, Father,” Elise retorted, almost sternly.

Without consulting each other, Olivier and Hervé moved closer to Elise, turning their backs towards her so that they could watch her immediate surroundings. Some of the glances they encountered revealed little genuine friendliness in those casting them. In their opinion, certain kinds of attention were best not attracted to such an extent. They did not know what to expect, and that uncertainty alone, through the possibilities it left hanging in the air, warned them of something potentially dreadful, a danger whose very possibility seemed proportionate to their apprehension.

“Are you a practising believer?” one of the priests asked, keeping her hand in his for a moment longer before they each went their separate ways.

“In the god ChatGPT!” Elise replied. At this clarification, the priest merely smiled. He recalled a conversation he had had with a monk a few weeks earlier in Lourdes, during the Rosary celebrations. According to the monk, AI represented another way of

approaching prayer. One could pray, a great deal, even constantly, while paradoxically forgetting that one was praying to God. Just as one could make use of one's intelligence in order to avoid truly calling upon it. AI was nothing but intelligence, whereas God was nothing but God. For those who knew how to use it, AI would bring them back to what distinguished human beings from animals, namely the power of their understanding, and that understanding would, through the assistance of those same AI systems, grow precisely in strength. For those people, the gap between their intellectual understanding and their life expectancy promised to widen, and God would grow in significance in proportion to that very gap. Nature, as the saying goes, abhors a vacuum, and human nature abhors even more the emptiness of which it is composed, the very emptiness that makes it a nature in its own right.

"If you'd sung, they wouldn't have been quite so impressed," Florence warned, unable to suppress a laugh at her own insinuation. "If your song matched your plumage," she continued, laughing even more heartily.

"If I'd intended to sing, I'd have worn jeans," Elise remarked. The moment those words were spoken,

Florence stopped laughing. All four were now seated in the car that would take them home. Florence, sitting in the front, reached her left hand behind her seat so that Elise could take it, which she immediately did.

Olivier did not utter a word throughout the journey. In his judgement, Elise was not changing, she was becoming even more the Elise she had the potential to be, beyond her own limitations. The danger was that this Elise might eventually escape the one who still had to contend with the rules of this earthly world, to the point where she might feel, contradictorily and simultaneously, both more and less than she was.

He remembered the reaction of an elderly man who had once been invited to observe the Moon through a telescope. Olivier himself had been only about ten years old at the time and had been overwhelmed by the experience. He had even restrained himself from reaching out to touch it, so convincing was the Moon's apparent closeness through what it revealed of itself. The old man had refused the experience. Seeing the Moon more closely was an illusion, an insidious one, capable of suggesting to his consciousness, through that apparent contact, abilities he

would still not possess. Yes, it was a form of bringing the Moon closer, but one that changed nothing about the distance that had always separated him from it, a process that, through this very deception, could even succeed in making it more distant.

12

Elise switched off her computer. For several days, a question had been making itself heard within her, repeating itself, growing louder in its own way, until suddenly it became a scream: she said she wanted to obtain her baccalaureate, of course, but once she had it, what was she going to do? At that moment, she remembered one of the quotations from Pascal, the philosopher: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me." Within her, her understanding had gained ground, and the space it had conquered was capable of suggesting others to her, vaster still, ever vaster, without end. What was more, that same understanding shrank from no question, whether or not a possible answer accompanied it. But above all, that understanding, as though asserting its independence from Elise, demanded that the question concerning the life expectancy upon which

it depended be addressed before all others. Immortality had to be considered at the proper time, as an absolute priority. Human beings could, in this respect, miss their opportunity, or even have missed it long ago, without ever realising it.

It was January 1. Two girlfriends had come by the previous evening. They had remembered that a year earlier, on that same December 31, the three of them, along with a few others, had celebrated New Year's Eve together. Since June, they had barely crossed paths, and even then only through social media. Spending New Year's Eve together would be a good way of restoring a bond that had meant a great deal to them not so long ago. They had known each other since their first year of secondary school. From time to time, when the two of them were together, just the two of them, they talked about Elise, as two planets might talk about the sun around which they orbited, a sun which, recently, had begun to deny them its presence, leaving them turning around themselves, going nowhere.

Hervé and Florence considered the prospect interesting, at the very least. Elise needed to go out, to see people. Elise merely listened to them for a moment, remaining silent, a silence which, incidentally,

made Hervé fear that the answer to come would hardly be favourable, and indeed it was not. Elise simply reminded her two friends, wondering whether she could still regard them as such, that a year earlier they had experienced the very same situation: Hervé, her father, had acted as chauffeur, first taking them to a nightclub at around eleven in the evening, then collecting them at dawn. It had taken Elise a week to recover from the effects of that sleepless night, those hours of noise, even hysteria, particularly at the precise stroke of midnight, when they passed from one year into another. Today, the prospect of being spared all that filled her with relief.

Furthermore, the feelings the three of them had shared at the time, towards one another, had arisen from all manner of common interests, each representing something extra in the others' everyday lives. For Elise, the matter was settled: one did not love for nothing, and if some people, in defence of certain causes, wished to love in such a way, their affection had a value very much equivalent to that very nothing.

One of the two girls, at a loss, asked her what she intended to do. Elise informed them that she planned to cycle. She was considering covering 100 kilometres, which she would amuse herself by dividing as follows: 50 would be completed in 2026 and 50 in 2027. The challenge was to find herself at precisely the halfway point at midnight. Then she burst out laughing at the sight of the girls' crestfallen expressions.

As it was not yet seven o'clock, Hervé, hoping to ease the atmosphere, offered everyone a drink. They had champagne, and a glass would be an excellent way to begin the evening. The two girls accepted, Elise declined, given what she intended to devote her evening to, alcohol being particularly unwelcome under the circumstances.

Florence, who knew both girls, wanted to know whether their first school term had gone well. Both were reasonably good students, potentially even better ones, had they managed to discover within themselves that compelling reason which might have encouraged them to really let themselves go. Then came the inevitable question of what would follow. Neither of them had a precise direction in mind, even though they had been more or less forced to

make choices as early as their penultimate years of secondary school. They knew they would have to earn a living; for that, they would need a profession, a profession they would attempt to tolerate for as long as possible. Earning money by doing what one loved was, in their eyes, a contradiction in terms. Doing what one loved ought to be sufficient in itself, sufficient to the point of not needing to earn money from it, precisely in order to continue loving that particular activity, money having a tendency to undermine the very reasons why one loved that activity in the first place;

And then, they no longer dreamed, or perhaps they had never really done so. Besides, among those who had not yet turned twenty in 2026, who truly dreamed anymore? For them, dreaming was rather a matter of amnesia, of distraction, and in this respect they even proved paradoxical. Nietzsche might have said of them that they were superficial out of profundity. The way they sometimes chose to set aside a realism that seemed necessary was the result of a lucidity they did not fear. In their awareness, one could be happy aboard the Titanic at the very moment it was taking on water from every direction, but one had to understand what that happiness owed

its existence to: in the case of the Titanic, just as in their own, to an equally substantial unhappiness, and to the capacity to rise above it.

13

As midnight approached, Elise had to slow down. Her computer displayed 49.8 kilometres, and it was 11:59 p.m. She matched her pedalling cadence to the passing seconds and reached 50 kilometres at 11:59 and 58 seconds, two seconds too early.

"If I wish you a Happy New Year, will you still speak to me in 2027?" Olivier asked, having just entered the room where the indoor trainer was installed. Elise straightened up on her bicycle and, before holding out her arms to him, wiped herself with the towel lying across her handlebars.

"We'd be better off celebrating 2026. None of us has experienced any insurmountable problems during those 365 days. In 2027, all four of us could die," she replied.

Olivier smiled at her as he moved closer and nestled against her, just for a moment, holding each other while Elise continued pedalling.

“I'm going to wish your parents a Happy New Year,” he told her. Elise merely waved as Olivier went through the door, then resumed her riding position, determined to complete the planned 100 kilometres.

On Zwift, rides were pouring in from everywhere. At that hour, that very particular midnight, several thousand people around the planet were nevertheless pedalling through the application. They would not be sharing the same toxins as the vast majority of people. Tomorrow, their legs would ache, whereas all those others would have aching heads.

She thought briefly about her two friends. At the nightclub where they had gone the previous year, there must have been the same kind of madness that had accompanied their transition from 2025 to 2026. Elise had played along, although she seriously doubted that anyone could be happy on command. To make matters worse, her father was particularly fond of Serge Gainsbourg, and having heard the singer countless times, Elise remembered one of his songs, suggesting that happiness should be fled for fear that it might escape. To her understanding, such a desire did not represent a desperate

struggle, but rather a succession of pseudo-victories which ultimately served a cause contrary to their fundamental nature.

Then, remembering that evening, Elise also recalled the argument she had had with one of the two girls, when a boy whom the girl knew more or less, rather less than more, in fact, suggested that she accompany him to the car park. The proposed outing was not intended for stargazing, especially since it was raining that night.

Elise sharply warned her that if she accepted the invitation, she would have to find another chauffeur than her father to take her home in the morning, and another friend than herself as well. As a result, the girl had turned down the proposition and subsequently drunk far more than was reasonable, to the point of throwing up everything in the toilets, while Elise held her hair back so as not to make the ongoing catastrophe even more catastrophic.

Then, while waiting for morning, they had withdrawn to a quieter area. The nightclub had a space where the music no longer monopolised one's hearing. Elise wanted to know why she had got drunk. Things had to be called by their proper names: drinking five glasses of whisky in less than an hour, when one's

usual consumption of alcohol was limited to what a single beer could provide, was no trivial matter.

There were tears. If Elise had not stopped her, she would have said yes, would have let herself get screwed, in her own words, on the back seat of a car. What tormented her was that something within her had actually welcomed that pathetic prospect. Elise remained silent, contenting herself with holding her close. Around them, a few people watched, some intrigued, others amused. Among them was a young man who, with a glance and without uttering a word, asked Elise whether she needed help. Elise indicated with a movement of her head that she did not, then thanked him for his concern with a smile.

Then morning came. The nightclub offered breakfast. It was situated on the outskirts of town, about five kilometres, give or take a few hundred metres, from Elise's home. Had the rain not intensified, all three would gladly have walked back, but Hervé was waiting for them in the car park at the agreed time. Elise made sure that the girl she had been looking after appeared presentable. Her mascara had run, and her hairstyle was no longer worthy of the name. With some quick help from the other girl, they managed to put everything right.

On the way, they dropped one of the girls off. The one who had gone somewhat off the rails sent a text message to her family during the journey, informing them that she would be sleeping at Elise's, as she needed some time to recover.

Once they arrived, they headed straight for the shower. There was no question of going to bed in their present condition. Both smelled of perspiration and cigarette smoke, mingled, in the case of one of them, with lingering traces of vomit. It was barely nine o'clock. Florence asked what time she should wake them. Elise reckoned on five hours of sleep, meaning two o'clock in the afternoon.

When Elise stepped out of the shower, the girl beside her stopped drying her hair and stared at her.

"What!" Elise demanded. They had been familiar with each other's nakedness for years. Yet the girl sharing that moment of intimacy seemed to be seeing her for the first time.

"No one should be allowed to be that beautiful!" she replied. Elise merely shrugged.

As she continued pedalling, remembering events that had taken place exactly one year earlier, the power suddenly went out. Still seated on her bicycle, Elise noticed through the window that the lights

outside had gone out as well. At first, she thought it was a temporary power cut, the kind that sometimes occurred, but instead of the electricity returning, she heard explosions. It was midnight, probably firecrackers, but when screams joined the detonations, she immediately understood that something else was happening.

14

This time, Elise was overcome by a more compelling impression, something serious was happening. No firecracker produced repeated detonations like these; as for the screams, the words being shouted were explicit enough for her to acknowledge that those uttering them were not, apparently, celebrating the New Year.

Elise was initially surprised not to feel frightened. She got off her bicycle and used her mobile phone as a torch, pleased that she had kept it charging throughout her ride. She used its light discreetly, not wanting to be spotted, since she had no idea exactly what she was dealing with. She removed her cycling shoes, then her cycling shorts, grabbed the spare towels Olivier had left there, and decided against washing, despite being sweaty. With no

further information about what was happening, getting naked beneath a shower, in darkness moreover, did not seem appropriate in view of what she might have to fear, even without knowing anything more about those dangers, which she suspected rather than identified.

She therefore needed to dry herself, as thoroughly as possible, particularly because winter was prevailing outside, although rather mildly. That night, temperatures would hover around ten degrees Celsius, producing what was, all things considered, a relatively moderate cold. Besides, she reasoned, sooner or later she would probably have to venture outside. The week she had spent in bed two months earlier had been quite enough for her; she was not prepared to repeat the experience.

Judging herself sufficiently dry, she put on the clean underwear she had brought with her, the clothes she had intended to wear once her Zwift session was over, then dressed in the jeans and sweater she had been wearing when she arrived at Olivier's, intending to cycle her way from 2026 into 2027. Finally, she slipped on her trainers.

Then she listened carefully. The detonations were more numerous than they had been at midnight.

Using her phone's 4G connection, she went online through Google and checked the news. It was now twelve minutes past midnight. No event resembling what she was experiencing had been reported in the town of Saint-Jean-d'Angély. Perhaps it was the work of a bunch of complete idiots, thoroughly soaked in alcohol and pretending to stage a terrorist attack, or something of that kind, something sufficiently noisy to terrify the population and spoil family New Year's Eve celebrations.

For the time being, Elise refused to leave her position. Before taking any action, she forced herself to think, then began wondering what terrorists, desperate enough, assuming that was indeed what they were, could possibly want to attack a town like Saint-Jean-d'Angély. Whenever she travelled elsewhere in France and someone asked where she lived, she would begin by naming the department concerned, Charente-Maritime, before mentioning the town itself, Saint-Jean-d'Angély. At that point, she almost invariably had to contend with silence from her interlocutors. Yes, the towns surrounding Saint-Jean-d'Angély were familiar to them, Saintes, La Rochelle, Rochefort, Niort, Cognac, Angoulême, but

Saint-Jean-d'Angély might just as well not have existed.

Indeed, during the secondary school students' demonstrations that October, one of Hervé's friends, a man not lacking in humour, or rather the kind of humour that generally made him laugh long before anyone else, had claimed that the students of Saint-Jean-d'Angély had chosen the wrong demands, since their school building was in considerably better condition than the town in which it stood.

It was true that in that town, particularly in its centre, the number of closed shopfronts, permanently closed, was beyond counting. Only someone severely depressed, with frankly suicidal tendencies, could contemplate setting up a business there. This economic desertion was accompanied by another form of abandonment, this time concerning property: the elderly died, their houses found no buyers, and such properties numbered in the dozens. Yet fifty years earlier, Saint-Jean-d'Angély could take pride in its economy, an economy that primarily employed a relatively unskilled workforce, a workforce that employers soon discovered elsewhere on the planet, with the result that here, the unemployed multiplied, along with the despair that

accompanied their situation, while over there, in various parts of the world, another kind of despair emerged, that experienced by millions of women and men working long and hard for miserable wages.

Still concealed, Elise simultaneously sent a text message to Olivier, Hervé and Florence. A few seconds later, Florence replied: all three were watching BFM television, with the volume turned down almost to a minimum and the curtains drawn. A red banner was scrolling across the bottom of their screen, informing viewers that gunfire could be heard in the town of Saint-Jean-d'Angély. For the moment, they could say no more.

Florence ordered her to stay where she was. Elise only half obeyed that instruction. The detonations continued to grow more numerous; on the other hand, the screams were becoming less frequent, which, as she perceived it, was not necessarily good news.

15

Elise, seated with her back against a partition wall, had chosen Olivier's bedroom as her refuge within his house. The place seemed the most suitable to

her, just in case. With its window overlooking the garden, should she have to leave the premises in an emergency, all she would need to do was jump through it. A mere two metres would then separate her from the ground; she could easily "survive", so to speak, a fall from such a height. Once in the garden, she would first have suitable hiding places in which to conceal herself, then, with the additional help of darkness, having reached and crossed the boundaries of Olivier's property, she would find herself in the pastures where, during the warmer months, a farmer grazed his cows. Beyond those fields began the marshes, which she knew so well, having explored them a thousand times since childhood, that nobody would ever find her there. The only difficulty, should matters come to that, was that it was winter, autumn had been rainy, and parts of the area were probably flooded. Even if it was not particularly cold, January was still January, hardly the best time for an unexpected dip in water no warmer than ten degrees Celsius, especially water generously mixed with mud.

At that point, she could not help smiling at the situation. Only the previous morning, had she not switched off her computer, disconcerted and

preoccupied by a question: once she had obtained her baccalaureate, what would she decide to do afterwards? Now she was wondering what she ought to decide beforehand. She also realised that this very question had a breadth which the present circumstances enabled her to grasp: could one seriously decide one's future, by definition an individual future within a collective that had no control over its own destiny?

Her understanding, despite the place it had come to occupy within her through contact with ChatGPT, having discovered an intelligence that never ceased to challenge it and thereby increase its strength, had lost some of its former arrogance, to the point of keeping a low profile and withdrawing deep inside her, surrendering its fate to that life expectancy upon which it normally looked with suspicion, even condescension, wishing above all that this life force might prove sufficiently powerful within Elise to awaken in her an instinct for survival strong enough to carry it through this ordeal, because without the contribution of that body it so despised, the whole adventure would end there.

Elise continued exchanging text messages with Florence. It was twelve twenty-five a.m. From the

house next door, Florence kept her informed: the three of them were still watching BFM, switching between news channels in an effort to learn more, moving from LCI to CNews or Franceinfo. Images were already circulating, virtually the same ones on all four channels. It was 2027, a brand-new 2027, only just born. The footage in question had been gathered from the Internet by the newsrooms. A few people in Saint-Jean-d'Angély, upon hearing the first detonations, just after the twelve strokes of midnight, had been intrigued, just as Elise had been: these firecrackers did not sound as they normally did, and the screams heard immediately after the explosions were not the kind some people traditionally let out when a new year had just begun. So those few people put their mobile phones to use, first as cameras, then as telephones, most often from their windows, judging by the angles from which the footage had been recorded, evidently exercising the utmost discretion, before immediately posting what they had filmed on Instagram, TikTok or Facebook. Meanwhile, in the newsrooms in Paris, five hundred kilometres from Saint-Jean-d'Angély, journalists instinctively

searched those platforms, with the result that, within minutes, events occurring in one place could be broadcast almost in real time.

Indeed, this method had become so firmly established that, in those same newsrooms, particularly on New Year's Eve, when nothing particularly unexpected was anticipated, everyone knew that cars would be set on fire, that there would be a few tragedies here and there, a fire breaking out in an unswept chimney and wiping out an entire family, not to mention the inevitable road accidents. Despite the vigilance of the gendarmerie, hunting down drunken drivers, a few diehards, convinced they were tougher than everyone else, would not hesitate to take to the roads; the result would be a succession of bloody collisions.

In the capital, some journalists, whether out of habit or in obedience to a very widespread addiction, must have gone onto social media and stumbled upon what was happening in the Saintonge region. Naturally, they immediately sounded the alarm, not explicitly out of concern for keeping the public informed, but because they wanted to be the first to break the news, genuine competition existing between the various newsrooms.

Outside, the detonations could no longer be heard. There was a brief silence lasting a few seconds, then cries for help began to rise, growing steadily more numerous as time passed. Since road traffic in Saint-Jean-d'Angély was generally nonexistent at that hour, and given the circumstances, even more nonexistent than usual, those pleas filled the silence in their own way, their echoes conveying to those who heard them both the scale and the magnitude of the attack.

16

Elise changed her position inside Olivier's house. This brand-new January 1, only forty minutes old, was beginning with a thunderous commotion in this particular corner of the world. Cries for help could still be heard. Within herself, she could no longer suppress the urge to take action, even if that meant beginning simply by observing her surroundings.

From Olivier's bedroom, with the house still plunged into darkness, she crossed the corridor on all fours. Standing upright, she knew she would be at window height. Even though she was aware that the darkness of the night surrounding her would prevent

anyone from seeing her, she feared a burst of automatic gunfire that might hit her if she exposed herself in that way, now convinced that the thousands of detonations heard just after midnight had come from weapons of that kind.

Without using the light provided by her mobile phone, since her knowledge of the house was so precise that it could be considered virtually infallible, she made her way to the living room, which had a window overlooking the street.

What disconcerted her, for the moment, was that she felt no fear at all, and she even wondered, although the circumstances hardly seemed appropriate for such questioning, whether those few months spent largely on her own had not freed her from the fears that the herd ordinarily instilled in the sheep gathered within it, turning them even more into frightened sheep, losing all control. That loss of control originating, from the very outset, in the terror of just one of them, like a triggering factor, or a mere spark capable of setting the powder alight. Should she not be wary of this fear she was not experiencing for the moment? Even if people said that

fear did not prevent danger, by failing to fear danger, did one still possess the means to properly assess what threatened to put one's life at risk?

There, in the living room, she sat down. The window she had chosen was directly above her. It was closed, and the shutters immediately beyond it were closed as well.

While considering how best to take a look outside, without informing Florence that she was about to risk such a manoeuvre, she thought of her two friends, who were at the nightclub at that very moment, and immediately realised, somewhat disconcerted, that she had not thought of them sooner. Her understanding must have been delighted: her life expectancy had transformed itself into an instinct for survival, giving rise to a kind of selfishness that was, all things considered, beneficial. Did one not have to begin by saving one's own life before attempting to save those of others? Of course, there remained the ultimate sacrifice, but even to reach that point, one had to make sure one was still breathing, posthumous heroism being nothing more than a figment of the imagination.

What was happening over there, in that nightclub, within those four walls, where, in an overcrowded

space, several hundred young people had been thinking only of enjoying themselves, paying not the slightest attention to the possibility of a catastrophe, let alone one of this nature? Elise shuddered at the mere prospect, not because she herself might have been there, but because those who had invited her to accompany them only a few hours earlier were there.

Just as she decided to open the window, her phone vibrated. Florence was sending her several links. Elise sat back down on the floor. They were very short videos, offering brief glimpses of the nature of the events unfolding, probably the same footage being shown repeatedly on the news channels. A few minutes earlier, Elise herself had visited those same social media platforms, eventually acknowledging that what could be found there was confusingly alarming without providing anything particularly precise. According to Florence's comments, at least those clips had the merit, in their own way, of serving as warnings, while also enabling the news channels to advise viewers living in the affected area to remain safely inside their homes.

Among them, one clip offered only a brief glimpse of several men dressed in black, apparently carrying

automatic weapons slung over their shoulders. Elise was suspicious of such images, particularly since the advent of AI. All this visual material transmitted through screens could be the result of various forms of manipulation, or might even correspond to entirely different circumstances, having nothing whatsoever to do with the events currently unfolding in Saint-Jean-d'Angély.

Elise asked Florence whether everything was all right on their side. Florence began by replying that they would feel better, much better even, if Elise were with them at that moment. Still, they knew she was only a block away. Besides, for the time being, the gunshots had ceased, replaced by cries for help which did not appear to be receiving any response, since they could still be heard.

Florence, continuing to communicate by text message, expressed concern in turn about what might have happened to Elise's two friends. Given the circumstances, a nightclub had to be the worst possible place to find oneself. Immediately afterwards, she expressed her concern at not hearing a single siren, neither those of the firefighters nor those of the gendarmerie or the police.

Indeed, before she could communicate her astonishment on that very subject, a female viewer speaking live on BFM, her voice clearly betraying extreme distress, was complaining about the absence of emergency services: an entire town was sending out an SOS, and receiving absolutely no response in return.

17

Elise began by opening the window, as gently as she could. Outside, apart from the cries for help, nothing else could be heard.

