

Tamat¹

One afternoon in the Hoggar, a mountainous massif in southern Algeria's Western Sahara, a Tuareg woman left her encampment to collect wood. It was an ageless time where only winter and summer existed.

Since time immemorial, it had been necessary to collect twigs and branches for the fire to cook the evening meal. In order to prepare the whole family's meagre meal, the woman also had to brave whatever dangers lurked outside to find this wood upon which their survival depended.

It was yet another day of oppressive heat and the gusty East² buffeted the Douar's³ colourless dwellings and vigorously swept the narrow, apparently deserted, alleyways. The collection area, where the earth had been stripped bare by the desert, was not far. And the stooping woman walked hither and thither, seeking out the wood that wind and nature had been kind enough to leave for her. The wretched soul gradually collected a pile of small bits of wood by a bush. She had finished assembling her bundle of

¹ Tamat: Acacia tree of the Hoggar region, which grows in a twisted shape and has many thorns and barely any shade-giving canopy.

² East: the wind has no name in the Hoggar. The Tuaregs show the contempt they have for it by simply naming it according to its direction.

³ Douar means a group of houses, fixed or mobile, temporary or permanent in North Africa.

firewood, and was preparing to carry it on her frail shoulders, when she caught sight of three Tahenchits⁴ running towards her. Desert and hunger had led these wild dogs inexorably to their prey. Truly, she felt a sublime savagery exhaling from their emaciated jaws. Dropping her bundle and calling upon Allah, the woman quickly climbed the nearest tree: a Tamat. Scratched by the thorns of the protector tree, she stared despairingly at the three wild animals that, foaming at the mouth, laid siege to the tree with an infernal pacing. The tree, the wood that she would perhaps have collected, had offered her a last chance of escape. She thanked Allah.

The day ended, and suddenly it was dark. The poor woman was completely exhausted. The drops of blood and beads of sweat periodically provoked the snarls of the carnivores circling in step. And then, affected by the desert chill, the wild animals curled up together and appeared to sleep quietly at the base of the tree. Their stench seemed worse than ever. The woman shifted conspicuously and tentatively on her branch. She too longed to sleep, but each time she began to drift off she risked a fall. She thought of her loved ones, of those in the village who must desperately be waiting for her. Little by little, fear, cold and exhaustion was taking hold of her. And, slowly, tears, trembling and sobs overtook her body and soul. It was possible that she could have been heard from the village... But without warning, and all

⁴ Tahenchit: a painted hyena of the Canidae family, only found in southern, central and Sub-Saharan Africa. Also known as the African wild dog.

at once, her resistance abandoned her. She relaxed. It was fate. Fate had decided she should leave the village to die in atrocious pain, devoured by wild animals, her dismembered body to disappear thanks to despicable beasts at the outermost bounds of the Sahara. And what was meant to happen happened. She gave in to sleep and fell...

In her fall, she let out a terrifying scream, and then another, loudly, when she had landed amongst the Tahenchits. "Each of you take your piece!" she cried out, covering her head with her arms.

But the Tahenchits, surprised and terrified by the screams and her crashing fall, fled far into the cold and darkness of the desert. The woman followed their example back to the village. Inch Allah !

Rewriting of a popular tale.

Translation Christine Scott-Fox