

THE MIRROR VISITOR
2. THE MISSING OF CLAIRDELUNE

VOLUME 1 RECALLED
A WINTER'S PROMISE

Ophelia lived on the floating ark of Anima, one of the few territories to survive the Rupture of the old world. And before she was betrothed, all was for the best in the best of all possible shattered worlds. Ophelia was certainly one of the clumsiest Animists, due to an accident with a mirror, but her hands had always produced excellent readings of objects and she felt at home in her museum. So, the day Thorn tears her away from her family and her ark to take her to the Pole, it's her own world that's shattered. Ophelia discovers the Citaceleste, a floating city built on illusions. The nobles there are endowed with dangerous powers and ready for all kinds of treachery to gain the favor of Farouk, their family spirit. He is the half-human, half-divine figure who rules over the Pole, and a disturbing character, to say the least.

It doesn't help that Thorn is the son of a disgraced woman and Treasurer of the Pole, so he's detested by everyone. With the collusion of his aunt, Berenilde, he hides his fiancée from everyone while awaiting the marriage. First locked away in a manor, then disguised as a valet, Ophelia gets to know the ins and outs of this world that rejects her before even knowing her. And that's how she finally learns of the existence of Farouk's Book, an ancient and enigmatic tome with which the family spirit is truly obsessed. Then the awful truth hits Ophelia. From the start, Thorn wanted to marry her for her reader's hands. He would accede to those hands at the wedding and they would enable him to decipher the Book! Disillusioned,

Ophelia vows never to trust Thorn again. And when circumstances oblige the latter to bring his fiancée out of hiding and present her officially at court, Ophelia is determined to find her place there for herself.

Fragment: a reminder

In the beginning, we were as one.

But God felt we couldn't satisfy him like that, so God set about dividing us. God had great fun with us, then God tired of us and forgot us. God could be so cruel in his indifference, he horrified me. God knew how to show his gentle side, too, and I loved him as I've loved no one else.

I think we could have all lived happily, in a way, God, me and the others, if it weren't for that accursed book. It disgusted me. I knew what bound me to it in the most sickening of ways, but the horror of that particular knowledge came later, much later. I didn't understand straight away, I was too ignorant.

I loved God, yes, but I despised that book, which he'd open at the drop of a hat. As for God, he relished it. When God was happy, he wrote. When God was furious, he wrote. And one day, when God was in a really bad mood, he did something enormously stupid.

God smashed the world to pieces.

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It's coming back to me—God was punished. On that day, I understood that God wasn't all-powerful. Since then, I've never seen him again.

THE STORYTELLER
THE GAME

Ophelia was dazzled. If she just risked a peek from under her parasol, the sunshine came at her from all directions: down it streamed from the sky; back it bounced off the varnished-wood promenade; it made the entire ocean sparkle; and lit up the jewellery of every courtier. She could see enough, however, to establish that neither Berenilde, nor Aunt Rosaline were any longer by her side.

Ophelia had to face facts: she was lost.

For someone who had come to the court with the firm intention of finding her place, things weren't looking too good. She had an appointment to be officially presented to Farouk. If there was one person in the world who absolutely mustn't be kept waiting, it was certainly this family spirit.

Where was he to be found? In the shade of the large palm trees? At one of the luxurious hotels lining the coast? Inside a beach hut?

Ophelia banged her nose against the sky. She'd been leaning over the parapet to look for Farouk, but the sea was nothing but a wall. A vast moving fresco in which the sound of the waves was as artificial as the smell of sand and the distant horizon. Ophelia readjusted her glasses and looked at the scenery around her. Almost everything here was fake: the palms, the fountains, the sea, the sun, the sky and the pervading heat. The grand hotels themselves were probably just two-dimensional facades.

Illusions. What else could be expected when one was on

the fifth floor of a tower, when that tower overlooked a city, and when that city hovered above a polar ark whose actual temperature never rose above minus fifteen degrees? The locals could distort space and stick illusions all over the place, but there were limits to their creativity.

