

Pierre Béhel

Human gods

Novel

H u m a n g o d s

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This novel was written in French. This book is a translation operated mainly by the AI of DeepL. The original title was: « Les dieux humains ». The translation by AI was reviewed by Cyril Escondeur.

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All the characters and situations presented in this book are pure invention. Any resemblance with existing or former facts or persons is purely coincidental.

The present story is a reinterpretation of "Apotheosis", by the same author. The story has been moved to the United States and France. It has also been cleaned of secondary elements to set it in the early 21st century for the second and third parts.

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Prelude

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The old man sat down on a stone. He was tired. His age, of course, was to blame. But he knew he was sick. Death would come soon. He was fully aware of that.

From where he was, he could not see the houses where the families had gathered. They were behind him. In front of his eyes were the wonders of the landscape willed by the gods. Or by a single god. Or by nobody. In spite of his age, or rather because of his age, the old man was no longer certain about the subject. He could only sigh as he waited, perhaps, for death to teach him the truth. Unless death was merely an entry into the Void. In that case, he would know nothing. He would be nothing. And all this would no longer matter.

Some young people had come out of the houses and were walking towards the place where the old man was sitting. You could see the landscape. It was nice. The young people liked to gather there.

But as they approached, they saw that the old man was sitting on the stone. Then their rowdiness stopped dead in its tracks. Cautiously, with the respect due to the elderly, especially those who are approaching death, the young people went around the stone. They always kept a certain distance.

The old man suddenly became aware of their appearance. He was somewhat deaf, partly blind,

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but not completely. He turned to them and greeted them with a smile.

The young people who were looking at him replied with the necessary respect. The others, seeing their friends' reaction, turned to the old man and saluted him as well. So the old man saluted a second time, for the latecomers.

One of the young people approached the old man, under the astonished eyes of his friends who were rather about to change location so as not to disturb the almost dying man.

"Master, I don't know the meaning of life."

"I hope you find one for yours," replied the old man.

"Are we in the dream of a god, as some claim?"

"Maybe."

"Who else would have created what surrounds us?"

"Houses were created by your parents, your grandparents... So were most objects. As for our world, no one can be certain."

"How to live without certainty?"

"By living, simply."

The old man suddenly burst out laughing. To think that he had been young, too. And at that moment, he died in full gaiety.

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Book One
Shaad

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Chapter 1

The river of lava meandered through the cave, radiating its red light on all the stone walls. It then passed into the next cavern through a small tunnel dug over the centuries by the molten mass. Unless the caverns are just the result of the cooling of the lava that would have moved too far from the central flow. The theologians of Shaad were constantly discussing this point. And the Goddess never answered very clearly.

She just came to participate in their games, to drink in their prayers. The Shaadins honored and adored her. They felt Her presence but only a few claimed to have seen Her, or rather glimpsed Her.

The world of Shaad was made up of caverns that were linked to each other by more or less narrow conduits. Some were pipes for the lava. Others had been dug by the Shaadins so that they could travel between the caverns.

The stone thus removed sometimes contained metals which, when properly heated in the lava, were used to create tools. These tools were, of course, primarily used to dig the rock more efficiently.

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Over time, the Shaadins' domain grew. They would dig and always find a cave after a while. Many of these caves were dark and uninteresting. Sometimes they were used to store souls. This is how the Goddess called the creatures that came screaming out of the lava.

The souls did have two arms like the Shaadins. But their legs were as hairless as their arms. And those legs ended in strange feet that looked like abominably deformed hands with their thumbs stuck to the other fingers. In fact, the souls had no hooves. Nor did they have a long, hairy tail, which was very useful for whipping through the air or balancing a jump over a lava flow.

These poor creatures were screaming out of the lava. They seemed to burn in it, but never completely. As soon as a soul sprang near a group of Shaadins, several of them would rush to capture it. The first thing to do was to tenderize the meat of the soul.

To do this, the Shaadins possessed tools that were designed by the Goddess. These tools could break the bones of souls, crush a part of their body or simply apply heat from a river of lava to their skin.

In fact, the souls hardly ever stopped screaming, except when they were sleeping in the caves where they were stored. They were either

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screaming because they had just come out of the lava, or they were screaming because the Shaadins were tenderizing their meat. And even when the Shaadins finally cut the souls into pieces and ate them, they still screamed.

Their mouths were finally silenced when their heads were separated from their bodies. But the memory of these screams remained as a taboo. So the Shaadins did not eat the heads of the souls. These heads were thrown back into the lava.

Where did the souls come from? From the lava river, the young Shaadins always answered. And that was a certain truth. But, obviously, these souls were not born there. In fact, they seemed to suffer from their very presence on the world of Shaad. Everything in this world seemed to make them suffer: the lava, the sharp edges of the rocks, the treatments inflicted by the Shaadins to tenderize their meat...

What disturbed the theologians was the shape of the Goddess. When she was seen, she did not look like a Shaadin or a Shaadine. The Goddess looked like a soul. But, unlike souls, the Goddess never screamed. She did not suffer on Shaad. She loved Shaad.

Then the theologians had prayed to the Goddess. And the Goddess had answered. The souls came from the original world of the Goddess.

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They were of the same species. But these souls had misbehaved on this world. Shaad was in fact a place of punishment for them.

The Shaadins loved their caves, their rivers of lava, and their Goddess. They did not like the fact that their world was a place of punishment for others. But these foul creatures called souls inspired no pity. No soul even seemed to know the Goddess.

The Goddess seemed to have created Shaad to inflict punishment on souls. No doubt did she, therefore, have the role of a judge in her own world. Perhaps she was a kind of ruler. In any case, it was obvious that the Goddess could not be considered a soul, even though she belonged to the same world and the same species. Above all, the Shaadins fed on souls and could not feed on the Goddess. This idea of eating the Goddess was, of course, horrifying to them.

Perhaps in the Other World the Goddess was known by another name. This Hidden Name has been the subject of much theological speculation.

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Chapter 2

The countryside was green in this late spring. The country seemed very quiet. Cows were grazing in the meadows. Farmers were milking them. Young birds were chirping in the hedges, demanding their parents' attention. Everything seemed perfectly normal. There was not even a goat on the horizon.

Knight Stephen von Kirchburg rode in the lead. He had donned his armor and chain mail before entering the county. Standing tall and proud on his white steed, he scanned the horizon on all sides, looking for any trace of what justified his presence and that of his companions. He carried his sword at his side, ready to be brandished. Other weapons were less accessible but could spring up in a few moments.

The knight's pace was slow. He was indeed followed by the mule of Father Bernardo of Novara. This mule trotted as much as it could under the weight of the luggage and its passenger.

Finally, on a small gray horse, the squire Adso of Ley observed the knight's actions. He tried to copy the knight's proud attitude while maintaining a minimum of humility linked to his function. He was there to learn and to serve. The

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time for him to be knighted himself had not yet come. He would have to wait a few more years for that.

The road that the little group was following went through the many fields of the area. It turned into a small wood. The knight's attention and focus became even more intense. But it took him less time to cross this dark place than it takes to recite a full prayer.

The pasture where the three men arrived was on a slope, and the road wound through it. Opposite, it went up, straighter, to the top of a hill. It then reached the wall of Heulbec, pierced at this point by a door flanked by two towers.

To speak of a wall was a bit of an exaggeration. Like many small towns, Heulbec was surrounded by a palisade made mostly of wood and cob. Stone was more expensive and therefore reserved for the foundations, a few pillars and the first levels of the small towers. The top of the guard towers, as well as the narrow parapet walk, were made of wood. And the roofs were covered with thatch.

How many men-at-arms did the Count have? Probably very few. Ten. Fifteen perhaps. If need be, the peasants could be armed. The greatest ordinary perils of the place must have been packs of wolves or a few troops of wandering brigands.

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But the mere presence of the small troop implied that a different peril threatened the land.

The city gate was open. At the sight of a troop of knights, priests and squires approaching, no one saw fit to close it. Two men stood in the doorway to wait for the visitors and ask them why they had come.

"Whoa, gentlemen. Who goes there?"

"I salute you. I am Sire Stephen von Kirchburg and I am accompanied by Father Bernardo of Novara and my squire Adso of Ley. Following the request of Count Eudes, we have been missioned here by My Lord the Duke and Monsignor the Bishop."

The knight showed the guards a sealed letter with the ducal seal. The priest did the same with a document bearing the bishop's seal. Only the squire had nothing to show. He belonged to the knight and followed him as a piece of luggage.

"Bless you, my lords, for we have been waiting for you with great anticipation," exclaimed one of the guards. He then began to run down the central street in the direction of the dungeon that could be seen in the distance.

The other guard simply stepped aside, inviting the three men to follow his companion with a respectful gesture. He added simply,

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"Messire the Count awaits you, my companion will notify him of your arrival."

In fact, when the little group arrived at a slow pace on the square shared between the church and the keep, three grooms were waiting. They took care of the mounts while the riders were greeted on the threshold of the lordly residence by Count Eudes himself.

The master of the house brought them into the courtroom. It had nothing of the grandeur of the ducal audience room. In the duke's palace, this room could have been just a bedroom. And the count's throne looked more like a large chair than anything else. There were some carvings, but hardly any detail and nothing metallic.

The ornamentation was also limited, to say the least: there was only one statue of Saint Esclarmonde des Murmures. She was recognizable by the low wall surrounding her feet, a symbol of her confinement in a walled cell in her father's chapel. She wore a large white tunic and leaned towards the one who prayed to her, her right hand in a conch shell around her ear to hear the prayers addressed through the small window through which she also received her food.

By habit, Father Bernardo of Novara crossed himself as he passed the statue. He had undoubtedly recognized the saint. But he did not

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risk insulting the master of the place by passing in front of a very controversial saint, who was even considered heretical by some members of the Roman Curia. Was it not said that she had carried her own father's child? And that this child disappeared into the woods, joining a pack of wolves in which he became a wolf himself? Others argued vehemently for the sanctity of this woman who remained a virgin, the wife of the one and only Christ the Savior. Were not the best proofs the miracles that regularly occurred on the spot where the chapel of the recluse was burned?

