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Extract from the novel *The Wrecking of The Moon*

Gigeri

April 1679

She rose before me with her gaping side, aloof and impregnable. With crumbling heart and wounded limb, I slipped. She held me. Caught hold of me. Today, she is my earth.

I am nourished by her curves. My life, carved out on her sheer side, is every day revived. She accepted me; I learnt to love her. Ever since, we drink together this thin dense rain that fills us up and, at times, destroys us.

The mountain treats everyone equally or is indifferent to us all. Human, insect, animal, plant: it matters not where her inhabitants come from, their ills, their colour... She treats us all the same and mistreats us equally.

It is early. She is only just beginning to wake. Thiziri and the olive tree, too.

Once, no one lived here.

Even the wind only passed through the valley. One day, it decided not to leave, and the nights grew cold.

The first time I saw it, there were still patches of moonlight, just like now.

‘Raïss, shall we keep that for us and Da Kamal’s family?’ says Ali, the oldest of the fishermen on board, pointing at a small crate of fish.

Brought back to the reality of the boat, Raïss Mahmoud grabs large handfuls of distressed sardines, not yet dead, and throws them in the crate.

‘Yes, and add that too.’

‘Are you getting off at the harbour with us?’

‘No. Soon it will be you who will take charge of this boat...’

‘Never, Raïss’, Ali protests. ‘You are our master.’

The fisherman gives the order to set off. Raïss simply raises his hand in protestation, leans over the prow and strikes it with the flat of his hand. As soon as the water darkens, he circles back around the fish once again.

Ali excuses himself and bows his head.

No one can claim to know better than Raïss Mahmoud these rapid ever-fleeing liquid roads. It is said that he has sailed Eastern waters, that he has gone into the depths of Africa, brushed the coasts of Sofala, and gone as far as Kiloa and Zanzibar.

He is suspected of having made a pact with the *moubarkine*, those monsters that come in winter from the sea. Others insist they have heard him speaking to them in the clear water, when zealots seem convinced that he is protected by God. They see in him a spiritual leader who has come to them to test them and their faith, as has happened before in the past. There is no shortage of speculation. What is certain is that he is both feared and respected at once. This suits the Captain just fine, being one not overly inclined to conversation. Still, these stories make him smile.

It is often creatures that are half-man, half-beast, that are take centre stage in those mad tales of the night. As the fear rises and the features of the monsters take shape, the *djinns* arrive. These unscrupulous beings of fire and light have a bothersome habit of falling for married men or women and making them lose their minds. Sometimes, they go for young virgins, rendering them unable to consummate their marriage.

No one has the right to question these tales, which resolve conflicts, justify certain spectacular infidelities and free forbidden loves.

These creatures straight from the shadows come also to earth to bring forward the truth and to liberate tormented souls.

Ali alone refuses to believe that *djinn*s are luminous beings and he a descendent of the clay of the mountains, malleable and deformable at will, as his cousin Rachid so often says.

'If I understand your reasoning', he retorts, 'the urn would be your cousin.'

The seamen roar with laughter. There is nothing but humour in Gigeri to pass the long nights at sea and banish sour tempers.

As they leave the coast, the sailors return to their own terms: *voga, sia, mola*, they cry. The winds and the tides twist their words. The past and the present merge on the water. The sea allows for the embrace of a myth and reality that, on land, are only ever found in conflict.

Raïss Mahmoud is no ordinary man. And nothing seems more exciting than to construct the most improbable stories around his words. Every one of his gestures is scrutinised, interpreted. He is admired, feared... maligned, as well, on those few occasions that arise.

It must be said that the Captain enjoys letting rumours flourish. While his gaze appears always as distant and detached, in reality he is aware of everything going on around him, leaving others to believe in the complicity of this *genie* that informed him of his sailors' every word.

Raïss knows what there is at the heart of the ocean, simply by brushing its surface, by the flavour of its salt and its colour.

He often murmurs mysterious phrases: she has come. She is leaving... She is waiting for me... He always speaks of the sea as a woman – as is custom where he is from – even if here the sea is always masculine.

In Gigeri, his oddities no longer surprise. An incurable disease always ceases to surprise.

And yet, like his sailors, the Captain believes in the existence of invisible beings who live on land and in the sea. Strangely, this seems to reassure everyone.

In the town, he is not lacking in enemies, but no one ever disrespects him. Here, there is a sense of honour and justice. The rules are clear. Those who break them are excluded from the clan.

