

**Julien Suaudeau**

***Black Blood***

Translation sample

by Marjolijn de Jager

**Prologue**

It's not the mountain; it's desert's door. Eric died in this valley, but he doesn't recognize it.

The night that was floating above the treetops just before has vanished. The storm was setting the sky ablaze, thunder rolling between the hollows; the smell of fire, the black wind, the summer rain: it was as if he were coming home. His uniform was soaked through. A wolf awaited him. Then the mountain crests and the cold evaporated. His clothes dried and the lightning was erased from the sky. The mountain faded like the morning dew.

He must have been dreaming. Now a pewter dawn hangs over the sand. The stars are growing paler. They, too, have been dying for a long time. Orion and Sirius. The Hunter and his Dog. Keeping watch is pointless. Somewhere a scorpion slips in between the folds of the galaxy.

‘I didn’t hear you coming,’ Eric says when he notices Camara, the old scarred Black man sitting on the iron stool he drags around with him everywhere.

‘The wolf is the dog that didn’t get close to the fire,’ Camara replies. ‘But I don’t need to tell you that.’

‘How long have you been here?’

‘That’s of no importance.’

‘And I?’

‘You’re an idiot. I wasn’t there when the Whites abandoned you to the hawks and the light of day. There are moments when I really wonder why I took you under my wing: you spend your time whining and asking yourself the wrong questions. You’d do better to focus on those that save lives.’

‘I don’t understand what’s happened to me,’ Eric begins again. ‘I’m in front of the ammunition dump and I’m hearing the voices of a few men. They’re soldiers and they’re hostile, yet we’re wearing the same uniform. The sweat and blood in my eyes prevent me from seeing their faces.’

‘And there he goes again!’ Camara cries out, stamping his foot on the sand. ‘Won’t you ever stop chewing the same

cud? You're like one of those cows in your country.'

'My shoulder hurts, here where the bullet went in. Are you sure you got it out?'

'You, wimpy white boy. From a distance you look so strong, but you have the heart of a chicken.'

'Something's going on.'

Around them the desert now disappears, too. The night returns. The rain soaks Eric's hair, the cold wind rushes in underneath his clothes. The thunder slams down on the crest line again. The mountain is there.

'What's going on? Camara!'

A refuge inside a hollow. The sound of his steps hitting the bricks. The smell of fire. The snickering of old scar face, busy setting down his damned stool next to the fireplace.

'Rekindle the fire,' he says. 'I'm not used to these temperatures. Ha, ha, ha.'

'Leave me alone.'

'Maybe you think I'm happy to be stuck here?' Camara says, as he rubs his arms to warm up. 'Now there's a truly French idea! You have to teach me how to build a fire, or else I'll catch my death.'

Eric looks at his hands. The skin, the lines, the veins are not in the right place.

'I'm not myself.'

'It'll pass,' Camara says. 'It's only normal to feel out of place when you've been gone a long time.'

'I want to go home.'

‘You are home. Go look out the window. It’s not the desert anymore, son. It’s the mountain. You left ten years ago, now you’re home. Now your work begins.’

The gusting wind makes the frame shake. Only a single pane is left in which the dying embers are reflected. Eric’s scar-covered face is as black as the ashes. His fist punches the night. There’s blood on his sleeve.

‘Seven years of misfortune,’ Camara rasps. ‘Fortunately they’re behind you.’

## **Maleterre**

**1970**

February's thick snow is falling on the Pignals.

They've come from the village with two snowplows that the agency rented for the circumstance. The last hairpin turns took forever. Houses and trees became less frequent, and then the road came to an end. The driver of the plow hesitated for a moment as he considered the best route. In the end he swung along a tree trunk lying in the powdery snow and then they tackled the wall of le Chastillon.

Maître Barbois despises being jolted like this. Nor does he like the cold or the heights. He almost got sick when he turned around to gauge the altitude—hoping his client hadn't noticed. It wasn't for lack of having tried to convince him the ascent would be easier in clear weather, in a helicopter the civil security would put at their disposal. But this client was a man with very strong ideas. He wanted to go up now. Not in a week, not in three days – but right now. The Brabois & Ponce Agency is well known in Mercantour for the quality and speed of its service; not a soul between Barcelonnette and Menton will contradict this. Maître Brabois swallowed his reluctance and reserved the snowplows.

The man beside him, a certain Pierre Lazar from who knows where, is inspecting the surroundings with a satisfied look. From Paris? From abroad? Hard to identify his accent. He's somewhere between thirty and thirty-five. The temperature may well be close to zero, but all he has on is a thin cotton sweater. The snowflakes leave little wet marks on it, its black color silhouetted against the surrounding whiteness. At least that's something, should he get lost in the blizzard. But for now it doesn't look like he's interested in exploring any higher. What does interest him is the Maletterre forest. Scattered across the upper part of the valley, the pine trees grow more closely together forming a dense green blanket halfway down, enhanced by the bright speck of a coppice of silver birches here and there. Their mass runs down the mountain's flank and creates the impression of darkening as it dives into its depths.

