

A trapdoor opens. A ladder made of hardened rope and rough timber appears in the small aperture. A dog scuttles up hesitantly the ladder and comes out onto the terrace. He sniffles the immediate surroundings of trap. The mud and straw flooring is dry, windswept by a thin smattering of ocher dust. A soft wind flaps his ears as he sniffles the cold night air. He climbs the small parapet separating his terrace from another similar one. He takes time over dark smudges and traces of cooked food on the next terrace. He then jumps onto the following terrace with an identical trap, and then another. From one to another, he slowly makes his way to the edge of the settlement. Once at the end of the last terrace, he hesitates, but then eventually jumps to the ground. Back on his feet, he hurries through an empty enclosure and squeezes his body through a gap in the wooden fence surrounding it. He scurries on a path and disappears in a barley field.

Çatalhöyük awakes. Men and women little by little appear on roof-tops. They are covered in undyed woolen garments and sheepskins. Some greet each other as they emerge from their trapdoors; others tidy up their terrace. A tall woman with long hair braided over her head picks up her laundry left drying overnight and climbs down the ladder back to her home. Asnära readies her home for the day, sweeping the reed mats, lighting up the fire in the clay oven and preparing food. She picks up a clay pot and carefully pours some of its liquid down a small rectangular hole on the floor. The hole leads to a lower chamber. The liquid trickles down onto dirty and oily cocoon reed nests containing the remains of ancestors neatly arranged in fetal positions. Asnära didn't like this morning ritual of symbolically feeding the ancestors who help build her house. But she also knew that it was a way of casting off evil spirits, of securing the ground onto which they were living. Back on the floor above, next to the oven, a tall and robust man with a dark beard awakes, yawns with a groan, stretches, and stands up. Takbir is naked. He quickly puts on a couple of sheepskin tied together and tightens them around his waist and shoulders. He kisses Asnara on the forehead, grabs some rough flatbread in a clay oven and without a word, heads up to the roof-terrace.

While chewing on his dark fibrous flat bread, Takbir spots his neighbor, Rajnal, on the next rooftop terrace and hails him. He is slightly older than Takbir, with piercing blue eyes and reddish greying hair and beard. His garment is made of a much more complex weaving of sheep and cow skins. His face is tattooed in marks of distinctions for his hunting prowess. Over the parapet separating their terraces, they start chatting about the morning hunting and the harvest later on that day. The sky is red with streams of cotton-like clouds strewn across the early morning sky. The sun hasn't risen yet. They look at the horizon and suddenly, while looking east towards the barley fields and beyond; they notice in the distance what they've been dreading for years. On the horizon, far away, they can see thin strands of smoke billowing into the air. Takbir asks Rajnal:

—Is that what I think it is.

—Yes, the nomads are here. The hunter-warriors are coming.

They look at each other for a second. Without waiting, they each run down the ladder of their own houses. Inside his, Takbir calls out Asnära. They try to make sense of what is happening. She questions him: the distance, the timing, the meaning of this threat. Takbir has no answer. A nomad invasion hasn't occurred in Çatalhöyük since the time of his grandfather. Asnära knows that however much she loves her companion, she knows that he isn't always able to find answers alone, let alone solutions to such unexpected and frightening threat. So she says:

—Go and ask Amlach. He will remember. He will know.

Takbir grabs a flake tool, tucks it between the skins of his garment, heads for the trap door, embraces Asnära one last time and hurries out. Once outside, he calls his neighbor again, asking him to join him to see Amlach. Without pausing a moment, the older man follows him, jumping over the small parapet between the terraces, and together they walk towards the edge of the settlement. They reach the last rooftop terrace and from the edge of the last parapet, they jump down onto the dusty red-ocher ground. Takbir points in the direction of Amlach's hut, near a clearing on the edge of the river. They hasten towards it. Once by the hut, they call out his name, but Amlach doesn't answer. Takbir says:

—He must be there. Let me climb to his door.

But as soon as Takbir tries to reach for the top of the hut, Amlach surprises them from behind. He's an old man with long grey hair, his sun-weathered face is covered in deep wrinkles. He's carrying a small dead animal and an arrow made of wood and cord. They turn to greet him. He says:

—What do you want? Why have you come here?

Rajnal replies:

—Haven't you seen? The smoke on the horizon.

—Yes, I've seen it. There isn't much we can do.

Indignant, Takbir says:

—What do you mean? We can defend ourselves. We've got enough men; they can get ready to defend our settlement.

—No, Takbir. The hunter-gatherers are skilled warriors. They are constantly on the move, they have no other aim, but to force us to join them and make us nomads again. Our little settlement has no means of stopping them. We'll have to join them.

—I refuse. Go on Rajnal, tell him that we can resist them. I will not let them destroy our city. We've been here for too long.