Father Bernardo of Novara did not know what the truth was. He did not know why this statue was there, the only real ornament in this country nobleman's dungeon. He did not know how a lack of respect for Saint Esclarmonde des Murmures would be detrimental to the mission he had been given.

In fact, Eudes d'Heulbec kept this statue because it came from his mother and linked his lineage to the saint by a rather limited number of generations. He supported her sanctity to guarantee his own prestige. But, for the time being, he was not concerned about the questioning of Esclarmonde's virginity.

The Count sat down on the throne. His visitors came and bowed respectfully. They held

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out their letters of mission. The Count broke the seals on the letters of the bishop and the duke and looked at the two documents for a long time, immersed in intense reflection. His scrupulous attention showed that he could not read. But, of course, he could not admit it to his noble visitors. The meaning of the letters was known anyway.

So he addressed the three visitors without hesitation.

"Father, Sirs, I thank you for your presence and I thank my lords the bishop and the duke for following up my request. But I presume that your journey has made you tired. I suggest that you go and rest. I hope you will honor my table with your presence this evening, including, if you permit, the young squire."

The knight answered for all the visitors. "We thank you and will honor your kind invitation. And where will our quarters be during our stay, which I hope, despite your kind welcome, will be as brief as possible? Other missions await us as well to satisfy My Lord the Duke or Monsignor the Bishop."

Count Eudes smiled. He was in fact mostly pleased with the announced brevity of his guests' stay, each guest quite quickly becoming a disastrous financial burden.

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"I wanted your stay to be comfortable and I asked the innkeeper to reserve his three best rooms for you. They are connected and each has a fireplace. The inn is located on the square in front of the church. As for your mounts, they are in the castle stables and will be groomed and fed."

The three visitors greeted the lord of the manor and withdrew. No one mentioned the lack of guest rooms in the small dungeon.

The knight, his squire and the priest bowed once more and went out. On the square, they immediately saw the aforementioned inn and, under the curious looks of the burghers who were not used to encounter people from other places, crossed the square.

The owner of the inn dropped them many curtsseys. He rarely had such a clientele. By his own admission, his customers were mostly simple peddlers. The innkeeper's babble tired the knight, who did not hesitate to sigh, while the priest smiled at the little bourgeois with a feint kindness.

Some boys, probably the innkeeper's children, brought the luggage of the three guests to the rooms. After the long journey through the duchy of Normandy, the knight asked for a bath. As he had gotten older, and since the end of the expedition to Jerusalem, he liked a little comfort.

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He had been in the service of Norman lords during this war against the Mohammedans.

One thing led to another and he ended up here. He had to pass through Coutances to escort Father Bernardo of Novara. The priest was preaching in the region at the request of the bishop after having studied in Rome, where he had also worked in one of the churches.

But everyone hoped that the mission would be short. No amount of plundering could seduce Stephen von Kirchburg, who dreamed of returning to war as soon as possible. As for Bernardo of Novara, he was impatient to return to Rome.

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Chapter 3

The dinner was deeply boring for the three visitors, but they were, of course, careful not to let that show in their words or attitudes. Count Eudes had hardly ever been out of his land, except to visit the Duke's court. His conversation was limited.

He enjoyed the war stories of Knight Stephen, as well as hearing about the Curia and the Papal Court from Father Bernardo of Novara. Adso of Ley was silent: that was his role.

It so happened that Father Bernardo of Novara had been sent to preach on the Duke's land while Knight Stephen was returning there after many months of expeditions. When the Count's request had arrived, the bishop and the duke had consulted each other and decided to send these two to deal with this famous witch. And the squire had followed his master.

The poultry was roasting in the large fireplace of the courtroom, which was also the banquet room. The two servants were bringing the dishes to the table as they went along. Besides the three visitors, Count Eudes and his wife, only the old priest and two officers sat around the table. There was little room left.

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Of course, the count had made a point of excusing his four sons and two daughters, each of whom had been held back for some obligation. Eudes was pleased that one of his daughters had been considered as a wife for the Duke's third son. But Knight Stephen kept his inner smile to himself. Such marriages were hardly an honor: the third son was known to be a fool, a feckless man and a debauchee. He despaired his father, who didn't know what to do with him. Marrying him off as soon as possible and sending him to a small garrison on the outskirts of the province had been considered.

Finally, Knight Stephen was able to bring the discussion to the purpose of their mission.

"Sir Count, can you tell us about this famous witch who is allegedly terrorizing your people?"

"Well, I don't know much about her. To tell the truth, there is hardly any visible disturbance, but the villagers are frightened. And... Well... Father, perhaps we should..."

He motioned to the old priest, who was biting into a duck leg, to speak. The priest managed to articulate a "but of course, Sir Count" while putting what was left of his duck leg back on the table. Once he had quickly swallowed what was in his mouth, he began to describe what was disturbing the region.

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"The harvests are quite good and no strange diseases strike us. The witch is discreet. But there are a thousand common ailments, like so many trials that Our Lord sends us. And some, it is said, have recourse to this witch and her potions to escape a trial punishing their sins. Let's face it, healers who trade with the devil exist all over the kingdom, and we wouldn't have bothered my lords for so little. But there is more to it. Men, rather young and handsome, considered good parties, have sometimes disappeared in the woods while approaching the witch's house. Others have returned and told me of deeds that only a succubus could have committed."

"Would you like to say that they were seduced and abused so that the witch could take their semen?" interrupted Bernardo of Novara.

"This is indeed the case. And some also testified to having visited Hell while they were filling the womb of the succubus with their semen."

Knight Stephen sighed. Rather than a witch, he saw her as a whore that some peasants regretted visiting. They would ease their conscience by claiming to have been abused. Nothing that a few lashes on the culprits could not solve.

So he asked, "and apart from these cases of seduction, have you seen more evil spells?"

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Stephen searched for words that would not humiliate his host. He didn't find any until the old priest answered.

"Would spontaneous, evil combustion meet what you would like to find, my lord?"

"Spontaneous combustion?"

"This is the latest in a long line of curses that have struck our parish. And the most spectacular one, in fact. The one that finally decided us to ask for your help. We had heard of peasants who came too close to the witch's house and were chased away by strong winds, by trees falling in front of them or by a thousand other signs that they were not welcome. But one of these peasants who had been chased away in this way wanted, out of defiance no doubt, to get closer to the house. He did so discreetly while his friends who accompanied him ran away screaming.

He saw the witch without her noticing him at first. There was a child running around the house. The peasant grabbed the child and took her with him, preventing her from screaming. He probably thought that the child had been kidnapped by the witch. But then the witch saw him and went after him. When he arrived at his house, in a clearing not far from the succubus' house, he locked the child in a small room until he could bring her to

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us. The witch did not leave the forest. The house burned to the ground.

"Well, what is so surprising? Do you consider a torch thrown on a thatched roof to be magic?"

"There was no torch. The room where the child was exploded, allowing him to join the witch of his own accord. And the peasant's family fled. But the peasant himself caught fire. He was consumed in front of his wife and children. All that was left of him was a charred corpse. I saw it with my own eyes before I buried him as a Christian. And the witch warned the family, ordering them to repeat the warning to the whole village that she would thus destroy all those who sought to harm her."

"This is indeed more interesting than these stories of seduction," judged Knight Stephen.

Bernardo of Novara replied: "I understand that a knight is more interested in violent manifestations but I, for one, do not underestimate the cases of seduction. Seduction, especially by a succubus, is the first weapon of the Devil. Let us not forget that, in the form of the Serpent, he seduced Eve who, in turn, seduced Adam. And since that moment, women were the first to succumb but also the first to pass on this

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evil seduction. No, let's not neglect this seduction. Could we meet one of the seduced?"

The Count smiled and exclaimed: "Until tomorrow morning, you will be able to meet one without difficulty. He is a brigand who was easily captured because he was so amazed by his misadventure. And he is to be hanged tomorrow."

"Sir Count, I am sorry to have to intervene in your right of high justice but it is necessary for us to interrogate this witness before he is executed" insisted Bernardo of Novara.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't see any reason to refuse to delay the execution for a few hours. Will that be enough?"

"I hope so, Messire. Do you have, if any, some of the necessary apparatus to help this brigand loosen his tongue?"

"My tormentor did not have the opportunity to use his talents with him. His tongue loosened spontaneously."

To kill a witness before he was properly questioned! This shocked Knight Stephen as much as Bernardo of Novara. Count Eudes was indeed a fool. But that the condemned man spoke without difficulty was good news. The dinner then drifted into small talk before, finally, the three visitors could go to sleep.

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Chapter 4

It was Sabbath day on Shaad! The Goddess was there, in the middle of her creatures. The hooves of the Shaadins pounded the rock in rhythm, playing the sacred music designed to honor their creator, a music based on percussions with a thousand subtleties. A hoof striking the ground flat does not sound the same as a sideways strike at this or that angle.

The Shaadins danced along the rivers of lava. They even forgot to capture the souls that continued to gush out of the molten rock. But the souls screamed only slightly less: they were suffering from lava burns and were terrified by the show before their eyes.

This show was nevertheless magnificent. The party grounds were lit by the red reflections of the mineral melt on the dark walls of the caves. And the dances of the Shaadins were projected in shadows on these walls.

In the middle of the dances, there was the goddess. She turned and turned again on herself. Without hoofs, she did not hit the ground, but merely brushed it. Her airy steps contrasted with the heavy pounding produced by the Shaadins.

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Finally, some Shaadins went into a trance. As soon as they felt ready, they migrated to the center of the dance, driven by some dark force. The Shaadins then offered themselves to the males, screaming their devotion to the Goddess. But their screams were not those of souls. They were also screaming their pleasure at being offered and impaled through various orifices, even through their skin, by the horny males. As on every Sabbath, many more Shaadins would be produced.

The Goddess danced with her airy steps but also watched the Shaadins celebrate her as they led their orgiastic revelry. Perhaps she was the one who frightened the souls the most. The Goddess was too much like them.