Ophelia was wary of fakes, but she was even more wary of individuals who used them to manipulate others. That was why she felt particularly ill at ease among the courtiers now jostling her. They were all Mirages, the masters of illusionism. With their imposing stature, pale hair, light eyes and clan tattoos, Ophelia felt even more diminutive, more dark-haired, more short-sighted and more of a stranger than ever in their midst. Occasionally, they would look snootily down at her. No doubt they were wondering who this young lady, desperately trying to hide under her parasol, was, but Ophelia certainly wasn't going to tell them. She was alone and without protection; if they discovered that she was engaged to Thorn, the most hated man in the whole city, she'd never save her skin. Or her mind. She had a cracked rib, a black eye, and a slashed cheek following her recent ordeals. Best not to make things even worse.

At least these Mirages proved useful to Ophelia. They were all moving towards a jetty-promenade on piles, which, due to a pretty convincing optical effect, gave the illusion of extending over the fake sea. By squinting, Ophelia realized that the sparkling she saw at the end of it ended was the light reflecting on a huge glass and metal structure. This Jetty-Promenade wasn't just another *trompe l'oeil*; it was an actual majestic palace. If Ophelia stood any chance of finding Farouk, Berenilde and Aunt Rosaline, it would be over there.

She followed the procession of courtiers. She'd wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible, but hadn't allowed for her scarf. With half of it coiled around her ankle and the other half gesticulating on the ground, it recalled a boa constrictor in full courting display. Ophelia hadn't managed to make it release its

grip. Delighted as she was to see her scarf thriving again, after weeks of separation, she'd have preferred not to shout that she was an Animist from the rooftops. Not until she'd found Berenilde, at least.

Ophelia tipped her parasol further over her face when she went past a newspaper kiosk. The papers all carried the headline:

TIME'S UP FOR DRAGONS:
HUNTERS BEATEN AT OWN GAME

Ophelia found it in extremely poor taste. The Dragons were her future in-laws and they'd all just perished in the forest in dramatic circumstances. In the eyes of the court, however, it was only ever one less rival clan.

She proceeded along the Jetty-Promenade. What had earlier been but an indistinct shimmer turned into architectural fireworks. The palace was even more gigantic than she'd thought. Its golden dome, whose finial darted into the sky like lightning, vied with the sun, and yet it was but the culmination of a much vaster edifice, all glass and cast iron, studded here and there with oriental-looking turrets.

And all this, Ophelia thought as she surveyed the palace, the sea, and the throng of courtiers, all this is just the fifth floor of Farouk's tower.

She was starting to feel really nervous.

Her nervousness turned into panic when she saw two dogs, as white and as massive as polar bears, coming towards her. They were focusing intently on her, but it wasn't them that terrified Ophelia. It was their master.

"Good day, miss. Are you walking alone?"

Ophelia couldn't believe her eyes as she recognised those blond curls, those bottle-bottom glasses and that chubby cherub's face. The Knight. The Mirage without whom the Dragons would still be alive.

He might seem like most little boys—clumsier than most, even—but that didn't make him any less of a scourge whom no adult could control and his own family feared. While the Mirages were generally happy to scatter illusions around themselves, the Knight would implant them directly into people. This deviant power was his plaything. He'd used it to inflict hysteria on a servant; imprison Aunt Rosaline in a memory bubble; turn the Beasts against the Dragons hunting them; and all without ever getting caught.

Ophelia found it incredible that there was no one, in the whole court, who could prevent him from showing himself in public.

"You seem to be lost," the Knight commented, with extreme politeness. "Would you like me to be your guide?"

Ophelia didn't reply to him. She couldn't decide whether saying "yes" or saying "no" would be the signing of her death warrant.

"There you are at last! Where on earth did you get to?" To Ophelia's great relief, it was Berenilde. With a graceful swish of her dress, she was making her way through the crowd of courtiers, serene as a swan crossing a lake. And yet, when she slid Ophelia's arm under her own, she gripped it as tightly as she could.

