**Don’t call me Witch - Sabina Colloredo**

**In the circle of light**

I remember clearly the day that I came into the world. In the buzz of the voices that reached me from the outside, my mother’s voice rose, exasperated, above all the others.

– Everybody out! – she shrieked. – I’m better off alone! – she wheezed. And I knew very well why: I was being born and she was terrified.

Then she addressed me, as I floated carefully, with that sweet and intimate tone that in nine months had woven the weft of our secret discourses.

– And you, little flower, wake up! I have no intention of spending the entire day pushing!

I interrupted my tour of the placenta and waited, perplexed.

– Now I’ll say... a magic formula... that will help us both! – she continued with a voice made rough by the exertion.

I curled myself, immobile, expecting the worst.

– AHINÀ-CA-RA-CTERE! – she yelled, with the little voice she had left.

An unbearable pressure pushed me out of her belly, the space filled with light and two steady hands deposited me on a perfumed carpet.

It wasn’t a flowered field, nor a sky overcrowded with spring winds, nor a rustling field of crops. It wasn’t, but it was. Can you see?

It was my cradle.

Mom had padded it with a mixture of herbs to help me grow up healthy and strong. So, the flowers of rue and chamomile, the mallow leaves and a handful of maidenhair powder make up the essence of my first impact with the world. The power of nature did the rest.

It was May 15th,1505. The day of my birth.

– You took your time, eh? – complained my mother, caressing me.

How different her voice was when in contact with the air. It didn’t have that padded sound, like a chant under the cushion; rather, it was loud and imperious.

Curious, I squinted my eyes, and in the chiaroscuro of my first gaze I tried to focus on the figure bowed over me. I saw a large red mouth and green tempestuous eyes staring at me over from head to toe.

The examination must have been satisfying because she lifted me up to her breast and there, finally, I found my place in the world. But it didn’t last long.

While I wasted time with the last drop of milk on my lips, she started rubbing me with tonic.

– You look like a mouse, with such a gray skin – she said. – You’ll see this pinches a bit, but it will make things better.

I was very sleepy and I let her do it without protesting.

When I was as shining and pink as a piglet, she slipped me into a clean shirt.

– First lesson: in your life, you should never ever count on others, only on yourself! – she went on. – We’ll start immediately. I go to bathe in the sea to purify myself from the birth, and you, you stay here like a good girl, alone.

Luckily for me, I didn’t yet know the meaning of the word “alone”: for me, it was an indistinct murmur, like many other words, confused with the waves far away on the shore.

Unaware, I sand into the wood-smelling cradle and relaxed into my first, real newborn sleep.

Between distinct dreams and confused wakings, the first weeks of my life went by.

I remember them as happy days. Nobody expected great things from me, and anyway, I had things to do like observing the squiggles of the sun through the leaves of the vineyard, the timeless flights of the seagulls, or the long shadows of the mountains.

I was in a world that was unknown and familiar at the same time. My little newborn world.

– Wake up, sleepy head! You’re always dreaming! – my mother was whispering.

I opened my eyes: the ringlets of her hair touched my face and the sun set on those magnificent copper tones that suddenly lit up like flames. It looked like a fire was erupting from her head.

I went from happiness to fear and burst into tears. The world slid towards the evening and mother sang a heartbreaking lullaby. I listened to her, rapt, with my mouth open too, like all pups around the world, in that timeless hour.

– Today is an important day, you know – she whispered, when the last note died away in the dusk. She laid me on the kitchen table, belly up. – It’s the day of your consecration to the Mother! Very soon you’ll meet the Ladies and their Mistress. And you’ll have your name.

– No, my love, no! – she tried to console me, holding me tight to her body, which was my entire life.

– Don’t!

I heard an imperceptible tremor in her voice. – Don’t cry, little flower! The fire that you saw is what you’ve already experienced. Don’t be afraid, in this life you’ll be spared the flames. Forget it! Let go of your previous life that doesn’t belong to you any longer.

She signed, wistfully. The last sunrays ruffled the sea and the swallows flew low, trilling, to their nests where the little ones waited for them with opened beaks.