And probably did they unconsciously feel that the end of the party would mean that all the souls in pain would be quickly captured. Then would begin the real torments and the real pain.

This Sabbath was particularly successful. There were many trances. Above all, the Goddess was in the company of her daughter. The Shaadins knew her but she was almost absent. She was called the Sad Girl. She did not seem to like Shaad. She didn't really participate in sabbats. She didn't dance. She didn't say anything. She looked at her mother sadly and waited. When her mother withdrew, the girl would follow her.

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The Shaadins had never really had an explanation for this girl. And they loved their goddess too much to risk offending her by asking intrusive questions. A mythology had been built and several traditions coexisted.

As suddenly as the Sabbath had begun, it stopped. The trances stopped. The goddess was no longer there.

The Shaadins were now starving after so much physical exertion. Fortunately, many souls were available.

Cassandra opened her eyes. She was still enjoying her trip to the Sabbath. She used the cloth next to her bed to wipe what was left of the young goat's fat ointment from her face. This ointment contained decoctions of various plants: belladonna, sarsaparilla, euphorbia... She then withdrew from between her thighs the oak rod coated with the same ointment in the part that was stuck in the intimate flesh of the witch.

Her heartbeat returned to normal. Exhausted by her Sabbath, she lay on her bed. She readjusted the heavy woolen blanket to cover her body because she was getting cold.

Then she remembered that her daughter Tamara was curled up against her. Both were naked. But while Cassandra smiled broadly as the

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pleasures of the Sabbath faded, Tamara looked with sadness as well as love at her mother. The daughter remained silent.

Cassandra wiped the small amount of ointment from the girl's face. At her age, about ten years old, one had to be careful, as excessive use of ointments and salves could be fatal to children. As she was not yet in puberty, she did not wear an oak stick between her thighs.

When Cassandra had finally recovered some of her vital energy, she grasped her daughter's chin between two fingers, affectionately, to question her.

"So, Tamara, did you enjoy this Sabbath? I sensed you next to me and the Shaadins sensed you as well but you weren't really with us."

"No, I don't like your sabbats, Mom. Shaad is scary."

Cassandra smiled.

"Shaad is similar to the sabbaths of my mother and, before her, of my grandmother and so on. But Other Worlds take many forms. You just have to find the one that suits you."

"It's already done, Mom."

"Will you ever take me there?"

"Maybe."

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Chapter 5

The count's prison had only two cells in the base of the dungeon. There was no real interrogation room, just a room for the guards with a trestle in order to tie up the prisoner and a fireplace where irons could be heated. Bernardo of Novara looked sad when he saw how little was available. He sighed.

Accompanied by the knight, he entered the corridor leading to the two dungeons. The ceiling was low, the doors followed a classic Roman arch. The smell was that of all prisons, made of humidity, dirt, rot and fear.

The guard of the place, who was also an executioner, was waiting for the two visitors in front of the door of the only occupied dungeon. He opened it as they approached. The smell of prison was even stronger and the window at the top of the wall opposite the door was closed by several bars, which made it difficult for fresh air to enter the cell.

Inside, an elderly man, over thirty for sure, was prostrate on a mattress stuffed with wet straw. He was wearing chains that bound both his wrists and both his ankles. He was obviously awaiting his ordeal with resignation.

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The man straightened his head when the priest entered into what would be his last home and threw himself at his feet.

"Father, I beg you to commend my soul to God. Our Lord must know how much I repent of my sins."

"Our Lord knows the extent of sins as well as the extent of repentance. And he is just and good. But repentance must be accompanied by deeds to prove its sincerity."

Bernardo of Novara's voice was soft, almost musical. It breathed compassion and goodness.

"Father, I cannot return what I have stolen, for my sins I have also spent much..."

"That's not what I'm talking about, Son."

Bernardo of Novara then showed the prisoner Stephen von Kirchburg.

"My son, my companion and I are not operating for the Count but have been commissioned by Monsignor the Bishop and My Lord the Duke. We want to know all about this witch who lives in the woods and whom we were told you had met."

The prisoner bowed until he hit his forehead on the floor, straightening up just to kiss the bottom of the priest's robe.

"Father, I have sinned, it is true, but this time it was not of my own will. I was bewitched."

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"We are listening to you, my son. We are listening to you."

"I was stealing in the woods, coming from the north from where we had to flee to escape the militia, and my companions and I had just robbed a traveling burgher when we went too far into the forest, which was foreign to us. We then surprised a woman who was gathering firewood."

The prisoner stopped. He hesitated to continue.

"Son, we don't have much time, please continue."

"Father... I... God forgive me!"

"You can only receive absolution for the sins you confess, my son."

"Well, after we robbed a burgher, we wanted to rob this woman."

"A common thing among brigands. There doesn't seem to be any malignant seduction at work here. What happened then?"

"She didn't run away. She didn't try to. We even thought for a moment, seeing her devilish little smile that she would consent to our games without our having to force her too much. But she looked at us one after the other, slowly, as we approached. She pouted as she looked at each of my companions and smiled at me. Everyone but me started to scream as if the Devil was still taking

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them alive to Hell. And indeed, they began to sizzle before turning into torches. They had already fallen silent by then, but their screams had paralyzed me. When I realized what had happened, I tried to run away. But a terrifying wind came up to me, a wind so strong that I could not move forward."

The prisoner was collapsed, almost face down on the floor.

"Go on, Son."

"My dagger became so hot that I dropped it and screamed. I turned back to the demoness and she was already beside me. She smiled at me, stroked my hair and told me that I would suit her well. The cords holding my clothes on began to burn and soon my lower body was naked. The witch grabbed me by my pecker. She forced my organ to stand erect. I found myself, without knowing how, lying on my back. Then she slit her skirts and settled in on me. She obtained my semen and got up without ever losing her calm nor her smile. I was then raised in the air and, passing over the ridge of the trees, I found myself lying on the road. However, the burgher we had robbed had found the guard, which, unluckily, was patrolling not far away. And so they took me as a prisoner."

The prisoner was silent.

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"My son, have you said everything? Is this the whole and exact truth?"

"Yes, Father, absolve me, I beg you."

The executioner bent down inside the dungeon and, addressing the two visitors, also called on them.

"Father, Sir, it is time and Sir Count is waiting. The rope is in place."

The prisoner began to scream and cry. He clasped his hands together and begged the priest, shaking with horror.

"Father, I have said everything, absolve me, I beg you."

"Not yet, my son. When you saw that your companions had been burned by the infernal fire summoned by this creature, what did you feel? Did you feel attracted to this creature?"

"No, Father. I had no attraction. I was afraid. But she made me lie on the ground. Although I had no longer any intention of robbing her, she succeeded with her curses in obtaining my semen."

"Did you feel pleasure?"

"I was afraid, Father. I was afraid."

"I asked you if you felt pleasure, not if you felt fear."

"Her cursed and unnatural caresses made me feel a certain bliss, indeed."

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"It is quite possible that we are dealing with a witch. For the time being, I believe that the count is expecting us all. Let us be punctual."

The prisoner clung to the robe.

"Absolve me, Father, absolve me!"

"I will accompany you to the gallows where I will pronounce absolution, my son."

Letting the thief weep on his knees, the priest and the knight left the dungeon without a backward glance. They went to the square and waited at the foot of the gallows. It was not even placed on a platform: there was just a vertical pole, planted in the ground of the square, as high as two men, and at the top was fixed at right angles a horizontal beam half as long as the pole. One beam formed an equilateral triangle with the other two pieces to ensure the solidity of the whole structure. At the end of the horizontal beam was a metal ring through which a long rope had been passed. Its two ends were lying on the ground.

The Count and his sons were waiting in the front row of the crowd that was beginning to gather, already enjoying the show which was yet to take place. A good part of the population of the village must have been present according to Knight Stephen's estimation. Adso of Ley had mingled with the crowd and would not have

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missed the opportunity to witness the hanging of a brigand for anything in the world.

Soon the condemned man was dragged out of the prison by the executioner and another man-at-arms. He was not resisting, but his shackled feet hardly allowed him to walk. He raised his head and looked at the gallows with a mixture of horror and resignation.

He was placed, standing, just below the metal ring. He did not move. The executioner took one end of the rope and tried three times to tie a proper knot. He then passed the loop of rope around the condemned man's neck and tightened it just right.

A guard came and placed a ladder against the mast of the gallows. With the help of another guard, the executioner forced the condemned man to step back and then climb the ladder rung by rung. The executioner then took the free end of the rope and tied it around the mast so that the whole rope was tight. Finally, a thinner rope was tied around the belly of the condemned man in order to hold the arms close to the trunk without allowing the hands to grab the rope that would break the neck. The prisoner looked at the priest with supplication.

Father Bernardo of Novara then approached the ladder and spoke loudly to the condemned. The

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parish priest was there but bowed to the bishop's envoy and let him proceed.

"The Lord is your judge. Let him see the extent of your sins and the extent of your repentance."

Crossing himself several times, he recited a prayer in Latin, lower down, for the sole attention of the condemned. The latter answered sometimes "amen", sometimes "et cum spiritu tuo". When he had finished his task, the priest moved several steps away, returning to the front of the crowd, next to the knight.

The executioner looked at the count. The latter nodded. The condemned man raised his eyes to heaven and exclaimed: "Forgive me, O God...".

His words were brutally interrupted by the new tension that the rope suddenly exerted on his neck. Indeed, the executioner had removed the ladder and the body of the condemned man was swaying under the gallows, a horrible tongue searching for air outside his mouth. His feet were waving in a kind of ridiculous dance that amused the people. Many people applauded the spectacle.

Neither the count, nor his sons, nor the knight, nor the priest applauded. They kept a dignified and silent attitude, even if it was rather joyful.

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Chapter 6

Two weeks had passed since the brigands had tried to rape Cassandra. Only one of the men had been chosen and accepted for his semen, the others had been killed. So the witch decided to find out if the little game she had played had achieved its objective.