"Good day, Madam Berenilde," stammered the Knight. His cheeks had gone very pink. He wiped his hands on his smock with an almost shy awkwardness.

"Hurry along, my dear girl," Berenilde said, without even a glance at or reply to the Knight. "The game is nearly over. Your aunt is saving our seats."

It was hard to make out the expression on the Knight's face—his bottle-bottom glasses made his eyes look particularly strange—but Ophelia was almost certain that he was crestfallen. She found the child unfathomable. Surely he wasn't expecting to be thanked for causing the death of a whole clan, was he?

“You’re not speaking to me anymore, madam?” he still asked, anxiously. “So you don’t have a single word for me?” Berenilde hesitated a little, and then turned her most beautiful smile on him. “If you insist, Knight, I even have nine: you will not be protected by your age forever.”

On this prediction, offered almost casually, Berenilde set off in the direction of the palace. When Ophelia glanced back, what she saw sent shivers up her spine. The Knight was looking daggers at her, and not at Berenilde, his face contorted with jealousy. Was he about to set his dogs after them?

“Of all the people with whom you must never find yourself alone, the Knight is top of the list,” murmured Berenilde, gripping Ophelia’s arm even tighter. “Do you never listen to my advice, then? Let’s hurry up,” she added, walking faster. “The game is coming to an end, and we absolutely mustn’t make Lord Farouk wait.”

“What game?” gasped Ophelia. Her cracked rib was increasingly painful.

“You are going to make a good impression on our lord,” Berenilde decreed without dropping her smile. “Today we have many more enemies than we have allies—his protection will swing the balance, decisively. If you don’t please him at first sight, you’re sentencing us to death.” She placed a hand on her stomach, including the child she was carrying in this statement.

Hampered as she walked, Ophelia kept having to shake the scarf that had wound itself around her foot. Berenilde’s words did nothing to help her feel less nervous. Her apprehension was all the greater for still having the telegram from her family in the pocket of her dress. Concerned by her silence, her parents, uncles, aunts, brother, sisters and cousins had decided to bring their arrival in the Pole forward by several months. They were, of course, unaware that their security also depended on Farouk’s goodwill.

Ophelia and Berenilde entered the palace's main rotunda, which was even more spectacular seen from inside. Five galleries radiated within it, each one as impressive as the nave of a cathedral. The slightest murmur from the court or rustle of a dress became greatly amplified beneath the vast glass canopies. In here, only the great and the good were to be found: ministers, consuls, artists and their current muses.

A butler in gold livery came towards Berenilde. "If the ladies would care to follow me to the Goose Garden. Lord Farouk will receive them as soon as his game is over." He led them along one of the five galleries, having relieved Ophelia of her parasol. "I would rather keep it," she told him, politely, when he wanted to take her scarf, too, perplexed at finding this accessory placed somewhere as inappropriate as an ankle. "Believe me, it gives me no choice."

With a sigh, Berenilde checked that Ophelia's veil was properly concealing her face behind its lace screen. "Don't show your injuries—such poor taste. Play your cards right, and you can consider the Jetty-Promenade as your second home."

Deep down, Ophelia wondered where exactly her first home might be. Since she'd arrived in the Pole, she'd already visited Berenilde's manor, the Clairdelune embassy, her fiancé's Treasury, and she hadn't felt at home in any of them.

The butler led them under a vast glass canopy just as there was a burst of applause, punctuated with, "Bravo!", and, "Good show, my lord!". Despite the white lace of her veil, Ophelia tried to work out what was going on between the palms of the indoor garden. A group of bewigged nobles was gathered on the lawn around what looked like a small maze. Ophelia was too short to glimpse anything over the shoulders of those in front of her, but Berenilde had no trouble clearing a path for them to the front row: the nobles, as soon as they recognized her, withdrew of their own accord,

less for decorum's sake than to be at a safe distance. They would await Farouk's verdict before aligning their behavior to his.