After a long night of lighting heather in the middle of the ocean to attract sardines and convince them to 'surrender their flesh' to the fisherman, *The Fortress* returns to the harbour, causing the waves to crash and spray as they tear themselves apart beneath its stem. The fishermen take to the oars to reach the harbour, murmuring all the while:

We have glorious sailors, oh Raïss

And our arms are strong

Row with cheer

And never fear

The formidable citadel rises up from the island and seems to watch them from afar. The sailors turn back to their sands and mountains.

At the sight of the craft, Remla, the *conjador*, starts to run to meet it. He climbs on board *The Fortress* with a child's excitement and collects up the heavy nets with a man's expert hand. The looper untangles them to repair any tears and immediately gets to work to impress Raïss. He sews with urgency, as seriously as if his life depended on it. He so wishes to go to sea one day. But his legs seem to be glued to the earth, his feet forever tangled up in the nets.

Remla lives in a small boat wedged into the sand. He sleeps on a bed of trammels, its imprint pressing into his cheek day after day. He often has the same dream: he sees his boat carried away by the waves. Remla knows how to be patient. One day, his sailor qualities will be recognised, he's sure of it. Until then, he concentrates on the theory and learns with great diligence all the names of the

different fish, their habitats, their behaviour as it changes according to the seasons or the moon... He even invented tales peopled with strange creatures of the sea. Invisible creatures, of course!

In spite of the wind's decision to die down and the dogged currents, the fishermen come bearing heavy crates of sardines. The sun is rising, and the sky is one huge puddle of water.

At the market, the poorer children play at games and fighting as they patiently await their share.

As is according to custom, the bidding is silent. The ritual is religiously respected. The buyer listens carefully, walks around between the sellers along a methodical path, lets the silence grow in the sleeping town. The least avid merchant wins the bid. When it is time for the remaining portion to be divided up, the orphans collect their share in an unhurried manner, as if they weren't hungry and it weren't raining at all. An incomprehensible drag has long slowed their movements.

The seamen try to get their equipment under shelter for the storm that is rising. But the harbour is small and Raïss Mouloud, the richest fisher-captain, thinks he is the only man in the world. He refuses to bring to land the sardine boats he is no longer using, and leaves ravaged old wooden wrack bobbing on the waves such that there is no place left for the other boats.

Versailles April 1664

Jean-François watches craftsmen, carpenters and mirror-makers pass by in suffocating disorder. Their agitation seems to murmur to the century a radically new tune.

Versailles, under construction, shrinks away from the reality of the world. Here, a man does not eat the same, laugh the same, live the same.

Life is moving towards the new castle. Real life. The one where you sing and have fun. Where literature and music can be heard wherever you go. Where they meet, constantly.

Lully and Molière dictate rhythm and rhyme, inventing new lines.

While loving each other and hating each other, comedy and ballet celebrate their spirit. With the two Baptists, one learns to sing and to speak. One listens to them as one would listen to a foreign language, with a mixture of curiosity, admiration and incomprehension.

The castle under construction raises spirals of dust and provokes the indignation of the impoverished workers, condemned to an interminable work site. But when Lully's musicians settle down to play, no one dares protest any longer.

Tender and abundant music. The orchestra blazes and deploys its vast, ravishing scores. Little by little, the workers' precise movements start up again, melting together in harmony.

Jean-François sits down in the gardens and savours Lully's compositions for hours on end. He also listens to the workers, their dreams and their gripes.

He loves to listen, quite simply to listen, from the bird song to the smallest sound in the world. The insidious cold penetrates his body. He is not yet used to the temperatures of Paris after his return from Ceylon and eastern Deccan. Having been back for so little time, the young doctor – already a great voyager – dreams of setting off again. What would he not give to be in the Indies again! With its colours as contrasting as its beliefs. To return to his brazen elephants dancing shamelessly. To listen to his sculpted walls whispering their thousand-year histories. That shadowless country, devoid of reflections, where everything is concrete and yet so unreal.

In those far-off lands, the doctor had spent the most troubling and captivating moments of his whole existence. He had mixed with the Indians, their life, and learnt their language.

'Soon he will go praying in their rat temples', his superior mocked.

Jean-François, seduced by the Indians' remedies and science, dared one day to make his sick crew drink a mystery brew. While their fevers went down, those sailors condemned to death and abandoned by all did not survive. But their deaths were quickly attributed to the young dissident who had dared to give them what was called 'the elixir of sweet death'.

Now back in France, he awaits authorisation to exercise his profession once more. This was not the first of the young surgeon's setbacks, and already he bears a heavy debt. In four years of practice he has made himself some remarkable enemies. While all around people smiled at him and predicted a career for him at the court, his life suddenly cast in shadows.