Having never experienced war herself, she remembered the accounts of those who had, which she had heard mainly on YouTube, particularly the enemy's practice of using wounded comrades to lure soldiers out of hiding, so that they too could be shot.

For Elise, if that was indeed what was happening, their situation was doubly distressing, first because it meant that potential gunmen were counting on a sense of solidarity that would enable them to claim even more victims, and also because the cries for help, still audible, were evidently not receiving that

very solidarity upon which the gunmen might be relying. In that respect, cruelty and selfishness were passing the ball back and forth. At once, she reproached herself for being so uncompromising, remembering Olivier's words on the subject: true heroes are always those who die in the end, survival and heroism not making particularly good companions. Besides, she should not overlook, in her overly hasty judgements, the fact that those who made up contemporary French society, herself included, even though they complained of supposedly increasing violence, had not, since 1945, been confronted with violence of the kind now unfolding in Saint-Jean-d'Angély on this New Year's Eve.

With the window open, Elise paused. She detected nothing that might suggest any activity whatsoever. It must be said that they were situated in a part of Saint-Jean-d'Angély that was not easily accessible. To reach it, one had to take a road so narrow that it was one-way. She unfastened the hook that joined the two shutters together, extending from one to the other so that, when secured in this way, they formed a single unit. Then, as delicately as possible, she pushed one of them open just a little and glanced outside. The street was plunged into darkness, and

no sign of activity could be detected in the neighbouring houses.

With equal caution, she closed the shutters again and, encouraged by the survey of her surroundings she had just completed, felt capable of reaching Florence, Hervé and Olivier. To do so, she would merely have to retrace her steps to the part of the house where a door gave access to a staircase leading down to the basement. From there, she could leave through another exit at the rear of the house, the one normally used to reach the garden. Once she had taken that route, reaching her parents' house without being noticed would be a mere formality.

She informed Florence of her intentions. For the operation to succeed, they would have to anticipate her arrival. Once again, Elise intended to enter her parents' house through an entrance similar to the one she planned to use to leave Olivier's, also opening onto their garden. But once she reached it, it would be preferable not to find the door locked.

Florence did not reply immediately. Elise imagined that her mother was consulting Hervé and Olivier. Was it really reasonable? Yet how could they suppress what was undoubtedly their desire to have her

beside them, a desire that was equally hers? Besides, as far as the journey was concerned, Elise had made it countless times and knew by heart every step she would have to take to complete it successfully. A few seconds later, Florence authorised her to take what was, all things considered, an extremely limited risk. She merely had to wait a few minutes, giving them time to reach the part of the house where they would await her arrival.

In the basement, Elise opened the door. This time, she dared to venture a little farther outside and noticed nothing, apart from those same cries for help, still numerous, still continuing!

To wait for Florence's go-ahead in greater safety, she did not remain in the doorway any longer. She stepped back into the basement and pushed the door towards its frame without closing it completely. It was at that moment that her mobile phone vibrated. Without questioning it for a single instant, she was convinced that it was Florence, letting her know that all three of them were in position at the agreed location and waiting for her. But to her surprise, it was a video call. One of the two girls was contacting her.

Elise immediately answered, keeping the sound muted for the moment, still careful not to reveal her presence. The footage lasted only a few seconds. The girl who had contacted her had a bruised and swollen face. Although Elise could not hear her, since she had not turned the sound back on, the cries for help expressed by her facial expression were perfectly audible, no doubt they were among those that could still be heard outside. Then, behind her, a man dressed in black suddenly appeared, seized her by the hair and shot her in the head. At that very instant, the corresponding gunshot inevitably rang out through that most extraordinary night.

Elise ended the call and found herself sitting on the floor, without having intended to do so. Her legs, quite literally letting her collapse, had made that decision for her.

18

Elise was sitting in the basement, trembling while berating herself. Only eight days earlier, she had made no secret of her pride at having completed 122 kilometres on Zwift in just under four hours, breaking her personal record. She had told Florence

that achieving such a result required two strong legs, and no ordinary ones at that. What were her legs saying now, those very legs incapable of supporting her, to the point where Elise wondered what means she would still have if, in the minutes to come, circumstances demanded that she flee to save her life; would she have to run on her hands to make her escape?

Nor could she contain her anger towards herself concerning her understanding of willpower. Her willpower was looking rather impressive now, wasn't it! What had she imagined? Shouldn't doing what one loved, while benefiting from ideal conditions, lead one to regard the results obtained, better in this case than the average achieved by other students having to contend with less favourable circumstances, as a kind of logical consequence? After all, with ChatGPT, she had a teacher possessing every possible competence and offering round-the-clock availability, without schedules or moods to impose limitations. From that perspective, wasn't the advantage she claimed to have gained merely, as the expression goes, the bare minimum one could reasonably expect?

Leaning against the wall, Elise made the necessary effort to pull herself upright. Her entire body was trembling. Had she been standing naked in the snow, somewhere in Siberia or the Canadian Far North, she could hardly have trembled any more.

Once standing, she remembered the advice of one of Hervé's friends, who used to say: "When you lose control, to regain at least some measure of it, concentrate on your breathing." And that was precisely what Elise did. At the very beginning of the exercise, she experienced real difficulty coordinating her breathing: either she inhaled far too deeply, or not deeply enough, or she failed to exhale altogether, or exhaled too much. To make matters worse, her heart was racing. Indeed, within her body, her vital organs seemed determined to save their own skins, independently of one another, without taking account of their counterparts, which were just as involved as they were in maintaining that fundamental balance allowing them all to enjoy the life they were, paradoxically, both experiencing and making possible at the same time.

But the process soon began to work. Her body became her body again. Still leaning against the wall, she ventured a few steps, keeping one arm extended

towards that same wall, just in case the balance she was trying to recover, which seemed gradually to be returning, proved to be nothing more than a superficial improvement.

Lying on the floor where she had left it, her mobile phone lit up. It was Florence. Text messages from her mother were piling up, one after another. Her memory reminded her of what she had been preparing to do before seeing that video, namely reach her parents' house and, in the process, those three people who seemed just as vital to her as the organs within her, now surrendering to a state of anarchy among themselves that was, for the moment, particularly unwelcome. Yet what had seemed perfectly ordinary only a few minutes earlier now struck her understanding as an extraordinary feat still to be accomplished. Even replying to Florence, using two trembling hands, was proving no small task.

At the same time, she checked the time on her phone: it was twelve forty-seven a.m. The realisation unsettled her. She steadied herself against the wall. Since the beginning of these events, only forty-seven short minutes had passed, and yet those same forty-seven minutes seemed capable of occupying

more space within her than all eighteen years of her existence.

The sight of her phone also brought the video in which she had witnessed her friend's murder crashing back into her mind, imposing upon her once again the same terrible clarity, intensified by the violence it had revealed.

Elise was seized by violent waves of nausea, forcing her down onto her knees. In that position, she vomited a little, then almost immediately tears began rolling down her cheeks. Her body was beginning, in its own way, a kind of evacuation procedure, as though it intended, in order to face whatever might come next, assuming there was to be a next, to start again on entirely new foundations.

Still kneeling against that same wall, Elise remembered that exactly one year earlier, at approximately the same hour, she had argued with that very same girl, the one who had been tempted by a most dubious invitation, to be consummated on the back seat of a car, and who, ultimately, towards the very end of that other night, had collapsed into Elise's arms, devastated, simply because she had realised

that such a proposition had found a favourable response somewhere within her, that she too was capable of being that kind of girl.

Remembering that episode, Elise could not escape another realisation, one highlighting the strangeness attached to each individual's destiny: it had taken a students' strike for her to turn definitively to ChatGPT in order to study differently; the progress she had made had then flattered her ego to the point of isolating her, so much so that she had refused the invitation to celebrate New Year's Eve with her former friends, whereas a year earlier, the idea of cycling alone in her corner, her attention fixed on an application, would have seemed completely absurd to her. And yet, she now owed her life, among other things, to that very absurdity.

"Elise!"

Hearing her name spoken pulled her out of the stupor in which her emotions were mingling, with varying degrees of harmony, with a few more considered conclusions. When she turned around, Olivier was already kneeling beside her, his arm wrapped around her shoulders.

“Can you walk?” Olivier asked her.

“Not very well!” Elise replied.

Olivier began by helping Elise to her feet, then, still holding her close to him, supporting her by the shoulders, encouraged her to take a few steps.

When Elise suggested joining them in the other house, her parents' home, situated just a short distance from Olivier's, Olivier, together with Hervé and Florence, had first made sure they discussed the matter. As they had agreed, the idea of having Elise beside them could only delight them. But the manoeuvre required to achieve that result would force Elise to cross an exposed area. Was the risk worth taking? Hervé pointed out that, at the same time, despite knowing the route she would have to take by heart, Elise was currently alone. If circumstances brought her face to face with those individuals who appeared to be spreading chaos throughout Saint-Jean-d'Angély, she would have no means of protecting herself other than hiding. But if she were discovered, given the very limited possibilities she had of defending herself, she would almost certainly be facing the worst.

Florence reacted even more forcefully to that suggestion. Even with all four of them together, confronted with what appeared to be military-grade weapons in the hands of individuals prepared to fire indiscriminately, they would be no better equipped to offer even the slightest resistance. At least they would die together. That last remark brought a certain silence among the three of them.

In the end, it was Florence who made the decision. They were not going to argue about it for hours, especially since, some fifty metres away, her daughter was waiting for them to suggest a course of action. She picked up her phone and informed Elise that they would be waiting for her at the basement door, situated, just as at Olivier's house, at the rear of the building and opening onto the garden.

While they waited, Hervé managed to receive the news channels on his iPhone. He was surprised that the relay systems enabling Internet connections were still functioning. Olivier replied that those currently attacking them might themselves need to use those systems, which could explain why the installations remained intact.

On BFM, among other channels, all those gathered around the studio table visibly could not help expressing a certain incomprehension, which they nevertheless tried to handle delicately so as not to offend anyone, particularly those most directly concerned, who were also the victims of what was taking place within the boundaries of this subprefecture. But Saint-Jean-d'Angély, not only, like every town in France and indeed throughout the world, did not deserve such a fate, but, furthermore, even if the suggestion was made with the greatest caution, did not seem to warrant an attack of such relentless intensity, one entirely out of proportion to its attractiveness, in every possible sense of the word. Saint-Jean-d'Angély possessed nothing that could be considered vital to the department, still less to the region. As for the country, without wishing to offend the inhabitants of the town in question, whether Saint-Jean-d'Angély existed or ceased to exist, France would continue to be France.

For several decades, Saint-Jean-d'Angély had been in a state of continuous decline. Indeed, its inhabitants themselves did not hesitate to claim that the town's population could be divided, broadly speaking, into two categories: those who had the means to

leave, whether through qualifications or money, and those who had no choice but to stay, either because they lacked sufficient training to risk starting elsewhere or because they were too old to attempt such an adventure.

The hospital itself had gradually, year after year, lost many of its specialist departments, which had mainly been transferred to Saintes, a little over twenty kilometres from Saint-Jean-d'Angély, where a modern establishment of the same kind had recently been built. In short, the town did not lack everything, but it lacked what was essential, particularly dentists and doctors, and even more so, available jobs.

Images continued to be collected and posted on social media. A little more information was beginning to emerge, particularly because some Internet users, from their rooftops, those who had access to a roof window allowing them to observe without being seen, had filmed several fires. Once the locations had been identified, it became readily apparent that the targeted sites corresponded to the fire station and the gendarmerie barracks. The police station also appeared to be among them. As for

the most impressive blaze, it was located at the site of the hospital.

Still on BFM, those same journalists and other commentators suggested that the extraordinary succession of gunshots heard earlier must somehow be connected to the absence of emergency sirens. At half past midnight, even though events were being reported almost as they unfolded, people were wondering, beyond the question of why this was happening, about the silence that had now descended. What did it mean? The end of this altogether incomprehensible attack, or merely a pause before a second act, apparently no more meaningful than the first?

20

Elise was still unsteady on her feet. Olivier, after making her walk back and forth a few times across his basement so that she could regain some use of her legs as quickly as possible, brought out a garden chair stored there, allowing her to sit down more comfortably than on the bare floor. For this purpose, he used one of those same chairs on which he used to sit during the warmer months to watch his vegetables grow, back when they still grew, and

above all, before tiger mosquitoes had begun plaguing their part of the world.

Having done that, he picked up his mobile phone to call Florence. He could afford to use their phones in this way without taking any risks, since everyone had made sure their devices were set to silent mode. Given the circumstances, an unexpected ringtone could reveal their presence. Besides, and above all, Florence feared that family members and a few friends living farther away, upon discovering what was happening in Saint-Jean-d'Angély, might try to contact them. And at the beginning of this particular year, exceptionally, the customary New Year greetings would have to wait a little while.

Florence answered. Naturally, she was extremely worried: what was happening? Olivier explained the situation, the fate of that girl, one of the two who had come to their house the previous evening to invite Elise to join them in celebrating New Year's Eve at a nightclub, as they had become accustomed to doing over the past two or three years. In response, Olivier heard Florence utter a highly revealing "Oh my God!"

Hervé, upon hearing this information, still glued to his mobile phone, was equally devastated by the

news. He was keeping himself informed of the unfolding events through the news channels. He connected this utterly dreadful information with what was being said on BFM's television panel, namely that nobody knew what a certain substantial fire corresponded to. He concluded that it must be the nightclub, the only establishment of its kind still operating in Saint-Jean-d'Angély and, inevitably, one whose geographical location was not as easily identifiable as those of the gendarmerie, the fire station, the police station and, even more so, the hospital.

Indeed, before Olivier contacted Florence, Hervé had pointed out to her this peculiarity, highly representative of their times, namely that all four of them were at the very heart of the event, yet were managing, with some difficulty, to gather information about it by making, thanks to the technology at their disposal, a virtual leap of just over five hundred kilometres. Thus, from Saint-Jean-d'Angély, one had to travel virtually to Paris in order to be informed, while taking care to remain somewhat cautious about whether these pieces of information

really deserved to be called information, so as to understand approximately what was happening in Saint-Jean-d'Angély.

Moreover, if one combined this peculiarity with an interpretation of a temporal nature, one realised that time in Saint-Jean-d'Angély was being experienced almost simultaneously with time in Paris, at least on BFM's television set, minus the corresponding distances.

Hervé, without mentioning it to Florence, imagined that he could hardly be the only person in town watching a screen, whether on a mobile phone or a television, creating a strange situation in which live coverage and delayed reporting became so intertwined that they risked becoming a source of confusion in many people's minds.

Olivier ended the call. He made a point of reassuring Florence, initially to dissuade her from coming to join them, even though there was a certain logic to such an intention, since the mother appeared to be steadier on her feet than the daughter. But to persuade Florence to remain where she was, Olivier argued that the short journey he himself had made only a few minutes earlier would serve as a way of getting Elise moving again. Those same few minutes,

in his view, would prove particularly useful in helping her emerge from her lethargy. Florence did not accept this strategy without letting out a long sigh. Throughout the fifteen years during which Olivier had accompanied her daughter in his own way, he had never made any mistakes, at least none that could be described as irreversible. And so she decided to draw once again upon that accumulated trust, granting one more approval to the initiative Olivier had devised.

Once the call had ended, Olivier moved towards Elise. She was still sitting on that same chair. When he reached her, he knelt down so that his eyes could meet hers more directly.

"We're going to get moving, my girl!" he began by telling her.

Elise responded simply by fixing her gaze even more deeply upon Olivier's. Knowing her as well as he did, he recognised in her eyes that particular smouldering anger she sometimes experienced, taking care to keep it concealed within herself. Olivier was not mistaken. Elise was angry with herself for having forgotten that the human world could also, quite unexpectedly, take on such a character, and equally

angry with that same human world which, at any moment, could determine her fate to such an extent that she was entitled to wonder whether she possessed the necessary means to make her life truly her own.

“Come on, let's go!”

Olivier took Elise by the hand. From her responsiveness, he noticed that she was already reacting much more effectively than when he had first reached her. After a few steps, she let go of his hand. Together, they then moved towards that same door, the one leading from the basement into the garden. Taking her by the waist, Olivier made it clear to Elise that he intended to go ahead and scout the way.

Outside, he could see nothing, but his attention was caught by an assortment of distant buzzing sounds, gradually growing louder until they dominated the surrounding space. Since the gunfire had ceased, only cries for help had been heard, and even those, over the past few minutes, had lost some of their initial intensity, raising fears of the worst for those uttering them. Thus, a certain silence had reclaimed its place.

Olivier quickly realised that they were drones, having heard such machines flying before. Without hesitating any further, he made use of the half-second available to them to throw them both to the ground. One of the drones crashed into Florence and Hervé's house, triggering a violent explosion. Several others struck nearby, producing the same consequences, all amid an unbearable uproar that caused them both to lose consciousness.

21

Lieutenant Mathieu Amant was returning from Paris with his squadron, exactly thirty-three men, on this New Year's Eve. The previous day, in the late afternoon, they had landed at Le Bourget, arriving from Romania. At the highest levels, both within Europe and NATO, Russia's actions in Ukraine were causing concern. Their mission had lasted three months. For them, it had primarily involved coordinating with the other European and American forces present, so that, should Putin decide to push farther west, they would know exactly what was expected of them. As part of their preparation, they had been taught, above all, how to protect themselves against drones, and how to use them as well. The days of bayonet charges seemed well and truly over.

In Paris, at Le Bourget Airport, a bus was waiting for them. The army had hired a private company to transport them to Bordeaux. Once they reached Bordeaux, they were scheduled to take a break of several hours before continuing to their barracks in Pau. As for their equipment, according to the arrangements made, it would be flown directly to the 1st Parachute Regiment at that same location. In France, they hardly ever travelled with their wea-

pons anymore, except on surveillance missions, particularly at the Sanctuary of Lourdes, where, whenever the possibility of terrorist attacks was considered greater than usual, the authorities, to guard against any unpleasant surprises, intensified the measures designed to increase vigilance, notably by raising the Vigipirate security alert level.

Mathieu Amant was twenty-five years old and had been promoted to lieutenant two years earlier.

A brilliant student, he had managed, at seventeen, to obtain his scientific baccalaureate with highest honours. As his mother was a general practitioner and his father a cardiologist, he had gravitated towards a similar course of study rather than truly deciding upon it himself. He therefore enrolled at the University of Bordeaux to study medicine in turn. He was admitted into the second year. During the summer holidays that followed, the prospect of continuing his studies, lacking any genuine motivation from the outset, began at least to lose its sense of inevitability. At nineteen and a few months, he acknowledged that the path he had chosen was not truly his own.

On this subject, he never expressed the slightest reproach towards his parents: they had allowed him

complete freedom. He could have chosen to become a plumber, a mechanic or a teacher. If, as the saying went, those professions could enable him to achieve a certain balance in his existence, without necessarily speaking of happiness, they would never have dreamed of challenging his decision. Naturally, his choice to study medicine had not displeased them, not so much because they were doctors themselves, but because they felt their son possessed the necessary abilities, first to complete those famous ten years of study, and then to become, ultimately, a healthcare professional of a particularly respectable standard.

When the time came to return to university, at the very entrance to the building, he suddenly found himself frozen. Two of his fellow students, standing beside him at that moment, became concerned: what was happening to him? For several minutes, he remained almost paralysed, staring straight ahead. He would later say of that moment that he had been trying to distinguish, within that other space lodged inside each of us, a possible horizon offering some prospect of a future, but that particular blue sky had appeared empty to him. Worse still, the ground beneath his feet, which, even symbolically, had

enabled him to remain standing, suddenly seemed flat, and he became convinced that if he crossed that boundary, he would enter a world where, upon reaching its farthest edge, he would be condemned to fall endlessly.

"I'm giving up medicine!" he declared. His fellow students tried to persuade him to think it over: such a decision, in their opinion, deserved careful consideration of the advantages and disadvantages. That first year of medical school, so difficult to complete successfully, all the effort he had devoted to making it his own, surely justified taking a moment, giving himself time. But Mathieu Amant immediately sensed that such time would take advantage of the pause to put him back on the very tracks he was determined to escape. This change of direction imposed itself upon him. Its arrival was no coincidence: it took hold of him at a moment in his life when Mathieu Amant was gradually, unconsciously, following a process that was leading him to take possession of himself.

As with any explosion, a spark had been necessary. The one that triggered this upheaval within him had appeared the previous day, in a supermarket. Walking through the aisles, he had become aware that

what was being offered there, under the guise of food, consisted largely of things that could hardly be considered suitable for the human body. Everything that, sooner or later, would damage the health of the men and women consuming it occupied those shelves, whether sugar and salt added to foods that naturally contained nowhere near such quantities, fats, alcohol or animal flesh. All that was missing to complete the picture was a tobacconist and a drug dealer. A conclusion imposed itself upon his mind: what was the point of treating people if their environment, in obedience to so many competing interests, contributed to making them ill?

Throughout the day, he wandered through the streets of Bordeaux. Whenever he raised his head, the sky, this time the one stretching above everyone, awakened within him something resembling a need for transcendence, giving rise to an obvious conclusion: he would become either a priest or a soldier. In one street, on his right, stood a small church; a little farther along, on the opposite side, an official building could be seen, displaying the French flag. His choice was made in that instant or, more precisely, that very choice decided for him:

the tricolour banner tipped the balance in its favour, at the expense of religion.

"Lieutenant, Lieutenant, look to the left, what's happening over there?"

Corporal Amery's question pulled Mathieu Amant out of his lethargy, a state bordering on half-sleep. They were on the motorway, some 130 kilometres from Bordeaux. A road sign had just indicated an exit towards Saint-Jean-d'Angély, that very town from which a multitude of blazing fires could be seen, giving the impression of an enormous conflagration seemingly engulfing its entire territory.

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"Very well, Colonel, thank you."

Immediately after seeing what was happening in Saint-Jean-d'Angély, Lieutenant Mathieu Amant decided to contact his superior, Colonel Imbert. It was precisely one o'clock in the morning. The colonel was celebrating New Year's Eve with friends near Pau and, since he shared a certain affinity with this senior officer, Amant knew that he could call him at any hour in an emergency. Indeed, Imbert usually switched off his mobile phone only when he was in close proximity to his men and, conversely, made

sure to keep it switched on around the clock whenever he was away from them.

Lieutenant Amant had quickly earned the appreciation of some for his spirit of initiative, and the dislike of others for that very same quality, depending on their individual sensibilities. Although he knew he had to obey orders, he never agreed to honour them without first confronting them with the realities of the moment. Indeed, on this subject, Imbert had explained to him that a good officer must also be capable of not following commands to the letter. A proper balance was necessary between those who regarded their superiors' instructions as gospel and those few others who did whatever they pleased. When close to the enemy, while keeping one's mission firmly in mind, one had to be prepared, in order to accomplish it more effectively, to enrich it with personal initiatives, sometimes even contrary to what had been specifically ordered. That was precisely what Mathieu Amant did on January 1, 2027.

The previous year, he had spent three weeks at the Saintes Air Base, a training establishment where it was thought that practical accounts given by soldiers returning from missions would help students either discover a vocation or discourage a few naive

dreamers who saw in the soldier's profession nothing but the advantages provided, among other things, by the prestige of the uniform and, incidentally, by a guaranteed salary.

Mathieu Amant had returned from Africa four months earlier. He was therefore invited to share his experience. When he had arrived on that continent, France was, at that very time, organising its withdrawal. He had contributed, in his modest capacity, to ensuring that this definitive departure proceeded as smoothly as possible.

At Saintes, during that same period, on New Year's Eve, those same students, upon learning that he would be spending the evening alone, invited him to make the transition from 2025 to 2026 in their company. They chose a nightclub, already frequented and appreciated by some of them, located in Saint-Jean-d'Angély.