Seeing Berenilde return with Ophelia, Aunt Rosaline hid her relief behind a look of annoyance. "You must explain to me some day," she muttered, "how I'm supposed to chaperone a girl who's forever giving me the slip."

Ophelia's view of the game was now unrestricted. The maze comprised a series of numbered tiles. On some of them, there were geese attached to pickets. Two servants stood at specific stages along the spiraling path and seemed to be waiting for instructions.

She turned to see what everyone was looking at right then: a small, round rostrum overlooking the maze. There, sitting at a dainty table painted the same white as the rostrum, a player was shaking his fist and taking obvious delight in annoying the spectators. Ophelia recognized him from his gaping top hat and cheeky, ear-to-ear grin—it was Archibald, Farouk's ambassador. When he finally opened his fist, a rattling of dice rang out in the silence.

"Seven!" announced the master of ceremonies. Immediately, one of the servants moved forward seven tiles and, to Ophelia's astonishment, disappeared down a hole. "Our ambassador's really not lucky at this game," said someone behind her, sarcastically. "It's his third turn and he *always* lands on the pit."

In one way, Archibald's presence reassured Ophelia. He was a man not without faults, but in this place he was the closest she had to a friend, and he at least had the merit of belonging to the Web clan. With very few exceptions, there were only Mirages among the courtiers, and the whiff of hostility that hovered around them made the air unbreathable. If they were all as devious as the Knight, it meant some delightful days to come.

Like the rest of the spectators, Ophelia now concentrated on the table of the other player, further up the rostrum. At

first, due to her veil, the only impression she got was of a constellation of diamonds. She finally realized that they were attached to the numerous favorites cradling Farouk in their entwined arms, with one combing his long, white hair, another pressed to his chest, yet another kneeling at his feet, and so on. Leaning his elbow on the table, which was far too small for his stature, Farouk seemed as indifferent to the caresses being lavished on him as to the game he was playing. That, at any rate, is what Ophelia inferred from the way he yawned noisily as he threw his dice. From where she was, she couldn't see his face that clearly.

"Five!" sang out the master of ceremonies in the midst of applause and joyful cries. The second servant immediately started leaping from square to square. Each time he landed on a tile occupied by a goose, honking furiously and trying to snap at his calves, but he was straight off, going from five to five, until he finished bang on the final square, in the centre of the spiral, to be hailed like an Olympic champion by the nobles. Farouk had won the game. As for Ophelia, she found the spectacle unreal. She hoped someone would bother to get the other servant out of his hole soon.

Up on the rostrum, a small man in a white suit took advantage of the game ending to approach Farouk with what looked like a writing case. He smiled broadly as he had a word in his ear. Baffled, Ophelia saw Farouk casually stamping a paper that the man held out to him, without reading a single word on it.

"See Count Boris as a model," Berenilde whispered to her. "He waited for the right moment to obtain a new estate. Prepare yourself, our turn's coming up."

Ophelia didn't hear her. She'd just noticed the presence of another man on the rostrum who was absorbing all her attention. He stood in the background, so dark and still that he might almost have gone unnoticed had he not suddenly snapped his watch cover shut. At the sight of him, Ophelia felt

a burning flash surge up from deep within her until even her ears were red-hot.

Thorn.

His black uniform, with its mandarin collar and heavy epaulettes, wasn't suited to the stifling heat—an illusion, certainly, but a very realistic one—beneath the glass canopy. Stiff as a poker, starchy from head to toe, silent as a shadow, he seemed out of place in the flamboyant world of the court.

Ophelia would have given anything not to find him here. True to form, he would take control of the situation and dictate her role to her.

“Madam Berenilde and the ladies from Anima!” announced the master of ceremonies. As all heads turned towards Ophelia in a deadly silence, broken only by the honking of the geese, she took a deep breath. The time had finally come for her to join the game.

She would find her place, despite Thorn.