She lay down on her bed and became aware of herself. She examined her lower abdomen. And she sadly noticed that her womb was still empty of any implantation. So Tamara would not have a little sister yet. Nor a little brother. She would have to start all over again. But she did not like to force men to hand over their semen. She preferred that they came in her in a natural way.

But she had to face the fact that her sulfurous reputation was keeping men away from her in the whole county. And then, at her age... She was about to turn thirty. She was missing several teeth. She no longer had the charm of fifteen or twenty years old. All the more reason to act quickly. It was absolutely necessary to find a man and keep him until he impregnated her.

"Your body is still empty without my little sister, isn't it, Mom?"

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Cassandra gasped. Tamara's foresight always surprised her. Was she already able to look beyond the visible surface? At her age, that would have been a feat.

"Indeed, my dear, I am not yet carrying your little sister."

Tamara walked away sadly. She had work to do. She had to take care of the chickens, as her mother had asked. She had not yet gone out to the barnyard when she suddenly froze. She just said, "A woman is coming".

Projecting her spirit around, examining the groves and undergrowth, Cassandra found nothing at first. But she knew her daughter wouldn't have said that without reason. And she hadn't said "someone" but "a woman."

Finally, Cassandra found the presence her daughter had indicated. It was a woman, indeed. She was formally dressed but walking alone. She wore a large cape with a hood covering her head.

"Tamara?"

"Yes, mother?"

"Don't go and take care of the chickens now. Hide in the closet and close the curtain. The woman you saw is coming. I don't want her to find you out."

Without a word, Tamara obeyed. Outside, the sun was setting. The woman was coming

Human gods

quietly, obviously. Cassandra got up, fixed her dress, grabbed a comb and untangled her hair.

Taking a burning firebrand from the fireplace, she lit the oil lamp. Then she put the firebrand back under the cauldron where a mixture was heating. In fact, it was nothing more than a soup with some extra fragrant herbs. But any inquisitor could have sworn that it was a satanic brew.

Since she had spotted the woman, Cassandra had been following her in spirit. The intruder walked in silence. If the woman hadn't been spotted from a distance by Tamara, Cassandra might have been surprised. No noise. A supple, feline gait. She took the precautions of a warrior in the way she was putting her feet on the ground.

Cassandra smiled. The woman had stopped. She was just outside the door of the modest cottage. She hesitated. Finally, she sighed and knocked.

"Come in, madam, and close the door behind you as the air is so fresh tonight," Cassandra shouted at her.

The woman pushed open the door, entered silently and closed it as she had been told. She stood there with her head down, covered by her hood.

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Across from her, Cassandra glared at her, her fists on her hips. She didn't have all day.

"Well, ma'am, what can I do for you?"

The woman gasped. A thin, frightened voice answered.

"Don't you know?"

The witch shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't want to be obnoxious while searching."

"My son is sick. He has a malignant fever and his head hurts. The doctor is not getting anywhere."

The woman described as much as she could about the symptoms of the disease. She answered all the questions of the witch. The witch concluded the interrogation with a "good, I see what it is."

She went rummaging through shelves, opening jars, pulling out a few dried leaves or roots here and there. She placed her harvest in a white handkerchief. She then held out her hand to the visitor, palm up. The woman understood. She pulled a purse from a fold in her clothing. She opened it and took with her fingertips, one by one, some coins that she put in the witch's hand until she closed her palm.

Cassandra placed the money and the handkerchief containing the plants on her workbench. She took a mortar and pestle. Then she

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set to work, crushing the entire harvest into a soft paste with a little water. She poured the contents of the mortar into the handkerchief and tied it in a knot.

Finally, she returned to the woman who had not moved since her entrance.

"Here you go. You will have to put one tenth of this preparation in your son's soup at each meal. Be careful to pour the remedy into the soup once it is cooked and to mix it well. If the patient does not recover, I will have to see him to treat him better. You live in the village of Heulbec, don't you?"

The woman turned to face her.

"I can't go into the compound. The Count would make trouble for me. You will have to bring your son to me on a litter."

The woman bowed to the witch. Then she turned around and took a step toward the door before stopping.

"Is there anything else you need?" inquired Cassandra.

The woman turned to face him.

"Yes. My husband commits the sin of adultery with our neighbor."

Cassandra burst out laughing.

"What do you want? I don't have a potion for that. At least, not directly."

"What can you offer me?"

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"I don't like to give out poisons whether to kill wayward husbands, voluptuous mistresses, or both. I may have something that, despite everything, could help you. There are substances that numb men's appetite for women. And, if you administer this substance to your husband, he will no longer be able to, and in any case will not want to, honor any woman, including you."

"I'm fine with that. I already have six children."

The witch held out her hand, palm up. The woman began to place coins in it again, one by one. The hand closed more slowly than the first time. But the witch fetched a small vial and handed it to the woman with her recommendations for dosages.

Finally, the woman left through the undergrowth. Cassandra followed her in spirit, more out of amusement than anything else. But soon something approached. Before the robber got too close, Cassandra saw his heart. She felt the beat. He slowed it to a stop.

The woman didn't even hear a body collapse in the undergrowth. But Cassandra wanted her clients to be happy and to get to their homes safely.

Human gods

Chapter 7

Stephen von Kirchburg was parading down the main street of Heulbec. Mounted on his white steed and harnessed for war, he had put on his chain mail and armor, polished that morning by his squire. He wore his gorgerin and his helmet but had not closed the faceplate. This allowed him to smile at the young women who watched him pass. The fathers were careful to reprimand any response that could be interpreted as insufficiently prudish.

On the sides of the horse had been hung, quite obviously, a spear, a sword and a mace. Stephen von Kirchburg was well aware that against a witch the spear and even the mace would be of no use. These weapons were not there for the witch, but for the escort of four guards who followed and had to be reassured. Yes, each of these men had to know that they were under the command of a valiant knight.

The four marched at a pace (or attempted to do so), in a square of two men on each side, a disposal which they held only on special occasions. But each one made sure to look his best in front of his neighbors, friends and rivals.

Human gods

What an affair this arrest of a witch was! After all, a woman, even a witch, could be subdued by two guards at most. What was the point of asking the duke and the bishop for help? Eudes de Heulbec was a fool and a coward. The knight had not changed at all his first judgment.

All the decorum and the parade in the main street of the village were also part of what, several centuries later, would be called a communication strategy. The count's people, the burghers, had to be reassured. They had to know that the duke respected his duties towards his vassals and his people.

They also had to know that their Holy Mother Church was watching over them. After the soldiers came the priest. The mule of Father Bernardo of Novara trotted gently and the clergyman made sure to bless the onlookers on both sides of the street regularly.

The only one who tried to be discreet and modest closed the procession. It was Squire Adso of Ley, on his little gray horse. He knew that any other attitude would bring him the jeers of the crowd and the reproaches of the knight. His time of glory would come. But later.

The procession finally left the village through the main gate of the ramparts. It headed towards the forest, in the direction of the witch's

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house. There were no more onlookers on the sides of the road. Only a few peasants stopped working in the fields to watch what was a spectacle for them.

Some of the middle-class people, helped by some peasants, stopped working for a moment when the expedition passed by. But the executioner reprimanded them. He was leading the little group. A high mast had already been planted deep in the ground, a hundred feet from the ramparts. It had been made of an old, very resinous pine to resist fire as long as possible. The small group piled up layers of dry wood logs, hay and bundles around the pole. The whole thing had to be strong enough to hoist the witch. It also had to be wide enough to be covered with a stable layer of bundles to trap the witch in the pyre, as required for her body to burn completely. The soul would then be sent more safely to Hell.

The count had given orders that the witch, as soon as she was seized, would undergo his judgment and that of the priest commissioned by the bishop and then her just punishment. He did not want to waste time. If it could be avoided that the witch was locked up even for a moment in the dungeons under his house, that was even better. Ideally, the witch should not enter the city, since it was too late for her not to enter the county. Every

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time he mentioned the witch out loud, Count Eudes would cross himself off sharply. A good Christian, he feared the Devil and his creatures.

As the troop entered the woods, the path became less wide. The order of the parade gave way to a disorderly march. The soldiers chatted among themselves. The knight knew which way to go and it was agreed that the soldiers would tell him when to leave the main path.

The sun would not be at its zenith for some time yet. The sky was blue. Not a cloud could be seen on the horizon.

This suited Stephen von Kirchburg well. The expedition would be quick. His outfit and his horse would not be soiled by mud. The witch would be roasted that evening, and then, before returning to the Duke's court, once again in glory, he could sleep at the inn in gallant company.

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Chapter 8

Cassandra felt something strange near her. She turned around sharply but saw nothing out of the ordinary in her cottage. Everything was in its place. Her bed was hidden by a curtain. Her daughter's was hidden by a curtain. The table was clean and tidy. Several stools were arranged underneath.

The witch looked up at the roof, but the thatch was ordinary. A floor separated the main room from an attic, but the attic covered only half the first floor.

Still worried, Cassandra closed her eyes and called upon her extra-sensory awareness. She first looked around the cottage, even behind the curtains, in the closets, in the attic. She noticed nothing. Not even her daughter. Then she opened her eyes again suddenly. But where was Tamara?

Cassandra looked at her herb scramble, which she was stirring gently over a low fire. She judged it ready. She removed the small pot from the fire and poured some brandy over the mixture. She mixed and let the mixture rest. After a time of infusion, it should be filtered and put in a flask.

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She could now look for her daughter. A mysterious instinct urged her not to call her. Something was happening. Something important.

Cassandra walked out and headed for the barnyard. Perhaps Tamara was feeding the chickens. She hadn't noticed until now, but the chickens seemed very agitated. They were cackling much more than usual.

As she rounded the corner of the house, Cassandra finally saw her daughter. She was kneeling near the pen and seemed to be sobbing. Tamara showed her mother only her back, hiding the object of her sadness. The mother rushed forward, not even thinking, not even fearing danger, not using magic to protect herself. Her daughter was crying.

"Well, Tamara, what's going on?"