The evening passed without excess. He drank no alcohol, nor did he consume those other substances that, for a while, made you something other than what you were, only for you to find yourself, once their effects had worn off, even less than what you had been originally. For Mathieu Amant, those substances were equivalent to the strategy adopted by

a prisoner who had somewhat lost his mind and imagined he could escape captivity by running as fast as possible around his cell. The walls of one form of escape had nothing to envy those of the other.

On the morning of that January 1, he had merely noticed a girl who appeared as distressed as she was desperate, being cared for by someone who was presumably a friend, nestled in her arms. With a simple glance, he had offered the latter his help. Without using any more words than he had, she indicated that she had the situation under control and thanked him with a smile. Mathieu Amant had not been indifferent to her beauty, while finding himself amused by that fleeting expression of interest, which seemed entirely unconcerned with his opinion as it took possession of him. The features and figure of this unknown young woman awakened a certain attraction within him, without his having requested it in the slightest, something that displeased him. Something inside him seemed to be monopolising his attention. Some people would not have hesitated to call it love at first sight. Mathieu Amant would have replied that life was counting on his body to continue itself, and that therefore love had to be made. Beauty, in this respect, knew how to be persuasive:

this other duty ensured, through such means, that it became even more evident. A passing of the baton was required with every generation. Others, in this particular case his father and mother, had agreed to that very same transition which had enabled him to come into the world. He was now old enough to take action himself, which made him, whether he wished it or not, mechanically susceptible to that other omnipresence embodied, this time, by life itself, and by the desires it knew how to convey on its own behalf, in order to perpetuate itself.

Personally, he knew that, given the path he had chosen as his vocation, he could promise nothing. Yes, there would be departures; as for returns, they would remain permanently uncertain. Already, two human beings worried about his fate whenever he went into the field, namely his parents. He saw no justification for increasing the number of those people.

The driver, as Mathieu Amant had requested, promised to leave the motorway at Saintes and head towards the air base. Mathieu Amant then addressed the men under his command, calling for silence. Ever since they had spotted Saint-Jean-d'Angély in flames from the motorway, comments had been

flying in every direction. Inside the bus, the noise had become so great that nobody could hear themselves speak. Naturally, everyone had rushed to their mobile phones, fearing a large-scale attack across the entire country. The weeks they had spent in Romania, preparing for a possible Russian assault, had fostered a certain paranoia among them, but apparently, only this town seemed to have been affected.

Mathieu Amant raised his voice. A few seconds later, had a fly managed to survive the month of January and found its way into that bus, there was no doubt that everyone would have heard it

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Lieutenant Mathieu Amant asked the bus driver to stop about a hundred metres from the air base. The base was situated outside Saintes, beside the main road leading towards Bordeaux. They would cover the remaining distance on foot.

This decision was made because, from where they stopped, they could already make out numerous flashing emergency lights at the entrance to the base. Even though it was the middle of the night,

since it was only twenty past one, silhouettes could also be discerned despite the darkness. A security cordon had evidently been established. Mathieu Amant was convinced that they would not be allowed to park there, even for the few minutes needed to get off the bus, especially since they were not expected.

Between Saint-Jean-d'Angély and Saintes, they had managed to gather a few pieces of information about what they had seen from the motorway, using the same means available to any ordinary citizen. The television installed at the front of the bus was switched on. They went straight to the news channels. A brief discussion arose among them, some claiming that BFM was more reliable than LCI, others maintaining the opposite. Mathieu Amant put an end to the disagreement by switching to Franceinfo.

No, it was not simply a fire. Countless gunshots had been heard, initially at the twelve strokes of midnight marking the beginning of 2027. Then, after a period of relative calm, a very large number of explosions had been heard about thirty minutes later, followed once again by gunfire. Since then, silence had returned. Added to this was the fact that, since

those same explosions, it had become impossible to contact the inhabitants of the town, just as they themselves apparently could no longer communicate with the outside world. Evidently, the relay stations enabling mobile phones and Internet connections to function had, at the very least, been damaged, if not completely destroyed. The only accounts now available came from a few individuals located several kilometres from Saint-Jean-d'Angély, who could testify solely to what they were hearing, relying on nothing more than their own sense of hearing.

In the studio, the journalists, surrounded by several commentators, could not conceal their unease. Did they not belong to one of the most powerful countries in the world? That country had just suffered an unimaginable event, whose scale appeared, at first sight, comparable to that of the German attack in 1940, and yet they were currently incapable of saying anything genuinely precise about it. In the eyes of those watching their television screens, this helplessness suggested that whatever was unfolding over there, in the Saintonge region, must be suffering from a degree of severity probably proportionate to the inability of these news professionals to describe it.

Indeed, criticism was pouring into their studios. Some people called in hoping to obtain information because they had family members or friends in Saint-Jean-d'Angély; others merely sought to satisfy a particularly inappropriate curiosity. In every case, the journalists were accused of a certain incompetence, an accusation that was entirely unjustified. Not only had there been no warning signs suggesting a catastrophe of such magnitude, but their inability to comment upon it was directly proportional both to the surprise caused by the catastrophe itself and to its consequences, which appeared to be assuming frankly surreal proportions. Added to this was the fact that many journalists working for these news channels maintained regular contact with certain government officials, some of whom operated within particularly discreet departments. Had an episode of this kind been feared in those circles, the journalists would surely have heard something about it. In that case, even without knowing anything more, at least this tragedy, for a tragedy it certainly was, would not have left them so paralysed, as though it had appeared out of nowhere.

“Lieutenant Amant, I was supposed to be heading for Bordeaux, but given the circumstances, I thought we might be of some use.”

The base commander stared at him for a few moments, then looked over Mathieu Amant's shoulder. The lieutenant and his men had managed to make their way through. At the entrance to the base, absolute chaos reigned. Mathieu Amant noticed members of the gendarmerie mingling with firefighters and personnel from other emergency services. An atmosphere of panic also emanated from the gathering. A monster had entered the room, everyone knew it was there, but none of them could locate it precisely or identify its characteristics.

“You haven't got your equipment!” the commander immediately remarked with concern.

“No, we're returning from Romania. It's being flown directly back to Pau.”

The commander let out a long sigh. At that moment, he was short of everything, and above all, information. What could he do with reinforcements deprived of the very means that would make them genuinely useful? It was true that this small group of soldiers, beyond their red berets, could make an impression, but they resembled, above all, a battle

tank from which the wheels and the cannon had been removed.

"Follow me!"

Mathieu Amant signalled to his men to move forward. Briefly, he checked their reactions, not to his command, but to the kind of disorder visible all around them. Without their saying a word, he could guess what they were thinking, since he knew them well, having spent several months in their company twenty-four hours a day. They had imagined themselves experiencing circumstances of this kind in Romania, only to encounter complete calm, sometimes synonymous with profound boredom, to the point of becoming convinced that they were serving no purpose whatsoever. And now, finally back in France, where, according to a certain understanding established since 1945, nothing of this kind was supposed to happen, they found themselves confronted with an episode of a particular kind of violence, the very kind they should, according to another logic, have been facing at the borders of Western Europe.

“It's complete chaos here, yes, yes! Very well, Colonel!”

Lieutenant Mathieu Amant, accompanied by Corporal Amery, was standing near the base's armoury, in a long corridor, with its door now some ten metres away from them, when they heard that rather explicit conclusion.

To satisfy the entirely justified suspicions of the commander of the base, who wanted more information, Mathieu Amant had taken the initiative of calling Colonel Imbert once again, briefly explaining their situation, then handing the phone to the man in charge of the establishment. Once that conversation had ended, and after expressing his respect to the man who remained his superior officer, the commander handed the mobile phone back to Mathieu Amant, visibly convinced.

The conversation between the commander and Colonel Imbert had consisted of two parts: the first in which Colonel Imbert provided the guarantees the commander had requested, the second in which a more or less adequate description of the events was given, the use of the word “chaos” sparing the commander the need to provide more precise details, which, moreover, he did not possess at that moment.

A few minutes earlier, during the journey from the entrance of the base to the armoury, the commander had abruptly stopped halfway, drawn the revolver he had until then been carrying at his waist and, without giving the slightest indication that he was about to do so, pointed it straight at Mathieu Amant. Around him, calls for calm could be heard here and there. The commander argued, quite rightly, that he could not simply take their word for it: they might be who they claimed to be, or they might actually be among those bastards who had spread death and destruction some twenty kilometres away. Their red berets were not enough to inspire such confidence in him. With his hands raised, Lieutenant Mathieu Amant first endeavoured to reassure him: yes, he understood his scepticism; he could contact his superior, who would confirm that they were genuine French soldiers, paratroopers to be precise. The commander agreed, taking the mobile phone offered by Mathieu Amant with his left hand while keeping his weapon pointed at him with the other, Mathieu Amant having already made the necessary arrangements to establish the connection. The commander began the conversation with his revolver still aimed at Mathieu Amant, then holstered it and

continued speaking as he walked, gesturing for Mathieu Amant and his men to follow him. He ended the call directly in front of the armoury door.

"How many of you are there exactly?" the commander asked, opening the armoury's reinforced door and then pressing the switch to his right to illuminate the room.

"Thirty-four, sir," Mathieu Amant replied.

"You know, we've become a training base here. Your superior has confirmed that I can trust you and that he takes responsibility for it. I can provide you with old FAMAS rifles; however, as far as ammunition is concerned, you'll have to make do with two hundred rounds per man. I must keep some reserves."

"You store the ammunition in the same place as the weapons?" Corporal Amery asked in surprise.

"Do me a favour and spare me a report!" the commander retorted, realising that the liberty he had taken, believing himself safe from everything, was sheer madness. Had what was happening in Saint-Jean-d'Angély happened in Saintes, and had this very armoury fallen into the wrong hands, it would have offered the attackers some particularly dangerous opportunities.

From the bunch of keys that included the one used to open the armoury door, the commander selected those needed to unlock the padlocks, thereby releasing the steel cables threaded through each FAMAS at the trigger guard. Finally freed from their restraints, the assault rifles were handed over by the commander, one after another, first to Lieutenant Mathieu Amant. From him, they passed through Corporal Amery to the rest of the unit, whose members passed them along, making sure that everyone was equipped.

"I can't even believe what I'm doing," the commander could not help admitting, before continuing: "Only yesterday, to replace one of the refrigerators in our canteen, I had to resign myself to filling out a thousand forms. And now here I am, handing out military weapons to complete strangers." At that thought, he stopped abruptly. "After all, the person you put me through to might be as much a colonel as my grandmother is President of the United States."

"You'd already be dead, sir, if we were among those people. Once the armoury was open, assuming we'd needed you to open it in the first place, we wouldn't have settled for thirty-four FAMAS rifles or two hundred rounds per man. If we were among those

people, believe me, we'd have taken everything, and you wouldn't be alive to realise it."

Corporal Amery replied. With a simple expression, Lieutenant Mathieu Amant made it clear to the commander that he entirely shared that opinion. The commander sighed and shook his head. After all, perhaps what he was experiencing was nothing more than a bad dream, one of those particularly stubborn nightmares, capable of defying what his own eyes, wide open though they were, were showing him.

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Having been equipped with weapons and, more or less, ammunition, they asked the commander not for a description of the situation, since he knew no more about it than what BFM and other news channels were reporting, but for information about the area surrounding Saint-Jean-d'Angély. Given the circumstances and everything that remained unknown about them, he advised them to begin their advance on the ground from Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche, a village located a little over ten kilometres from Saint-Jean-d'Angély. Starting from that distance, especially since they would be advancing on foot,

would give them a better chance of seeing what was coming.

Mathieu Amant wanted to know whether he knew anyone who might be able to guide them, particularly at night, from that starting point to Saint-Jean-d'Angély. The commander thought for a moment. A few weeks earlier, he had met a certain André Pardieu, one of the deputy mayors of the very village towards which he was about to advise them to head. The commander had a passion that he was careful to conceal, lest it undermine his warrior image: he loved pétanque and never missed a competition. André Pardieu was equally enthusiastic about the game. They had therefore faced each other during a tournament organised in Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche itself. The commander had suffered a thorough defeat, which had not prevented them from getting acquainted afterwards over a drink. The winner, wishing to soften the psychological frustration caused by the score, had graciously invited the loser to join him. The man had struck him as respectable and might perhaps, judging by what little he had seen of him, possess that sense of duty which encourages people to volunteer.

Using his iPhone, he searched for the man's contact details, professional ones in this case. He knew that Pardieu was a bricklayer by trade. Having obtained his mobile number, he immediately tried to contact him. It was 1:52 a.m. Normally, everyone stayed up late on New Year's Eve, and some did not go to bed at all, but on this particular night, considering what was happening, especially for those living so close to the events, one might well wonder who could possibly manage to fall asleep under such circumstances. Unsurprisingly, the man answered.

The commander explained what he was preparing to undertake, once again finding it difficult to believe what he was allowing himself to do. After handing out military weapons left and right, here he was asking a civilian to accompany soldiers. Some might have said that they had taken leave of their senses, although that still required them to have their heads firmly attached to their shoulders.

André Pardieu replied that he did not feel capable, nor was he of an age, to undertake such an enterprise. On the other hand, two of his nephews, both under thirty and hunters by occupation, knew the surrounding countryside like the backs of their

hands and might possibly be able to fulfil that role. At first glance, he believed them capable of it.

Apparently, the two young men were standing beside him, probably having taken part in a family New Year's Eve celebration. The commander heard André Pardieu explain to them the nature of the request he had just received. Would they be willing to take over from him, acting as scouts in his place, while understanding that, if they agreed, they should not expect a pleasure trip? A discussion followed, lasting two or three minutes. Finally, André Pardieu resumed his conversation with the commander: his nephews agreed, on condition that they were allowed to arm themselves with their hunting rifles. The commander, who had switched on the loudspeaker, looked at both Mathieu Amant and Corporal Amery. All three had the same reaction: what were they resigning themselves to? Without wishing to make a bad pun, their military formation was becoming a little more winged and wounded with every passing moment. Mathieu Amant gave his approval. In any case, did they have any other options?

Mathieu Amant immediately contacted the bus driver who had brought them from Le Bourget Airport to Saintes, hoping he had not gone too far, intending

to ask him to transport them to Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche. In reality, after dropping them off, the driver had decided to take his compulsory rest break right in front of the military base, where Mathieu Amant and his men still were. Two things had appealed to him: first, there was a parking area large enough to accommodate a bus, and secondly, just a few metres away, numerous gendarmes and soldiers could be seen, suggesting that, in proportion to their visible presence, he could count on a considerable degree of security.

Persuading the same man to drive them as close as possible to Saint-Jean-d'Angély proved no easy task, indeed, it rapidly became a mission impossible. Besides, suspecting that the man was not particularly adventurous, Mathieu Amant had deliberately avoided making the request over the telephone, fearing, quite rightly, that the driver might make himself scarce rather than risk being persuaded. He therefore went to meet him in the car park where the bus was stationed, accompanied by Corporal Amery. He was relieved to discover that the driver, at least by remaining nearby, appeared to offer a certain degree of availability. Mathieu Amant would

soon discover that the man was not prepared to make himself any more accommodating.

Some of the men under his command knew how to drive this kind of vehicle. They therefore had greater need of the bus itself than of the man who had been driving it until then, and that was precisely how matters unfolded. Exasperated as the minutes passed, it was now 2:11 a.m., Mathieu Amant informed the reluctant driver that his bus was being requisitioned and that he could seek refuge inside the base. The base commander let out yet another sigh, wondering what on earth he was supposed to do with the fellow. All that had been missing was a civilian inside a military barracks on high alert to make his situation even more incoherent.

At 2:23 a.m., they set off towards Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche. The man behind the wheel made sure to remove his red beret and take off his camouflage jacket. He needed to look like an ordinary civilian. The rest of the unit adopted positions inside the bus that prevented them from being seen from outside. The strategy seemed rather absurd to everyone, but what was not absurd at that hour? If they encountered any wrongdoers along the way, those individuals could hardly fail to question the legitimacy

of a bus travelling in the middle of the night, apparently carrying nobody but its driver and heading towards a place any sensible person would currently refuse to approach. There was no longer merely something suspicious beneath the surface: the suspicious thing had become so enormous that the surface itself had disappeared beneath it.

While the men were settling into the bus, a few minutes earlier, Corporal Amery had pointed out to Mathieu Amant that they risked finding themselves under enemy fire without helmets or bulletproof vests, possessing, by way of first-aid kits to deal with possible injuries, nothing more than a few dressings and an ordinary disinfectant. At least they had managed to obtain a backpack each, a 1954 model, into which they placed a bottle of water and a few bananas taken from the canteen's supplies.

Mathieu Amant said nothing. Strangely, his thoughts turned to Verdun, to the men of 1914, to those circumstances that leave you no choice, in which soldiers must, in order to survive and triumph, transform themselves into warriors.

“What a bloody mess!!”

One of Mathieu Amant's men could not contain his astonishment. It was 2:47 a.m. on January 1, 2027. They had finally reached Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche without encountering any trouble along the way, even surprised that the road had been deserted in both directions. There, Corporal Amery spotted a place where they could park in front of the village cemetery and pointed it out to the man behind the wheel. Finally, they pulled over.

All around them stood dozens of men and women, some helping others, beginning by protecting them from the cold and offering hot drinks as a form of initial assistance. The contrast between the victims and those prepared to help them was striking: some were still almost dressed for an evening celebration, while others were in rags. The miserable appearance they already presented sent a chill down Corporal Amery's spine. Barely three hours had been enough to transform these people's appearances completely. How many times had he and Mathieu Amant reflected that the comfortable standard of living enjoyed by certain countries, including France, paradoxically existed in close proximity to a potential misery of comparable proportions? All it took was

for the structures sustaining that favourable condition to disintegrate, and its opposite would impose itself with a terribly destructive equivalence.

When they stepped off the bus, everyone turned to look at them. Some came forward, clung to them and burst into tears. With a simple glance, Mathieu Amant made it clear to the men under his command that their mission was not to provide emergency assistance, and for good reason, since they lacked the necessary means to do so. Above all, aware of his inability to help in that respect, he made sure that this inability would not be perceived as such by those who were demanding, quite rightly, that someone take care of them. A certain tension could be felt all around them; there was no need for their helplessness in this regard to become too apparent.

In single file, they proceeded down the main street. At every step, people called out to them, sometimes angrily. Where were the emergency services? How could such an event possibly occur in an advanced society like France? Mathieu Amant said nothing, not knowing what he was about to face and taking care not to make any promises. The best course was to remain silent.

It was near the church in Saint-Hilaire-de-Ville-franche that they met André Pardieu's two nephews, who recognised them as arranged.

Immediately, as they shook hands, they introduced themselves simply by giving their first names: one was Julien, the other Jérôme. Mathieu Amant took an immediate liking to them. They possessed that kind of friendliness associated not with people who never tremble, but with those who are not afraid of being afraid. They shook hands with the entire group, overlooking none of its members.

The two young men were dressed as hunters, equipped with their firearms and backpacks. Once the greetings were over, they immediately turned to the reason they had been called upon.

"We're going to take you along the route we know best. It's approximately thirteen kilometres. If everything goes well, we could reach Saint-Jean-d'Angély by dawn," the one called Jérôme explained, before continuing: "People have been arriving from there, some on foot, others by bicycle. They've avoided motor vehicles so they wouldn't be spotted. I don't know whether you've had time to speak to any of them?" he asked.

Mathieu Amant indicated with a simple shake of his head that he had not. Jérôme Pardieu then continued: “From what people are saying, it's the Apocalypse over there. Because of the explosions, fires started in loads of houses, then spread from one house to another. Apparently, there are dead bodies everywhere, seriously wounded people left abandoned. They say you can hear screaming in every direction, hell on earth, basically!”

Mathieu Amant looked at Corporal Amery and realised that he was not the only one who had heard this description. Several of the men had caught it as well. He could not allow a certain paralysis to take hold within their ranks; the best thing was to get moving as quickly as possible. With a gesture, Mathieu Amant indicated to the two brothers that it was time to advance.

Instructions followed in rapid succession. They would proceed in single file, in groups of six. Each group would remain about ten metres behind the one preceding it, so that in the event of an ambush, only those positioned at the front would be hit. Naturally, absolute silence was required. Mathieu Amant gave the order to load their weapons, and immediately the distinctive metallic clicks could be

heard as cartridges were chambered in the automatic rifles. Once this had been done, everyone spent a few moments checking one another. Their rifles were now ready for use, but their index fingers were not to rest on the triggers, especially during a night march, when someone might stumble and, through that loss of balance, accidentally discharge a weapon, potentially causing serious damage.

Corporal Amery took the lead of the column, accompanied by Jérôme Pardieu, while Mathieu Amant kept his brother beside him, both positioned in the middle of the column. In the event of an ambush, if those at the front were eliminated, a command structure would thus remain in place, along with someone capable of continuing to indicate the route towards Saint-Jean-d'Angély.

For just under a kilometre, they walked along a departmental road, then turned right onto a dirt track.

Mathieu Amant cast a discreet glance behind him. The men for whom he was responsible were following. The lights of Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche were already fading into the distance. Farther away, towards Saintes, the first flashing emergency lights were finally becoming visible. A response was beginning to take shape. He and his men were positioned

at its very forefront. The worst thing about the situation was not that he considered himself at war, but that he had absolutely no idea who the enemies were that had compelled him to declare it.

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"Don't scream!"

When Elise regained consciousness, she felt as though she were being crushed beneath a weight that prevented her from getting up. No matter how hard she struggled, it kept her firmly pinned face down against the ground. Finally, when someone relieved her of whatever was holding her down, she recognised her mother's voice. Freed, she rolled over and sat up, supporting herself on her hands placed behind her, catching her breath. Elise realised that what had prevented her from moving was none other than Olivier's body.

"He's dead," Florence whispered to her, keeping one hand over her daughter's mouth so that the emotion she could not possibly avoid feeling would remain discreet. Then, with her other hand, placing her index finger in that particular position used to demand silence, she ordered Elise to remain quiet.

When Elise met her mother's gaze, she was surprised by the expression she saw there: an authority she had never known in her before.

As Elise's mind finally began functioning again, she became aware of gunfire. The detonations gradually grew more distinct. Yet, although their reverberations were considerable, her hearing did not immediately allow her to register them for what they were, the unconsciousness that had possessed her only moments earlier, depriving her of her most basic faculties, still retaining some hold over her.

"Get up, we have to hide!" This time, her mother took both her hands and helped her to her feet, then immediately led her towards a part of Olivier's basement offering two advantages. The first was that it was situated on the opposite side from their own house, which had been in flames since the explosion. If the fire were to spread, as there was every reason to fear, at least they would be less immediately exposed to it. The second was that this was one of those places where Olivier, like so many others, accumulated all manner of belongings, things one keeps because one cannot bring oneself to take them to the recycling centre, while knowing perfectly well that one will never use them again.

All around them, the gunfire grew more frequent and closer, accompanied by screams. Florence ordered Elise to help her. The increasing proximity of the danger meant they had no time to waste. They began by moving a few cardboard boxes, then immediately occupied the space where they had been stored, taking care to pull the boxes back around themselves so that they could no longer be seen, making use of the darkness surrounding them. Concealed in this way, it would be impossible to notice them if someone entering the basement, even equipped with a light, carried out only a cursory inspection. Furthermore, Olivier's body, left there at the entrance, might ultimately convince anyone searching for survivors that not a living soul remained inside.

Elise and Florence stayed there for quite some time, huddled against one another. Behind their boxes, they had arranged a gap as narrow as possible, allowing them to see anything that might appear through the basement door.