The timid clinician began to contest bloodlettings, even refusing on several occasions to prescribe them. 'All they do is weaken the patients' he maintains. He does not even hide his fondness for the theories of the controversial and scandalous Antoine Leeuwenhoek, the draper who claims to have discovered living beings invisible to the human eye.

'Weavers giving us lessons in medicine? What next!' railed the King's doctor, Vallot.

It is true that there is nothing of a renowned doctor in Leeuwenhoek, for he spends his life making lenses and examining curtains. In the end, the Dutchman, with his nose deep in the sweat and nights of others, discovered in the fabrics tiny living creatures never before seen. He drew them and described them with great care. He says that the world is going to change, that human kind will see differently now.

If the majority see the cloth merchant as an imposter and a buffoon, Jean-François believes Leeuwenhoek has made a major discovery that opens up new horizons for thought. In drawing close to this world of unfathomably tiny creatures, the doctor distanced himself from the court. For several months he shut himself up in the family house in Touloun, there where his naval officer father was hiding away. No one knows what happened during these long months of silence. Upon returning to society life, the young man repeated to anyone who would hear him a phrase that became as famous as it is mysterious: 'In human and oceanic abysses alike dwell the same mysteries'.

Ever since the ocean became a body to care for, he can be found forever coming and going between Paris, Toulon and Marseille, at the bedside of his dear beloved, the Mediterranean.

That voyage to eastern Decan had come like a gift from heaven to draw him out of his silence.

Jean-François wanders through Versailles and seems to understand the King's solitude, his desire to get away from Paris. Here a radically new world is emerging. The musicians and actors make all the decisions, ever since Molière was introduced to the Court and the King began his unrestrained spending on theatre, music and dance.

'It's complete madness!' the Queen exclaims despairingly.

The King has put a bit of madness pretty much everywhere. In the castle of Versailles, in its gardens, its meals, its dancing, in the smallest of its movements. Louis is getting ready for a celebration and wishes to spread 'its glory and its beauty to the four corners of the universe'. His ministers of joy have given themselves the mission of combating boredom and those who, through their indelicateness, dare to affect the royal mood.

The April sun, as rare as silence, breaks during the day. The plants seek it imploringly. The winter has been long and cold. The leaves awaken, the stems jostle them, the groves are overflowing, and the gardeners overrun. The King has sent trees travelling, moved waters, put nature at his command. He spreads his power over everything. He decrees the shape of things. Every thing. Rows of yews and cypresses stand in the courtyard like soldiers. Transformed into topiaries, the condemned shrubs submit to pruning, undressing, their flanks bare.

At their feet, the box trees seem to writhe in pain, cut to the core. Lush embroidery and living geometries snake around, seeking a way out. But everything is by design. Pre-determined. Anything out of place is chopped: a stem, a leaf, even a head.

Nature must grow according to His Majesty's desires.

The ever-expanding spaces are carefully planned out.

The young king has never been so ready to enjoy himself. He wants to assert his authority and set a new order in place: an order of pleasure! Louis' pleasures carry a title: La Vallière. They carry a face: that of the young lady, sweet and loving. Everyone knows that it is in her honour that the celebrations are given.

Jean-François could not care less for such hearsay. He is seeking Marie-Hélène. Since his return from the Orient, he has struggled to abandon himself to Parisian society life. While he had been prepared for it, life at the court seemed so futile to him. People everywhere are saying he had been enchanted by the Indians or that he had fallen ill with an oriental disease.

The exhausted sun, have barely risen, retires from the cold day.

Jean-François gives up his search. His fiancée is not there, and he is getting ever colder.

An irritable Molière is running the rehearsals. He is in a bad mood. Something appears to be bothering him. Or rather, enraging him. The actors exchange knowing looks. Since they began training for this game of speech and silence, that know that today it is their turn to keep quiet.

'The scandal of the world is that which causes offence / And sinning in silence is no sin...' Molière suddenly stopped.

'I did not expect the wall hangings to conceal such pretty creatures!' he exclaims, drawing Marie-Hélène out from her hiding place. He continues to speak in dramatic tones, as if he were still acting, without leaving her the space to reply.

'Is Madame lost in this great castle or within her own thoughts? Has Madame come to spy? For whom? Does Madame wish to taste the pleasures of the enchanted isle before her time is up? What do you want, Madame? So as to restrain my ire, I prefer to stay silent and ask that you retire.'

'I... I...'

'Is there somewhere I may escort Madame?' offered La Grange.

'No. I want to stay here.'

'That is not possible,' retorted Madeleine, drinking delicately from her precious chocolate.