She rubbed my body with an ointment with the sweet perfume of hay.

– One’s destiny is written in every name, don’t forget it – she blew into my nostrils to clean them – but no destiny is ever definitively drawn.

She placed an ear of corn in each of my hands, a round bread on my heart and a field flower in my belly button.

I was terribly uncomfortable decorated this way despite the scent of flowers and fresh bread.

– And don’t even think about peeing or pooping during the ceremony – she admonished me, casting a satisfied eye on her masterpiece, a newborn that seemed like a market stall.

– What would they think of me? You would be the first in our family who...

She interrupted herself and quickly pulled back her hands.

A shadow overlaid hers: without a sound, the Ladies had slid into the house. Silent, insubstantial as dreams, they placed themselves in a circle around the cradle. I remember noses, eyes and mouths leaning over me. I kicked and kicked to get over my nervousness.

The Ladies spoke to me in an ancient language, made of pops and hisses, and their sweet fingers touched my forehead, chest and the soles of my feet. I immediately felt a wave of wellbeing and sweetness wash over me, and I stopped wiggling like a worm.

But time passed and they were still there around me, hindering me from seeing my mother. I was scared. I crushed the two ears of corn in my hands and peed on myself, so the flower began to float, lost, in my belly button.

What were they waiting for?

When the owl sent its call and the full moon shone in the frame of the window, the Mistress lifted me up from the cradle, wrapped me in a blanket and left the house, followed by the other three.

The night was so deep, and the darkness so unfathomable. I closed my eyes to reassure myself: what I saw behind my eyelids, at least, was a darkness I knew.

We walked along the beach and then through the sleeping village, not even a dog barking. A group of fishermen sewed their nets by the torchlight, but only one of them raised his head towards us, staring into the emptiness of the night and shivering.

We left him stuttering confusedly, bent over his work, and we headed into the forest.

The flight brought us to a stream in the time of a yawn.

I woke up as the Mistress tried to open my numb fists: without blinking an eye, she took that bit of pulp that I still held in place of the ears of corn and threw it in the running water. Then she moistened my lips with the water of the Fountain.

– Today, night of the summer solstice, the little Nothing comes out of the shadows and takes part in our circle of light... – she said in a loud voice. – For the Mother, for us and for the rest of the world, you will be called... Lucetta!

She turned and held me out towards my mother, who came forward with her dancing steps, through the circle of Ladies, her slim body wearing with a red tunic. Her hair fluttered loose to her waist, wrapping around her like snakes.

She formed a circle in the air with her arms, before stretching them towards me.

– Your name is Lucetta – she whispered – because you will be our light...

She gave me to another woman, the oldest of the group.

– ...never born, never dead... – the woman continued, offering me to her neighbor.

– ...you will pass from the visible world to the invisible... – another one went on, rocking me.

– ...and you will be the Word of our circle in the world, – finished the last one, inadvertently pulling my hair.

I had had enough. Uncaring of my mother’s furious expression, I burst out in bitter cries.

– Bless her, Mother! – added the Mistress, quickly immersing me in the beam of moonlight.

I doubled my screams and started kicking like a madwoman until my mother’s breast finally entered my field of vision. Then I stopped crying and started sucking contentedly.

**From the cradle to the house**

– As of today, no more cradle! Look at what I’ve built for you!

Mother’s strong fingers slipped me, kicking, into a hollowed out oak trunk, cut more or less to my height. Satisfied, she observed my head, red like the cap of a mushroom growing out of the bark.

– Perfect! – she cheered. – Now you can stand on your feet alone, without falling, and start looking around you.

I rested my elbows on the trunk and waited. I knew the novelties weren’t over.

She gathered her hair on top of her head and began sweeping the ground energetically, even in the most hidden corners.

– Dirt brings illnesses and attracts evil spirits! – she declared with the authority of someone giving out the first lesson in the field. – This is why the house of a healer must always be very clean!