The girl raised her tear-streaked face to her mother. She pointed to what was in front of her. A chicken was dead, its neck caught in a red mouth. But this mouth seemed curiously mutilated. And the body to which it was more or less attached was practically reduced to ashes.

"Tamara, what happened?"

The girl looked down, as if fearing a just punishment. Cassandra knelt beside her and nestled her head against her chest, hugging her to comfort her.

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Using her softest voice, she repeated her request.

"Tamara, explain to me what happened and why you are crying."

Finally, after several more sobs, the child told her mother.

"I was out taking care of the chickens. But when I got to the barnyard, I caught this fox taking one of our chickens. So I got very angry. My mind focused on the fox. I saw its guts more than its fur. And my anger rose. I wanted fire to punish that thief. And the fox burned. He died very quickly. But the hen was already dead. I could see her broken neck. I tried to glue her bones back together but it didn't work. And it stayed dead. We lost a chicken and I killed that fox for nothing."

"Calm down, Tamara. Calm down. It's nothing. We'll have a chicken for lunch, that's all. I'll have to reinforce the pen so we don't lose our whole barnyard."

"Mom, I felt the anger rising in me. I saw how I killed that fox. I felt his pain."

"Yes, you are very good. At your age, I would have been incapable of such a feat."

"Mom, isn't it wrong to kill living things like this?"

"We must defend ourselves. The fox killed the hen. You defended the hen because she

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belonged to you. You owed her protection as the Count owes protection to his people. You didn't save her, but you probably saved the rest of our flock. You did the right thing."

"Do you really think so, Mom?"

"But yes."

Cassandra stood up, helping her daughter to do the same. She picked up the chicken, shaking it just a little to get it out of the fox's mouth. The witch didn't dare touch what was left of the charred body. Tamara was definitely very powerful for her age. Cassandra was beginning to wonder if she should fear her or be proud of her.

She would have to go to her Sabbath. Tamara had never shared her Sabbath. Many young witches do this, keeping their secret gardens to themselves. But with her daughter's unusual and precocious power, Cassandra had to know. What was going to happen when the Sabbath was made more intense by herbs that heightened perception of other worlds?

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Chapter 9

Adso was the first to dismount his little gray horse. He took it by the bridle and quickly joined his lord. He took the bridle of his lord's horse also in his hands and tied both horses to a small tree. He was careful to be able to untie either one quickly. It had already happened that the knight asked his squire to fetch this or that person or something. Adso had to be able to leave quickly without having to untie the knight's steed. And then, for a witch hunt, being able to leave without asking for help could be useful.

While Father Bernardo of Novara tied his own mount to another tree, Adso helped Stephen von Kirchburg off the horse. Arresting a witch would be easier on foot. The knight had not put on his full suit of armor, and he took the precaution of lightening up a bit, now that he was operating and not parading.

He thus removed his limb cannons, his breastplate and his bib, keeping the protection of his hauber, his spalieres, his gauntlets and foot protection, as well as his gorget and his heaume. A knife thrown quickly by a woman at gunpoint could indeed very well penetrate a throat. He gave up his faceplate, however, as it was too stifling

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under the beautiful sun. For the knight, it was clearly a risk he could pay for with the loss of an eye.

He took his sword in his right hand and his mace in his left. The latter would be appropriate for breaking down the door. Stephen von Kirchburg thought as he looked at his weapons. He had to be careful. The good citizens of Heulbec were waiting for the spectacle of a witch roasting at the stake. He had to refrain from crushing her skull with a mace or cutting her head off.

"It's this way, sir."

The soldier pointed to a small path leading into the thicket. The trail was light. Very few people must use it. It was said, however, that some women came at night to get some poisons to murder their husbands or to seduce men younger and stronger than them.

A little further on, through the trees, we could see a thatched cottage. A fire was burning inside: smoke was coming out of the chimney. The daughter of Satan must have been preparing some abominable potion.

Stephen von Kirchburg appointed one of the Count's soldiers to guard the mounts with Adso. The two young men looked at each other and

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smiled. Not having to face the witch was rather good news.

The knight sighed. He couldn't wait to get it over with. He was already bored with this mission, even though he was about to take action. Arresting a shrew. Was that an office worthy of a knight? He didn't believe in bewitching, in the cases of bodily combustion reported by the brigand and so on.

But the main difficulty was to prevent the witch from running away into the woods. It would then be very difficult to catch her, especially since she had to know the possible hiding places in the area. In this respect, she had a clear advantage over her opponents.

Stephen von Kirchburg observed the area. The undergrowth was sparse. There were, however, thickets of all types covering the ground. It was easy to get trapped if the demonic creature had set traps like pits filled with sharp stakes and covered with leaves. The knight had seen this kind of thing before.

He decided to go to the cottage by the path with the priest. He would walk ahead, as the foot protection could protect from small stakes.

Giving short orders, he sent the three available guards around, keeping some distance from the cottage. Each would take a position on one side of the house. Once each participant in the

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expedition was in his or her place, they would look at the knight and begin to move forward with him. The one placed on the other side of the thatched cottage would give the signal by looking at his two acolytes on his right and left.

It would soon be time for lunch. The knight found himself hoping that the fire in the cottage was to cook the meal. After all, witches have to eat too. They don't just cook sordid potions.

The guards moved slowly through the thicket. They used their daggers sparingly to make their way through. They had to avoid making too much noise, even if they kept some distance from the cottage.

If the witch came out of her house before the tactical device was in place, it was agreed that the knight would howl like the wolf, leading to a hasty charge by the soldiers. It would then be necessary to try to outrun the underworld whore.

Stephen von Kirchburg was waiting, looking at the door of the thatched cottage.

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Chapter 10

"Mom, people are coming."

Cassandra was turning the chicken on the spit over the fire. Her daughter's affirmation stopped her in her tracks. The witch was afraid. Why? Was it her daughter's tone? Indeed, there was an unspeakable terror that lay beneath the words. But how did she know that people were approaching? Did she keep herself perpetually awake?

If these people were hostile, Cassandra would kill them. She had to protect herself. She had to protect her daughter.

Did Tamara understand the meaning of her mother's frozen expression? She said, "Mom, you shouldn't kill people. It's not right."

"If they mean us harm, I won't hesitate. I will protect you, Tamara. No matter what."

"Please, Mom, let's just scare them. They'll leave us alone afterwards."

Cassandra sighed. Her daughter was naive. People fear witches. Many want to roast them like the chicken, which she began to spin again to prevent it from burning. Something had to be done.

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"Tamara, I'll take care of it. Stay here and keep turning the chicken so it doesn't burn."

The girl grabbed the brooch and obeyed her mother. Cassandra closed her eyes for a moment and sent her conscience wandering around. One, two, three soldiers. A fourth waited while the previous three took their places to surround the cottage. This fourth was different. He had armor and heavy weapons. Near the road, two others were waiting beside two horses and a mule. Why a mule? Someone was missing.

Yes, he was there. She had seen him. He was there, in a thicket, he had rolled up his clothes to urinate. A priest. He wore a heavy crucifix hung around his neck with a chain. A gold chain paid for by tithes while the peasants were starving. Cassandra could see each ring of the chain. It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship. The tithe had paid for a beautiful job. Expensive work. The witch's anger was rising.

Father Bernardo of Novara had cried out in horror. His crucifix had fallen into the pool of his urine. The priest had defiled Christ. The chain had broken. How could this be?

Upon hearing the cry, the knight turned around. He saw the priest urinating on the crucifix. He was so stunned that he was left speechless.

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"The blessed chain gave way. How is that possible?"

The priest burned himself as he grabbed the broken ends. The chain had not broken but had melted. He took a white cloth and wiped the crucifix on it. Then he took an embroidered handkerchief to wrap it in. He put it away with the gold chain. He tied the corners of the handkerchief and hid it in his robe.

The three soldiers were in place. They looked towards the knight, trying to understand what was happening to the priest.

Stephen von Kirchburg brandished his sword, giving the expected signal. He began to advance toward the thatched cottage, followed by the priest, who looked troubled and terrified. The soldiers drew their daggers and marched towards the thatched cottage.

The daggers. Three daggers. Three soldiers of poor extraction.

"Mom, please don't kill them. I'll scare them off."

"And how are you going to do that, Tamara?"

She kept turning the spit through the chicken, but her gaze seemed to reach far beyond the walls of the cottage. Cassandra kept herself in

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an extra-sensory state of consciousness while wearing a small mocking smile. How was her daughter going to do it?

A first soldier dropped his dagger with a small cry of pain. Then a second. And finally the last. The daggers seemed to come out of the blacksmith's fire as they had suddenly turned red.

Stephen von Kirchburg saw them running away in great disorder. No matter how much he barked orders or called them cowards, the soldiers ran away from the witch without regard for their mission, their honor, or the knight's exhortations. The priest whispered, "Lord Almighty, come to the aid of your children facing the Devil."

He took the crucifix out of the folds of his robe. Without even thinking of untying the wrapping, he grabbed it by the stipes and held it up in front of him, shouting, "Back off, Satan, for the True God protects us." The cloth caught fire, forcing the priest to drop the crucifix.

Stephen von Kirchburg felt the anger rising inside him. This witch was challenging him, a knight. He didn't care if she was a God or a devil. The enemy had to give in. The knight began to run despite what was left of his armor. He charged towards the door of the cottage, giving himself courage with a long cry of rage, carrying his sword

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high and his mace back, ready to spring and break whatever might come his way.

Cassandra couldn't help but giggle. What a belligerent bachelor. But his manhood was interesting from what the witch perceived under the hauberts. It would be a shame to deprive herself of it. Might as well capture this fool and use him to impregnate herself as many times as necessary.

"This one we'll keep," she said to her daughter.

"But, Mom, he is indeed the most dangerous."

"Let me do it. Finish chasing the priest. I'll take care of the knight."

The crucifix began to burn. The figure of Christ, made of solid gold, began to melt. Bernardo of Novara looked on, bewildered. He did not pay any more attention to the howling knight who rushed right in front of him towards the cottage.