Throughout those thirty minutes, Florence made sure not to let herself be overwhelmed by her grief. She still had to breathe, even to the point of exasperation. Olivier, having gone to fetch Elise, had not

returned. Unable to bear it any longer, she had decided, despite Hervé's advice to the contrary, to go and meet them. Hervé had not tried any harder to stop her, persuading himself that she was not taking much of a risk. It was only halfway there that a device struck their house, a device she did not identify as a drone, being too preoccupied with the overwhelming need to find her daughter. She paid no attention to the distinctive buzzing sounds associated with their flight.

The force of the explosion threw her to the ground. The lawn on which she landed helped cushion the impact. Moreover, as she fell onto slightly lower ground, having just crossed the fence separating the two properties, the various materials hurled through the air passed over her head. Those same materials struck Olivier's house with full force, killing him when one of them hit him at the back of the neck.

Crawling, she made her way to Olivier's house. Gunshots began ringing out everywhere, in countless numbers. It was as she crossed the entrance that she discovered Olivier, with Elise beneath him, struggling in vain to free herself.

Holding Elise close to her, she thought of nothing but survival, survival by every possible means, even to the point of refusing to help those calling for assistance. The same scenario witnessed a little earlier was being repeated by their tormentors, even more openly and cynically, but this time with a change of strategy: this series of explosions had been designed by those same individuals to drive people out of their homes. Florence guessed that many would flee their burning houses rather than be burned alive inside them. Once outside, they would become targets.

Then, although until that moment she had resisted doing so, forbidding herself to entertain that particular concern, she began to worry about Hervé. When their house was struck, he had been inside. She even found herself wishing, tormented by that very hope, that he had not survived, for fear of the condition he might otherwise be in. More than that, the Florence she was becoming at breakneck speed was devouring the woman she had always believed herself to be.

When Florence checked her mobile phone, it showed her the time: 1:45 a.m.

For precisely twenty minutes, not a single gunshot had been heard outside. Without knowing what made her so utterly convinced, she was certain that their attackers had not only completed their atrocities, but had also left the area. In her opinion, reaching that conclusion required neither a prophet nor a particularly astute analyst. All she had to do was recall their actions. They had probably reached a level of destruction sufficient to satisfy their tastes. That level was easy enough to assess, all one had to do was look and listen. What else was there left to destroy in Saint-Jean-d'Angély? First came the gunfire, just after midnight, then explosions so numerous that they gave the impression of one single explosion spreading endlessly. Then came gunfire again, apparently continuing until the very last round of ammunition had been spent, like a fireworks display, criminal in nature this time, setting off its final rockets simultaneously and cumulatively, so as not to leave the participants with any sense of unfinished business.

She emerged alone from the place where they had been hiding. For the moment, she did not ask Elise

to follow her; her daughter did not even react when Florence began to extricate herself from their hiding place. Here again, recognising that Elise was in a state of shock did not require the expertise of a leading psychologist. Only the previous day, at the age of eighteen, her daughter had been studying with the help of ChatGPT, alone in her bedroom, playing the guitar, or rather attempting, with limited success, to play it, and preparing to complete 100 kilometres on her bicycle using the Zwift application, determined to cycle that distance as a way of moving from 2026 into 2027. Elise had been evolving in a world shaped to her liking, a world that suggested to her that this was the world itself. Evidently, a considerable part of that world, and no insignificant part at that, did not share her approach. Elise was not merely falling from a great height, but, through the emptiness now becoming apparent within her, was accelerating the speed of that very fall, a fall destined to make her crash, unless she reacted as quickly as possible, to make her crash in another, paradoxical way, by causing her to fall endlessly within herself, until she disappeared.

As Florence moved forward, she realised that, on the side where their house stood, the fire consuming it had reached a kind of maximum intensity. Unsurprisingly, she detected a characteristic sound of activity above her: debris projected from their house had struck the roof of Olivier's, giving the flames, through its accumulation, the means to spread. Although a light rain was falling outside, resembling the activity of some enormous misting device, the intensity of the fires was such that it could do nothing to contain their advance.

Her decision was made. Beyond the fire that would soon spread throughout Olivier's house, smoke, probably toxic to varying degrees, was obscuring the outside and beginning to penetrate the basement where they still found themselves. She had to act. Florence returned to Elise.

“Get up, we're moving!” When Florence obtained no reaction from her daughter, she slapped her twice, fairly hard. Elise received the blows as though she had suddenly been struck by an electric shock. She stared at her mother; a certain astonishment was visible on her face.

“Get up, we're moving!” she repeated.

Elise managed to stand up without assistance, pushed aside the cardboard boxes that had concealed her moments earlier and cleared a passage for herself. She coughed slightly: smoke was increasingly filling the space around them. Florence, having anticipated their needs, handed her one of the jackets Olivier used to wear in winter, warm and more or less waterproof, when carrying out the gardening tasks appropriate to that season. Elise, who felt as much at home at Olivier's as she did at her parents', retrieved the pair of boots she sometimes wore when helping the master of the house with his crops, whenever rain had soaked the ground and made appropriate footwear necessary. Without further comment, she handed Florence Olivier's boots, which were too large for her. Using newspapers and other advertising leaflets, which she stuffed into the boots, this makeshift adjustment brought them more or less down to the size of Florence's feet. Florence retrieved a large rubbish bag, pierced holes in its bottom and sides to allow her head and arms through, and used it to protect herself, at least to some extent, from the rain.

Before venturing outside, they covered Olivier's body with a tarpaulin stored nearby. They exchanged a brief glance. Later, they would grant their respective grief that entirely legitimate right to sadden them, in proportion to the feelings they had for Olivier, while both were already tormented by immense pain.

Finally, they left the basement without another word. This time, it was Elise who took the initiative, choosing a direction she had considered when the electricity had failed and the first bursts of automatic gunfire had been heard. First, they would reach the far end of the garden, cross the fence, make their way through the adjoining pastures and finally enter the marshes. Once outside, they were certain that the smoke would at least provide them with a screen, provided they did not linger. Naturally, if breathing it caused them to cough uncontrollably, the advantage gained on one side would be squandered on the other.

When they reached the fence, the first boundary they had to cross, they turned around. Both were crying, and the smoke was not solely responsible for their tears. Their house was burning, but far worse,

beyond all possible comparison, the body of the father of one and the husband of the other was being consumed by the flames. They crossed that first obstacle sobbing. Following the fence, now on the opposite side, they reached the small footbridge providing access to the pasture. Once they had advanced into it, they again allowed themselves a sweeping view of Saint-Jean-d'Angély. The town was nothing but flames. Then, as they resumed running, Elise was seized by infinite sorrow, infinite incomprehension, infinite anger and, finally, infinite hatred.

29

In the marshes, Florence and Elise were not alone: strangers were also attempting to escape the town. As far as possible, they avoided getting too close to anyone they did not know, having no idea whom they might be dealing with. Everywhere, rather imprudently in their opinion, mobile phones being used as torches could be seen. They decided to use the same means of illumination only very briefly, whenever Elise, despite her perfect knowledge of the area,

could no longer manage to guide them through the darkness.

The most difficult part was reaching the Boutonne. This was the river that ran through Saint-Jean-d'Angély. Although, in January, successive downpours had caused it to overflow its banks, a certain footpath remained alongside its course, presenting genuine difficulties in places on this moonless night, but nevertheless offering a route with a definite direction: at least by following it upstream, one knew where one was heading. By contrast, venturing deep into the marshes not only carried a considerable risk of getting lost, made worse by the almost complete lack of visibility, but one could also become so deeply bogged down that one might be condemned to spend the entire night immobilised, trapped in freezing mud, waiting for daylight and for someone to spot you, assuming anyone did, and that whoever found you was willing to help. For when it came to assistance, it was to be expected that, given the circumstances, on this first morning of January, when the sun finally provided Saint-Jean-d'Angély with the necessary light, the emergency services would have no shortage of work.

At various moments, whenever they saw people approaching, they made sure to hide. Naturally, others had chosen this riverbank for precisely the same advantages, and they were forced to make these somewhat hurried retreats on several occasions.

It was as they approached Julien-de-l'Escap, which, judging by the fires already visible in the distance, appeared to have suffered a fate similar to that of Saint-Jean-d'Angély, this small village being barely two kilometres away, that they heard cries for help. Elise switched on her phone for just a few seconds, hoping to establish whom, or what, they might have to deal with. They spotted a man in the river, clinging to a root to avoid being swept away by the current, apparently at the end of his strength, paralysed by water at less than ten degrees Celsius.

At first, they looked at one another: should they take the risk of rescuing him? Then, as though by mutual agreement, without exchanging a single word on the subject, they arrived at the same conclusion: what had become of them? Had two hours been enough to irreversibly dissolve those fundamental principles that made them, at least supposedly, civilised human beings?

Florence immediately surveyed their surroundings. The Boutonne was now receding; in mid-December, after reaching a higher water level, it had deposited numerous branches along its banks. Among them, Florence spotted a substantial piece of wood, long enough to use to pull the man, currently in such a desperate situation, back onto dry land. They therefore held out one end of the branch to him while the two of them, pulling with all their strength from the opposite end, supplied the effort needed to make the rescue successful. After about a minute, they finally managed to bring the stranger onto the bank.

On all fours on the ground, the man initially said nothing, then slowly stood up, trembling from head to toe. His body would have to methodically recover a temperature more compatible with the requirements of a human organism. He remained for a few seconds with his hands resting on his knees, as people often do when out of breath, then suddenly, without the slightest warning, took a step forward, apparently intending to seize Elise. But still suffering from the conditions he had just endured, the suddenness he believed he was displaying in order to surprise her existed only in the commands issued by his brain, commands his body was unable to carry

out, deprived of its usual abilities and still far from having recovered from its immersion in the Boutonne.

"Give me your jacket, bitch, I'm freezing to death!" he suddenly ordered Elise. She, obeying nothing more than a survival reflex which, in this instance, consisted of stepping backwards, instinctively gave a start corresponding to the surprise inflicted upon her. She lost her balance and fell backwards. In an almost simultaneous movement, her back having barely touched the ground, she thrust her left foot towards a particular place where the male anatomy is known to display a certain sensitivity. The man cried out in pain.

Florence, who had been both surprised and concerned moments earlier by the fact that the individual had shown them no gratitude whatsoever, was still holding the piece of wood. She used the very branch with which they had rescued him from the water to strike the man who had intended to assault her daughter, delivering a first blow to his lower back, then continuing to strike him with a ferocity that no longer had anything to do with deterrence.

“Mum, stop, stop!” Elise ordered, having barely regained her footing, placing her arms over her mother's as she reached her, trying to make her stop hitting the man, who was now lying on the ground, motionless. When Elise switched on her phone to check his condition, blood was flowing from the back of his neck.

“You've killed him,” Elise warned.

“So what!” Florence replied in an extremely aggressive tone, already using that same piece of wood as a lever to push the man's body towards the river. She carried the action through to its conclusion, continuing until the body of the man she had rescued barely a minute earlier slowly slid down the bank, without a sound, and disappeared, carried away by the dark waters.

“Everyone is killing everyone tonight,” Florence added.

Elise took the branch from her mother's hands and threw it aside, then grasped her mother by the arm, at the elbow.

“Come on, Mum, we can't stay here,” she told her.

“Everyone is killing everyone,” Florence repeated several times.

Elise realised that the state of shock which had paralysed her some twenty minutes earlier had now passed from her to her mother. Without really understanding why, Elise thought of the morning that could not fail to arrive, wondering whether this night, which possessed them now, both within themselves and outside, might not resist the light of day until the very end of their lives.

30

Once again, Elise and Florence encountered strangers, or at least made out silhouettes, heard footsteps accompanied by whispers, and hid once more. For the moment, when it came to all those people about whom they knew nothing, they were the ones who spotted others before being spotted themselves, already dreading the moment when that very situation might be reversed.

If, before the incident with the stranger who had attacked them, they had preferred to avoid all contact, this time, in view of what they had experienced, their determination to do so had become even stronger.

Still following the Boutonne, when they reached the bridge over which trains had travelled half a century

earlier, Elise decided to make her way to the old railway line. Once there, she intended to follow it until they reached a small country road, one she knew well from having cycled along it back when she still rode outdoors. That road suited their strategy, since it was bordered by hedges capable of providing the concealment they needed. Then, step by step, following that same narrow road, they would head towards a departmental road which, being surrounded by wooded areas on either side, offered places where they could hide should an emergency require it.

Elise quickly realised, without mentioning it to her mother, that they could no longer continue moving through the marshes. Their objective was to put distance between themselves and Saint-Jean-d'Angély, which, whenever they turned around to assess the town's condition, now resembled nothing more than an enormous blazing inferno. Here, the dangers were multiple, too numerous and too unpredictable for them not to end up falling victim to one of them, whatever form it might take. A different strategy was necessary.

The difficulty lay in reaching the old railway line. To do so, they had to climb a particularly steep slope,

some thirty metres long. During the dry season, the undertaking would have been a mere formality, but in the rainy season, it was an entirely different matter. By clinging to the shrubs along the sides, they managed to haul themselves to the top. Their greatest fear was that one of them might slip and drag the other down, or that, in attempting to hold on to the one who was falling, both might ultimately suffer the same fate, and that this unforeseen mishap, after a dangerous tumble down the slope, might injure them, when the circumstances allowed for neither minor nor serious injuries.

"Don't move, and put your hands up!"

The command came from behind them. Elise and Florence, taken by surprise, had no choice but to obey. They did not even feel afraid, fear having been unable to find within them the few seconds it needed to make itself felt.

"It's two ladies, they're not armed. Sorry, ladies, but in the dark, you never know who you're dealing with," explained the man who, only moments earlier, had ordered them to stop and raise their hands. Immediately after illuminating them with a torch and then doing the same to himself, by way of introduction, he switched it off, regaining his invisibility.

When they turned around, lowering their arms, they saw several individuals approaching them. They were armed and were surrounding some children, each concealed beneath a blanket to protect them from the cold and from the fine drizzle that continued to fall without interruption.

"We're hunters. We're patrolling the area, trying to get those who've managed to escape to safety." At that point, he paused very briefly. "We found these little girls. We tried to find out where they came from, but they won't speak, probably in shock. It wouldn't take much to understand why," he said.

The man explaining their actions was the same one who had demanded that they prove they posed no threat. Despite the darkness, it was possible to make out that he was young, probably under thirty. Gradually, Elise and Florence managed to see them all more clearly. There were eight of them, accompanying six children.

"Come with us, we're going to take you to Sainte-Même," he explained. Then he took out a radio communication device.

"Mobile phones no longer work within a ten-kilometre radius of Saint-Jean-d'Angély, so we're

using the equipment we normally use when hunting," he told them.

With the young man walking immediately beside them, Florence and Elise heard him establish contact over the radio as they began following him. From the exchange, they gathered that arrangements were being made to take care of them and, more specifically, to organise their transport.

"A truck is coming to pick you up. As I said, we're taking you to Sainte-Même. They're setting up a crisis response centre there, and some emergency services have already arrived."

Neither Elise nor Florence made any comment. They were vaguely familiar with the village of Sainte-Même. Unless one happened to be among its few inhabitants, it was one of those small villages one sometimes passed through but never stopped in.

Having reached the end of the old railway line, they took up position there. A few minutes later, four vehicles appeared: two trucks, with a pickup truck carrying armed men in front of them and another behind. Making sure they remained stationary for as little time as possible, the men encouraged Florence and Elise, along with the children accompanying

them, to climb into the back. A man already positioned inside extended his hand to each of them in turn to help them aboard. The young man joined them.

"Lie down!" he ordered.

Everyone lay down without further explanation. The young man tapped his index finger against the sides surrounding them in that position, which were no more than seventy centimetres high. From the sound, Florence and Elise recognised the metallic response. Above those sides, a tarpaulin reacted noticeably to the movements of air generated by the moving truck. They immediately understood that, in the event of gunfire, bullets would have greater difficulty penetrating the metal sides, giving them some protection, whereas those same bullets would make short work of the very tarpaulin now flapping noisily in the wind.

31

When a little girl caught her eye, Elise immediately held out her arms to her, making sure to accompany the gesture with a very restrained smile, expressing

not joy but understanding. The little girl immediately got down on all fours, realising that her head must not rise above the metal side of the truck, and made her way towards Elise, nestling against her.

Florence, ever since what she had allowed herself to do to the stranger who had attempted to attack Elise, had remained silent, as though possessed by a kind of stupor arising directly from her reaction towards that man. She who, only two hours earlier, while 2026 was still the current year, had been known as much for her gentleness as for the little inclination she claimed to possess towards violence, had become a killer. As though, by yielding to that impulse, a nature within her, far more closely bound to her true identity than the courtesy for which she was appreciated, had taken command of her being. In the blink of an eye, all the civility accumulated under the pressure of an upbringing maintained throughout her entire existence had been swept aside, as though with a wave of the hand, giving way to those reflexes that females, mothers by nature, whatever their species, display when someone dares to touch their young.

Seeing what Elise had done, she acted in the same way towards the other little girls, who in turn came to join them and benefit from their physical closeness. Some moved towards Elise, others towards Florence. The young man who had stopped them earlier raised an approving thumb, accompanied by a smile directed primarily at Elise, no doubt because, in his eyes, she had been the originator of this initiative, or perhaps for other reasons, Elise's beauty, even under such circumstances, surely having something to do with that preference.

The truck travelled for only about ten minutes and encountered no difficulties. At the end of that journey, it was stopped at a first checkpoint, also apparently established only recently by what seemed to be hunters. It then had to stop a second time for the same reason, this time a few dozen metres from Sainte-Même. Once they had passed through, the young man informed them that they could sit up again.

When the truck finally came to a stop, several women approached and opened its rear doors. Its engine was not even switched off, since it was understood that it would be setting off again immediately, other people undoubtedly needing to be rescued.

It was 2:16 a.m. Those who were trying to help them believed that many people were still hiding, provided the conditions allowing them to do so had not been destroyed by the numerous fires consuming Saint-Jean-d'Angély, making it impossible for most people to remain in the places where they naturally felt safest.

"Follow me!" Once they had climbed down, Florence and Elise continued following that same young man, who appeared to be from the area, judging by his knowledge of where to go. The little girls held their hands while also holding hands with one another, since there were too many of them for each to maintain direct contact with the two women, forming a chain among themselves so that the connection established during the journey would remain unbroken.

Around them, fire engines were finally beginning to arrive. Members of the gendarmerie could also be seen. Nothing was genuinely organised; the event was, in the broadest sense, something being endured rather than controlled. Indeed, everyone was aware that the worst was still to come.

"They've come from Saintes. They say those from Rochefort, Niort and Angoulême are already on their way. Apparently, even Bordeaux and Poitiers

are sending reinforcements," the young man informed them, before continuing. "You have to understand, the local gendarmes and firefighters have taken a terrible beating. They tried to intervene immediately, but they were ambushed. Apparently, there isn't a single survivor. A real slaughter!"

Elise tried to catch the young man's eye. The little girls beside her had ears, and although, for the moment, they remained speechless, they were not deaf. The word "slaughter" was hardly appropriate. Realising his mistake, he returned her gaze with a confused, almost embarrassed expression.

Florence and Elise were quickly called upon to help. Given the circumstances, there was no other way to provide assistance. Those who could still stand on their own two feet would have to manage as best they could. The task ahead promised to be as immense as it was painful. This time, as far as precipitation was concerned, the light mist had given way to genuine rain, and the temperature did not exceed six degrees Celsius.

Florence and Elise were directed towards an improvised location where coffee was beginning to be prepared. For the time being, no food would be offered

to adults, since the little that was available was being reserved for the children.

Once there, they were approached by two gendarmes. Their faces were more stern than solemn, making it clear that, for the moment, they did not have the means to indulge anyone's tears and complaints. Although they knew they belonged to a nation that would soon respond, and was already responding, the coming hours remained uncertain. They lacked everything, and the possibility of another attack had not been ruled out. In this very village, the efforts at organisation to which so many people were devoting themselves amounted, in reality, to one enormous mess, with neither rhyme nor reason. And if their tormentors were to attack them again, the hunters would represent nothing more than additional potential victims. The hunting rifles slung over their shoulders would make little difference.

The gendarmes wanted to know their identities. Did they have any identification papers? They asked the question simply because they could hardly avoid asking it, already suspecting what the answer would be. Everyone had fled that hell in such haste that documents establishing their identities had become a very secondary concern.

Inside, it was felt that the bond Florence and Elise had managed to establish with the little girls was worth making use of. They were therefore asked to look after them. The children needed to be dried, changed, assuming clothes could be found in their sizes, which seemed unlikely, comforted as much as possible, and asked their names and where they lived. In short, they needed to be cared for as well as circumstances allowed, while waiting for the situation to improve, if it was going to improve at all. On that subject, nobody could claim the slightest certainty.

32

In the Paris newsrooms, there was hesitation about rebroadcasting certain scenes circulating on the Internet, especially since, at the highest levels of government, more precisely at the Élysée Palace, despite the freedom traditionally granted to the press, and without issuing any official prohibitions on the matter, the media organisations concerned were urged to act responsibly. This applied particularly to one specific sequence in which dogs, left to fend for

themselves and driven mad by the flames surrounding them, attacked a child who had been abandoned in the street and could not have been more than three years old.

Indeed, at that level of government, on the express orders of the man in charge, a point would be made, when the time came, of finding the person who had chosen above all to film that atrocity rather than come to the child's assistance. That failure to assist a person in danger was going to cost him dearly. In response to this recommendation from the State, the media organisations responsible for informing the general public assured the authorities that they would fulfil their responsibilities, and that was precisely what they did, limiting themselves to broadcasting material capable of informing or warning the public, while setting aside what was not worth seeing, unless one happened to be among those directly confronted with the scenes in question, whose eyes had no choice but to show them what they were being forced to endure.

The authorities, without even being any better informed, immediately declared a state of emergency.

It was now exactly two o'clock in the morning. At the very beginning of these events, the President of

the Republic had been spending the evening with his closest collaborators when, at ten minutes past midnight, he was informed that something serious was happening in Charente-Maritime. He wanted to know what was meant by serious, but nobody could tell him anything more, except that large numbers of gunshots could be heard in Saint-Jean-d'Angély, screams as well, and that little else was known. Two hours later, the increasingly exasperated Head of State knew scarcely any more.

Naturally, the gendarmerie units from the surrounding small towns were immediately mobilised, if only to establish what was happening. When no further news came from those units, and the few personnel who had remained on duty at the gendarmerie stations concerned knew nothing more, having lost all contact with their colleagues sent into the field, it became clear that an unprecedented and extremely serious event was unfolding.

Once again, without possessing any reliable information, it was suspected that the firefighters must have suffered similar consequences. Such conclusions followed almost logically: if the firefighters had retained the necessary freedom of action to intervene, the videos posted on social media would not

have shown so many fires and so few members of those emergency services attempting to extinguish them.

People said of this president that he was unlike the others, being far more comfortable with action than with speeches. So much so that during official ceremonies, he would appoint a distinguished figure, an intellectual, an artist, or a retired senior officer from the army or gendarmerie, to pay tribute, sometimes to the nation itself on July 14, sometimes to those who had given their lives so that this collective adventure, the French nation in this particular instance, might continue, on May 8 and November 11.

His political opponents criticised him for this. The thirty-eight-year-old man had won people over through his simplicity. In March 2025, he had been elected President of the Republic following an early election, his predecessor having been forced to step down for health reasons. He had made headlines two years earlier, when he was still only a mayor, by deciding to build a dam in his municipality and flood three hectares of land in order to create a water reservoir, with the aim of developing vegetable cultivation over an area of ten hectares and making vegetables more affordable for his fellow citizens.