When the show started boring me, she interrupted herself to look straight into my eyes. – And this house will be your entire world, at least for a while. You must never go out! Neither from here... – she said, showing me the door frame through which the blinding light of the sun came – nor from here... – she indicated the window, – nor from here! – she concluded, pointing a finger towards the fireplace.

I looked in that direction, surprised. Nobody had ever entered or exited from there. At least, not that I know of.

The great copper pot, polished like a mirror, hung over the fire with the soup cooking inside. My mother lifted the lid, tasted a bit with the ladle and added a handful of dried mushrooms and aromatic herbs from a basket above the fireplace.

– Very tasty! – she announced, satisfied. My stomach started growling.

– The fire must never go out, remember! – she continued. – It would be a great misfortune for us! Not only is it the soul of the house, but also a familiar light for the spirits who don’t find their way. If it went out, they would torment us with their lamentations. It’s not a good feeling to have them around, you know?

I felt the scarce hair on my head stand on end, and I slipped a finger in my nose to control my fear.

– You must learn to fear it, but also to honor it: it’s true, it can destroy you, but you will learn how to read your future in the flames and prepare healing potions.

I yawned, while my stomach rumbled like a storm.

A bee landed next to my elbow and started sucking the resin of the bark. Everybody was eating except for me, the youngest of all.

– In a few years – my mother continued undeterred – I’ll teach you to do it yourself. Something must always boil in the pot: soup, stew, concoctions, potions, it doesn’t matter. But in my house, the fire works without rest, like me.

She put down the broom, and started to carefully dust the terracotta jars, the ceramic and glass vases, the containers and the ampules, that is, all of the paraphernalia that occupied the long shelves on the wall in a precise order. I thought with terror about when she would entrust that very boring job to me.

– Here is everything I know – she continued – and I don’t need to write labels to remember what I put inside. Besides, I can’t write. But that’s not the point. The point is to recognize the elements by sight, feel, smell. There are herbs that are very dangerous, you know? Poisons! They can cure or kill, depending on how you use them. They can bring peace or drive one mad. Until you become an expert, never ever touch them, not even with a finger! Do you understand?

– Din-dins – I said.

I waited with a triumphal air for her reaction, but the first word of my life was lost in the loud notes of the song that she had just started singing.

I could have tried again later, but the nice smell of the soup was a torture.

– Din-dins! – I insisted. Nothing.

I gave up and raised my eyes to the ceiling. It was a part of the house that I knew well, since I had been observing it from the cradle for an entire year.

Hanging from strings that ran along the beams were drying bunches of flowers and herbs, spaced at regular distances. An upside-down forest. The soup’s smell, carried around by the heat of the constantly burning fire, no longer held secrets for me.

– Din-dins! – I repeated, more forcefully. Finally, the song ceased and my mother looked at me incredulously.

- You... spoke!?

I concentrated, furrowing my forehead and, with all my strength, tried to say the magic word again.

– Prr... – I said.

- Ah, that’s it. I thought so. Don’t force it – she said, disappointed, – I get that you’re hungry!

She sat on the doorway, stretched her legs in front of her and started feeding me.

I heard steps coming towards us, running.

– You’re Melusina the healer, aren’t you? – asked a loud voice.

I pricked up my ears with curiosity. It was the voice of a little girl.

– That’s me, little one, and what is your name?

– Aurora. My mother says she needs you. My little sister has a terrible pain here and has been throwing up for three days. We live in the first house of the village. The pink one.

– Does your sister have a fever?

– What is the fever?

– It doesn’t matter. Tell your mother that I’ll be there soon.

She took me off her breast before I had finished and laid me in the cradle.

She started running frantically from one side of the room to the other, stuffing pieces of clean linen and bunches of herbs in a sack.

– I’ve been here for two years and nobody in the village has ever asked me for help before! You know what that means, my little leaf? It means they are beginning to trust me, to consider me one of them! This is important, Lucetta, see? Human beings can’t live in solitude! Not even me. What kind of a healer would I be, without people to comfort?

She untied her hair, combed it carefully into a braid and sprayed some drops of propolis on her neck and hands.

She kissed me on the tip of my nose.

– And now, be good, I’ll come right back to you.

