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Il cannocchiale del tenente Dumont

(Lieutenant Dumont's Spyglass)

English Sample

L'Orma, 2021

African Coast, Fructidor, Year 7

(The End of August, 1799)

He shouldn't make his way with that pace, Lieutenant Dumont always told him: to hide, it's not like four rags are enough to cover his face. You must do exactly what these people do, forgetting haste, following the river of the crowd and letting himself be pulled along by the dreams of Maryut, waiting for the copper of the sunset to settle upon everything and raise the powder. Only this way will we resemble them, *basco*¹.

But none of it is true. Until now, this worn kandura that he has on always worked, and to the *basco* the voice of the Lieutenant returns to his mind only because he hates it.

Before slipping into the alley, he stops to watch the cages of the little birds. In the past, during the restocking operations. It had also happened the week before that he had the sensation that they followed him, and so he turned backwards, just a stretch, and he penetrated the portico, or he waited for another staircase. But today it seemed to him that everything was going smooth, and this excess of confidence worries him a bit, almost as if there were an unspoken deal that he could go. (But, c'mon! Among who?)

It is a portico, closed off by tents and rushes, like on a lake, and at the bottom, the rustle of water drives beyond the dim light. The sky tightens within the cropping of the roofing and the walls, flights of swallows caressing the palm trees. He knows them by memory, the angles of The Greek Quarter, the flights of stairs that lead to most-elegant palaces, the perfume of roasting vegetables and the odor of goats in their stalls, the blows of antlers on the doors on his crossing. Instead, the fear that the movement of the swallows produces is something recent, they arrived early, they are the first. In the beginning, he went there with

¹ Probably referring to the Basque population.

the Lieutenant -- later on, always alone. As to the decision to slip into the kandura, it's one of the usual ones come upon by the captain. He never agreed, above all, about having to walk a lot to stock up, and the Lieutenant didn't agree either. According to the Lieutenant, these people also notice that you're not one of them by how you cross the street. Regarding the choice about the supply location, however, it must be said that the captain was right: he never trusted supplies that were organized from inside the campsite, and in fact on the few-weeks mission, the secret police dismantled the traffic, and it rained arrests also upon the officials. In reality, there was a time in Maryut when consumption wasn't prohibited, at least not so severely. Having disembarked not long ago onto African land, they had camped on the shores of the lake, and it was there, among reedbeds and marshes, that they consumed hashish for the first time. Then, one night, the never-ending column of chasseurs -- infantrymen, artillerymen, grenadiers, and savants, transported by wagons -- started towards the Pyramids, because it was being said that the enemy would be found over there, but it's not easy to find someone in the desert without knowing who they are. And so, as it happens, for every caravan, the smugglers of Maryut moved in their wake and did it together with every other re-supply so that the hashish would never be missing from the rearguard.

The prunings from the palm tree were moved into a gap of light, the breeze bringing the usual scent of orchards. The sounds of the market didn't reach anyone up there.

Facing the balcony, a strange Mamluk, the scarlet bodice, the white turban -- he looks down, in the direction of the piers. He too must have noticed, across the vegetation of the palms, the two Frigates and the tartane anchored there for some days.

They are part of the incandescent calm that rolls on the beach at sunset and blows the powder into the Asian Quarters.

A trick: On these bridges, waiting for the last boardings, the air is of great vigil. Every time, new appeals are made, the crew passes and passes again in a hurry, obeying the whistles and orders of the boatswain, and he obeying the orders of the officials. Screams from one frigate to the next, and those on the lookout from the top warn about everything. Nelson is a ghost and could reappear within the downpour of two waves, like he did in Abu Qir.

Dozens of passengers, scientists, and poets are near the bulwarks in order to not hinder the work.

The captain, Philippe Lemoine, and the Lieutenant, Gerard Henri Dumont, backpack between his feet, feel disoriented in the middle of many civilians. At first, they thought they should embark onto the Muiron, but then they were diverted to the Carrere.

Admiral Ganteaume's men just identified two intruders. An order, from the bridge, alarmed the personnel of one of the lifeboats who was waiting in the turbulent waters. The oarsmen approach The Bay of Biscay. In a shoving match, the two intruders are invited to descend. The lifeboat welcomes them and takes them back to land.

And them, Lemoine, Dumont, and Urruti (but how much time will he take to arrive?), who would have happily remained in Africa -- Why were they chosen for this journey, based on what? A captain, a Lieutenant, and a half-Basque soldier?