Naturally, he found himself on the wrong side of the law, but refused to give way, not hesitating to march at the head of demonstrations, or to retain that same leadership when clashes broke out with the representatives of the law assigned to demolish what had been built. This man pursued his ideas to their conclusion, and people liked that. He therefore found himself very high in the opinion polls even before officially declaring his candidacy. In the first round of the election, the forty-two per cent of the vote he obtained was regarded as a genuine landslide of support; in the second round, facing Marine Le Pen, his sixty-three per cent victory seemed almost a formality.

His energy was combined with a particularly direct pragmatism, leading him to display genuine inventiveness when it came to finding solutions, even if that meant rolling up his sleeves to demonstrate that those solutions were realistic. Thus, during the great fires of July and August, he was seen alongside firefighters in the forests of the Landes, battling the flames, just as he could be found on farms seeking to develop new approaches, in companies suffering from staff shortages, or even in secondary schools, promoting new ways of learning

there too. For him, every lesson had to be conveyed through example. Each time, he involved in his demonstrations men and women known for their scepticism, particularly towards his own proposals, in order to demonstrate to them in practice that actions combined with determination, fuelled by a genuine desire to succeed, were worth more than a thousand words. Some said of him that he possessed one of those old-fashioned temperaments, embodied particularly by military leaders who placed themselves at the forefront of every assault, leading their men, so that if anyone was to be killed, they would be the first among them, and preferably the only one.

At half past two, no longer able to bear knowing nothing beyond the fact that something appalling was taking place in Saint-Jean-d'Angély, Didier Répprisson, the ninth President of the Fifth Republic since Charles de Gaulle, brought the flat of his hand down on his desk, merely informing those gathered around him at that hour that he had made his decision, in one of those abrupt sentences so characteristic of him.

"I'm going there!"

Everyone around Didier Réprisson tried to dissuade him. Not only should he not travel to Saint-Jean-d'Angély at such an hour in his capacity as Head of State. Not only could his safety not be guaranteed, but furthermore, as president, he could hardly be left without protection, and that necessity would create problems in terms of personnel, those more or less present on the ground, more or less numerous, more or less trained for this kind of mission and, given the circumstances, already overwhelmed.

He thought exactly the opposite. Saint-Jean-d'Angély was not merely Saint-Jean-d'Angély, the entirety of France stood all around it, and he was mobilising himself in order to mobilise everyone else more effectively. As for his personal safety, considering what people must be experiencing down there, it was the least of his concerns.

And so it was at 3:12 a.m. that his helicopter took off from the lawns of the Élysée Palace. Once beyond Parisian airspace, three Tiger attack helicopters were to provide his immediate protection. Above them, Rafale fighter jets would carry out a similar mission at a higher altitude. As the crow flies, Paris was four hundred kilometres from Saint-

Jean-d'Angély, so it would take them a little under two hours to reach their destination.

The first pieces of information concerning Saint-Jean-d'Angély were trickling in, particularly from neighbouring municipalities. The inhabitants of the surrounding areas were beginning to organise themselves, taking care of those who had managed to escape from the town. The bulk of the gendarmerie and police forces urgently dispatched as reinforcements were, for the time being, still keeping their distance from the town itself, concentrating first on securing the nearby villages, particularly those where popular initiatives, even if they were proving beneficial in the immediate circumstances and inspired by good intentions, were being organised. The aim was to take command of these efforts as quickly as possible, since, in the eyes of the law enforcement authorities, legitimate authority needed to regain control without delay.

During the flight, Didier Réprisson expressed his astonishment. France possessed, naturally enough, intelligence services staffed by highly experienced professionals, undoubtedly among the most capable on the planet. How was it possible that they had seen nothing coming?

One of the senior intelligence officials, seated beside him in the helicopter, having been mobilised at short notice for his security and feeling understandably rather alone, since he was not accompanied by any of his colleagues, put forward an initial hypothesis.

By definition, intelligence investigations focused on possibilities that possessed, in the minds of those conducting them, a certain underlying rationality, and what was happening in Saint-Jean-d'Angély did not correspond to any such criterion. Even without more detailed information, the scale of the attack was as considerable as the place targeted appeared, according to their analyses, to be almost literally a thousand miles away from being a likely target for an assault of such magnitude. Thus, within the intelligence services, it had been assumed, first of all, that a criminal operation on such a scale could hardly be organised without attracting attention beforehand, but above all that such an operation would scarcely be conceivable against a town like Saint-Jean-d'Angély, which possessed no intrinsic value, in any sense of the word, that might justify its being subjected to violence on such a scale.

A few minutes of silence followed between the two men, or rather a kind of silence, since the helicopter's turbines were far from sparing them the decibels, forcing them to wear headsets and communicate through microphones.

Didier Réprisson then asked the same official whether he could estimate the number of attackers. The man did not reply immediately, then, after some reflection, assured him that around thirty would have been more than sufficient to produce such a result.

Didier Réprisson opened his eyes wide. Only thirty, he retorted. The official continued, explaining that he had taken two essential factors into account in arriving at that figure: firstly, Saint-Jean-d'Angély, having no infrastructure considered particularly sensitive, was poorly protected. He knew the town at least by reputation, since some of his subordinates had grown up in that part of France. Nor was it afflicted by particularly serious criminal activity. The offences committed there were, all things considered, relatively insignificant, and a combination of gendarmes and national and municipal police officers should, in theory, have been sufficient to contain the few more dubious impulses that might arise.

Finally, two additional characteristics had to be considered together. First, the assault had taken place on December 31 and had targeted men and women who had never even contemplated the possibility that anything resembling what they were now experiencing might one day be inflicted upon them.

Taking these factors into account, it was easy enough to acknowledge that causing widespread destruction did not necessarily require the mobilisation of an entire regiment.

Didier Réprisson continued. Before taking off, one of his collaborators had suggested that the fires had probably been started by drones. His interlocutor replied first that he had heard the same information and that it seemed plausible to him. Didier Réprisson, remaining speechless at that suggestion, made it clear through his reaction that he wanted to hear more. The official began his explanation by pointing out something obvious. Having made several visits to Ukraine, he had learned that drones were all the more effective when they had only a short distance to travel to reach their targets. The closer they were to what they were intended to strike, the less time, consequently, their intended victims had to see them coming.

In Saint-Jean-d'Angély, the local economy was unfortunately far from flourishing, indeed it was in outright decline, and many buildings originally intended for commercial or professional use stood empty. Since they were being offered either for sale or for rent without finding anyone interested, they represented just as many locations that could potentially be converted into drone launch sites. Added to this was the fact that, after nine o'clock in the evening, particularly during the week, virtually no activity could be observed in the town's streets. This characteristic was a double-edged sword: handled badly, it could make it easier for someone to spot you, but exploited intelligently, it could just as easily render you invisible.

Once again, the two men became absorbed in their own thoughts, then Didier Réprisson asked another question, one that required only a single word to express.

"Why!"

The man facing him in the helicopter shrugged his shoulders and made a characteristic gesture with his hands, turning them upwards and opening them towards the president, thereby indicating that he had absolutely no idea.

34

Corporal-Chef Amery was the first to hear the Tiger helicopters. It was 5:25 a.m. A few moments earlier, Jérôme Pardieu had informed him that they were less than two kilometres from Saint-Jean-d'Angély. At that distance, the town could no longer be distinguished by the particular characteristics that made it a town in its own right, but rather by more or less distinct pockets of fire forming one vast inferno.

During their advance, they encountered numerous women, men and children, utterly disoriented. Some were injured, many were suffering from respiratory problems, still affected by the smoke they had inhaled. A few became angry, demanding assistance, particularly when they were accompanied by children. Mathieu Amant, like the rest of his men, even reluctantly, using an authority that sometimes became threatening, ordered them to walk towards Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche. There, they would be taken care of.

Through these encounters, they were able to gather several pieces of information. The first was reassuring: if survivors were travelling along the same route in the opposite direction, it might mean that those who had spread death throughout Saint-Jean-d'Angély had moved on to something else, perhaps being too concerned with ensuring their escape. They also received a number of accounts, however brief. Mathieu Amant took each of them into consideration, stopping momentarily to listen more carefully, while at the same time refusing to allow the column formed by his men to interrupt its progress simply so that everyone could learn a little more. He alone therefore absorbed what was being communicated to him, at breakneck speed, while making sure to thank those who shared their experiences. Then, running, he would catch up with the men under his command. Moving back along the column, while ensuring, as the kilometres passed, that the distances maintained between each group were gradually reduced, he repeated to his men what he had learned, refusing to leave them in uncertainty, but also refusing to let them believe that what he had been told should be regarded as information of absolute reliability.

According to the accounts they received, corpses were numerous in the streets, but above all, solidarity no longer existed, not because the men and women of Saint-Jean-d'Angély had lost all humanity, but because, not knowing who was truly responsible for what they were suffering, they distrusted everyone. It was enough for someone to be pointed out, for any number of reasons, for the mere accusation to become a condemnation regarded as legitimate. An individual seen carrying a weapon, whether a knife or an old hunting rifle, might be enough for people to declare him an accomplice. Another, simply because he was unknown to those living in a particular part of Saint-Jean-d'Angély, whatever that neighbourhood might be, could find himself subjected to swift popular vengeance merely for being somewhere he did not belong, since this was hardly the time for nocturnal strolls. Those who seized him, having lived in the same area for many years, turned that difference alone into a verdict in its own right, accompanied by a sentence carried out in the very same impulse.

Old grudges were also resurfacing. Some exploited the opportunity to point the finger at a neighbour considered undesirable, and sometimes the

neighbour in question, doing exactly the same in return, caused the two of them, by accusing each other so vehemently, to be regarded, to their great misfortune, as accomplices. This could lead to their being beaten, sometimes to death. Finally, there remained that need to attach a face to this tragedy that had come from nowhere, several faces if possible, regardless of whether the accusations made had any foundation whatsoever. These methods, rather than proving effective, succeeded above all in creating a few more victims.

When the Tiger helicopter flew over them, it must have spotted the small troop, for it made a wide sweeping turn, preparing to follow once again the same course it had just taken. Mathieu Amant, positioned further back, reacted less quickly than Corporal-Chef Amery, who immediately threw Jérôme Pardieu to the ground, unwilling to let the presence of a civilian among them create any doubt in the pilot's mind. Then he removed his red beret and, holding it with both hands, raised it above his head.

His heart was pounding. If the pilot judged his attempt insufficiently convincing, given the circumstances and the firepower of such aircraft, he would be torn to pieces. The helicopter switched on

its searchlights, its nose pointing towards the ground, and made a second pass over them at reduced speed. Clearly, it had spotted not only Corporal-Chef Amery but the entire column. Apparently convinced of the legitimacy of the armed men beneath him, the helicopter came to a hover some fifty metres away, remaining stationary for around fifteen seconds. The message was clear: it was indicating the direction they should take.

"Good work," Mathieu Amant assured him, having reached his side, giving him a pat on the shoulder while running and ordering the rest of the troop to adopt the same pace.

"I nearly shit myself," Corporal-Chef Amery admitted to Jérôme Pardieu, who was having some difficulty shaking off a terror as sudden as it had been justified. Although he was not a professional soldier, Jérôme understood perfectly well that, for a few seconds, their fate had hung in the balance. Had the pilot decided otherwise, considering the calibre of the weapons carried by that aircraft, they would have been blown to pieces.

They covered the 1,300 metres separating them from their destination at a good pace, the path beneath their feet being stable enough to maintain

their speed. The same Tiger helicopter flew over them twice more, both to confirm the direction they were currently following at a run and to ensure their protection.

Finally, they reached a field where a civilian helicopter had apparently just landed. Its rotor blades were still turning. A Tiger helicopter was preparing to do the same, while two other aircraft of the same type circled around them, one closer than the other, ensuring the security of the perimeter.

Mathieu Amant, accompanied by his troop, went towards those who had just landed, walking this time, partly to recover their breath. Some of his men, quite naturally and without being ordered to do so, positioned themselves at various locations to establish observation posts.

For his part, he hoped to obtain information that might prove more reliable than what he had gathered here and there during their journey from Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche to Saint-Jean-d'Angély. He also hoped, if possible, to receive clear orders, for he had not forgotten his rank: he was only a lieutenant. His ability to take the initiative, if it was to remain productive, would at some point need to be given direction. He knew that what he lacked,

in order to act judiciously, was that overall view of the situation, the very perspective that enables a person to act with a proper understanding of the circumstances.

"Gentlemen, you've arrived at just the right moment!"

Mathieu Amant froze. He immediately recognised the individual who had addressed that remark to him. It was Didier Réprisson, the Head of State. He was wearing jeans and a jacket. The peak of a cap partly concealed his face, but not enough to prevent Mathieu from recognising him.

Mathieu Amant remained astonished for a few moments. What was this man doing in this part of the world, at a time like this?

When the president extended his hand, Mathieu recovered his composure, first giving the regulation military salute before placing his hand in the one offered to him, while uttering these words, so entirely appropriate to the circumstances:

"We are at your command, Mr President."

Didier Réprisson was ordered to wear a bulletproof vest and a helmet. For the moment, he refused, since the soldiers surrounding him had nothing but their berets and camouflage jackets, utterly ineffective should they come under attack. That same equipment was already struggling to protect them from the cold of the approaching winter dawn.

Mathieu Amant then intervened: they were not the President of the Republic. If something unfortunate happened to them, they would be replaced, without an election being necessary. Whereas if the Head of State were killed, beyond the death of an individual, every death deserving to be treated with respect, regardless of the person concerned, the institutions themselves would be thrown into disarray. He then added that, given the circumstances, it would serve no purpose to lose, at the very beginning of a battle about which they knew nothing, and above all what kind of war it might lead them into, the very person embodying the highest authority.

Didier Réprisson nodded in silence, without taking his eyes off Mathieu Amant. Without further comment, he agreed to put on the equipment as recommended, then could not suppress a smile, even though the event confronting them all hardly lent

itself to amusement. He was thinking about that mechanism generally associated with such events, which almost automatically brought certain men and women to the forefront, individuals who imposed themselves almost naturally by revealing a kind of reasoning capable of dealing with the disorder unfolding around them, a reasoning synonymous with common sense proving itself in real time.

Thus, all it took was for the established rules to be overturned for these few individuals to emerge. As though that particular quality within them, lying dormant, had never known how to reveal its potential while life continued along its more or less ordinary course.

The personnel accompanying Didier Réprisson possessed means of communication that Mathieu Amant, for the moment, lacked. They therefore learned that the A10 motorway had just been closed to the public. Those already travelling on it before that decision would be redirected towards other roads. From Bordeaux and Paris, reinforcements were already setting out for Saint-Jean-d'Angély. The motorway was essential because it offered two lanes of traffic in each direction, making it possible to reserve one for the movement of priority units

while having all the others wait on the second until their services were required.

This time, France was setting itself in motion. In less than three minutes, it would be six o'clock in the morning on January 1, 2027. It could hardly be said that the country was getting back on its feet, since, at that very moment, nobody knew whether it was still standing.

Nevertheless, alongside this determination to respond, another concern was asserting itself. Although Saint-Jean-d'Angély clearly had to be helped, this subprefecture had, according to the latest census, some 7,218 inhabitants. It was also necessary to recognise that Saint-Jean-d'Angély, without showing the slightest indifference towards what its inhabitants were currently enduring, which unquestionably demanded an appropriate response, did not possess any infrastructure on its territory that could be described as vital to the nation.

Consequently, at the highest levels of government, because of what was taking place there, and above all because of the suspicious inconsistency perceived in the choice of target, those responsible for establishing a defensive strategy, since a counterattack was not yet possible, concluded that Saint-

Jean-d'Angély, from a strategic standpoint and according to any rational assessment, did not warrant such a fate.

They therefore feared that the extreme nature of the operation had been deliberately intended to draw a corresponding proportion of all available resources towards the town. The general emotion felt throughout the country would compel the authorities to provide assistance to the men and women of Saint-Jean-d'Angély on a comparable scale, thereby leaving a certain freedom of action elsewhere for those who had committed the worst atrocities in Saint-Jean-d'Angély, allowing them this time to attack installations of the utmost importance.

They therefore had to contend with a strategy divided into two parts, both requiring considerable numbers of personnel: establishing increased protection around the most sensitive locations, while at the same time providing themselves with the means to assist the inhabitants of Saint-Jean-d'Angély.

Real-time satellite imagery provided an overall view of the town. From these images, they could see, with terrifying clarity, that Saint-Jean-d'Angély had become nothing more than an immense inferno. Once this information had been taken into account, it was

decided to operate according to the direction of the wind. It was blowing due west, and although its maximum speed was not particularly high, with gusts not exceeding thirty kilometres per hour, the fire absolutely had to be approached from the side where the smoke presented the fewest difficulties.

Indeed, the helicopter pilots took care not to venture into the areas where the smoke threatened to deprive them of all visibility. One of them even claimed that the present condition of Saint-Jean-d'Angély reminded him of black-and-white documentaries about the Second World War, recounting the fate of Dresden on a certain February 14, 1945.

It was quickly established that, from their present position, they needed to reach the motorway access point situated outside Saint-Jean-d'Angély, to the south-southwest. Didier Réprisson was offered the possibility of travelling there by helicopter, but he preferred to accompany the small troop commanded by Mathieu Amant.

The lieutenant was less than enthusiastic about the idea. Since transporting his thirty or so men by helicopter would be too complicated, he calculated that they would have a little under three kilometres to cover in order to reach the designated location,

amounting to a good hour's walk. This would allow them to monitor the surrounding area, while the Tiger helicopters possessed the necessary capabilities to provide the more general protection required for that sector.

Mathieu Amant warned that they could not rule out the possibility of an unfortunate encounter. Should that happen, they would be forced to fight in darkness, since full daylight was still a good hour away, without the appropriate equipment for a confrontation at night, and with the President of the Republic himself among them.

He therefore suggested, with considerable restraint, since he was only a lieutenant and was addressing his superiors, and not just any superiors, given that the highest-ranking of them all was among those present, that it would be more sensible for the Head of State to make that particular journey by air.

The president himself brought the discussion to a close by declaring:

"With my helmet and bulletproof vest, I have nothing to worry about," he suggested, unable to suppress a smile at his own remark.

36

“That's it!”

As little Ambre Litune finished her account, Elise held the child even more tightly against her.

They were all in the village hall of Sainte-Même. Together with Florence and the six little girls, Elise had taken refuge in a corner of the hall, slightly apart from the others, sitting directly on the floor, keeping themselves warm with blankets and other bedcovers, which were being distributed continuously and made available by the inhabitants of this tiny village. Almost all of them had immediately come forward to offer their help, some even taking disaster victims into their own homes, as more and more continued to arrive.

It was 7:31 a.m. Through the windows at the far end of the hall, it was possible to make out that daylight had finally arrived in earnest, its excessively pale light suggesting that the weather outside must be grey.

Two hours earlier, everyone had received a visit from a baker established in a nearby village called Brizambourg. The least that could be said was that he had not arrived empty-handed. In his van, the

very one he ordinarily used for his delivery rounds, he had brought bread, brioches and other chocolate-filled pastries, almost fresh from the oven.

When the idea first came to him, he had been celebrating the New Year when, a few minutes after midnight, he learned through the news channels what was happening in Saint-Jean-d'Angély. Surrounded by his loved ones, he needed a few moments to overcome a feeling of astonishment mixed with an equal degree of stupor, fearing, as anyone surely would, that what was unfolding in Saint-Jean-d'Angély might spread as far as Brizambourg.

The baker then ordered everyone around him to take shelter in his bakery, which was equipped with more secure doors than his home, precautions required by the insurance companies to protect the equipment used in his production. If they were attacked in turn, the assailants would have greater difficulty forcing their way through that entrance. As for the shop itself, he switched off the lights that made his business conspicuous even at night and left the security shutter lowered. Of course, he was under no illusions: if those committing the worst atrocities in Saint-Jean-d'Angély really wanted to

enter his establishment, those few barriers would not delay them for very long.

Once everyone had taken refuge in his bakery, they initially contented themselves with following developments, receiving more or less regular information from the news channels, a television being positioned slightly above head height in his production area. Then, when he learned at around three in the morning that an initial refuge was being improvised in the municipality of Sainte-Même, he immediately mobilised everyone around him, determined to produce as many treats of every kind as possible, already suspecting that, in view of what some people were enduring in Saint-Jean-d'Angély, those who managed to reach Sainte-Même would appreciate them enormously.

When he arrived in Sainte-Même at dawn, he was initially stopped by gendarmes. Already, in this municipality, the checkpoints improvised by the hunters had been taken over by law enforcement. All these representatives of the law were heavily armed, equipped with bulletproof vests and extremely vigilant. Every one of their senses was on alert. They still knew virtually nothing about the tragedy being experienced by thousands of women, men and

children some ten kilometres from their position, and they also imagined that, sooner or later, the perpetrators of this atrocity would have to make their escape. Their paths might therefore cross, making it essential for the gendarmes to maintain the highest possible degree of concentration.

At first, the baker had experienced some difficulty leaving his bakery, his loved ones considering it madness to take to the roads at night under such circumstances. He had merely shrugged at their objections. Why, then, had they helped him produce so much food? He was hardly going to freeze now, paralysed by the thought of what might happen, having already reached the halfway point. Such caution no longer made any sense. He had made a decision, and that decision mechanically imposed a second upon him: to see through what he had undertaken.

As for being afraid, although he was naturally aware that the few kilometres separating Brizambourg from Sainte-Même were not without risk, the man was fifty-five years old. He knew himself to be honest, honest to the greatest extent he could manage. This event offered him the opportunity to become more honest still, by showing courage, and he would not miss that opportunity for anything in

the world, an opportunity that consisted, quite simply, of making himself a better man.

He explained his intentions to the gendarmes, who did not press him for further details, particularly since two of them recognised him. They occasionally bought supplies from his bakery, which, it had to be said, was conveniently situated beside the road, with a car park directly opposite.

The baker did not leave the checkpoint to venture further into Sainte-Même without distributing a few chocolate-filled pastries to those who had stopped him. He took the opportunity to try to learn a little more, but the gendarmes merely confirmed what he already knew: over there, it must be hell.

One gendarme even admitted that he did not feel truly operational, because he could not bring himself to accept that what was happening just ten minutes away by car had to be acknowledged as a reality in its own right.

The baker then stopped his vehicle outside the village hall. Immediately, he had the impression of having entered another country, another dimension. Everywhere, men, women and children, their faces blackened by smoke, stained with mud, their eyes

vacant, visibly in a state of shock, not knowing where to go, were being attended to as best they could.

Since his delivery rounds extended as far as Sainte-Même, his van was recognised. He climbed down and opened the rear doors. Several people took hold of the baskets. Outside, a fine rain was falling, and those precious goods needed to be brought under shelter. Carrying a load himself, he followed the others inside.

Once indoors, he was struck by a kind of misery that was both pervasive and universal. Were they still in France? The question deserved to be asked.

He immediately began handing out the food. Then he noticed two women sitting in a corner of the hall, surrounded by six little girls wrapped in blankets. He approached them and distributed hastily cut pieces of brioche to each of them. When he came to one of the little girls, he wanted to know her name.

"Ambre," she told him. "My name is Ambre."

The baker remained motionless for a second, then turned away, not expressly to continue distributing the food, but so that the little girl would not see him crying.

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Ambre Litune had just finished her piece of brioche. A woman had come by to offer the little girls some hot chocolate and coffee, served at the same temperature, to Elise and Florence, the latter having, for the moment, lost all real responsiveness. Of the six little girls, Ambre seemed the least affected. The other five, although they accepted their pieces of brioche, struggled to eat them and refused the drink they were offered. About twenty minutes earlier, a female gendarme had signalled to Elise, apparently wishing to speak to her away from the children. Elise stood up, promising the little girls nestled against her that she was not leaving them, that she was merely moving some ten metres away and would be back immediately.