The sun was low on the horizon when something woke me up.

I yawned, stretched. And finally I saw him.

He was crouched on the windowsill, his long black fur brushing the floor, his white fangs, his pointed claws. A cat that wasn’t a cat.

He stared at me with an insolent air. Then he opened his mouth wide. No sound came out, but I distinctly heard his words: – I’ve been watching you sleep for a while now. It’s not a good sign that you didn’t wake up immediately. That means that you are not a great psychic! Your mother, though, feels me from afar... ah, your mother! She’s getting into trouble again, you know?

He hopped towards me. He was as big as a turkey, but when he landed on the cradle, it didn’t even make it rock.

I put a piece of the sheet in my mouth and started sucking it noisily, while the black cat searched deeply with his amber eyes into mine. He probably didn’t find anything dangerous there, or if he did, he didn’t say, because he gathered his fur around his body and relaxed.

– Your mother is stubborn, she’s really incapable of staying hidden – he growled, in his sinister and rustling way. – Didn’t you see the flames last night? Didn’t the wind bring the burning odor here?

I looked at the copper cauldron that bubbled over the fire. The cat followed my gaze, hungry.

– Not that odor, Lucetta... – he said, wiggling his nose. I bet, though, that she saw the fires there, up in the valleys – he insisted. – They’re unmistakable, the witches’ burnings. They only appear when the moon is high up in the sky...

He interrupted himself to smell the perfumed vapor that rose from the pot.

– Stew with mushrooms. Would you like some? – he blew. I made an affirmative sign.

- You’ll have to wait, then!

With a paw, he spilled the content of the pot onto the floor and started licking it.

– Din-dins… Din-dins! – I yelled furiously.

- You must tell your mother that there is a Commissioner of the Inquisition who is cleaning up the mountains... she knows him well... we all know that he’s a zealot who wants to do his work well. Thirty witches burned in the fire just one month after his arrival!

He licked his whiskers with care, and when they were perfectly clean, he jumped back onto the cradle.

– Now he’s gone back to Rome, but I bet we’ll see him again. He liked his experience. Nobody controls him here, and he can do whatever he wants.

I smelled a bitter odor spreading through the air: the leftover drippings of the stew were burning in the pot.

– Poor little one! I bet you never even heard the sound of bells since you were born, and you know why? Because there are no churches around here. And they don’t like this, nor do the Lord Inquisitors! Sooner or later they’ll stick their noses here too, in this beach of no-man’s-land!

The cool night wind slipped into the room. The cat stuck out his raspy tongue and passed it over my little face.

– You seem like a good girl. You must try to convince her, that stubborn ass, Melusina, to not stand out too much. And now eat...

He took me in his paws, soft as clouds, and put me face down on the stew, now cold, that splattered the floor.

**The invisible world**

My mother came back late during the night. I awaited her, curled up on the threshold of the house, and watched with fascination the vastness of the sea on which the silver light of the moon drew a path. It was my first time alone. Outside.

– Lucetta? – she called, surprised.

Then she stopped, looking around frantically, her senses in a spasm, as if she felt a presence, a danger in the air.

– Has HE been here?! – she yelled.

She held me in her arms, squeezing me convulsively. – But he didn’t hurt you, did he? He didn’t hurt you, right?!

She ran into the house. She stared like in shock at the overturned and burnt pot, the paw prints on the dirty floor.

– I can’t believe it! He’s found me again. Damned him!

She ran to take another pot, filled it with water and set it to boil on the fire. She threw in some moss, a pinch of yellow powder and watercress leaves.

– This will chase away his evil presence forever – she explained, breathing heavily. – Forever, from our lives!

When the potion was ready, she made me take some sips, then she poured the rest into a basin and immersed me in it, hair and all.

– Now he’s gone – she repeated, as if in a state of trance, – now he’s gone. With this bath, I free you from his obscene presence. And you will be pure again, Lucetta, my light! Pure!

She washed and dried me carefully.

– That was a werecat! An evil being! A messenger of misfortune! – she insisted.

– What did he tell you? Ah, if only you could talk!