THE KID

As Ophelia walked up to the rostrum, she felt eyes on her that were burning with such curiosity, she wondered if she might end up catching fire. She tried to ignore the cheeky wink Archibald gave her from his gaming table, and climbed the rostrum's white steps while concentrating on a single thought: my future depends on what takes place here and now.

Perhaps it was due to the nervousness Thorn brought out in her, or the lace veil obscuring her vision, or the scarf coiled around foot, or her pathological clumsiness, the fact is, Ophelia tripped on the final step of the stairs. She would have fallen flat on the floor had Thorn not caught her in full flight by grabbing her arm and forcibly putting her back on her feet. This near miss, however, went unnoticed by no one—not by Berenilde, whose smile froze; not by Aunt Rosaline, who buried her face in her hands; not by Ophelia's cracked rib, which throbbed furiously against her side.

Laughter rippled across the Goose Garden, but was swiftly stifled once it was noticed that Farouk himself didn't seem to find the situation remotely amusing. With elbow still on table, he hadn't moved an inch since the end of the game, and while he looked utterly bored, his diamond-adorned favorites clung to his body as though a natural extension of it.

As for Ophelia, she'd forgotten Thorn the moment the family spirit had focused his inscrutable eyes, with their pale blue, almost white irises, on her. In fact, everything about Farouk

was white—his long, smooth hair, his eternally young skin, his imperial garb—but all Ophelia noticed were his eyes. Family spirits were, by nature, impressive. Each ark, with just one exception, had their own. Powerful and immortal, they were the roots of the world's great family tree, the ancestors common to all the great lines. On the rare occasions when Ophelia had met her own ancestor, Artemis, on Anima, she'd felt minuscule. And yet that was nothing compared with how Farouk made her feel right now. Ophelia was separated from him by the distance demanded by protocol, but even so, his psychic power crushed her as he contemplated her with the fixed stare of a statue, without blinking, without a scruple.

"Who's this?" Farouk asked.

Ophelia couldn't reproach him for not remembering her. The only time their paths had crossed, it had been at a distance, she'd been disguised as a valet, and they'd exchanged not a glance. She was taken aback when she realized that his question also referred to Thorn and Berenilde, on whom Farouk had turned his blank eyes. Ophelia knew that family spirits had very bad memories, but all the same! Thorn was the Superintendent of Citaceleste and all the Pole's provinces, so was responsible for the finances and a good deal of the judicial administration. As for Berenilde, she was pregnant by Farouk, and yesterday, once again, they had spent the night together.

"Where's the Aide-memoire?" asked Farouk.

"I'm here, my lord!" A young man, who must have been about Ophelia's age, sprang out from behind Farouk's chair. He had the forehead tattoo and the blond beauty of the Web clan. Probably a cousin of Archibald. "Mr. Ambassador has requested an audience to converse with you on the subject of the situation of your treasurer Mr. Thorn, his aunt Madam Berenilde, and his fiancée Miss Ophelia."

The Aide-memoire had spoken gently and patiently, indicating each person to Farouk as he named them. First to come

forward was Archibald, his top hat askew on his tousled hair. Ophelia was convinced he hadn't shaved on purpose: the more solemn the occasion, the more the ambassador defied convention.

"On what subject?"

"On the subject of the disappearance of the Dragons clan, my lord," the Aide-memoire reminded him with angelic sweetness. "The disastrous accident that cost your hunters their lives. Mr. Archibald explained it all to you this morning. Read here, my lord—you noted it down in your memorandum."

The Aide-memoire passed a notebook, dog-eared from much handling, to Farouk. Painfully slowly, Farouk dragged his elbow from the gaming table and began to leaf through it. The favorites adapted to the slightest movement of his body, releasing their embrace here only to tighten it there. Ophelia watched the scene with both fascination and repulsion. Under their diamond tiaras, diamond necklaces and diamond rings, they no longer really looked like women.

"The Dragons are dead?" asked Farouk.