Hesitant, Rajnal replies:

—Amlach is probably right. We only have hunting tools. The city is strong but not enough for an army of men intending on destroying our way of life. We will have to join them.

—No, replies Takbir. I'll return to our settlement, I'm sure I'm not the only one willing to defend our city. There is too much at stake. We've invested too much in building our world, inventing new ways of living in one place without the need to be on the move and harvesting wild food.

Amlach replies:

—We haven't achieved much, you know. We spend too much time sitting down, making, doing, inventing new things to improve our lives, but what value does this have in comparison to those who travel from place to place looking for fresh pasture for their livestock?

—So what? Are you simply going to accept that some nomad chief tells you to leave because he or she says so?

—We've inhabited this place for a long time now. Maybe staying in one place isn't what makes us human. Why stay in one spot desperately trying to deal with our waste when we can be on the move and never worry about it?

—Why focus on our waste? Think of the improvements we've made to the cultivation of barley. Think of our houses, our temples. Think of our irrigation systems. All this means something. It shows what we've accomplished. It's our legacy.

—Our legacy to whom?

—To our children!

—Our settlement means nothing compared to the vastness of what's out there. Discovering other worlds is our legacy to our children.

—Well, Çatalhöyük means a lot to me, it's the only life I know.

Rajnal and Amlach look at each other. They suddenly realize that things have perhaps changed, that maybe they've gone too far this time, that maybe something can be done to prevent them returning to a nomadic life. Finally, Amlach says:

—Go Takbir. Your eagerness, I'm sure, will be contagious. If you want some advice from an old man, go under our dwellings and retrieve the heads of

ancestors who died recently and place them on sticks outside our city. They will protect us and it will scare them for a while, giving you more time to prepare your defenses.

Wasting no time, Takbir bids Amlach farewell and makes his way back to the settlement. As they leave, Rajnal embraces Amlach, wishing him well. He follows Takbir, unsure whether any attempt to resist the passing nomads is such a good idea.

Back in Çatalhöyük, Takbir goes to the highest terrace in the centre of the settlement, which is also the oldest house in the settlement, the one with the most ancestors buried atop of each other. From there, he can hail the men and women of the city. He is no leader, but he is convinced that some of them, the young ones especially, will hear his plea to defend the city. Once a few have gathered around him, he tells them of his discussion with Amlach. They are overwhelmingly against the idea of disturbing the ancestors. One of them says:

—The ancestors are what tie us to this land. We can't use them as a scare-tactics to gain more time!

Takbir replies:

—Yes, the ancestors are our past. Yes, they form the foundations of our city and yes, we lifted ourselves to the skies thanks to them. But Amlach is right; it is they who should protect us. They are also our greatest strength, our only symbolic power.

The men remain skeptic. Another, much younger, asks:

—What would a nomadic life be like?

An elder with a long flowing grey beard replies:

—Nomads aren't like us. They produce nothing. They just go from one place to another and yet, they don't know the world. Even though they give the impression they are wise because they are constantly on the move, they in fact remain stubbornly the same. We are different. We've developed means of staying in one place, which also means we are the only ones who really travel: we explore and we come back. This is what makes Çatalhöyük what it is today: it is the only place from which one departs and one comes back. Going with the nomads is stupid and backward; it takes us back to a time of aimless wondering. We will return to the state of wild animals.

—So you are with me, elder? Asks Takbir impatiently.

—Not so fast, interrupts a stocky middle age man with a leathered sheepskin round his waist. I disagree; nomads are constantly open to the opportunities of the world. They spend their time encountering new places and people. It is us who live closed in on ourselves. I'm for joining them.

Another voice interjects:

—I don't want to live in permanent exile. My barley fields and my sheep are all I need. Why should I follow them?

Sensing that the debate could go on for a long time, Takbir decides to intervene and says:

—Whatever we decide to do, what should be our position once they are here? If we are not using the heads of our ancestors as a way of frightening them away, then what should we do?

Everyone congregated around Takbir starts speaking at once, their voices creating a cacophony of sounds. Takbir sighs. He looks at the horizon and notices that the thin streaks of smoke he and Rajnal saw early this morning have been replaced by a long trail of dust clearly indicating that the nomads have lifted camp and are on their way. He says:

—Look over there. They are coming.

He starts by giving orders, but everyone is already dispersing, paying no attention to what he has to say. Sensing that it's all too late, he calls Rajnal and together they make their way to their corner of Çatalhöyük. As they climb parapets and walk across one roof-top terrace after another, Takbir says to Rajnal:

—Let's seek shelter by the forest. We'll be able to run to the river if we run out of options.

—I'll gather my things and I'll join you.