She put me safely into the hollowed-out tree trunk and abandoned herself to an incontrollable rage. She tore down the bundles of herbs from the ceiling and overturned many of her beloved jars onto the floor. Then she made a circle with the candles and sat in it, repeating the same magical formula two or three times, then she cut off a curl and threw it in the air.

Then the hair fell to the ground, she launched a blood-curdling scream and threw herself out of the door. I had never seen her this way. She wasn’t my mother any more. She was a stranger who frightened me.

Appalled, I began to whine quietly. A cold wind came in through the open windows and started rubbing against the bundles of herbs that were left hanging from the ceiling. Our house, our warm, sweet-smelling and welcoming house had been transformed into cold and gray lair. The candles had gone out, the embers in the fireplace trembled. I felt the unsettling presences moving around me and I called my mother, but she was running around the house like a madwoman, singing a grim dirge, followed by moans, hisses and sighs.

Finally, after an eternity, she came back in, took me in her arms and threw herself, exhausted, onto the mattress. She fell asleep immediately.

Curled against her, I breathed her new odor, acrid like that of the cat. I watched her carefully, as if it were the last time I could watch her and I wanted to impress her face into my memory forever.

She breathed fast and her forehead was soaked with sweat, grimacing with the effort, but she was able to reach the werecat in the unexplored territory of the dream. Her eyelids, furrowed by delicate blue lines, quivered and palpitated, because a battle was taking place behind them.

I couldn’t do anything. I waited for her, sure that she would win, until, exhausted, I fell asleep, too.

– Don’t be afraid anymore – she reassured me when we woke up, immersed in the rosy light of dawn. – I caught him and banished him forever. He’ll never come to disturb you again.

**From the house to the world**

In the following four years, I grew like a carrot: tall, slim and orange, and I explored the world around the house, which rose isolated in the middle of an endless expanse of sand.

In that solitude, the sea was my first and only friend. I spent hours crouched at its feet, observing and listening to it. It showed me its secrets and I told it my little pains.

Behind our backs was the constant shadow of the mountains covered with thick, unexplored forests. But that was behind us. In front of our house there was the power of the sea. Without limits, without horizons.

My mother explained that we lived in Liguria, a region in northern Italy that faced the Mediterranean Sea. She said Liguria is in the west, where the sun sets, so it is permeated with a melancholy light even on summer days.

I understood what that meant. That light was a part of me. I felt it in my bones.

I knew that the nearest city was called Genoa, and it was an important sea port, as well as an agglomeration of dirty houses and pestilent streets full of every type of sickness. The air stank and stagnated, between land and sky, like a barrier. In Genoa, my mother concluded, there was never silence, not even at night. Only screams, swears, uproar.

She shook her head at the memory and did not add anything else. But it was sufficient. If I ever had any aspiration to visit a city, she took away it from me. After all, the only inhabited centre that interested me was the fishermen’s village behind the dunes. And that was enough for me. It didn’t have a name, nor a church with bells, as the cat had said.

Once a year, a priest came to the village and registered the living and the dead, blessed some unions already consummated and said mass on the beach, while the wind moved his sacred vestments.

Then he left in a huff, in all speed, because, he said, in those desolate lands, the voice of the Lord was weaker than the wind, because of us and our sins.

– What is sin? – I asked my mother one day.

– Hurting others. If you steal, humiliate, forget, kill... this is sin – she said to me, in a serious tone. – If you give up on your inclinations out of fear or ignorance... this, too, is sin. Sin is not recognizing the gifts that Mother Nature has given you and throwing them away into the wind, for laziness or superficiality.

– And me, what gifts did I get? – I asked her.

You’ll recognize them at the right moment.

– How?

– Never lose sight of yourself and continue taking care of others. We are part of a Everything, and we are nothing if we isolate ourselves from the Everything.

- And this Everything, what is it?

She made a gesture to include the sky, the sea, the forests.

– The Harmony of the Cosmos – she whispered.