"Yes, my lord," replied the Aide-memoire. "That's the last thing you wrote."

"The Dragons are dead'," repeated Farouk, this time reading out what he'd written. He paused for a long while, still as a block of marble, and then turned another page of his memorandum. " 'Berenilde belongs to the Dragons clan'. I wrote that, there."

Farouk had separated each syllable as he had made that statement. Coming from his mouth, the Northern accent took on a thunderous resonance. Distant thunder, barely audible, but truly menacing. When he raised his eyes from his memorandum, Ophelia detected a worrying glint that hadn't been there a moment ago.

"Where is Berenilde?"

With not a word, not a curtsy, Berenilde went forward to

stroke his cheek with the tenderness of a real wife. This time, Farouk seemed to recognize her immediately. He gazed at her, uttering not a word himself, but Ophelia sensed there was much more in their silence than in all the conversations in the world.

It was Thorn, impatiently snapping his watch cover shut, who broke the spell. Farouk, with the slowness of a drifting iceberg, then moved once again, seizing the fountain pen his Aide-memoire held out to him and adding a new note in his memorandum. Ophelia wondered whether he was writing, 'Berenilde is alive', never to forget it again.

"So, madam," Farouk continued, "you have just lost your whole family. I offer you my condolences." His cavernous voice betrayed not a single emotion, as if an entire branch of his own line hadn't just been wiped out in a bloodbath.

"Most fortunately, I'm not the sole survivor," Berenilde was quick to clarify. "My mother is undergoing treatment in the provinces, unaware of recent events. As for my nephew, here present, he is soon to take a wife. The continuation of the Dragons is assured."

Ophelia almost felt bad. One day she'd try to break it to Berenilde that the marriage would remain unconsummated and there'd be no children.

When murmurs of protest rose among the nobles gathered around the players' rostrum, the word "bastard" was clearly enunciated. Thorn didn't even attempt to defend his honor. With his forehead dripping in sweat, his eyes were glued to the dial of his fob watch, as if he were enduring a considerable delay to his schedule.

"Here's why I requested this audience," Archibald broke in, with a broad smile. "Whether you like it or not, my dear Berenilde, your nephew has never been recognized by the Dragons, and your mother is no longer a spring chicken. Before very long, you will be the sole representative of your

clan. This is what calls into question your position at court, as you'll accept in good faith."

His speech was greeted with scattered applause. As the worthy representative of the embassy, Archibald had expressed out loud what everyone was quietly thinking. Ophelia turned round when she heard the sound of a typewriter behind her: a clerk was sitting at a gaming table and recording all that was said.

"For that reason," Archibald continued, more stridently, "I have offered the official friendship of my family to Madam Berenilde and Miss Ophelia." This statement cast a terrible chill over the Goose Garden and any applause immediately stopped. Until then, the Mirages were unaware that an alliance had been agreed between Berenilde and the Web clan. "It's a diplomatic friendship, not a military alliance," Archibald explained, with the joviality of someone telling a good joke. "The Web wants to ensure that nothing unfortunate happens to these ladies, but it also wants to maintain its political neutrality and to stay out of your little backstairs murders. We thus formally undertake neither to threaten the life of anyone, nor to hire someone to do so on our behalf."

Ophelia was staggered at the offhand way in which Archibald tackled such a serious matter. She also noted that he'd said nothing of the linchpin of the aforementioned friendship: Berenilde making him the official godfather of her future child. The direct descendant of a family spirit—it was certainly no minor detail.

"The friendship of my family has its own limitations, my lord," Archibald said, directly to Farouk. "Would you accept to take these ladies under your personal protection, here, at the court?"

Farouk was barely listening to him. He was slumped with boredom, elbows on knees, and any concentration was only for his memorandum, which he was limply leafing through.

Ophelia wondered where that pain in her arm was coming from, and then realized that it was Thorn's hand. He'd not let go of her since her stumble, and was digging his long, bony fingers into her flesh. He tightened them even more when Farouk froze, mid-memorandum, and his white eyebrows shot up, sky-high.