When there was nothing left but a small pile of ashes and a puddle of molten metal, the priest fled. He grabbed his mule, untied it from the shrub before climbing on it and kicking it in the chest

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with his heels. The animal took off in the kind of gallop that characterizes mules.

Adso and the last soldier looked at each other. While the man of the count undertook to follow the priest with the help of his legs alone, Adso preferred to imitate Bernardo of Novara by mounting his small gray horse. It didn't occur to anyone to detach or to take hold of the knight's steed. The beautiful white horse continued phlegmatically to eat the high grass within reach of jaw.

Forgetting the cowards, Stephen von Kirchburg was only a few steps away from the cottage. He was about to blow the door open with his mace when it became heavy beyond expression. He didn't have time to let go. He was thrown to the ground, lying on his back.

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Chapter 11

Stephen felt oppressed, compressed against the ground. A heavy invisible stone must have been placed on his body. The knight could hardly breathe.

The witch came out of the cottage. She was neither too old nor too ugly. She seemed to be enjoying her opponent's confusion. She carried four ropes and as many poles, as well as a heavy mallet. She drove each pole a few hands away from each of the knight's limbs and then proceeded to tie each to the nearest stake. She was careful to stay out of the crush zone, bringing only her hands and the ropes into it. When the knight was immobilized, the spell was immediately lifted. Stephen von Kirchburg could breathe normally again.

The witch then planted herself at his feet, standing in front of the knight, her fists on her hips and her legs slightly spread. She was not angry but amused.

"Sir, I did not kill you because I think you hide under your hauberts what can be useful to me. I will use it as much as necessary to finally give my daughter the little sister or brother I wish for her. Then your soul will roast in Hell."

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"Devil's whore, your place is on the pyre and I swear I will lead you there!"

The witch only responded to the knight's insult with a loud laugh. She went back into the cottage and came out immediately with a bucket of water and a cloth. She then crouched down between Stephen von Kirchburg's spread thighs, lifted his shroud and doublet and tore off his undergarments.

She took in hand and weighed the phallus of the knight as a horse dealer could have done with that of a bull. She wore a happy pout before letting her tongue moisten her lips.

Stephen von Kirchburg felt the vixen's grip on his private parts. She then took the cloth, soaked it in water and passed it over the whole of the organ, even taking care to retract the foreskin.

The diabolic caresses then began. Their effect was felt quite quickly. The woman knew how to do these things and no man could have resisted her malignant charm for long. Stephen von Kirchburg, still young and fiery, was used to fucking whores or peasant girls whose farm was being plundered, felt the pleasure take hold of his body. Just what was needed.

The daughter of Satan then rolled up her dresses and petticoats and impaled herself on the

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knight. She adopted the adequate movements so that the knight's pleasure reached a peak. He released his semen without being able to contain it, meanwhile giving a long sigh with as much pleasure as annoyance. All his chivalrous art had been of no help against the witch. Much worse than that, he could only admit to himself that he had known intense pleasure in the arms of this hellish whore. Would his soul be damned as a result? He felt indeed taken to a hellish place.

Cassandra felt the phallus of the man penetrating her in the depths of her intimacy. The dimensions of the phallus were completely appropriate to her. She moved as was necessary for her to bring the man to deliver his semen to her but also to experience pleasure herself.

Without really wanting to, simply because she was in a trance, she called a Sabbath. She immediately found herself on Shaad.

Surprised, the demons stopped their occupations to gather around their goddess. They spontaneously formed their bacchanal. The souls that emerged from the rivers of lava continued to crash to the ground but were just paralyzed with horror at the spectacle before them.

Something, however, was disturbing the Sabbath. Something accompanied the goddess, but it was not her daughter.

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Cassandra was the first to be surprised when she realized that the soul curled up at her feet was the one belonging to the knight. He was thus participating in her sabbath quite involuntarily. The witch was angry at herself for having drawn her enemy into her intimacy. She knew better than to engage in a Sabbath during a sexual act.

When the witch had received in her the earthly semen of the man who penetrated her, she completed the Sabbath by blessing her demons. She forced herself to return to Earth. She had no choice now: as soon as she was fertilized, she would kill the man. So much for Tamara's naive good feelings.

Stephen von Kirchburg was stunned. As the witch withdrew, leaving the now flaccid phallus in the air and putting her skirts back on, he wondered if the scene to which he had been invited was only a foretaste of his fate.

"Is this the Hell where the damned go?" he asked aloud.

The witch only shrugged her shoulders and put his pourpoint and hauberk back into place. She then disappeared into the cottage, closing the door behind her.

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Chapter 12

Lined up standing in the great hall of the castle, the four soldiers lowered their heads like children caught with their hand in the cookie jar. In front of them, Count Eudes was pacing furiously. In a corner of the room, not far from the fireplace, Bernardo of Novara was sitting on a stool, still trembling, his pale face marked by grimaces of fright. Behind the priest, leaning discreetly against the wall, Adso of Ley was also pale but still standing.

The report that had been made of the events of the middle of the day strongly upset the lord of the place. And the good people of the village had demanded with loud cries the closing of the gates of the enclosure, the doubling of the guard and other precautionary measures which employed the totality of the available forces. The count had been obliged to give satisfaction to the burghers because their opinion was unanimous. In any case, the count was also scared to death.

The bourgeois women took turns in the parish church. The parish priest was not replaced and was beginning to show signs of exhaustion. The prayers, masses and other ceremonies followed one another.

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It must be said that the contrast between, on the one hand, the parade of the morning, when the knight, the priest and the soldiers had left, and, on the other hand, the sort of disorderly cavalcade of the return, was not there to reassure anyone. The soldiers themselves, upon crossing the entrance, had demanded that their companions on guard duty close the gates at once. They ran with such disorder, shouting things that were almost incomprehensible, except that the doors had to be closed, that it seemed as if Satan himself was chasing them. Count Eudes stopped suddenly and turned to Bernardo of Novara to question him.

"Well, Father, what should we do now?"

The priest bowed his head, clasping his hands as if in prayer, and seemed to mumble some litany. His body trembled from the tips of his toes to the tips of his hair.

When he failed to get an answer, the Count shouted his rage so loudly that it could probably be heard throughout the village. His fists came crashing down on the heavy table where, just the day before, the guests had been dining. The thick planks shook with the impact.

Upstairs, the ladies were crying and shaking. No one knew if they were more afraid of the witch or the wrath of the master of the house.

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Chapter 13

Tamara came out of the cottage carrying a clay plate with care. On it sat a whole chicken leg, still steaming, and next to it a large piece of bread. She gently placed the plate on the chest of the knight, still tied to the ground.

"I'll be right back," she said, before quickly turning around and heading back to the house. A few moments later, she returned, indeed, carrying a jug of a herbal wine and a goblet.

The girl filled the goblet two thirds and put the jug on the grass. She then brought the wine close to the knight's lips but he turned away.

"How do I know that this wine is not poisoned or carrying some kind of charm?"

"My mama told me to give you something to drink and feed you, like can be done with a sick person. She never hurts anyone unless someone wants to hurt her."

The knight laughed. Either way, he was at the mercy of the witch and her daughter. Killing him was simple. He was so humiliated by his position that he was no longer so reluctant to die of poisoning.

He straightened his head and accepted to drink from the cup that the girl handed him. Then

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she put the glass down and grabbed the leg by one end before making the man gnaw on it. The meat was just cooked as it should be, juicy, tasty and tender. Finally came the turn of the bread. Every time he asked for a drink, the girl gave him some.

When the meal was over, Tamara took the plate and cup back into the cottage, throwing the chicken bone into the grass. Stephen von Kirchburg wondered if he was not under a spell, but he recognized that he was only dizzy from the wine. It was only a bad herbal wine, of the type which could be found in inns.

The knight tried to forget the cramps that were beginning to get to him. He distended the ropes to be able to move just a little. That was enough, for the moment, to chase away the pain.

Letting himself get carried away by the fumes of alcohol, the knight wondered what his fellow expeditionaries were doing. He imagined them running to Jerusalem or Rome, fleeing the witch, fearing Satan and seeking the consolation of the Lord of the Universe.

Human gods

Chapter 14

"Tamara, stay home and don't come out until I call you."

Cassandra went out and closed the cottage door behind her. She carried a bucket of water and a cloth, as she had done in the morning. She repeated the same gestures, cleaning the knight's phallus, which was somewhat soiled from the excrement he had unleashed beside him.

The witch resumed her infernal massages. The knight could not, once again, resist. When the ideal moment came, she impaled herself on the turgid phallus of the male prisoner. And she received in her the semen that she desired, less than in the morning, however. This time it seemed that she had totally robbed Stephen von Kirchburg of his mojo.

Being carried away herself by intense pleasure, she convened a sabbath, without refusing to take the frightened soul of the knight with her. And the demons honored their goddess with joy.

Stephen von Kirchburg looked more closely at this unfamiliar world. Unhappy creatures were rising from the lava rivers, screaming, but they did belong to this world. They were not like the witch and himself.

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Stephen von Kirchburg remembered the plundering of a town in Italy. He had forgotten the name. It did not matter. It was night. Trapped in a burning barn, he had been afraid. The fear of dying without having confessed. And just after having fornicated with bourgeois women who were held quartered by four men while the fifth one was going about his business before the soldiers exchanged roles. And each woman screamed, shouted, cried.

Yes, then, in the burning barn, Knight Stephen von Kirchburg had been afraid. He had been afraid of his God. He had been afraid to die. He had been afraid of the weight of his sins. And he had escaped.

Why was he afraid? Because his body was threatened. His life was threatened. But in the witch's world, where she lived her Sabbath, he seemed to be on equal footing with her. The only difference was the worship of the demons, which was only for this witch. These demons were just indifferent to her.

The Sabbath ended. The witch withdrew from the now flaccid phallus. She set about to weigh it once again, to examine it in detail. Yes, it was well purged. It would be necessary to wait at least one day before it was really usable again. At least for an impregnation. For pleasure, after all...