A shepherd and his son live in the dwelling in front of which they've parked their plows.

'Don't stand there, Calixte! Can't you see these gentlemen have better things to do than admire your bratty little strut? Go put a log on the fire for me instead!'

No trace of a mother. How you can raise a child alone in such an inhospitable place is beyond all comprehension.

'Let him be,' the client interrupts as he turns to the kid.

‘What’s your name?’

The boy stares at Lazar with his empty gray eyes.

‘Well, answer him for God’s sake! You’ve gotta excuse him, sir, the little fool is a bit slow. Doesn’t have much chance to make conversation since my wife left us. And I’m not really a talker... On the other hand, if you need him, he knows the mountain like the back of his hand. In that way he really is his father’s son. Calixte! Show Monsieur Lazar the place you like best up there.’

The boy points his finger to the west at a tooth-shaped cavity. He already has the hard look of the ski patrol and of the shepherds. Several times since their arrival, Maître Brabois has caught him watching their every move and gesture. The child’s peculiar eyes and his silence, the father who is too affable to be well-intentioned, their hut perched at an inhuman altitude—it all sends shivers down his spine.

‘He should take you there some other day.’ The shepherd lowers his voice as if he were about to reveal an ancient secret. ‘When it’s really dry and the sky is clear, you have a view over the sea.’

‘I didn’t come for the view. What I want is the wood. The wood and the land.’

‘No shortage of that.’

‘From up there,’ Lazar says as he indicates the summit of Pignals, ‘to all the way down below.’

He’s wearing a strange ring on his index finger. An eccentric, no doubt. The shepherd lowers his eyes, shamed, snubbed like a puppy. Something in Lazar’s appearance has changed. He’s no longer the insistent but cordial client who presented himself out of the blue just before the agency was closing for the weekend. He gazes up at the mountain as if it were already his, with the self-assurance of an empire builder. But what land is he speaking of? This unwelcoming rock, too high for summer pasturing, too cold for growing anything but stones and pine trees? Maître Brabois entered his profession in 1947, almost a quarter of a century ago, the year that Italy relinquished this vile territory with which it wanted nothing further to do. The local representatives may well have proclaimed far and wide that it was a legitimate revenge for the miseries of the war, they’re still waiting for the surveyors to enter it in the land registry. In his twenty-three years of doing business, Maître Brabois has never encountered anyone crazy enough to settle here—even less to conceive of Maletterre becoming the cradle of a commercial extravaganza.

‘Don’t delay too much,’ one of the two snowplow drivers warns from his cabin. ‘The radio is predicting thirty centimeters of snow by evening.’



‘I’m going to build a ski resort down below, where the road comes to an end,’ Lazar says.

‘At an altitude of two thousand feet?’ Maître Brabois protests.

The picture of concrete blocks on these desolate slopes is absurd and this man is wasting his time. So far, he hasn’t shown any sign of payment. The joke has gone far enough.

‘It will be called Isola 2000. I’ll build a sawmill on the other side to transport the wood to the valley via the road that borders the river.’

‘The Tinée?’ the shepherd asks. ‘My word...’

‘You can stay here without paying rent. And I’ll pay you a salary as game warden.’

Without waiting for a response, Lazar returns to the vehicle. As he glances back, the last thing Maître Brabois sees are the boy’s gray eyes behind the snow-covered windowpanes.

## **The wolf and his master**

**2016**

The police found the first animal, a heifer skinny as a rail, three days before, on Midsummer Day, the morning of Saint-Jean. In a wooded area about a hundred meters from her summer grazing land, her carotid artery crushed. Paulin looks at the dark mass of the forest around him. Thirst must have awakened the animal and she must have gone down into the valley, to the Tinée. A cow with more experience of the mountain pastures wouldn't have isolated herself this way; she would have stayed with the others. In the picture published in the newspaper, her coat shines as if she'd been dipped in motor oil. The blood of animals that aren't yours doesn't look like blood: black paint, thick and moist, poured on a pile of dirty laundry.

Paulin spits in a thicket. The attack was precise—an execution. The wolf had mauled, destroyed, then vanished into the forest without rewarding himself for his effort. There are tracks in the melted snow around the trap. No explanation needed: the mountain either takes or gives and around here

they're not in the habit of asking why. Paulin learned this when he was very little, as he watched the red fox running to its hole, the ermine's broken neck between its teeth. He would be angry with the fox, but something told him that his resentment was unfounded. Animals don't have the privilege of killing for pleasure. Even a thirteen-year old knows that—even when his size makes the local drunkards laugh.