Takbir and Rajnal climb down their respective ladders. Once inside his own house, Takbir calls out for Asnära. She appears in the main room. He tells her of his meeting with Amlach and his failure to convince the people of Çatalhöyük to defend the city. She looks at him with fear. He comforts her saying that he and Rajnal are there to defend her. Unconvinced, she starts gathering their possessions. Once they are ready, they climb back out. Rajnal is there carrying a small pouch. They proceed to the furthest terrace and step down to the ground in the direction of the forest. Çatalhöyük is in chaos. People shout, run, and scatter in all directions. People flee towards the river, but most of them run for the nearby hill and the shelters of its caves.

Once they reach the forest, Takbir says:

—There is an escarpment over there in the woods. It will give us enough time to see them coming.

As soon as they reach the escarpment, they suddenly notice a low rumbling sound in the distance. They all turn around and see in the distance the nomad's procession approaching the settlement of Çatalhöyük. Ahead of the procession are tall men carrying spears and shields. Their faces and torsos are covered in painted motifs. Their loincloths appear to be made of a material close to that of foliage. Their headsets are made of long torturous tree branches. They look menacing and yet they don't run. They walk slowly to the rhythm of the men carrying large circular drums immediately after them. The sound of the drums slowly becomes louder as they approach Çatalhöyük. Behind the drummers, men are carrying large faces attached at the end of long poles. The faces appear animated, the light of the early-morning sun refracting on the shiny surfaces of the eyes and mouths. The drum rolls, the procession stops. The men and women at the front part way for what no one in Çatalhöyük could have possibly imagined: men and women on top of large hairy animals with large tusks, advancing slowly their heads held high. They are dressed in different kinds of animal skins, of varying colours and textures. The women have headsets that appear to be made of birds' wings and the men alongside them have crowns made of horns. Behind them hundreds of men, women, and children all gathered in a long line disappearing in the distance.

Rajnal bows his head in despair. Takbir and Asnära look in awe at the sight of the procession. Asnära asks:

—What will they do now that they are here?

—Kill us all, replies Rajnal.

—I doubt it, says Takbir. They are not attacking; they are just impressing us with their displays. For many, it will be difficult not to follow them now.

Even at their incredibly slow pace, it doesn't take long for the men and women on large animals to reach the edge of the settlement,. Once at the edge, they use the might of their animals to hit at the structure of the settlement, some houses resist, but a lot collapse at the weight inflicted upon them. Men on foot follow them, destroying the empty animal enclosures adjacent to the city and setting fire to the nearby crops. And then, as if enough damage was done, they all stop and return back to the procession. Once reassembled, the hordes of nomads continue their march past the devastated Çatalhöyük. As they pass, Rajnal, Takbir and Asnära notice amidst the dark smoke of the burnt crops, the inhabitant of their settlement leave the temporary refuge of the hill nearby and begin to descend towards the marching procession.

—What are they doing? asks Asnära.

Rajnal replies:

—They are joining them. We should do the same. We'll never survive alone without barley or livestock.

—Let's stay. We can hunt and fish. We can rebuild Çatalhöyük, says Takbir.

—What for? They are bound to come back. We will have to start over again. No, let's follow them.

—Asnära, are you with me?

—I don't know, she replies.

—Please stay, he implores her. Our world worked. It's worth preserving. It's also worth improving upon. They don't impress me.

—They impress me. As she looks in the distance, she adds: Also, they are bound to come back.

—They will eventually tire of destroying settlements, say Takbir. They can only exhaust themselves eventually. We'll remain. Look at the way some houses withstood the might of their animals. The ancestors inside them are telling us something. We should hear them and preserve what they alone had the courage to defend.

—I'm not sure, Takbir.

—We have seeds. We can start a new crop.

—I don't see anything worth staying for and certainly not a few seeds, says Rajnal. Amlach is right. Sedentary life is for animals living in enclosures. I'm going.

—Do as you must, but I'm sure you are wrong, says Takbir. One day, the world will only be made of settlements. Houses will rise towards the skies made up of layers and layers of descendants. Even the sun will have to make way for us.

—Perhaps, but I don't want to die of hunger. Following them guarantees me food. Are you staying with Takbir or joining me, Asnära?

Asnära turns to Takbir and asks:

—What proof do you have that one day, the world will be made of settlements reaching up to the skies?

—I don't need proof. I know. Is that not enough to convince you to stay?

Asnära wasn't keen to follow Takbir on a premonition, but she loved him and couldn't imagine living without him. Also, the idea of trailing behind a group of nomads and getting used to their wayward ways wasn't very appealing. She says:

—I trust you, but only on the condition that we rebuild our house on another site and without resting on the settlements of ancestors. I'm sure we can reach for the stars without having to rely on the dead.

—As you please, Asnära. We'll start over. It will be our new settlement.

—I think you are both mad, says Rajnal. I'm leaving.

Rajnal embraces them and runs towards the disappearing procession. Asnära and Takbir look at each other. They have much to accomplish if they want to stay alive, if they want to prove Amlach and Rajnal wrong. They start gathering wood for the night ahead.