I opened my mouth to ask one more question, then I closed it again. I didn’t want any more lessons for that day: the sun was blazing in the sky, which was turquoise like a freshly painted cloth. The sea was blue and green and gray and indigo and violet. The sand was warm and velvety under my feet.

The sin... the cat came to my mind. I shivered and felt the deadly cold of that night in my bones. But the light is life. And I was bathed in blinding light.

Laughing, I let go of mother’s hand and launched myself onto the beach to chase the seagulls.

Almost every day, some inhabitant of the village approached our house to ask for advice and care for their body and spirit.

My mother listened, suggested, cared and often healed. She read the palms of lovers, helped women give birth, closed the eyes of the dying and was always radiant, because what she was doing was what she loved most in the world.

Her fame as a healer spread, and people from other villages along the coast came for her. The more people I saw, the more I was convinced that my mother was unique, different from everyone else. She was beautiful, free and brave, she had her eyes open to the world without prejudice, and she had a profound awareness of her powers, which she put at the service of the sick and the needy.

I though that was her gift. I believed it was an advantage...

She wanted me to accompany her to the village for the visits, and I followed her willingly, because I was enchanted by the nets hanging up to dry under the sun, the smell of the fish and the intimacy of the houses in white lime wash with their floors swept by the waves that entered and exited with the tide. I was charmed by the puppies that ran to lick my hands, the newborns tender as breaths, the big mother of pearl shells placed to dry on the windowsills and kids of my own age, even if they avoided my passage and threw sand at me when my mother wasn’t there. I was too different from them, and they never let me forget it.

The adults were more affectionate, once in a while they extended a hand and caressed my curly red hair, but pulled it back abruptly, as if that contact disturbed them, as if my head was burning.

The Ladies kept coming to our house twice a year, the day of the Equinox. They arrived, rustling in the heart of the night, while I slept, and bowed over me, so I saw them in my sleep, and they touched me, murmuring words as sweet as the rain. My mother never wanted me to wait for them awake, nor did she explain to me who they were.

– Friends – she cut me off one day that I was insisting more than usual. – Your god-mothers. Wherever you go, you will always be connected to their circle.

– Circle?

– For us healers, the circle is our family. Remember this, Lucetta, in case you need help or advice. They will always be there.

– And how can I call them?

– You won’t need to call them – she concluded in a mysterious way. – And now let’s go on with the lesson... – she continued with her unmistakable hoarse voice, – maidenhair...

– ...for lung illnesses... concoction or infusion... hmm... – I concentrated, recalling what I had already repeated many time, – depending on the gravity of the symptoms, one or two cups every two hours!

– Digitalis...

– ... disturbances of the heart... just a few drops on the lips... every hour, if the heart attack is serious... otherwise... a... concoction and ointment on the chest!

– Great! And for fevers?

– Elderflower.

– To cure conjunctivitis?

– Chamomile compresses.

My mother nodded satisfied, her eyes closed, her face turned towards the flames of the fireplace. Outside, the winter storms raked the sea, but inside our warm and perfumed house, she and I shelled the roasted chestnuts and repeated the list of medications to prepare for the next day.

It was a real life. With a meaning. The magic meaning of life.

**The world of men**

But even madness has its own place in the world. The priests say that madness is the work of the devil, but I think that it is the forbidden fruit of men: their dark side, the opposite of the bright side that each of us, at birth, holds within.

Madness came to the village on a sunny and windy day, at the beginning of March, in the saddle of a bay horse with a sweet and defenseless face.

I was sitting on the threshold of the house of Artemisia, who had been in labor for some hours, and my mother was assisting her. I threw some stones in the air that fell back to earth and formed strange figures to which I tried to assign a meaning. They reminded me of something and I began to enjoy the game. Birthing moans came from the house at regular intervals.

When the horse stopped, wheezing exactly in front of me, I raised my head and instinctively extended my hand, fascinated by his languid eyes. The animal flared his pink nostrils and sniffed me.

– Remove that filthy hand – said a piercing voice. – Little ragamuffin.

The sunlight was blinding me, so it was difficult to focus on the knight, but the tone of that voice made my blood freeze. The horse, too, reacted and started stamping restlessly. More knights were approching from the only path that crossed the village. I felt a tingling on the back of my head.