Elise first described to the gendarme their own ordeal, then that of the little girls, or at least what she knew of it, which, for the moment, began when the hunters had taken them into their care and ended where they now found themselves, in the village hall alongside her and Florence. Before that initial encounter, Elise explained that she knew nothing about them, neither their identities nor what they

had endured. The gendarme asked whether she could continue keeping a watchful eye on them. Appropriate emergency assistance for situations of this kind was on its way, including psychologists. Until then, the children needed to be kept under close protection. It would be a mistake to believe that only good things would emerge from this apparent wave of solidarity; as the expression went, certain predators might exploit the circumstances to do their shopping. Elise promised the gendarme that she would not take her eyes off the little girls, and the officer thanked her.

When Elise returned to sit down, the little girls nestled against her resumed their places. Florence, beside her, was asleep, and so were those who had curled up against her.

"My parents aren't dead!"

These were the first words Ambre Litune addressed to Elise, who was surprised, since it was the first time one of the little girls had spoken to her. Elise herself had been wondering about both her mother's condition and her own. In turn, without either of them having anticipated it, they had been so overwhelmed by events as to become almost helpless, then capable of reacting, independently of

one another, whenever the situation demanded it. Now Florence seemed to have cast off her moorings and was drifting somewhere within herself. The deaths of Olivier and Hervé had probably caught up with her, whereas Elise, although she could not help grieving, was managing to keep her sorrow under control, suspecting that the presence of the little girls, what they needed from her and what they gave her in return, had something to do with it.

"I'm sorry, I was lost in thought. What were you saying?" Elise replied.

"I said my parents aren't dead!" Ambre Litune repeated.

Faced with the certainty expressed by the little girl, Elise did not know what words to use to encourage her to say more. She therefore relied on the expression she deliberately allowed to appear on her face, one of attentive expectation, hoping it would encourage the child to become more talkative.

"My parents have gone to the USA for work. They're both lawyers. They left me for a month with her parents, friends of theirs."

Ambre pointed to the daughter of the parents in question, who was, for the moment, apparently sleeping deeply in Florence's arms, then continued.

“When the shooting started, we were in her house, in the basement. There's a playroom down there. A grown-up came downstairs, it was her dad. He stayed with us for a while, then, when the shooting stopped, he went back upstairs. He told us he'd be right back, and then there was a really loud noise upstairs, and straight away there was fire.”

Ambre Litune stopped telling her story. Her eyes seemed fixed, and Elise noticed that they no longer allowed the little girl to see what was happening around her, but only to revisit what all six of them had experienced a few hours earlier. It was as though her gaze was no longer directed outwards but turned entirely inwards, like a rear-view mirror, sensitive not to space but to time, and favouring, at that moment, the past over the present.

Then Ambre Litune continued.

“We ran to get out of the basement. The upstairs was on fire. At first there were seven of us, but one of the girls wanted to go back to her parents. She went into the burning house, and then nothing.”

Ambre Litune broke off, visibly shaken. Elise immediately realised that this little girl would need time to come to terms with what she had experien-

ced, fearing that her entire lifetime, even if she lived to a very old age, might not provide enough time for her to overcome what she had just witnessed.

Ambre Litune continued.

"We ran, we crossed the main road because on the other side there are some warehouses. I thought we could hide there. The others were crying and screaming, but I wasn't. We found somewhere to hide, out of the rain. We got cold straight away, so we huddled together."

She paused again before continuing.

"Some of them wanted to go back to the house. I said no. I even slapped them. Because I'm the oldest, they listened to me. Then there were the drones."

Elise took care not to react. The little girl was willing to talk, and she decided to let her speak.

Ambre Litune continued.

"Even while we were running from the house to our hiding place, we saw loads of them flying over us. We even saw some fall onto houses, and straight away the houses caught fire. But from our hiding place, we saw some men arrive in a sort of little truck."

With a gesture, Ambre tried to describe the kind of vehicle. Elise thought for a moment before finally responding.

"A pickup truck," Elise said.

"Yes, that's what it's called, a pickup truck," Ambre Litune replied before continuing.

"The men got out of the pickup. They opened a sort of warehouse. I thought that one was abandoned. The big door made a lot of noise when they opened it. Then they brought out things like shelves, with loads of drones on them. Nothing happened for two or three minutes, then they all flew off at once. It sounded like a swarm, like a huge swarm of enormous bees."

At that point, Ambre Litune fell silent.

Elise allowed herself to kiss her on the cheek. Slightly surprised by this gesture of affection, Ambre Litune straightened up to kiss her in the same way.

"My name's Ambre, Ambre Litune. What's yours?"

"Elise Marchand."

Ambre Litune snuggled against Elise, pulled the blanket around herself and closed her eyes. Elise held her a little more tightly.

Around them, new victims were taking refuge in the village hall. She, Elise, was alive, wondering first whether that condition, given the burdens she would henceforth carry until the end of her days, was truly an opportunity, and at the same time whether she even had the right to ask herself such a question, whether that luxury was not indecent, because back there, in Saint-Jean-d'Angély, women, children and men were fighting like the possessed, simply to avoid dying.

38

The female gendarme who had approached Elise an hour earlier returned, this time accompanied by police officers and a psychologist. Apart from Ambre Litune, since the little girls had been with them, neither Elise nor Florence could claim to have heard the sound of their voices. They had merely swallowed a few small pieces of the brioche distributed by the baker from Brizambourg. The rest of the time, they had remained either withdrawn into themselves or asleep. A considerable amount of psychological work would be needed to try to bring them back to life in a different sense, and for that work to be fully effective, it was essential to act as quickly as possible.

“No, I'm staying with Elise,” Ambre Litune announced, clinging tightly to the young woman she had just named.

Elise responded by remaining still, prepared to support that possibility if the authorities facing her considered it appropriate under the circumstances, but equally prepared to accept their opposition if those same authorities decided otherwise, judging that responsibilities had to be assumed and that they could not be entrusted to a young woman about whom they knew nothing.

The psychologist signalled to those accompanying her that, above all, they needed to show understanding. These little girls had been profoundly traumatised, and there was no point in adding further distress to what they had already endured.

“I know my mum's and dad's phone numbers. I can give them to you. They're in the USA for work,” Ambre Litune explained.

They all looked at one another and reached the same conclusion: if the little girl was telling the truth, then on the other side of the Atlantic, two parents must be beside themselves with worry. What was happening in Saint-Jean-d'Angély was being broadcast almost in real time by television channels across

the planet. Added to that speed of transmission was the acceleration made possible by social media, sometimes, indeed often, for the worst, with certain individuals stopping at nothing to accumulate views, even resorting to artificial intelligence to make the footage still more disturbing than it had originally been.

Those responsible for dealing with Ambre Litune's situation imagined that her parents, once alerted, must inevitably have rushed to their telephones. Although there was a considerable time difference between the United States and France, the people around them must surely have known they were French. Having travelled to the USA for professional reasons, they must have established contacts, and those contacts, learning of the events in France, would probably have warned them.

Added to this was the fact that conventional mobile phones were no longer working within a radius of ten kilometres, as the crow flies, around Saint-Jean-d'Angély. In Sainte-Même, communications were functioning intermittently, while beyond Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche they were beginning to become genuinely operational.

“You can't stay with Elise,” the psychologist began, deliberately using Elise's first name, even though she was meeting her for the first time, seeking to establish the most personal connection possible with the little girl. She had also knelt down to Ambre Litune's level, so that their eyes were at the same height.

At these words, the child clung even more tightly to Elise. The psychologist, who knew her profession well, allowed just a few seconds to pass before offering an alternative.

“On the other hand, perhaps Elise could stay with you until we manage to contact your parents.”

In proposing this solution, the psychologist was not improvising. The purpose of her approach was to make the impossible possible.

Without using words to express her agreement, Elise indicated with a smile that she had no objection to such an arrangement.

Once this agreement had been reached, everything accelerated. The little girls were helped to their feet. Florence stood up in turn, lost her balance slightly, and Elise caught her.

Her mother was not well. At that moment, she could certainly be described as alive, but life, life alone,

was not enough for a human being. Everyone needed an existence in order to continue living in this world, and Elise did not know whether the woman who had brought her into it eighteen years earlier still possessed the means to have one.

"We're going to take you to Saintes," the psychologist informed them.

Those accompanying this healthcare professional did not hesitate. Since there were enough of them, each took a little girl in their arms. The children offered no resistance. Although they were being held by strangers, they rested their heads on the shoulders of those carrying them. Elise took charge of Florence.

It was 8:11 a.m. Inside the village hall, they had to make their way through the crowd. Disaster victims were continuing to arrive, ever more numerous in one sense, yet far too few in another. There was reason to be relieved that some had managed to escape, and that their numbers were increasing hour by hour, while at the same time acknowledging that many were still missing.

The law enforcement officers on the scene had not forgotten that Saint-Jean-d'Angély had a population of almost eight thousand inhabitants. Given the

holiday season, that figure might perhaps have been lower. It was true that this subprefecture was hardly among the liveliest of places. Those who had the means to leave it, whether at the end of the year for Christmas and New Year or during their holidays, rarely deprived themselves of the opportunity.

But there remained all the others, those who could not leave, either because they had nowhere else to go where they might be welcomed, or, above all, because they lacked the financial means to do so. The economic crisis affecting France did nothing to improve the situation of those thousands of people who represented a substantial majority in Saint-Jean-d'Angély, more so than elsewhere, since the town no longer possessed any significant economic activity worthy of the name.

Naturally, in an attempt to reassure themselves, they also counted on the possibility that other escape routes existed. From Saint-Jean-d'Angély, as from every town in the world, four cardinal directions could be envisaged. But when they considered those other possibilities, they seemed to offer fewer advantages than Sainte-Même, either because they were farther away or because the surrounding terrain was exposed, hardly an appealing prospect

for terrified victims whose primary concern was to find a direction in which to flee while remaining as inconspicuous as possible.

39

Once outside in the street, Elise was surprised by what she saw. Inside the village hall, sitting in their corner, they had paradoxically found themselves in the eye of a cyclone of a different kind, that place where its winds, destructive in their own way, blow all around you without reaching you, precisely because you have found yourself at its centre. Having left that position, they were overtaken by the turmoil it unleashed, a storm of the utmost violence.

Everywhere around them, crying could be heard, and even screaming. A few metres away, two men were fighting, apparently because the blanket covering one of them was claimed by the other as his property. At the first food distribution points, too, some people, still far too many, were taking more food and drink than they needed, creating tensions and turning against those responsible for distributing the supplies, expressing their dissatisfaction

with a violence that was genuine even when confined to words.

These same people, in the name of the suffering they had endured, suffering that nobody questioned, considered themselves entitled to priority in proportion to that suffering. The damage inflicted upon their minds, in their view, gave them more rights than they would ordinarily possess. More than that, they did not hesitate to confront the gendarmes and other military personnel who were trying to calm these outbursts, deemed excessively aggressive, reproaching them for not having been present when they had needed them. Now, they no longer considered them useful and rejected their authority, accusing them of having been weak with the strong, so weak that they were continuing along the same path by now being strong with the weak.

To make matters worse, some of the disaster victims were armed, most often with hunting rifles. Even though they were not behaving threateningly, the law enforcement officers had been instructed to disarm anyone equipped in that way, including the hunters. Although the latter had demonstrated a particularly productive spirit of initiative, having

helped to save lives, the time had come for them to fall back into line.

For those responsible for restoring order hoped that, once order had been re-established, they would be able to restore the security that was supposed to serve everyone's interests. It was impossible to maintain a society without that essential requirement, even if, for the moment, that very security had been fundamentally discredited, and understandably so, in the eyes of those who had endured this terrible event.

The gendarmerie, above all, also feared that people who currently possessed weapons with good intentions might, tomorrow, use them for other reasons, less commendable ones, in the service of far more self-interested causes.

They therefore wasted no time. The six little girls, Florence and Elise were escorted to a minibus, one of those used in Saintes for school transport, parked at the other end of the village.

Since those manning the checkpoints had been instructed to allow through only vehicles requisitioned for emergencies, Elise and Florence could see around them only fire engines and ambulances belonging to the emergency medical services.

It must also be said that some people, despite their injuries, sometimes serious ones, had found within themselves the necessary strength, that survival instinct lodged in everyone to varying degrees, to reach Sainte-Même, only to collapse upon seeing the first emergency responders, sometimes never to rise again.

Even though they were more or less concealed, blankets could be seen here and there, spread directly on the ground, beneath which lay the bodies of those who had survived long enough to reach this place, but not long enough for their lives to continue beyond it.

"Where are the children?" Elise asked the female gendarme walking beside her, keeping her voice low.

Before answering, the officer glanced towards Ambre Litune. Unlike the other little girls, Ambre was not being carried. She was walking beside Elise, holding one of her hands.

"You can say it. I'm a big girl, I'm twelve," she pointed out to the gendarme when she noticed that the officer was watching her, hesitating to communicate what she currently knew about the fate of the younger children.

“As far as I know, according to the latest reports, very few children have been rescued,” the gendarme began. “From what I've been told, a lot of parents didn't survive while trying to save their children.”

She paused, but before she could continue, Ambre Litune spoke more quickly.

“Obviously, lots of little ones were in bed, or hanging around the house in their pyjamas, when the fires started. Their parents thought about their children and died with them trying to save them.”

At Ambre Litune's observation, Elise and the gendarme exchanged glances. Was this child really twelve years old?

Clearly, maturity was not simply a matter of age. It was most evident in those who were not afraid to confront reality, beginning by accepting it as it presented itself to them, imposed itself upon them, rather, since reality, by definition and broadly speaking, is not something offered for one's approval.

“If I hadn't been there, the others would be dead too. They all wanted to go back to their parents. I was also the one who had the idea of us all huddling together because of the cold. And the hunters too, that was me. I saw they had guns like my dad's brother. I knew we had nothing to be afraid of. I've

seen documentaries about the Bataclan and Charlie Hebdo attacks. Terrorists have machine guns, not hunting rifles. All of that was me!"

Ambre Litune caught the eyes of Elise and the gendarme. The two young women could not tell whether, from that exchange of glances, they should recognise a desire for acknowledgement of what Ambre had accomplished, or a broader demand for respect, consisting of not judging her solely on the basis of her age.

At the same time, Elise looked towards her mother. Although Florence was keeping pace with the rest of the group, she seemed completely absent, incapable, if those who had spread death were suddenly to reappear, of coming to anyone's assistance or even managing to save herself.

Unlike Ambre Litune who, at the age of twelve, gave the impression that, faced with the same situation, she would find within herself the best possible response, not one necessarily capable of getting her out of danger, but at least one that would give her the means to try.

Mathieu Amant, Corporal-Chef Emery and Didier Réprisson, accompanied by the rest of the troop, arrived at what had become a strategic location, represented by the only access to the A10 motorway from Saint-Jean-d'Angély, marked by three automated toll booths, at 7:32 a.m.

At the very beginning of their advance, Mathieu Amant had intended to pass through an area where a lake had been created in the early 1980s, a place favoured by the inhabitants of Saint-Jean-d'Angély during the warmer months. From there, reaching the entrance to the A10 motorway would be a mere formality. They would only have to follow the Boutonne and turn right. Once past a small village adjoining Saint-Jean-d'Angély, called Moulinveau, they would be no more than two or three hundred metres from their destination. From their present position, he estimated that the journey would take a little under an hour at most.

When he had spent some three weeks in Saintes the previous year, he had taken advantage of his stay to discover the region, particularly Saint-Jean-d'Angély and, more specifically, its rather unusual church.

Originally, this church had been built to serve only as a temporary structure. The intention had been to construct a cathedral which, once completed, would replace it. A cathedral that never truly came into existence, or almost never did, the two towers intended to form its façade still standing, together with that vast opening suggesting an entrance without a door. When one ventured a glance through it, having visually crossed that threshold, an absence was perfectly embodied, at least in Mathieu Amant's perception, the omnipresence of God.

At the opposite end of that same church, demonstrating that certain temporary arrangements know how to endure, one could see the remains of what had once been a Gothic church, badly damaged by a few ill-mannered barbarians from the North.

The whole ultimately formed a structure more eloquent, spiritually and philosophically, than many others of its kind, containing within itself what should have been but never was, what was intended to be temporary yet remained, and what had failed to survive.

This assemblage of stone and wood knew how to speak, without words, of human history, more effectively than a thousand books devoted to the subject.

When Mathieu Amant attempted to follow the route he had planned, they were forced to abandon it. The fires blocked their passage. They had to turn left, skirt the outskirts of Saint-Jean-d'Angély at a distance and cut across the fields. In the end, the hour's walk initially anticipated amounted to some 120 minutes.

Shortly after their departure, having covered barely a few hundred metres, Mathieu Amant ordered those accompanying him to enter a small wooded area. There, he laid down new conditions for Didier Réprisson, warning him in advance that they would not be negotiable: the clothes of one man were to become the clothes of the other.

Mathieu Amant was particularly concerned about the speed at which information circulated, even the most confidential information. If undesirable individuals learned that the Head of State was among them and decided to target him, they would succeed only in killing a young lieutenant.

Didier Réprisson offered no resistance. They undressed and exchanged their clothes, one becoming, through this deception, a lieutenant, the other the President of the Republic.

"Mr President!" Didier Réprisson declared, now wearing the distinctive red beret and performing a military salute which, although improvised, could nevertheless be described as regulation.

Many of those around them laughed. Corporal-Chef Emery refrained, as did Mathieu Amant, and with good reason. He immediately fixed the others with a stern gaze, reminding them all of their duties and of what was happening barely a kilometre from their position, where children, women and men were dying by the dozen. This was no time for amusement.

He concluded his reprimand by addressing Didier Réprisson himself, who merely raised his forearms to indicate that he apologised for his clumsiness, limiting his apology to:

"My mistake!"

During those two hours, they were called out to by several inhabitants, most often from their windows. The question was always the same: what was happening in Saint-Jean-d'Angély?

They received the same answer each time. They were to remain in their homes. Once the danger had passed and normal conditions had been restored, they would be informed.

A few inhabitants came outside to offer them coffee. Didier Réprisson, obliged by the clothes he was wearing to play the lieutenant he appeared to be, repeated aloud the orders whispered to him by Mathieu Amant: his men could accept the hot drinks, provided they managed to drink them while continuing to walk.

For his part, Didier Réprisson was thinking. He had agreed to these two hours of walking for one reason alone: to gain some distance from everything, particularly from his collaborators. He appreciated them, but they would never stop accumulating details.

Their determination to do things properly would force him to seek, through a different kind of addition, a final result that would never cease to increase throughout the calculation itself.

Didier Réprisson was a man of instinct, of logic. What had been decided in Saint-Jean-d'Angély served a purpose, and might even, paradoxically, serve one without offering any prospect of continuation.

Thus, this appalling initiative might have no further developments.

One day, an acquaintance had predicted to him that the famous Greenpeace, without that organisation

itself being responsible for such a transformation, could turn into Green War. The idea of those involved would be to accelerate the process destined to bring humanity to its downfall, by generating a disaster sufficiently explicit to serve as a triggering factor.

But Didier Réprisson immediately became convinced that environmentalists, even the most radical among them, did not possess the temperament required to shed blood on such a scale, nor, above all, the resources necessary to bring about such a cataclysm.

Those who had decided upon this catastrophe possessed considerable resources, primarily financial ones.

In 2026, more than at any other time in the entire history of humanity, power was dependent upon money.

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When Mathieu Amant realised that the final kilometre they still had to cover would take them not only through an area visible to everyone, but also

alongside the A10 motorway, he anticipated the situation by ordering Didier Réprisson to follow him so that they could change clothes once again. Out of sight, the time had now come for each of them to put on the clothes corresponding to his actual position.

Mathieu Amant could hardly imagine arriving at the place where they were expected wearing the clothes by which the Head of State would be recognised. Nor did the reverse seem to him an acceptable possibility, since, given the circumstances, there was no room for absurdity, particularly the kind that would reduce a President of the Republic to an ordinary lieutenant.

"If we keep this up, I'll end up catching a cold, Captain!" Didier Réprisson warned.

"I'm a lieutenant, Mr President," Mathieu Amant pointed out to the Head of State.

"That was before," the president replied, putting on his cap, giving Mathieu Amant a satisfied smile and rejoining the rest of the troop before the lieutenant even had time to react.

Mathieu Amant remained for a few more seconds in the place the two of them had just occupied, still

beneath those trees which had concealed Didier Réprisson and himself, rather imperfectly, since at that time of year they no longer possessed the slightest foliage.

There, he bit his lower lip to suppress an emotion which, according to his sense of duty, had chosen the wrong moment to manifest itself within him.

But the man who had just promised him that rank was the President of the Republic, and behind that individual stood an entity far greater still, embodying the nation he had decided, through his commitment, to serve.

Mathieu Amant felt within himself, perhaps excessively, the full weight of that recognition. Fatigue, too, combined with the responsibilities he had assumed, played its part. Never during his short career had he experienced anything comparable.

He breathed deeply to regain his composure and recalled what he had undertaken to deserve this promotion. Nothing exceptional, ultimately. Merely an initiative, synonymous in some respects with disobedience, followed by a series of decisions that had led to equally fortunate outcomes, not because he deserved to be credited with any talent above the average, but because they had been lucky.

Above all, they had been fortunate not to encounter those who had orchestrated the atrocity towards which they were heading.

For he was under no illusions, and none of the men under his command were either, Corporal-Chef Emery even less so than the others.

Had they been confronted unexpectedly by their opponents, they would have been decimated, particularly during the first part of their journey, from the moment they left Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche until they came into contact with Didier Réprisson.

The second part had involved less risk, firstly because daylight was beginning to appear, making an ambush less likely, and secondly because the Tiger helicopters had acted as their guardian angels, continually flying overhead.

This had prompted Corporal-Chef Emery to remark that such manoeuvres, being rather too insistent for his liking, might prove highly counterproductive. Such excessive protection did not correspond to the apparent importance of what was visibly being protected and might encourage certain individuals to wonder why.

As they walked alongside the A10 motorway, not one of them, whether an ordinary private or the President of the Republic, escaped a powerful feeling of astonishment.

The emergency services were arriving in enormous numbers. Some, as planned, were positioned on standby in the right-hand lane, forming a queue that stretched as far as the eye could see. They were being overtaken, as a priority, by fire engines. In the distance, Saint-Jean-d'Angély was still burning, more fiercely than ever.

On this January 1, 2027, following relatively heavy rainfall towards the end of the night, the sky above the region had now cleared.

Explosions could still be heard, just as they had been heard since the drone attacks and the fires that followed, caused primarily by gas cylinders and other tanks containing fuel or similarly flammable substances.

At one point, a few hundred metres farther along, they all reached an elevated position. They were now only about fifteen minutes from the roundabout that had become strategically vital, situated at the motorway entrance, where they were expected.

There, they all became aware of the situation and of what confronted them.

At night, Saint-Jean-d'Angély had no longer been visible, the flames of the inferno devouring it concealing the town beneath their murderous brightness.

In daylight, the town regained something resembling its former appearance. If, in the darkness, they had dreaded the condition in which they might find it, once that darkness had been driven away, what now stood out above all were its wounds, and they were considerable.

Across its entire extent, no place seemed to have been spared.

From where they stood, they could see that the firefighters had already begun the battle that was theirs to fight.

One did not have to be a specialist to realise that they would have to contend with appalling conditions.

Beyond the risks, particularly those of explosions, wounded people, those too badly injured to have managed to escape, must be scattered here and there, depriving the firefighters of the option of proceeding without restraint.

All these personnel, some of whom were volunteers, had been mobilised to overcome the flames while avoiding, throughout that struggle, the creation of still more victims.

"Fuck!!"

Lost in thought, Didier Réprisson did not even hear himself utter the obscenity.