The moon is high between the branches of the beech tree. This is where Paulin had set the trap just before. He wipes off the hair and the bits of cartilage that are clinging to the metal teeth. The old metal, the contraption, they're disgusting when not working properly. That damned animal should have stayed there, moaning over his fractured tibia. Instead he found a way to trip the trap's anchor, then release its jaw. Paulin must have done it all wrong. Who knows? Uncertainty grips his stomach. The silence of the trees. Not a breath of wind. The sun has dropped behind the crest of Saint-Sauveur, the sky filled with a dark blue where Orion shimmers—and the blackbird hasn't sung. Night never falls over the Alps without this signal, which every animal understands.

Paulin should have gone home a long time ago. There'll be hell to pay. The best thing to do is to start back right now for the station. But it's as if the stillness of the forest is whispering for him to stay. He shivers. It looks like snow. Impossible, at this altitude in the good season. And not a cloud. Between two pine trees a firefly signals to him. Paulin disappears into the darkness of the trees.

Running warms his muscles. The sound of his steps on the stones gives the night's texture a familiar shape again. The light air, molded by the scent of resin and cold, the softness of the needles brushing his elbows. Everyone knows you shouldn't go up so high on this side, so close to the one they call the Forester, the master of Maletterre. Seen from the station, the crest line looks like an ordinary succession of fishbones and hollows. When you approach, three summits rise around the curve of a path, linked by a symmetry that has something abnormal about it—as if a monstrous chisel had dug the massif to create this feature set deeply into the foot of a rocky triangle. The top of Pelevos, the top of Pignals, the top of Sisteron. They say that on days of clear weather the Forester can view the sea from his room. That he's gone out of his mind and hasn't left his place in years. When you come from the west, the fragrance of buttercups announces the fact you're about to cross over into his territory. No entry. On the mountain everybody knows this warning, animals and humans alike. For those without a sense of smell, the Forester has had the sign of his three summits carved into the rocks of the domain:



Everyone knows the treatment that his son Sylvain reserves for hikers and poachers who continue their ascent without an invitation.

Paulin speeds up, the slope hardens under his strides. His thighs are burning but he keeps up the pace, the bodies of cows and sheep bled to death dancing before him, like a hallucination in the sweat of his eyes. After the white heifer, the police spoke of two other attacks in the valleys. According to his mother only the *Ritals*<sup>1</sup> tell more lies than the police. This morning he heard that the PGHM—the High Mountain Police Force—had buried dozens of cadavers in the woods. There were too many of them to be transferred to the slaughterhouse without attracting attention. Even in the valley people are beginning to talk. Paulin was busy pulling on his boots in the kitchen when the phone rang upstairs. It was the journalist from *Nice-Matin*, his mother's way of answering left no doubt. She was saying that down below they had to know *what people were feeling*. Fear. Isolation. The despair of those who have been *abandoned*. Those were someone else's words: if there's one thing of which Paulin is sure, it's that his mother never speaks of her feelings.

She was pacing up and down the hallway between her bedroom and the bathroom, repeating to the journalist the refrain they've been reciting on the mountain ever since Paris authorized the return of the wolf to the region. It had to happen

<sup>1</sup> The popular web-series *Ritals* (two seasons) depicts a situation of two Italians transferring to Paris. The term *Ritals* is a quite denigratory French word referring to Italian immigrants.

sooner or later. You understand? The wolf, a nice dirty trick coming from city dwellers. And what about our animals? Paulin was about to leave when she started talking about the breeder of the Escarene. Ten heads of cattle lost on the southern flank of Maletterre, just above the place where the heifer had been killed. Eight animals, among which two pregnant cows and a bighorn that happened to be passing by. ‘A bighorn?’, the person on the other end of the line must have expressed surprise, because his mother repeated it, detaching the syllables, *big-horn*, as if it were a bomb to be defused, before describing the open bellies, the ripped-out fetuses abandoned on the black grass. Paulin ran to the shed. He pulled out one of his grandfather’s old traps and started on his way to the Forester’s domain.

The clearing of silver birches forms a sad circle. Above the trees the moon hangs suspended in a hollow sky. The stars have disappeared. Where did all those clouds come from? Up there, there’s nothing but the mountain. Stone, snow, stillborn grass. It’s starting to rain. Somewhere up there stands the house of the master of the place, anchored in the terrible night. A howl cuts across the mountain, one continuous note, like the siren of the ambulances that take away the seriously injured on foggy days when the helicopter is grounded. Paulin stops, out of breath. The clearing looks like a a trap. Nowhere to hide. Too late to flee. He’s going to get torn to shreds like a piece of meat.