– What’s your name, little beggar? – continued the man, dismounting from the horse.

My heart pounded. I wanted to respond, but no sound came out of my mouth. I kept looking at him, gasping like a fish out of water.

He was the scariest man I had ever seen, thin and white like a ghost, with a long mustache falling down to his bony neck and framing a lipless mouth. What terrified me the most were his dark, febrile and penetrating eyes.

I sensed in him a repressed violence that grabbed me by the throat, like a hand.

– I asked for your name, little idiot – he emphasized, in a low and threatening tone. Then he raised an arm, ready to strike me.

– Her name’s Doretta, sir – a sweet voice stopped him. – Forgive her... the girl isn’t right in the head.

I turned back, surprised; my mother had appeared on the threshold. She hadn’t spoken with her usual tone, and even the expression on her face was different: surrendering and cautious, as if she were playing a game. I understood that I had to go along with her, and I made myself smaller and smaller against her body.

– Perhaps you’re looking for someone, reverend father? – she went on.

The man didn’t reply, but he shot her a glance I will never forget. In an instant, everything and its contrary passed through those evil eyes: surprise, admiration, lasciviousness, fear, desire and also fear and anger. Much anger.

The other knights encircled us.

There was an unreal silence, broken by the shrieks of the seagulls and the huffing of the horses.

– Look at that morsel – said one of them.

– Let’s hope that she’s the witch, so we can eat her!

The others snickered. I trembled like a leaf. I felt death howling around us, but mother’s hands were firm on my shoulders and I forced myself to control my fear. I searched for a positive thought. I found the Ladies.

- I am Monsignor Manenti, Vicar of the Diocese of Rome – said the priest in a dry tone, directed to the small crowd that was gathering, – and I am here in the name of the Lord and the Holy Father to make an investigation – he paused to control the effect of his words. – This is the Curate of Albenga – he continued, indicating a thin and scared man who rocked uncomfortably in the saddle that wasvlarger than him, – and he says that none of you shows their faces at sacred functions.

– Truly, Monsignor... – intervened hesitantly, Ileardo, the head of the village, – we... uhm... we are good Christians.

Then, as if he reconsidered, he stopped talking, rocking with embarrassment from one foot to another.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a small group of men hiding stealthily behind the wall of a house, clutching sticks and pitchforks.

– ...all of us in the village are God-fearing, but... uhm... Albenga is a many-hour walk from here... – continued Ileardo, holding up the impenetrable gaze of the Monsignor with his serene eyes, – it is impossible for us to come every Sunday.

– Nothing is impossible, in the name of the Lord. But we will talk about this further, – roared Monsignor Manenti. – We are here for other matters! In the church of Albenga, someone left an anonymous note, but with very interesting information, in the confession box... – He pulled a note out of his pocket and waved it in front of us. – It says that around here there is a healer who goes by the name of Melusina...

He interrupted himself to stare at my mother with inquisitive eyes: – ...who uses magical arts... –, sneering, casting his gaze around. – You know that the Church and all of its devotees don’t like witches... and it is my job to verify whether these accusations are accurate. I will only ask some questions, and if she is innocent, I will send her home... Maybe this Melusina is only a skilled healer, in that case she should have nothing to fear. On the contrary, since there is an epidemic of fever in the city, she could recommend some remedies to us. The doctors don’t know what to do. A shout stronger than the others, coming from the house, made the air vibrate. It was Artemisia who called my mother. The moment of the birth was approaching. Nobody moved, not even a breath.

– When you see that woman – he concluded to Ileardo, who didn’t know where to look in order not to give anything away and just stared at his feet, – tell her not to fear the judgment of the Inquisition, which is the judgment of God, and to come to Albenga tomorrow. I shall await her.

He jumped back onto the saddle, as agile as a butterfly.

I remember the jingle of the spurs. The commotion of the knights. The sand that rose into the air. And his last words:

– Tell her that I don’t have time to wait for her. If she doesn’t come, I will burn this village down together with all its inhabitants.