"The reader. I wrote down here that Berenilde would bring a reader to me. Where is she?"

"She's here, my lord," said the Aide-memoire, indicating Ophelia. "Beside her fiancé."

Here we go, thought Ophelia, clutching her hands to control their shaking.

"Oh," said Farouk, closing his memorandum. "So it's her."

Silence filled the entire glass canopy as he went over to Ophelia and crouched down in front of her, like an adult drawing level with a child. She hadn't expected such a face-to-face encounter.

Without a qualm, Farouk lifted the lace veil to study Ophelia's face. While he was staring at her, lengthily and attentively, Ophelia struggled, with all her might, not to do a runner. Farouk's mental power was blurring her sight, splitting her head, overwhelming her, body and soul.

"She's damaged," he declared in a disappointed voice, as though sold shoddy goods. The clerk conscientiously tapped these words out on his typewriter.

"And also," Farouk continued, "I don't like kids."

Ophelia could see now why no one mentioned Berenilde's pregnancy in front of him. She took a deep breath. If she didn't speak up, right here, right now, her entire future would be in jeopardy. She exchanged a glance with Aunt Rosaline, who indicated that she should speak frankly, and then looked straight at Farouk's face, with its inhuman beauty, forcing herself, above all, not to look away.

"I may not be what one might call a grown-up, but I'm no

longer a kid.” Ophelia had a tiny voice that didn’t carry far and that often obliged her to repeat herself; so she’d now dug deep in her lungs for enough breath to be heard by all those present on the rostrum. She wasn’t merely addressing Farouk, but also Thorn, Berenilde, Archibald, all the people who’d got into the regrettable habit of treating her like a little girl.

Farouk tapped his bottom lip, pensively, and reopened his memorandum at its opening pages. Ophelia was close enough to make out, upside down, the clumsy handwriting and impressive number of sketches. Farouk lingered on the drawing of a little figure with stick arms, orangey-brown colored-in curls, and a giant pair of glasses. “That’s Artemis,” he explained, in his drawling voice. “Since she’s my sister, and since she’s your family spirit, I suppose that makes you a sort of great-great-great-great-grand-niece? Yes,” he finally conceded, squinting at the drawing, “I suppose you remind me a little of her. Particularly the glasses.”

Ophelia wondered when Farouk had last seen his sister, because Artemis looked nothing like that scribble and didn’t wear glasses. Family spirits never left their arks. They may once have shared a childhood together, before the Rupture, but they didn’t seem to retain a very vivid recollection of it. They had no memory, a possible side effect of their prodigious longevity, and that gave an aura of mystery to their past—to the past of the whole of humanity, in fact. Even Ophelia, despite being a reader, knew nothing of their personal history. She sometimes wondered whether they themselves had had parents, at some very distant time.

“So, Artemis’s girl,” Farouk continued, “you can read the past of objects?”

“To my great regret,” Ophelia sighed, “it’s the only thing I can get my ten fingers to do properly.” That, and escaping through mirrors, but the latter was trickier to include in a professional reference.

“Don’t regret it.” A spark had just lit up beneath Farouk’s drooping eyelids. With interminable slowness, he plunged a hand inside his great imperial coat and pulled out a book, its binding encrusted in precious stones. In proportion to Farouk’s height, it was the size of a paperback; on the Ophelia scale, it was equivalent to an encyclopedia. “You could, for example, ‘read’ my Book.”

Ophelia’s apprehension on seeing this object was almost as intense as her curiosity. Such a Book deserved its capital ‘B’. Ophelia had long thought that only one of its type existed, on Anima, within Artemis’s private archives; a tome so singular and so ancient that the best readers, including Ophelia, had never succeeded in deciphering it. On arriving in the Pole, Ophelia had not only discovered that there were others across the various arks, but also, more importantly, that Farouk’s volume was the *raison d’être* of her marriage.