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Pulling on the ropes with persistence, Stephen von Kirchburg managed to grasp the pommel of his sword with his fingertips. Neither the witch nor her daughter had thought of moving him since the fall. Little by little, the knight managed to draw the pommel into the palm of his hand and then to grasp the edge of the hilt.

The witch had no time to react. She had not looked at the hands of the immobilized man. The man's wrist suddenly swung around and the blade struck the still kneeling woman in the waist. She received the blow in the upper left arm. The sword recoiled to regain momentum.

Cassandra screamed. She had been taken by surprise by the sword. Her arm hurt. She was bleeding. Her dress was torn. She jumped aside to get away from the danger as the man she was holding as a prisoner struggled to break his bonds. Fortunately, the sword could not turn against the ropes. The orientation of the blade did not allow it.

The witch's left arm remained stiff, glued to her trunk as she stood up. The look in her eyes towards the knight clearly meant that she had decided to kill him.

The sword was suddenly so heavy that it remained stuck to the ground without the knight

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being able to straighten it. The man felt weak, dominated. He was afraid again, as in Italy. But can a knight be afraid? His master of arms had taught him that fear is necessary. But that it must be dominated.

Then he turned his own glance towards the witch's. He challenged her in silence.

Cassandra laughed. But her laughter was all restrained. An evil laugh. She picked up the mace with her good hand and then, going around the lying body, the sword. The extraordinary weight which had afflicted it disappeared when necessary. The witch threw the weapons away, into the tall grass.

Disdainfully, she seemed to spit out, "You don't need that anymore, knight."

"I do not fear your demons or your evil tricks, witch. For God is on my side. And I will know victory over Satan by annihilating you."

The witch then burst out laughing. She simply said, "Look, since you have eyes to see."

The blood stopped flowing from the injured arm. The flesh closed up. If it hadn't been for the tear in the fabric and the bloodstain, there would have been no trace of the wound.

The knight wondered how to kill an enemy who was repairing her wounds as was necessary.

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Chapter 15

Cassandra had potions to prepare. It was not yet dark, but she had already eaten with her daughter. The presence of the knight had been a topic of conversation during dinner. The witch did not admit that she was planning to kill the man as soon as he was no longer useful. But she made it clear that he was there so Tamara would have a little brother or, better yet, a little sister.

"But shouldn't we feed the man?" the girl suddenly asked.

"He has not behaved well this afternoon. To deprive him of dinner will be a just punishment. On the other hand, it is appropriate that he drinks. And it would be better if he slept, drunk, for example."

The witch took an earthen pot and went to fill it with spiced wine. She gave the pot to her daughter. Just as she was about to go out, the girl turned around and asked her mother, "Mom, can I stay outside for a while and watch the moon and stars rise?"

Cassandra shrugged her shoulders. And she replied absentmindedly, "If you want, Tamara, but beware of the knight and, above all, come home as

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soon as it is dark. As you saw today, there are foxes and wolves nearby."

Tamara then left, taking care to close the door behind her. The girl approached the knight's head and silently helped him drink the wine. When the jug was empty, the knight felt like talking.

"Well, did your mother tell you what she planned to do with me?"

"Yes, my little brother or sister's father."

"What next?"

"Well, you stay a father for the rest of your life, right?"

"Uh... Indeed."

Stephen von Kirchburg felt stupid. Was the girl particularly devious or had she just made an answer worthy of a child her age? Stunned by the wine, the knight decided not to decide right away. The girl walked away without speaking, keeping the earthen pot with her.

When she sat down cross-legged, not far away, she kept the container in her lap. Tamara began to look at the sky with an appeased smile. She needed to regain a serenity that the knight's irruption in her life had shattered.

Tamara was no longer on Earth. She was looking at the landscape of the world of her own Sabbath. She had never wanted to invite her

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mother to this world that she had first named Na-Heulbec, then Na-Heul and finally Naheul.

Here there were no flames, no demons. Tamara was floating in a blue sky where the clouds had been purged. Snow was beginning to spread on the sides of the steep mountains and the bottoms of the thousand deep valleys that intersected.

The large ferns covering, like the forests, and most of the land was beginning to feel the arrival of winter. They were storing up reserves in their roots. Soon, the leaves would freeze.

Tamara approached a village. The houses were a mixture of stone and wood. Soon there would be a cult to the Goddess.

Humanoids with long blond hair and big blue eyes were going about their business in a small village built around a narrow river. Winter was coming. It was necessary to finish building up the reserves before going to the basements of the houses to hibernate.

And then, in the temple, the priest gave a great blow on a metal gong. The sound spread through the valley, bouncing off the sides of the mountains, giving rise to multiple echoes.

The humanoids left their fields or workshops. They were expected at the temple.

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They went there without undue haste. But they walked with determination.

The goddess took her place in the holy of holies. And the creatures came to worship her as they should. Tamara felt the energy that her children gave her. The girl knew, since her creatures worshipped her, that she would be a great witch thanks to this cult.

Still, something was disturbing her in her own world. She felt she was being spied on. But she decided not to distract herself. She owed her creatures respect. So she focused on the ceremony.

Lurking in the shadow of the temple, Stephen von Kirchburg watched. On Earth, he would lie in the grass, tied to stakes. But here he admired a harmonious world.

This world, which the little girl had called Naheul when she invoked it, seemed to have nothing in common with the abominable hell invoked by her mother. But, in both cases, it would be appropriate for the creatures to know the True God.

In the mists of wine, Stephen von Kirchburg wondered if these beings were endowed with souls and if, therefore, the Lord Jesus had also died for them.

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Chapter 16

Cassandra was lying on her bed. She closed her eyes. She began to look at herself, or rather, to become aware of herself. She focused her attention on her belly. The womb was there, ready to receive a little being who would come to nestle there.

The seed of the man had gone all the way up. Likewise, the egg had descended into the fallopian tubes. But the sublime encounter from which a new life would arise had not yet taken shape. The witch decided to purge the man's gonads at dawn the next morning. For now, it was time to sleep. Tamara was already sleeping. Her mother could hear the little breath.

Outside, Stephen von Kirchburg lay watching the stars. He remembered the campaign nights when, after a long journey or a few battles, it was time to sleep. The aches and pains were just as bad as they are today, but they were not the same. Back then, he had ridden for hours before feeling the saddle on his thighs or the trot on his back.

He still managed to move his arms and legs enough to keep from becoming too stiff. Satan's whore had tied him up tight. Slipping away from

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the ropes, whether at the wrists or the ankles, was impossible. Looking at the sky did not help him to find a solution, no sign came from the dark canopy pierced by the distant lights.

But the stars were beginning to disappear. Clouds were coming in and gradually covering the show. It was going to rain, no doubt.

Stephen von Kirchburg longed to see again that diabolical world where there was no sky, no light other than fire, no rain. His mind had already been there once, he knew the way.

The little demons were busy chasing the other creatures that sprang from the lava. These creatures seemed much more human. Was this the Hell promised to the wicked?

Stephen von Kirchburg did not feel like questioning himself out loud. However, the demons around him suddenly became aware of his presence.

"What is this?" asked one.

"It looks like the being who accompanied the Goddess, the other Sabbath" answered another.

An immense anger seemed to emanate from the knight. He shouted into this demonic world, "there is no goddess, there is only one God."

The caves shook. Rocks fell from the ceiling. Two demons were crushed to death. Well, just

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being present in this world meant he could influence it? Couldn't he save the unfortunate creatures that sprang from the lava?

The five demons who were about to capture two souls that had fallen together on the floor of the cave were suddenly thrown into the lava where they disappeared screaming. The surrounding demons looked on in bewilderment at what had just happened. The souls were no longer screaming, at least not when they were no longer in the lava river. The souls felt that an immense power was protecting them.

Stephen von Kirchburg proclaimed as loudly as he could, causing the people of Shaad to cover their ears: "The goddess you honor is a false god. There is only one true God and he does not live in this place."

The Shaadins were terrified of such a speech. Who was this creature of the same nature as their goddess but who disputed the divine nature of the latter? What did this protector of souls want? Was he this True God of whom he spoke?

And what did the Goddess do?

Stephen von Kirchburg was surprised by his powers in this strange world. Was this really Hell? How could he have such destructive power against the creatures of Satan?

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Perhaps God had chosen him. He had to show the way of light to the fallen creatures.

Then the knight opened the way upwards. The caves collapsed around him, raising the level of the lava, diverting the courses of the rivers of fire.

The Shaadins panicked as the souls, warmed by the love of this new god, began their ascent in search of the light they were promised. The souls no longer screamed. But the Shaadins were replacing them.

Cassandra awoke in a startled state. Something was calling her. Standing up on her bed, she turned over. No, her daughter was sleeping peacefully. The gentle breathing had not changed.

Outside, a storm had broken out. The witch could hear it. Perhaps it was the sound of the rain that had awakened her.

She thought, amused, of the knight who was tied up in the rain, lying in the mud. She smiled. She even imagined the joy of killing him not with fire or iron but with water or earth. To bury him alive. Drown him. That would change.

But the anxiety was still there. It was even stronger. She closed her eyes and became aware of herself. But she could not see anything. Her closed

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eyelids seemed to block any vision. What was happening?

She opened her eyes again but saw only the darkness in her cottage. She tried again to dive into the extrasensory perception. But she did not perceive anything, as if she had no more power.

The anxiety became stronger. It was now based on something concrete: Cassandra could no longer perceive beyond the common senses. She concentrated on the pile of kindling under her cauldron. But she could not light it either.

What was going on? Cassandra needed to regain some magical power. She needed the devotion of the Shaadins.

She forced herself to lie back down on her bed. She projected herself on Shaad but did not recognize his world.

Rivers of lava flowed everywhere. Shaadins were dying by the thousands. Some of them perceived her presence and started to pray to her, but without much conviction as their world was dissolving.

And then the witch saw the souls going up a well. And she understood that the knight was there.