'I want to act with you,' Mari-Hélène confesses.

The actors roar with exaggerated laughter, watching her squirm.

'That cannot be, Madame,' replied La Grange.

'Why not?'

'A lady cannot be an actress. You know that very well.'

'And why not?'

'We are not the ones who come up with the rules. Alas! You must talk to...'

'To your cousin, the King!' concludes Madeleine.

'Actors are damned, didn't you know?' adds La Grange.

'They will burn in hell,' continues Molière.

'And for eternity.'

They roar with laughter once again.

'Listen, we don't have a role for you,' Madeleine cuts in.

'Is it true that you are rehearsing a play about...'

'About what?'

'Zealots?'

'The walls have ears!' cries Molière. 'We'll either have to keep you, or... kill you.'

The actors are silent for a long moment, before bursting into laughter again.

Gigeri**May 1679**

Raïss' shadow moves towards the *jbel* and crosses those of Tahar and Omar. The two zealots, who never miss the sunrise prayer are heading towards the peninsula, as the mosque is located inside the old city. The twin brothers do not fail to throw a few inquisitive glances in the fisherman's direction. To all appearances, he is not going in the right direction. Tahar hails him and entreats him to return to the right path.

Mahmoud takes up the sacred formula and wishes that everyone may find his path. Walking slowly, he makes a detour in the direction of the sweet fountain of the Oasis. It is at this spring that he likes to drink and wash himself. The Captain crosses a wood of poplars, fights his way through the trees, follows twisting paths. It is on such wanderings that he discovers, every time, a new way through, with its ever-changing fauna diverse and multicoloured. It is here that he thinks and finds meaning in his life.

Raïss follows a path made of a thousand and one detours before returning once again to the opening from which the light pours in. He looks at the poplars that rise before him like a retreating army and feels a great affinity with these trees that live on the water's edge without fear of winds or ocean spray. Their roots never dig down into the earth, but they are powerful, they can destroy fortifications.

These morning wanderings are necessary for him. They are far from the whim Thiziri thinks them to be. The sailor has trouble becoming a land creature again. He continues to sway, his head filled with those rocking waves. He must walk a long time before the amphibian in him can find its legs again, adapt to its breathing, reconnect with the rhythm of the earth. The spring of the Oasis is a transition. It is his water on earth.

The daylight illuminates the sailor's face. Blue eyes, bronzed skin, and hundreds of freckles fighting for a place on his face. Raïss speaks many languages, as is custom here. The deformed words twist together in his mouth and seem to be reborn with every phrase.

Other shadows climb towards the *djebel*. The sailors are returning home. Separately. Each one appears to have found a different path to finally wash up on the same shore.

Thiziri awakens her hair sleeping in the nape of her neck and shakes it energetically. She slides a stick of khol between her eyelashes and allows the antimony to nourish her gaze. But her outlined eyes only reveal their fatigue. She already regrets her effort.

Her face is very pale, and her lovely restless eyes are now circled with black. It is her mouth that she should have made up. Of course! A mouth is never tired. A mouth is always lying. The young woman nervously crushes a mirabilis between her forefinger and thumb and delicately rubs it across her lips. The plant leaves behind its scent and the sweetness of its scarlet colour. Her lips, thus prepared, are ready to face the eyes of the world.

Daylight having barely broken, Thirizi watches the sun behind her curtains and fears its rays as a young coral would. She is pregnant and moves about with difficulty and swollen feet. It is her eighth pregnancy. But only three of her children had survived the innumerable infectious diseases that strike in this cold, humid climate. The young mum is always worried, the smallest cold sore alarms her. Her terrible memories of the plague at Bougie continue to feed her fears.

The rain arrives without warning and forces the sun from the sky.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter. It is always raining here.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter. The water flows from the crack of dawn and creeps through all the openings of the rising day.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter. A beat that conducts gestures, conversations.

Thiziri never complains. But her husband knows that this pregnancy is tiring her more than any one before. She is waiting for the birth as a prisoner holds out for the date of his release. Yet it is not the pain of the birth that she fears, nor the endless sleepless night. What scares her, once again, is disease.

She brushes her transformed body with her fingertips. She would so love to be able to look at herself and to take advantage of those rare moments where she finds herself alone and able to observe her breasts, her stomach, her thighs. Every day, she looks at herself in a concave metal mirror. Her face is deformed by it. Is she really so swollen? Of course not. All she has to do is turn the magical instrument around and there she is, so thin as to be almost unwell.