Beyond what lay before his eyes, the consequences were already appearing within him, almost mechanically, because he belonged to that category of individuals capable of perceiving them: consequences at both national and international levels, economic, political and societal consequences.

Somewhere, an enemy of France had declared war upon them, taking care, in order to make that war even more unbearable, not to reveal itself and thereby allow its identity to be established.

What followed was an initiative taken by Corporal-Chef Emery.

Sensing that some response was necessary, that they all had to free themselves from this kind of toxic fascination, he knew that missions would soon be assigned to them, necessarily difficult ones. They had to regain control of themselves in order to help France regain control of itself.

And so he began softly singing *La Marseillaise*, almost to himself.

One man joined him, then two, then everyone, Didier Réprisson and Mathieu Amant included, until finally they were singing at the tops of their voices.

A few tears flowed, contradictory tears, born at once of compassion, anger and hatred.

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Upon arriving at the scene, Didier Réprisson experienced exactly what he had dreaded. His collaborators, who had arrived an hour earlier by helicopter, descended upon him. Decisions had to be made, orders had to be given, and for both, he alone could be the one to favour one course of action over another. A few journalists also tried to attract his attention, but with a gesture he made it clear that he would make no comment for the moment.

A moment of tension arose when those ordinarily responsible for Didier Réprisson's security, who had been excluded from their duties because of the Head of State's hasty departure and had themselves come from Paris, attempted to resume

their functions. They made it clear to Mathieu Amant's men, in a rather contemptuous manner, that they did not possess the necessary qualifications for such a task, which was not untrue, since their training had not been intended for that purpose.

Before Mathieu Amant could intervene, some of his men resorted to physical confrontation, without actually striking those who were treating them in that way, merely pushing them back with a characteristic movement at shoulder height, unwilling to be treated as though they were of no consequence. What they had just experienced gave them, at least in their own eyes, the right to consider themselves legitimate. Had they not, under exceptional circumstances, also managed to ensure the safety of the foremost citizen of France?

Naturally, the bodyguards responded in turn. It was at that moment that Mathieu Amant intervened, warning both sides that this was no time for squabbling.

Once calm had been restored, Mathieu Amant discreetly reproached Corporal-Chef Emery for having allowed the situation to develop. Emery, displaying a satisfied smile, was not altogether displeased that

his lads, as he liked to call them, had shown some spirit.

Didier Réprisson witnessed the scene and immediately approached Mathieu Amant, who was still reprimanding his men.

"I need a close-protection team. Are you interested?"

For a few seconds, Mathieu Amant was speechless. Then he recovered his composure and, giving Didier Réprisson the regulation military salute, replied:

"It would be an honour for all of us, Mr President."

Without allowing virtually any pause in the sequence of decisions he was making, Didier Réprisson went over to those who ordinarily ensured his security around the clock. Without displaying the slightest reproach, at least outwardly, and even behaving warmly towards them, he ordered them to return to the capital, claiming to be sorry that they had made the journey for nothing.

The words *for nothing* made it clear to those concerned that, for the mission currently under way, they did not possess the required qualifications.

They understood the implication. The master of the Élysée Palace wanted, at this hour more than at any

other, to remain precisely that: the master of the Élysée Palace.

He was prepared to listen to anything, even to change his mind, something he regularly did, provided that a different course of action was proposed to him. If it was imposed upon him, he concluded that the arguments in question, being insufficient in themselves, required the use of force in order to gain acceptance.

This reaction said everything about Didier Répris-son.

Some commentators described him as a political animal. In reality, he was a leader of men of genius. His successes arose from his ability to surround himself, according to the problems he had to resolve, with the appropriate individuals and, furthermore, to communicate to them an additional degree of motivation through the recognition he knew how to grant them.

That recognition invariably enhanced their sense of worth, stimulating those few individuals to the point of making them more than they ordinarily were and, consequently, enabling them to accomplish more than they were normally capable of doing.

Added to this, Didier Réprisson understood the advantage he stood to gain from being surrounded by Mathieu Amant and his men.

By choosing this arrangement, he found himself, given the individuals making up this small troop, protected by the people rather than by an elite dressed in suits and ties, an elite not lacking in merit, but one that did not correspond to the setting imposed by the circumstances of the moment.

Once he was slightly apart from the others, Didier Réprisson was informed that Friedrich Merz, the German Chancellor, had expressed his support, just as Germany as a whole, according to his words, was offering its unconditional support to France.

Giorgia Meloni had also been among the first to offer her country's assistance. Andy Burnham and Donald Trump had not failed to respond, along with many others. Even Vladimir Putin had expressed his emotion, a detail that brought a faint smile to Didier Réprisson's face.

He was also informed that those who had received these messages of solidarity had not escaped a few questions from these senior dignitaries, questions that could all be reduced to one: did they know any more?

All these leading figures were, quite understandably, seeking information as a priority in order to prevent their own nations from suffering the same fate.

Without being insensitive to the tragedy affecting France, if this country, renowned throughout the world for the quality of its intelligence services, had been taken so completely by surprise, they feared that they might be next on the list.

Didier Réprisson barely reacted to this information. Later, he would contact those who, like him, embodied comparable authority. For the moment, he wished to devote himself to other considerations.

Now surrounded, as he had decided, by Mathieu Amant and his men, he went to meet the emergency responders.

At first sight, these personnel had some difficulty recognising him. Was this muddy, unshaven man, with his tired face, really the same Didier Réprisson they had all seen at some point on television?

After greeting them, he wanted an overview of the situation.

It was proving as complex as it was distressing. The firefighters were being delayed in their advance by the countless bodies strewn across the streets,

those of people who had probably been shot while attempting to escape the fires started by drones inside their homes.

The problem arose above all from the fact that these same bodies had been damaged by the flames. The identification services recommended that, before moving them, the exact locations where they had been found should be recorded.

Naturally, the procedure could not claim to be completely reliable in terms of accuracy, but the information it might provide could not be disregarded.

The weather was doing nothing to make their task easier.

For the first days of 2027, at least until January 10, the arrival of an anticyclone over southwestern France was being forecast. Temperatures would fall, since it was January, but there would be no rain.

Furthermore, they would have to contend with a light wind that would help the flames spread from one house to another.

They would therefore be forced to endure excessive heat on one side and biting cold on the other.

It was exactly ten o'clock when Didier Réprisson pointed out that they, both he and Mathieu Amant's men, needed to take a break. They were all exhausted and therefore no longer operational.

To that end, he asked that somewhere be found for them, anywhere at all, so that they could take this compulsory respite. A warehouse, originally used as a storage depot by a large supermarket, which had recently ceased using it and to which no other purpose had since been assigned, might serve their needs. It stood a short distance from the motorway entrance. Situated away from the town, at the very edge of what was known as an industrial estate, it had escaped the fire.

The emergency services had decided against using it because it lacked the facilities they required. Access was provided by a single, rather narrow road, and in front of the building, something resembling a car park did not allow several vehicles to manoeuvre there simultaneously. Since everyone would constantly be dealing with emergencies on an XXL scale, emergencies growing more pressing by the minute, it was understood that using such a location would

inevitably result in everyone getting in one another's way.

His collaborators insisted that, as President of the Republic, Didier Réprisson should have access to other facilities more suited to his responsibilities, offering him both the rest he desired and the means to continue meeting the demands that a Head of State must fulfil, even while taking a moment to recover.

Didier Réprisson was receptive to these arguments, but rather than isolate himself, he ordered his collaborators to follow him, bringing with them the necessary equipment, particularly communications equipment, so that he could continue carrying out his duties.

He knew that he would soon have to make decisions that would probably prove unpopular. He therefore wished to command the respect he would need to inspire when that moment came, a respect earned through the example he intended to set, by making sure, in anticipation of that need, that he shared the conditions imposed upon Mathieu Amant's men.

His collaborators sighed for a few moments, then immediately recovered their composure. The duty

they had undertaken to fulfil had to remain, according to their own sense of duty, precisely that same duty, now exercised far from the comfort of their offices at the Élysée Palace. All the more so when people were relying on them to take care of those who had lost everything.

Around the motorway entrance, activity was both intense and steadily increasing. Despite the circumstances, the services mobilised displayed considerable self-control. Those unable to contain their emotions were asked, without being judged for them, to step aside and allow others to take their places. This was a time for action. Tears, grief and the tributes that would have to be paid could come later.

An organisation was quickly established along the following lines.

The bodies recovered were entrusted to those responsible for identification. Working at an accelerated pace without sacrificing their effectiveness, they took the necessary photographs, attached a numbered label to each body and recorded all the information associated with it, supplied by those working in the field whenever such information was available.

Priority was given to the name of the street where the body had been found, provided the sign identifying that street had not been reduced to ashes, along with the very street it was supposed to name.

The bodies were then laid directly on the ground inside large tents, which were being erected continuously, one after another, occupying the departmental road D939 towards La Rochelle. The road was divided into two sections across its width: on the right, the bodies of those who had not survived were processed; on the other side, the wounded were attended to.

From the outset, the wounded found in these locations were those whom the emergency services had logically expected to encounter: people who had possessed neither the strength to flee Saint-Jean-d'Angély nor the opportunity to do so. The necessary energy alone had not been enough. They had taken refuge in the few houses that had escaped the flames.

These people had suffered primarily from the surrounding smoke and consequently experienced breathing difficulties.

Some displayed gunshot wounds, relatively minor by definition, since they had survived.

Their attackers had targeted them as soon as they stepped outside their homes, satisfying a curiosity as understandable as it was ill-timed: what on earth was happening in Saint-Jean-d'Angély, a town of which it was commonly said that nothing, or almost nothing, ever happened?

Those who were struck had managed to return to their homes. For some, that return had consisted merely of reversing the step they had taken through their own doorway, covering only two or three metres to get back inside.

These details already suggested that those who had orchestrated the disaster had taken care not to enter people's homes, undoubtedly because they lacked the time to do so, but also because they were unwilling to venture into surroundings where their potential victims, knowing those places a million times better than their attackers, would retain a genuine advantage.

An advantage that might mean some of those inhabitants would do more than merely hide, choosing instead to go on the offensive and proving considerably more aggressive than average.

All these necessary measures, concerning the living and the dead alike, required time, slowing the firefighters' progress. In order to advance using their vehicles, they could neither drive over the dead nor disregard the wounded, who, upon spotting them, hurried to make their presence known.

On this morning of January 1, some ten hours after the attack, the results of the emergency services' interventions were barely perceptible. To make matters worse, nine firefighters had already been injured and one had been killed, these men sometimes taking every conceivable risk to bring assistance to those calling for their help.

Didier Réprisson, sitting on the floor with his back against a partition, allowed his eyes to close.

A few metres away, his collaborators remained glued to their iPhones, communicating with several people simultaneously, answering certain questions while making sure to say nothing in response to others.

Mathieu Amant, sitting in a similar position, appeared to have dozed off. His weapon stood vertically, the butt resting on the floor between his legs, the barrel leaning against one shoulder. His two hands, clasped around its middle, suggested that he had not

ruled out the possibility that the hostilities which had caused so much destruction might resume.

All of them were simultaneously experiencing and enduring an extraordinary contradiction, finding themselves both at the end and at the beginning of an episode of which, for the moment, they understood nothing.

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"Lieutenant, Lieutenant, please."

One of Mathieu Amant's men had been asked to wake him, taking particular care not to startle him, because of the weapon he was holding against himself. There was concern that, with fatigue playing its part, he might not have removed the round chambered several hours earlier, when they had begun their mission from Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche, and that an unexpected start could result in disaster.

It was 2:14 p.m. on January 1, 2027.

Mathieu Amant opened his eyes and passed a hand over his face.

“Have I been asleep long?” he immediately wanted to know.

“Almost four hours, Lieutenant. Colonel Imbert is here. He would like to speak to you.”

At this information, Mathieu Amant looked around him.

At the entrance to the warehouse where they had stopped to rest stood Didier Réprisson, talking to Colonel Imbert. A little farther back was Corporal-Chef Emery. From his posture, knowing him well, his head lowered, his hands behind his back and his fingers interlocked, Mathieu immediately guessed that he was feeling somewhat uncomfortable.

He attributed this detail to the fact that his subordinate was in the presence of two superior officers, and not just any two.

He therefore got to his feet, grimacing slightly. The little sleep he had managed to obtain had hardly been restorative, seeming capable only of reminding his body that it required considerably more of it, under more suitable conditions.

He used the few moments separating him from Colonel Imbert and Didier Réprisson to straighten his uniform and generally improve his appearance.

The president, meanwhile, even as he spoke with the senior officer, was answering his collaborators, who approached him in turn, without interruption, one succeeding another, an iPhone pressed to an ear, each seeking his attention.

"Mr President, Colonel."

Mathieu Amant began by giving both men the regulation military salute, while discreetly patting Corporal-Chef Emery on the back, using the gesture to offer him a less official greeting, judging by the manner in which it was returned, but one every bit as sincere.

"Colonel Imbert has no objection to your taking responsibility for my security. I intend to move into Saint-Jean-d'Angély in about twenty minutes, to support the emergency personnel. I'm counting on you," Didier Réprisson stated.

His request barely delivered, he turned on his heels and left the warehouse, still surrounded by his collaborators, whose faces betrayed considerable fatigue.

The dark circles beneath their eyes made it clear that none of them had slept. The fate suffered by Saint-Jean-d'Angély was generating one difficulty after another.

On the political front, opposition to those in power was already becoming increasingly fierce, particularly from the extremes.

Didier Réprisson's style disturbed these people, especially because he frequently appeared in jeans and trainers, prompting accusations that he did not look presidential.

Didier Réprisson never hesitated to reply that there were other ways of being a president, primarily not by seeking to be exemplary, since he suspected that such an ambition, merely by being entertained, betrayed an underlying degree of pride proportionate to it, but by following the example of simplicity shown by men and women who were as ordinary as they were virtuous.

Yet his opponents criticised him, for reasons they could hardly admit openly, because his human-centred policies were bearing fruit. The effectiveness of the man disturbed them even more than the man himself.

The economy, in particular, although not yet recovering, appeared at least to be slowing its decline.

Always pursuing this notion of an example, not one to be set but one to be sought, Didier Réprisson did not hesitate to spend a day on a building site, on a

farm or in a factory, not to visit such places, but to share the tasks that represented, for the men and women he worked alongside during those few hours, a daily labour repeated over many years, made all the more arduous by the fact that it was poorly paid.

Saint-Jean-d'Angély also risked creating an economic problem.

How would the markets react, first towards France, then towards Europe, but also towards all societies whose systems of operation were more or less similar?

France might end up paying the price on behalf of all the others, having brought into focus a risk that, until that day, had never truly been taken into account.

What had just happened here could happen elsewhere in exactly the same form.

Finally, the tragedy suffered by Saint-Jean-d'Angély could plunge the entire French population into a state of shock whose toxicity had to be feared, since it might generate widespread collective paranoia, causing people, under its influence, to prefer finding culprits to finding solutions.

Didier Réprisson was aware of these potential dangers.

That was why he remained in Saint-Jean-d'Angély, having understood that whatever directives he issued had to originate from the very place where the catastrophe had begun and where it was continuing.

It seemed essential to him to experience it physically, in order to devise, as effectively as possible, the responses that, even if they could not eradicate it, would at least begin by containing it.

"Well done!"

This complimentary remark from Colonel Imbert drew Mathieu Amant out of his thoughts.

A second earlier, he had still been watching Didier Réprisson through the open doorway leading outside the warehouse where they stood.

He would have to protect this man, while simultaneously wondering against what, and above all against whom.

"Thank you, Colonel," was all he replied.

"To decide upon such an initiative, to carry it through to the end, and then find yourself accompanied by the President of the Republic without being remotely prepared for it, I take my hat off to you!"

Mathieu Amant said nothing.

He glanced at Corporal-Chef Emery, as though wishing, through that exchange, to share the compliments with him. In return, he detected a kind of embarrassment in Emery's eyes.

Meanwhile, those congratulations brought him back to everything he had undertaken: the decision not to continue towards Pau, the weapons obtained at the Saintes air base, the journey by bus from Saintes to Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche, then on foot from Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche to Saint-Jean-d'Angély, his extraordinary encounter with Didier Réprisson and the Tiger helicopters flying over them.

Had that same journey been presented to him as a mission, leaving him free to accept or refuse it, he was not convinced that, at this moment, he would have agreed to undertake it.

"No, truly, well done, and I'm addressing both of you," Colonel Imbert continued.

Then, suddenly, his expression became less satisfied.

"Nevertheless, gentlemen, haven't you forgotten something along the way?"

At this question, Mathieu Amant and Corporal-Chef Emery looked at one another, Mathieu wondering

what on earth they could have forgotten, apart from obeying orders other than those they had given themselves.

45

"They found both of them riddled with bullets," Colonel Imbert announced to Mathieu Amant, who instantly lost all colour. He immediately turned towards Corporal-Chef Emery, who was as pale as a man could possibly be.

"It was the commander of the Saintes air base who first informed me about this affair. He called me before I even had the chance to contact him, if only to thank him for the trust he placed in you. Had he not opened the doors of his armoury to you, gentlemen, all you would have had to do was get back on your bus and continue towards Pau."

Mathieu Amant and Corporal-Chef Emery remained silent. Colonel Imbert continued.

"He then told me about a certain André Pardieu, whom he had contacted. You wanted someone to show you the most suitable route to take to reach Saint-Jean-d'Angély. That same André Pardieu had suggested his nephews, Julien and Jérôme Pardieu."

At that point, Colonel Imbert paused.

One of Didier Réprisson's collaborators was passing nearby. Although the Head of State had been informed of the matter, the information was known only to a few gendarmes and Colonel Imbert. The famous André Pardieu knew nothing of his nephews' fate, and the commander of the Saintes air base knew no more.

Colonel Imbert wanted the matter to remain confidential for as long as possible, so that a credible explanation could be attached to it.

He resumed.

"Gendarmes on patrol this morning, having been authorised to inspect the surroundings of Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche, discovered two bodies lying in the middle of a dirt track, visible from the road. They were identified immediately.

"The gendarmes reported their discovery to their superior by radio. Fortunately, that same superior ordered them not to communicate the information to anyone and to have the bodies moved and covered so that they could not be seen. He believed that encounters of such a macabre nature should be confined to Saint-Jean-d'Angély, in order to avoid creating still more traumatised people."

Once again, Colonel Imbert interrupted his account, as though he needed to recover his breath.

"When I arrived in Saint-Hilaire-de-Villefranche, that same officer presented himself to me. As luck would have it, I was the first senior officer he had encountered. He informed me of the situation. I explicitly ordered him to maintain secrecy and personally recover the bodies. For the moment, they are still in that same gendarmerie vehicle, while we decide what is to be done about this affair."

Without realising it, Mathieu Amant and Corporal-Chef Emery were sharing the same thoughts.

How could they have forgotten those two young men?

Corporal-Chef Emery attributed that oversight to the sudden presence of Didier Réprisson and his determination to accompany them. This unforeseen development had overwhelmed their ability to adapt, pushing everything else aside. The responsibility that followed had made them indifferent to anything not directly connected with that imperative, to the point that they no longer paid attention to those two presences embodied by Jérôme and Julien Pardieu.

The hours spent in their company could not compete with the urgency of the moment, an urgency whose overwhelming characteristics had come to dominate everything.

Mathieu Amant had another interpretation.

They had carried out a mission they had assigned to themselves.

For the first time in their careers, they had not been acting under orders. The chain of command they were accustomed to obeying ordinarily provided a foundation upon which they could rely.

This first departure from their usual framework had led them, all the more so under the pressure of circumstances unlike anything they had ever experienced, to commit a whole succession of further omissions, allowing them to concentrate more fully on what they had to accomplish while forgetting everything else, including Jérôme and Julien Pardieu.

"Does the Head of State know?" Mathieu Amant asked, wondering, at the very moment he posed the question, where he still found the audacity to ask it, especially of his superior. He also wondered, deep within himself and with regard to his own person, who he was dealing with now.

“He does,” Colonel Imbert replied.

“And?” was all Mathieu Amant said.

“He says that, as far as this affair is concerned, there is only one solution, and there cannot be another. But I must wait for yours, to see whether it corresponds to his, if only to establish, above all, whether you really are the individual he believes he has begun to recognise in you,” Colonel Imbert informed him.

Then he added:

“The ball is in your court. Your move... Captain!”

Corporal-Chef Emery ventured only the briefest glance towards Mathieu Amant, admitting through that look that he much preferred his own position to the lieutenant's.

Colonel Imbert, for his part, remained motionless. His face bore a gravity Mathieu Amant had never witnessed in him before.

Mathieu had the impression of being forced to play Russian roulette without knowing how many bullets were in the cylinder.

The use of the word *Captain* by Colonel Imbert said everything, above all that he stood to gain everything if his solution to the problem matched the one

recommended by the Head of State, and, conversely, that he stood to lose everything if it failed to align with what the President of the Republic had advocated.

He even suspected that, if the way he proposed to deal with the affair was not the desired one, beyond being held responsible, he might become a kind of culprit, not an ideal one, but a very useful one.

This battered nation was ready to act unjustly, so desperate was it to extricate itself from the quagmire in which it found itself.

This was no longer a matter of possibilities, but of necessities. France would give itself the means to survive, regardless of the collateral damage, even if that meant resorting to every available expedient, including the most immoral.

Added to that, he acknowledged having made a mistake. According to his interpretation, given the circumstances, it would not be incomprehensible for him to pay a price greater than the mistake itself warranted.

Many other soldiers had been sacrificed before him, in different ways, but sacrificed all the same, in the service of a cause beside which they amounted to little more than negligible quantities.

"Keep the bodies for as long as necessary, until more extensive access to Saint-Jean-d'Angély becomes possible. The gendarmes who discovered them will then claim to have found them within the town itself.

"We will then be able to say that they did not withdraw as agreed, that they took unfortunate and ill-advised initiatives of their own free will, and that they were shot."

Mathieu Amant paused before continuing.

"This version will not diminish the courage they displayed. Quite the contrary. And the recognition they receive will ensure that no further questions are asked about them."

Corporal-Chef Emery stared at Mathieu Amant as though seeing him for the very first time.

As for Colonel Imbert, he was unsurprised in one respect and greatly astonished in another.

Unsurprised because he knew Mathieu Amant to be intelligent; astonished because he was discovering that Mathieu could be one of those individuals who would stop at nothing to achieve a desired outcome.

"Very well. You may go. The Head of State requires your protection and that of your men. Dismissed."

Mathieu Amant and Corporal-Chef Emery obeyed.

Both had come a long way back, a very long way indeed.

46

At 5:46 p.m., as night was falling, a moment of extreme tension arose: two more firefighters had just lost their lives. The day's total losses now stood at twelve dead and twenty-seven injured, three of them seriously.

As Didier Réprisson had pointed out to Mathieu Amant shortly before five o'clock, France, considering the struggle it was engaged in, had entered a war. In his analysis, this was not an ordinary fire, so to speak, of the kind that had struck the forests of the Landes in summer, but a challenge issued by an enemy, all the more formidable and insidious in its own way because, for the moment, it was taking great care not to reveal its name.

The two firefighters who had most recently died had lost their lives attempting to rescue five people, two adults and three children trapped inside their home.

They were the Berton family, the two parents and their three daughters.

When gunfire was heard at midnight, the father, surprised by the nature of the detonations, opened a window and became a target for the attackers.

Although the shots fired in his direction did not hit him, they terrified all five members of the family to such an extent that they retreated farther into their home, taking refuge in a windowless room used for storage.

All the more so because, when the drone attack began, two strikes occurred in their neighbourhood, first making themselves known through the consequences of the explosions. Everything in their house shook under the impact, leaving them even more paralysed by fear.

The gunfire that followed only strengthened their determination to remain where they had chosen to take refuge.