So, when she finally saw this Book, to which her destiny was linked, with her own eyes, Ophelia could feel her hands itching and reaching instinctively towards it. By penetrating its secret, maybe she should be able to free herself?

“Not her.” That lugubrious voice had rung out like a funeral gong. It was the first time Thorn was speaking since the start of the audience. He seemed to have waited for that precise moment suddenly to pull on Ophelia’s arm, dragging her back and placing her behind him, well hidden in his shadow. “Me.”

Still crouching and clutching his Book, Farouk blinked as he looked up at Thorn, dazed, as if roused from a siesta.

“It is I who will read your Book,” Thorn continued, his tone unequivocal. “When I have inherited my wife’s power, in four months and nine days, and when I have learnt how to use it. It’s in our contract.”

Thorn put his fob watch away, plunged his fingers into an outside pocket of his uniform and promptly produced an

official document. His other hand still hadn't let go of his fiancée. Ophelia knew that this gesture was neither affectionate, nor protective. It was a clear warning to Farouk and his entire court: he, Thorn, had exclusive ownership of her reader's gift.

Ophelia seized up, from head to toe. Of all that she'd discovered in the Pole, this was by far the most repugnant. The Ceremony of the Gift was a nuptial ritual during which husband and wife passed on their respective family powers. Thorn had carefully avoided telling Ophelia that he'd organized their marriage with the sole intention of inheriting her Animism and of proving himself as a reader. He had his mother's phenomenal memory, and seemed to think that the combining of their family powers would allow him to go back far enough in time to decipher Farouk's Book.

Thorn wasn't interested in historic discovery itself. He was thinking only of his personal ambition. "Will you take my fiancée and my aunt into your protection from now until my marriage?" he continued. "Along with all the Animists who will be coming to the Pole, in order to maintain good diplomatic relations with them?"

His Northern accent was, of course, particularly strong, hardening each syllable, but requesting this favor of Farouk actually seemed to hurt his lips. As for Berenilde, she maintained a calm silence; one had to know her well to be aware that her silky smile concealed a certain anxiety.

Ophelia was aware that they were acting together on a theatrical stage, before an audience waiting for just one slip to boo them. Every word, every inflection, every movement mattered. But on this stage, Thorn remained her greatest adversary. Because of him, the only image retained of her would be that of a woman cowering in her husband's shadow.

Sullenly, Farouk read again the terms of the contract Thorn had given him, and then put the Book away inside his coat and

straightened up, muscle after muscle, joint after joint, until standing fully upright. Thorn was big; Farouk was gigantic.

“If all she’s good for is reading, and I can’t ask her to read,” he said, slowly, “what am I going to use her for? I only accept, within my entourage, people who can entertain me.”

It was now or never. Ophelia stepped out of Thorn’s shadow, obliging him to let go of her arm, and then raised her eyes up to Farouk to look squarely at him, and never mind the pain involved.

“I’m not entertaining, but I can make myself useful. I ran a museum on Anima; I could open one up here. A museum, it’s like a memory,” she stressed, choosing her words carefully. “It’s like your memorandum.” Ophelia couldn’t see Thorn’s expression, as he was behind her, but she could see that of Berenilde, who was smiling no more. This was definitely not what she’d had in mind when asking her to make a good impression. Ophelia tried to ignore the shocked murmurs rising from the audience surrounding the rostrum. With this request, she’d probably broken half the rules of etiquette.

“What kind of museum did you run?” asked Farouk.

“Primitive history,” Ophelia swiftly replied, relieved at having succeeded in arousing his curiosity. “Everything relating to the old world. Of course, I can adapt myself to your historical resources.”

Farouk seemed truly interested and, for a brief moment, Ophelia thought she’d finally obtained her museum, her independence and her freedom. So she was incredulous when she heard the response, faithfully recorded by the clerk’s typewriter: “History, then. Perfect, Artemis’s girl, you will tell me stories. That will be the price of the protection I give you—you and your family. I appoint you Vice-storyteller.”