What a pity that is. He himself has never had anything against wolves. How many times had his mother beaten him up because he thought the hunts were unfair? A hundred guys,

dead-drunk, sweating alcohol at sunrise, managing to put one foot in front of the other only out of pure vindictiveness. Paulin isn't moving anymore. Like the heifer, they will find him early in the morning, inert, with a hole in the soft part of his neck. They will pull his mother out of bed. She'll reek of alcohol and cigarettes. 'He had it coming' will be her first thought. She won't see the night. The cold. The solitude. The flesh of the brewing storm. The rain seeping into his shoes.

The lament reverberates one last time against the rock face before plunging down into a hollow. Paulin waits. There's only the sound of the downpour on the stones now. His fear fades under an ice-cold shame. He is a mountain dweller after all. He begins to walk to the summit again. The ruins of a shelter emerge on his left. The rain pelts across the framework. He circles around to arrive at the upper side. Only the front wall and the gable still stand. And the fireplace. From the chimney comes thick smoke.

The Forester's son, so they say at the station, surveys his realm himself with two of his game keepers. If it's them, Paulin will tell them he got lost. He crosses the threshold of the shelter. The wolf is sitting in front of the brick fireplace, head up, ears raised. He looks like he's mesmerized by the remnants of the fire. His eyes stare at the embers starting to get cold, indifferent to the visitor and the drops that are getting his coat wet. Worn fur of an old carnivore who's been around. There's an open wound on his right rear paw.

‘There you are,’ Paulin whispers.

The wolf continues to ignore him, motionless, hypnotized by the glowing embers and ash.

‘Talk to me. I’m not like the others,’ he begins again as he comes closer.

He passes his hand over the hearth. The heat relaxes him. He faces the wolf.

*Animals, black blood. Men, black blood.*

Animals talk to us, watch us. All you need to do is listen. Paulin has always heard their voices.

*Blood, blood, to extinguish the fire that’s killing me.*

Very close by lightning strikes a mountain peak.

Something around Paulin and the wolf is changing—shapes at their very brightest, the way in which the rain resounds between the disintegrated walls, the wind that has risen on the peaks. The wolf begins to wag its tail, like a dog recognizing its master. The Lombard Pass flickers beneath the silent lightning flashes. Above the crests the clouds speed off toward the border in the east. In the north, an isolated star sputters like a lightbulb whose filament is about to go dead.

For a few seconds a lightning streak lights up the relief of a white-out. The wolf turns his head and crosses the little room, limping.

A figure is outlined standing in the doorway. The shadow moves into the feeble light of the dwelling—a man of about forty, his face grimy and dour. He belongs here. His eyes are blacker than the darkness from which he appeared, tall, broad



shoulders. Cold, electric eyes. Strange symmetrical scars. He's wearing a torn uniform with a dark stain on the shoulder.

'Why did you trap my wolf, boy?'

The rain is slowing down. The rumble of the thunder is coming from the Italian side. The mountain is lit by the lightning, then plunges back into darkness. Paulin hesitates, his heart in his mouth.

'Because he's been killing animals.'

'Were those your animals?'

'My mother is poor. We don't even have enough to feed a scrawny dog.'

'Righter of wrongs?'

'No, sir. I'm not stupid enough to believe there's any justice on the mountain. But there is a balance.'

'A balance of power, you mean.'

'Why does he kill these animals without eating them?'

The soldier tosses a log on the cinders and squats down to rekindle the fire. Those scars of his, that profile like a bull. The massive muscles under his uniform. The badge on his sleeve. Paulin has seen this man before.

'Because one day when they'd finished their watch, the men from Maleterre killed his female and his cubs,' the soldier says as he stands back up, the palms of his hands are black, his face covered with ash.

'Then they cut out his tongue and tied him to a stake, on the glacier, amid the carcasses of his pack. Just like that, because they had nothing better to do. Those wolves were living way up

there, far from the cattle, sharing rodents. Maybe a fawn or a stray doe. A wolf doesn't ask for very much to survive. This one was half frozen to death when I found him.'

'The Forester's people?'

'They did the same to me once. I'll kill them one by one and watch them croak while this beast devours their liver.'

The tiger sewn on his rags. The number 27, like the 27<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Alpine soldiers. The station's soldier who died in Africa ten years ago, somewhere south of the Sahara. Paulin's mother has saved the newspaper clippings in a drawer. A minister came from Paris for the ceremony. Teachers and students observed a minute of silence in the schoolyard while the flag was lowered in front of the monument to the dead and an empty coffin.

'You do know how to set a trap, kid. But you're meddling in things that are none of your business. Now what you're going to do is go back down. You will tell them what you've seen here. You will repeat what I've told you. Word for word. And then you will forget me.'

The wolf has fallen asleep. The soldier pulls a knife from his boot and starts to sharpen it. At the time, his first name was on everyone's lips. They also called him the Hunter. Tonight he's a devil with scars full of soot.

'Who are you?'

'This is war, kid. You'd do better to stop asking the wrong questions. Focus on those that save lives.'