Whatever happened, their decision was made: they would not leave their house until the emergency services, for whom they were already waiting, guaranteed that they could escape from it in complete safety.

Although the fire initially took hold in only two houses in their neighbourhood, those struck by the drones and situated some distance from their own, as the hours passed the flames spread from one home to another.

Some of their neighbours, forced by circumstances, resigned themselves to fleeing.

At first, a few succeeded, since Saint-Jean-d'Angély still possessed escape routes, but as the fire grew stronger, those routes became fewer, and people attempting to escape from their houses, realising that their homes would soon catch fire in turn, could not get very far. They died first from asphyxiation before the flames ravaged their remains.

That was what happened to the Berton family.

At 4:21 p.m., despite the protections they had struggled to install here and there, smoke made the air inside their house increasingly impossible to breathe.

When the father finally ventured to look outside, he realised that the entire neighbourhood had become one enormous inferno.

Their strategy, which consisted of retreating into a place that simultaneously cut them off from what

was happening outdoors, suddenly imposed its limitations upon them.

From the front door, the father cried out for help, and his calls were heard.

Two young volunteer firefighters, against the recommendations of their superior, decided to respond to those cries.

They equipped themselves with fire-resistant blankets to protect the victims during their evacuation and set off at a run down the street in question.

On the outward journey, they were troubled only by the heat. Equipped with masks and compressed-air cylinders carried on their backs, they were relatively unaffected by the smoke, except that its thickness at any given moment reduced their visibility.

When they reached the Bertons' house, all five were waiting for them.

The mother had had the good idea of soaking their clothes and covering everyone's mouth with equally thoroughly soaked towels.

Without delay, wrapped in the fire-resistant blankets, they set off in the opposite direction.

Back at their starting point, the firefighters stationed there were directing powerful jets of water onto the houses within their reach.

But less than twenty metres from that same position, just as the returning group was beginning to come into view, an entire section of a house collapsed upon all seven of them.

For the emergency responders who were waiting for them and had already caught sight of them, it was a terrible shock.

The news spread immediately, and a wave of discouragement of similar magnitude swept through the emergency services.

Some even dared to suggest that, given the circumstances, it would be better to let the town burn, since it seemed destined to claim more lives among the rescuers than those same rescuers would manage to save in return.

In several places, the firefighters began to retreat. For the majority, this latest episode was simply too much.

Shortly beforehand, one team had managed, with great difficulty, to contain the fire that had destroyed Saint-Jean-d'Angély's only nightclub.

They had succeeded primarily because the establishment stood outside the town and was surrounded only by agricultural fields.

When the last flames had finally been extinguished, all of them were forced to confront, psychologically, a heap of corpses.

Even without identifying them, they knew that these were young people.

And as though that first discovery were not enough, a short distance from the establishment they found fifteen other victims, each shot in the head.

Among them, one young woman moved them particularly deeply.

During her final moments, she had probably been on her knees, perhaps begging her tormentors to spare her life, a plea that, in the minds of her murderers, had found no mercy.

She had died in that same position, the very position in which they discovered her.

Added to this were the first, highly approximate estimates.

One of them was communicated to Didier Réprisson, the most reliable available, even though, like all the

others, it would have to undergo substantial revisions in the coming hours, almost certainly in a direction they feared would be far from favourable.

These assessments suggested at least one thousand dead and probably twice as many injured, in other words, approximately half the population of Saint-Jean-d'Angély.

Although this was hardly the moment for further calculations, his collaborators outlined for him the scale of the resources that would be needed to rebuild the town.

In financial terms, this would also have to include lifelong support for people left with disabilities of every kind, whether permanently damaged physically or psychologically diminished.

Taken as a whole, this undertaking might require some twenty billion euros, to be borne primarily by the State and the insurance companies.

Didier Réprisson said nothing.

He merely sat down on a few crates left there, containing emergency equipment, and asked for a cigarette, he who had not smoked for ten years.

He understood that, if he was to find a way out of this horror, he must not hope to discover one.

Such a way out, as such, did not exist, or no longer existed.

If he was to have one, he would have to resign himself to inventing it.

47

At eight o'clock in the evening, Didier Réprisson agreed to deliver an address.

A few minutes earlier, while washing from his face the dark stains left by the smoke, he had fallen to his knees in tears. Immediately, Mathieu Amant's men positioned themselves all around him, ensuring that this moment of weakness would not be seen.

Mathieu Amant knelt down beside the Head of State and took him by the shoulders. He knew at once that he did not possess the words needed to respond, by speaking them, to what Didier Réprisson was feeling, convinced that, confronted with this disaster, after an entire day of struggling almost for nothing, those particular words were absent from everyone's vocabulary.

All of them, Didier Réprisson, Mathieu Amant, Corporal-Chef Emery and the rest of the troop, had

spent the day on the front line, hauling hoses and attending to firefighters, sometimes injured but more often exhausted, the temperatures with which they had to contend being extreme.

Managing to extinguish the flames consuming a single house was no small achievement. For a block of houses, the undertaking became as exhausting as it was dangerous. For an entire neighbourhood, the conventional resources at their disposal had never proved sufficient.

By the end of January 1, the few advances they had made had been swallowed up by the progress of the fire elsewhere.

If they succeeded in extinguishing the flames consuming ten houses in one part of the town, ten others would be engulfed somewhere else.

Furthermore, given the conditions, they were becoming even less optimistic about the possibility of saving any more lives.

The few people recovered here and there were, for the most part, described as alive only because they were still breathing, and in most cases died shortly after being rescued.

As though their last remaining strength had been concentrated on that single objective, as though,

once taken into someone's care, they allowed themselves to slip away, as though that opportunity consisted, in its own way, of refusing to die alone, of experiencing a kind of relative peace that enabled them to accept their fate a little more readily before falling into nothingness.

Naturally, the event attracted numerous journalists and a multitude of curious onlookers, most of whom remained on the outskirts of Saint-Jean-d'Angély, on the higher ground from which the fire could be seen almost in its entirety.

Fortunately, the A10 motorway, having been requisitioned at the earliest possible opportunity, allowed the injured to be evacuated.

In the overwhelming majority of cases, these evacuations concerned emergency personnel. Poisoning from the various kinds of smoke, some of them toxic, was widespread, while the explosions of gas cylinders and fuel tanks also caused their share of injuries, sometimes with permanent consequences.

In this year 2027, everything was moving faster and faster.

Throughout the world, governments and diplomatic authorities responded.

Humanity had experienced many other catastrophes.

Some were recent, notably the tsunami of 2004, several other earthquakes and various cyclones.

There were also the conflicts, the one between Russia and Ukraine, or the United States and Iran, as well as those receiving less attention but proving equally bloody, if not more so, in central Africa.

But all these tragedies shared at least one characteristic: they were identified, their nature was known. To the senseless suffering they inflicted was not added the uncertainty associated precisely with what was, for the moment, destroying Saint-Jean-d'Angély.

Here, nobody knew to whom this atrocity was owed, or why it had been planned.

Didier Réprisson straightened up, still leaning on Mathieu Amant.

Deep within himself, he realised how important this young lieutenant had become at his side. Without understanding how the process worked, Mathieu communicated to him a comfort that had become necessary, if not indispensable.

Perhaps this was simply one of the consequences of these new circumstances.

Like a game whose rules had suddenly changed, no longer allowing the cards to play today the role they had fulfilled yesterday.

And, conversely, cards that had been less useful the previous day might, because of that upheaval, acquire considerably greater importance the following day.

Some fifty metres from where he stood, a camera was waiting for him.

Numerous television channels had requested permission to position their own cameras there. They were told that they would be free to use the recording afterwards, but that the address itself would be broadcast exclusively by France 2, the public television channel, in accordance with Didier Réprisson's orders.

As he covered those fifty metres, he made sure to recover some of his strength.

By the time he reached his destination, he had once again become that very particular President of the Republic for whom he was known, hoping, somewhere within himself, that he would remain in that state throughout his address.

Finally, he began to speak, Mathieu Amant standing beside him, all his men, including Corporal-Chef Emery, positioned slightly farther back.

"Brothers and sisters, French or otherwise, it matters little whether you share our nationality today, whether you were born in this part of the world or somewhere else. What we are enduring here is far more than a tragedy. What we are enduring here bears witness to a deviation within the humanity of which we are all part.

"For those who perpetrated this tragedy may strive to explain to us why they brought it into being. Whatever languages or dialects they choose to employ, none of their reasons will ever amount to reasons worthy of the name, for they are the products of a human mind that can no longer be the mind it ought to be, having lost within itself that human foundation which alone can constitute it.

"My brothers and sisters, what is happening here, beyond the victims, beyond the deaths of men, women and children like yourselves, must not, in our interpretation, be confined exclusively to the tragedy that it is, but must also be understood in terms of what we have all become, this humanity as a whole

that has allowed such a tragedy, long before becoming possible, to become conceivable in the minds of some among us.

"Thank you."

In Saintes, sitting in front of a television screen with several other people, Elise suddenly started when the camera lingered for just a moment on Mathieu Amant's face.

"But I know him!" she exclaimed.

48

On January 2, 2027, Saint-Jean-d'Angély was still burning, in a manner both paradoxical and frustrating for the emergency services. Some fires, the oldest ones, those that had begun in the very first minutes of the new year, were already starting to extinguish themselves because there was nothing left to sustain their combustion. It was even becoming apparent that this process was, in its own way, bringing about a return to calm more substantial than the one the firefighters had been struggling to achieve.

During the night, some heated discussions had taken place among those responsible for extinguishing the fire consuming Saint-Jean-d'Angély.

Some favoured the use of Canadair water-bombing aircraft, arguing that the human losses already suffered justified such a measure.

Others opposed it.

To begin with, all the aircraft of that kind belonging to France were undergoing maintenance. Ordinarily, such planes were hardly ever used in winter, although some specialists in global warming were warning that, within less than a decade, those same aircraft would be employed twelve months a year, provided, by the end of that period, there were still a few forests left on French territory.

Those opposing this method also pointed to the hundreds of bodies that still had to be recovered.

If the living had to be protected, then, in their view, the dead also deserved respect, and the passage of water-bombing aircraft would inevitably damage their remains.

Eventually, Didier Réprisson was called upon to decide.

He made his choice without really having much of a choice, since the manoeuvre involving Canadair aircraft presented too many obstacles of every kind, particularly technical ones.

He decided to continue using the method adopted the previous day, while slightly modifying their strategy.

It would no longer be a matter of fighting the fire at all costs, as they had attempted to do on January 1, but of helping it, as it gradually exhausted itself, to cease burning sooner than it would if left entirely to its own devices.

In other words, from this perspective, they would no longer be seeking a potential victory, but rather attempting to spare themselves a more substantial and more conspicuous defeat.

That same night, from nine o'clock onwards, all those mobilised on this front had been recalled.

Six firefighters had lost their lives, bringing the total number of deaths for January 1 to eighteen. Another eleven had been injured, one of them seriously.

Didier Réprisson ordered the operation to be suspended, with work scheduled to resume the following morning at 7:30.

Didier Réprisson spent the night in the warehouse, still in the company of Mathieu Amant, Corporal-Chef Emery and their men, as well as his collaborators, who continued insisting that he return to the Élysée Palace as soon as possible.

In their opinion, not only did he lack the facilities necessary to fulfil his role as President of the Republic properly, but, by remaining away from them, he was gradually losing some of the attributes that allowed him still to be regarded as Head of State.

Although he was convinced that clothes did not make the man, by increasingly ceasing to look the part, in an age when appearances took precedence, he might ultimately sacrifice all credibility in the pursuit of his determination.

He, on the contrary, was perfectly aware that his presence served no practical purpose, yet made sure to remain on the scene, counting on the experience of this disaster to inspire in him the idea through which he might succeed in imposing a subsequent chapter upon this episode.

During those hours when he dozed intermittently, he reflected that rebuilding Saint-Jean-d'Angély would not be enough. The tragedy had to be used,

turned against itself, until some added value could be wrested from it.

At around one o'clock in the morning, as Mathieu Amant handed him a coffee, he asked the lieutenant to sit beside him, while requesting a few minutes' respite from those who were continually seeking his attention.

"If I had ordered you to carry out an attack like this, how would you have organised it?" Didier Réprisson asked.

Mathieu Amant sat down beside the Head of State, adopting a position similar to his, directly on the floor, his gaze becoming fixed, like that of someone concentrating intensely.

"The attack itself isn't the problem. The main difficulty is organising it," Mathieu Amant began.

By remaining silent, Didier Réprisson made it clear that he was waiting for him to continue.

"I'm only a lieutenant, just a young lieutenant..."

"Future captain," Didier Réprisson reminded him, using the remark to make him aware of the expectations he had aroused.

Mathieu Amant merely gave a slight shrug, indicating to the Head of State that he had understood the message, then continued.

"I'm only a young lieutenant, but the sinews of war in this affair are money, and a great deal of it is needed to organise an attack like this."

"How much?" Didier Réprisson wanted to know.

"Millions of euros, probably. To pay the men, to recruit them, mercenaries perhaps, but not necessarily. Men without scruples, willing to fire indiscriminately into a crowd, might be enough. Then there are the weapons and ammunition, the drones. From what I've heard, there seem to have been nearly four hundred strikes.

"But above all, the logistics. The people capable of organising everything, and especially of organising it all without the authorities noticing anything, or with those authorities being paid handsomely not to see."

"You're thinking of corruption?" Didier Réprisson asked.

"I don't know," Mathieu Amant began to reply.

"I don't know, but the resources employed require an extraordinary degree of coordination at every level. The question is, how does an elephant manage

not to be noticed when it has to pass through a corridor to reach its destination?"

Mathieu Amant fell silent.

Deep within himself, he felt incapable of saying anything more.

He had already exchanged a few thoughts with Corporal-Chef Emery and some of his other men, in conversations similar to the one he was now having with Didier Réprisson.

All of them had felt overwhelmed.

How could anyone conceive of such an operation, one that above all required remaining invisible throughout its preparation to those who would eventually suffer its consequences?

None of them knew.

Except one, who placed less faith in the collective vigilance that was supposed to detect, in advance, what threatened to destroy them.

That man summed up his thinking in just a few words:

"The bigger it is, the easier it is to get away with!"

“Yes, don't worry, I'll keep an eye on her. Speak to you very soon.”

Elise hung up, having just offered her reassurance.

When all six little girls arrived in Saintes, Ambre Litune refused to leave Elise. Since the young woman possessed no official authority, the authorities were obliged to take responsibility for the child, but at the age of twelve, Ambre was not prepared to allow others to make decisions on her behalf and demanded that she be given the means to contact her parents.

Those responsible for handling her situation did not argue. The circumstances allowed them, depending on the case, to grant themselves certain freedoms that they would certainly never have considered under normal conditions.

This was a time for improvisation. Any outcome that might prove positive, given the circumstances, could be accepted as an opportunity. The regulations governing so-called ordinary periods would have to wait until normality returned, assuming it ever did.

Contact was immediately established with Ambre's parents, whose only information had come from the news channels.

When they realised that they were speaking with the French authorities, they feared the worst, suddenly paralysed by the possibility that they were about to be informed of their daughter's death.

To reassure them, the telephone was handed to Ambre.

Upon hearing one another's voices, both father and mother cried far more than their daughter, who maintained a composure seemingly inconsistent with a child of her age.

Ambre immediately explained the situation to them. She wanted to remain with a young woman named Elise Marchand. She knew she could trust her, and for that arrangement to be possible, her parents had to give their consent.

The officials took back the telephone.

Ambre's parents, knowing their daughter, although they had never suspected that she could display such courage when confronted with events of this nature, decided to trust her judgement.

They were told that matters were not so simple.

Nothing indisputably guaranteed to these representatives of the law that the people on the telephone were indeed Ambre's parents, as they claimed to be, just as nothing guaranteed the reliability of Elise Marchand.

After all, given everything Ambre had just experienced, she might, despite the confidence she displayed, be incapable of correctly assessing her situation.

That apparent maturity might be nothing more than a façade, a kind of sudden response capable of creating an impression, arising from a necessity generated by panic, even though the person concerned did not recognise it as such.

Those responsible for the matter briefly consulted one another, their respective telephones ringing incessantly as they were called upon elsewhere.

Not without a long sigh, they yielded to Ambre Litune's request, taking care to obtain as much information as possible from Elise, even though they knew that whatever the young woman told them carried little weight, since it was supported by no official documentation.

These same officials had already been warned that the urgency of the moment would inevitably lead

some of them to make mistakes, mistakes for which they would certainly be reproached when the accounts were finally settled.

The two columns traditionally headed, on one side, *Credit* and, on the other, *Debit*, would see their respective titles changed: one would be renamed *Finding*, and the other *Culprit*.

And so, before bringing to a close what could and should be no more than a temporary episode in Ambre Litune's life, Elise was allowed to speak with the little girl's parents, promising them that she would take care of their daughter.

The other five little girls showed no more resistance to what they were instructed to do than they showed any reaction at all, something that those responsible for their safety found far from reassuring.

Ambre Litune watched them leave.

Perhaps, among everything she had been forced to endure, this was what affected her most deeply.

These girls, who had been her playmates, seemed to have deserted their own beings.

As they moved away from Ambre, they paid her not the slightest attention, as though Ambre no longer

existed, any more than they themselves still existed within themselves, or even existed for themselves.

In Saintes, a majority of inhabitants offered to accommodate the disaster victims.

Florence, Elise and Ambre Litune were entrusted to a retired widower, seventy-five years old, named Christophe Othon.

He was known to the gendarmerie, firstly because he was a former serviceman, having spent fifteen years in the navy, and secondly because he had subsequently worked as a municipal police officer, first in Bordeaux and then in Saintes.

"The house is large, and so is my family. I had four children, and I've got just as many spare bedrooms. There's also a bathroom upstairs, and clothes available in the wardrobes. Make yourselves at home."

Christophe Othon received no reply.

Florence, Elise and Ambre Litune, having just entered his house, had reached the kitchen, where all three sat down on chairs.

For half an hour now, they had remained in that position, their eyes vacant.

It was January 2, 2027.

Christophe Othon offered them hot drinks, coffee for Florence and Elise, and hot chocolate for Ambre Litune.

They drank a few mouthfuls without uttering a word.

Christophe Othon made no attempt to engage them in conversation.

He had spent almost the entire night in front of the television, watching Saint-Jean-d'Angély burn from a distance, unable to believe that what he was witnessing was really happening some twenty kilometres from his home.

His experience as a soldier suggested to him that those who survived this hell were destined to suffer far more afterwards than during it.

Now he had proof of that before his very eyes, in the presence of the three people to whom he had offered hospitality.

Florence was the first to move.

She announced that she was going to take a shower and then get some rest.

Ambre Litune said she would do the same once the bathroom was free, and that afterwards she too would go to sleep.

Elise remained silent.

Tears were running down her cheeks, although she was not really crying.

She was thinking of Hervé and Olivier, of her former life, which she had loved so much, her studies with the help of ChatGPT, her cycling sessions on Zwift, her guitar, an electric guitar, of that happiness which had never taken even the slightest precaution to warn her how truly deserving of the name happiness it had been.

None of it would ever return.

She, who had imagined living that same life, now reduced to ruins, again and again, had to resign herself to considering it lost forever.

Ambre Litune, noticing her condition, approached Elise and pressed her forehead against hers, simply repeating the same sentence several times.

"You have to live, Elise. You have to live!"

50

On January 2, Didier Réprisson behaved exactly as Didier Réprisson would, not by deciding to return to Paris, as he was insistently being advised to do, but by inviting his international counterparts to come to

Saint-Jean-d'Angély so that they could better appreciate the situation for themselves.

Two of them immediately expressed their willingness to come, namely Giorgia Meloni and Donald Trump.

Didier Réprisson informed Mathieu Amant that if those two, together with others, actually came to the scene, he would be entrusted with the French side of their security arrangements.

Mathieu Amant had some difficulty swallowing at the prospect.

For Didier Réprisson, the condition of Saint-Jean-d'Angély reflected, at the same time, the condition of the world in which they lived.

The disaster had to be understood as a warning, not exclusively because those who had planned it might reproduce it elsewhere, but because those responsible were human beings and, by destroying others, were ultimately destroying themselves, sooner or later.

In his analysis, humanity was heading in the wrong direction.

What had happened here suggested two alternatives: either humanity changed course, or it continued along its present path, but then in full knowledge of the consequences, accepting that it would be entitled to no form of redemption, having been fully warned beforehand, whether that redemption were expected to come from humanity itself or from some supposed entity dwelling in illustrious heights.

Saint-Jean-d'Angély continued to burn.

As planned during the night, the firefighters were ordered to stop taking unreasonable risks.

No more cries for help could be heard within the town. They had to resign themselves to accepting that, amid those walls and neighbourhoods, no survivors remained within the inferno.

Some journalists were already pointing accusing fingers at the emergency services for their inability to contain the fire.

Those entrusted with that very mission explained that they had only been able to intervene seriously eight hours after the first fires had broken out, whereas under ordinary circumstances they would have dealt with such an incident as soon as it was reported.

Those same eight hours had given the fire such a head start that they were now incapable of catching up with it.

They also reminded those who did not hesitate to emphasise their supposed helplessness, or even incompetence, that many of their colleagues had mobilised immediately when the first flames appeared and had been shot dead by the attackers.

Consequently, the number of casualties in their ranks was considerably higher than the figure reported by the media, which concentrated exclusively on those who had fallen from the morning of January 1 onwards.

Furthermore, there were strong suspicions that the drones had been loaded with incendiary substances.

In that respect, not a single one had yet been recovered that might have helped them better understand what they had been dealing with.

Among the hundreds of devices that had riddled Saint-Jean-d'Angély with impact points, some had undoubtedly failed to accomplish their mission, but had subsequently been destroyed by the fire.

According to the services concerned, it would take at least ten days to bring the fire under control.

Once that period had passed, the most painful task would still remain: recovering the bodies and establishing their identities.

Then would come whatever followed, although nobody could say, on that day, what it might look like.

Mathieu Amant, Corporal-Chef Emery and their men remained at the disposal of the Head of State.

Colonel Imbert merely ordered them to obey the President of the Republic. Considering the situation far too improvised for his liking, he left responsibility for it to Didier Réprisson, knowing above all that these soldiers had never received training corresponding to what was now expected of them.

The specialist security personnel still stationed at the Élysée Palace continually warned Didier Réprisson's collaborators that, by choosing this kind of protection, the Head of State was placing himself in danger.

What they failed to understand was that Didier Réprisson, by placing himself in danger, was also, politically speaking, enhancing his own standing.

Around Saint-Jean-d'Angély, something resembling a second town had almost appeared, with tents rising everywhere.

For kilometres along the A10 motorway, a queue of vehicles of every kind could be seen.

On the other carriageway, regardless of the direction taken, whether towards Bordeaux or Paris, ambulances, but more particularly funeral vehicles, travelled continuously, the dead being far more numerous than the injured.

Didier Réprisson remarked to Mathieu Amant, and to Mathieu Amant alone, that what all of them were presently revealing of themselves demonstrated the power that still belonged to them.

A dormant power which, having undergone a violent electric shock, all the more violent for having been in no way anticipated, was recovering an energy previously unknown, even unsuspected, almost synonymous from now on with a certain ferocity.

This led Didier Réprisson to wonder whether the country had to pass through the worst in order to attain the best.

Although that question, for the moment far too provocative given the circumstances, had to remain entirely within him, he believed it nevertheless deserved to be asked.

It was at the end of the day that his encrypted telephone rang once again, the device having scarcely ceased demanding his attention.

The identity of the person sending him the message was not displayed.

He opened it nonetheless.

It consisted of two words.

Two words only, two and no more.

“Best wishes.”

The end.