She plays at spinning the mirror around faster and faster, trying to grasp her portrait. Her true face only exists between two deformations, and of this moonlight after which she is named, Thirizi retains only a few dispersed slivers. She should stop looking at herself. It is forbidden. Ever since she was a little girl, she has been doing it secretly.

Now she has an accomplice. Her husband promised to buy her a real mirror in Venice.

'Is Venice far?' she asks.

'There's only the ocean', he replies.

With her venetian mirror, she would be able to see the smallest reflection of her face and explore the new lines of her body. For the time being, she stubbornly continues to slip into the linen dress that no longer suits her. She also stubbornly insisted on dyeing its threads herself: the green shell of the walnut for the black, madder for the red, centaurea root for the light yellow, pomegranate shell for the dark...

She can no longer remember. All that is so long ago now.

She looks at her stomach which seems to want to tear her now too small *djebba* open. Or is it Thirizi who has become too big, for this wedding attire, and perhaps even for this life that she has led for the past fifteen years? But nothing is worth the softness of this linen gown in the deep countryside of Gigeri, with a reputation that stretches all the way to Tunis, where it sells at a high price. The life she leads today is as soft and narrow as that dress.

Raïss Mahmou finally gets home and collapses on the heavy rugs, drunk from the ocean. Thiziri lies down at his side, laying out her hair, too.

'Aren't you cold?' Raïss asks.

'You know very well I'm not.'

He touches her stomach. She sighs.

'There's not too long to go', he responds to her impatience.

'All I want is for him to live like his other brothers.'

'He will live.'

'*Insh'allah!*'

'*Insh'allah!*'

Raïss Mahmoud takes his wife in his arms. Her body has so completely transformed, he no longer knows how to hold her. Only her scent remains, in which he falls asleep every evening. His hands seek a pathway on her skin. She stops him. He does not insist.

Where has the rebellious young girl gone, the one he used to know? How did the young, innocent face of before transform? When did it become covered with all these wrinkles and uncertainties? Where had that woman gone, whose courage surpassed that of a thousand men? How had he managed to so crumple her body and spirit?

Today, she is truly tired. He feels guilty for having made of her what she had become: a mother and a wife like the others. This woman was not made to be married; she belongs to no one.

He has made his decision: this will be the last child.

They lie beside each other awaiting the birth of their child as if it were the final rampart separating them. Raïss hopes they will have a daughter, contrary to custom. He already has three sons: Mekki, Mohamed and Rachid.

Da Mahmoud wants a daughter with the name of his mother. This is his only whim. He looks at his wife's body as she undresses. Thiziri guess what her husband is thinking and wishes she could disappear. Why are women condemned to giving birth so often? And yet she had been so convinced of her sterility. As a little girl, Thiziri has refused to gather the moon in the water of the well to receive her fertility. She still remembers the punishments that her stubbornness has cost her. 'Poor mama,' she thinks to herself. Even in defying all these rules, Thiziri's stomach is full of life, as round as the moon. Why does the moon inside her torment her so? She should stop asking herself questions that have no answer. Is she not happy with this man that she chose for herself, a rare privilege in this world where women are given in marriage to a cousin, if not a stranger?

Despite all the conflicts that opposed her to her mother, Thiziri would have liked to have her at her side in these fragile moments of maternity. She hears her singing:

*Be the moon, my daughter, who illuminates but does not blind
Be the moon in the sky, high above, watching
Be the moon, discrete and luminous
Be the moon who transforms, forever beautiful, never the same
Be the moon who crosses rivers
Be the moon that nourishes the flower and makes the sap rise.*

The rain is pouring down. The children rise at the same time. The noise of the roof awakens them. The noise on the roof introduces the day as it unleashes its torrent. For Thiziri, the rest was a brief one. Mekki is the first to arrive. He enters the room suddenly, without warning, like a great sun. The first meal of the day is animated and lively. The children are starving. One, two, three. *Pitter-patter-pitter.* Three children. And hundreds of disputes every day!

This morning, an astonishing energy emanates from those tiny bodies. The children find their father and Thiziri has at last a small moment with the man she sees less and less. The ocean that united them today draws them apart. Warm milk, oregano, sorghum bread and olive oil – their life often tastes of these three foods. As usual, Mekki only grudgingly swallows his share of *naama*, this bread so rare that one would think it grows in the sky rather than on earth. Eating becomes a sacred act which no one can escape. Mohamed and Rachid carry out the task without being asked twice. Eating one's fill is rare around here, and Da Mahmoud understands the greatness of this privilege. But Mekki is an ailing child and has little appetite. His mother has used every ploy to convince him to swallow the bread that cost her so many long hours of work.

[...]

Translated from the French by Lillian Flemons