Cassandra tried to close the well to the ascending souls but could not do so because the intruder's will was now stronger than hers. And the

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world was losing coherence. It was losing substance. Her world was in danger of disappearing. The world she had built since her first sabbaths...

She had to kill this man now. On Earth. But without any magical power.

Stephen von Kirchburg was forced to return to Earth. His body was calling for help. Water was beginning to cover him. He must have been in a small hole and the storm was violent. The sky was streaked with lightning.

So he pulled on the ropes, which were now soaked, but they did not give way. However, the ground around the poles had become loose because of the rain. And pulling them out was now simple.

Within moments Stephen von Kirchburg was on his feet. It took him a few basic movements to regain his mobility after almost a day tied to the ground. He found his weapons in the tall grass. He freed himself from the ropes with the edge of his sword.

Then he grabbed his weapons and brandished them as he turned back to the cottage.

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Chapter 17

Count Eudes had taken shelter under the roof of the lookout post on top of one of the two towers of the main gate of the city of Heulbec. The storm had come on rather suddenly, but nothing magical was needed to explain it. The clouds had progressed quite normally.

They were already moving away. The rain was beginning to subside.

Located on a small mound of earth, the pyre was well in place. In the light of the flashes of lightning, one could see its sinister silhouette. It would be necessary to wait for it to dry out a bit before lighting it. But the water did not accumulate. And since a floor had been installed around the pole where the witch would be tied, most of the wood had been preserved from too much moisture. The floor had acted as a roof. If there was a little wind, the pyre would be usable in the morning.

It was still necessary to be able to capture the witch.

For the night, the bourgeois had returned to their homes. And the priest had been able to sleep in his rectory. The church was almost deserted.

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Alone, on the stone floor of the nave, at the edge of the choir, lay Father Bernardo of Novara on his stomach. His arms were spread out in a cross and he kept his face to the ground. Penitent in prayer, he was questioning God about the signs he had seen with his own eyes. How could the Holy Cross have been destroyed in this way? Could Satan prosper before the envoys of the only God?

The place was deserted. No one answered the priest's questions. There was no light in the sky except for the flashes of lightning that gave short illuminations in the dark church, well diminished by the stained glass windows closing the Romanesque windows. Outside, one could hear the storm receding. But the dawn was still far away.

Doubt crept into the priest's mind. Faith was fought by reason. If his God was so weak against Satan, maybe he didn't exist. Or perhaps Satan had finally defeated his Creator. Wasn't he Lucifer, the Bringer of Light, the most powerful of the angels, the right hand of the Lord? In many earthly kingdoms, rulers had been replaced by their second-in-command, their palace mayors, or some great vassal. Why should it be any different in Heaven when man is made in the image of God? Doesn't the first chapter of Genesis warn, in a hidden way, that such a reversal could take place?

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And did not the Book of Job indicate that Satan and the Lord could converse civilly? Were they not, therefore, practically equal?

The priest shook his head. Everything was becoming clearer. God had tempted him. Signs would test his faith. Yes, like Job and his sons, he would have to face defeat in order for the power of God to be revealed to him.

Had not the Lord Himself sacrificed Himself, undergoing the torments inflicted by the Romans and the Jews, even to the point of having His earthly body die? But this torment of the cross had become the emblem of believers because the Lord had triumphed. He had conquered death. And the faith of the disciples, so tried and tested, had been strengthened.

Could God, in his infinite mercy, blame poor Father Bernardo of Novara for having been, for a moment, as weak as Saint Thomas? No, he had to do penance to proclaim his faith again.

And this faith would defeat Satan incarnated as this whore from Hell. The priest took hold of his boxwood rosary. Then he resumed his position, arms in the form of a cross, his face against the stone floor.

He began to recite: "Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris..." The beads of the

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rosary slipped through his fingers as he recited the prayers.

"Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum, adveniat regnum tuum..."

Time passed. The prayer soothed the priest. No, God had not abandoned him. His presence was evident. How could a simple creature like an ordinary priest doubt? When the matter was over, he would have to do real penance. He would retire for forty days to the monastery near the ducal capital and ask the penitentiary brother to give him the whip while he recited the appropriate prayers.

Count Eudes had sat on a carved stone placed in the lookout post for the rest of the soldiers who were on guard without being on duty. He was dozing, his sword resting on his lap. He stroked the side of it, sometimes feeling the edge but without risking spilling his blood. His sword was his only friend. It had never betrayed him.

The hilt closed the blade before the handle. The whole thing formed a cross. The cross of the Lord. The sword could only defeat the creature of Satan. What happened to the knight Stephen von Kirchburg? He too carried the sword. And he had not returned.

None of his men, be it this cowardly squire and this unworthy priest had been able to tell what

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had happened to their leader. What fools. What traitors. Fleeing like that in front of the enemy.

If the day before, panic had taken over the city, it was time for him to come to his senses. No doubt Stephen von Kirchburg was facing the hordes of Satan. Alone. He would therefore be the only one to gain glory from his victory.

Staying within the city walls like this was not appropriate. Either the witch would eventually attack them, or she was being defeated. It would be necessary to confront her in a direct way. And so, leading the expedition, Count Eudes d'Heulbec would become the true savior of his region. He had been wrong to ask the Duke to interfere in this matter. Was he not, by God, master of his domain? And he had confessed his weakness by asking for the help of his suzerain against a simple witch. His honor had to be cleared.

There was still a certain amount of time before dawn. It was necessary to wait for the morning in order to leave on an expedition. He would choose his best men. He would let the cowards guard the city. Staying behind the ramparts should be fine for them. He could get help from the blacksmith, a strong man who could handle a sledgehammer with skill and was not afraid of fire.

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The rain had stopped. The clouds, now unloaded, were moving away. The stars and the moon were appearing again. A fresh wind caressed the stones and the cob. Although, in the morning, some puddles would probably remain, the walls would be dry. And so would the pyre. At most, it would give off a little too much smoke.

The Count would have preferred that the witch burned at high heat and not be asphyxiated before the flames reached her. But either way! Perhaps it was a sign that the Lord had compassion even for the daughters of Satan. So she would die before being devoured by the flames. She would, in any case, have eternity to burn in the Underworld.

In the blacksmith's house, upstairs, his faithful wife was sleeping, with tranquility. Her son was also sleeping well. His malignant fever was gone.

By her side, her husband was very unhappy. He had not been able to sleep since he had not been able to honor his mistress the night before. His phallus had not risen, and he had not even felt the desire to fuck the girl. He had gone to his rendezvous because it was already agreed upon. These stories of witches, no doubt, had disturbed him. It was what the girl had said. To reassure him.

H u m a n g o d s

In fact, the witch was no stranger to his troubles. But how could he have suspected that his own wife had given him a filter in his wine?

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Chapter 18

Suddenly Tamara screamed. A frightened scream. Not a child's scream. Not a cry from a nightmare. She had sat up in bed. Her mother rushed to her side.

"He's coming, Mom, he's at the door..."

"I'll take care of him. Now. But I'm afraid of hurting you by mistake. The fight will be hard. Go out the back window and go to the Hermit's Cave. Wait for me there. I'll come for you when it's all over."

"Mom, I can help you, I don't want to abandon you."

"Do what I say. Now. Go to the Hermit's Cave."

Cassandra had almost been forced to scream. Finally, Tamara had gotten up. She had wrapped herself in her blanket and climbed out the window to escape into the night. Her mother saw her run and get away from danger. The witch knew the situation was critical. If she couldn't regain her powers, she would die. At least her daughter would survive.

The witch heard behind her the thud of the mace against the wood of the door. There had been

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a rip. A piece of board had flown into the middle of the room.

The Hermit's Cave? Stephen von Kirchburg had overheard the conversation, but he didn't know the area well enough to know where it was. It didn't matter! He had to destroy the witch first. He would deal with the girl later on.

A first blow from the mace on the door made a piece of board fly. He could see the dark room. The witch had her back to him. A window had been opened facing her. The girl had left.

Satan's whore turned around to face him. She was looking at him. She was standing upright, her legs slightly spread to ensure her stability. She spread her arms as if she were waiting for a lover, in a sort of parody of a cross. But her hooked fingers were curled up towards the knight.

The eyes of the witch were fixed on the knight. Eyes that carried hatred and a curse. Eyes that made Stephen von Kirchburg hesitate. Eyes that frightened him.

On Shaad, the Goddess called a Sabbath. But there was no one left to worship her. The world was becoming vague. It was disappearing. In their well, the souls had escaped into nothingness. They

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never saw the heaven that was promised to them by this false god.

The last Shaadins watched the lava rivers dry up. They disappeared one after the other. Even if they weren't crushed by rocks or burned by lava. They were there, stunned by the horror, and the next moment they were gone, without having moved.

They had forgotten their goddess. And they had forgotten themselves.

The door gave way after a second blow from the mace. It shattered. The knight pushed aside the remains and saw the witch who was not moving. She was on top of Shaad.

He approached her. And he went in turn to Shaad.

The goddess was watching the disaster. And the false god was suddenly at her side.

"You destroyed Shaad, the source of my powers."

"It was those demons that were giving you their powers, wasn't it?"

"No, they had no power. But their prayers fed mine. A wizard's power is tied to the power of his Sabbath world. He must be the god of creatures with free will. And you have destroyed the

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coherence of this world. The creatures that populated it are gone. I am no longer their goddess. I am no longer anything."

"Yes, a daughter of Satan."

The pain woke Cassandra from her sabbatical trance. The mace had just hit her left arm. The bone was broken. The witch screamed in pain. She collapsed to her knees in front of the knight. Her eyes could not hold back the tears.

The tip of the sword landed at the base of her neck. The side of the weapon followed the witch's cheek. Cassandra knew she was going to die.

She closed her eyes and begged the knight, "Please hurry. Let's get it over with."

Stephen von Kirchburg withdrew his sword and sheathed it. He took two steps back. He looked at Cassandra. All he saw was a wounded peasant girl. And not the ugliest. There was no more witch, no more danger. He put his mace on the table.

The room was dimly lit by a remnant fire in the fireplace. The knight approached and took a firebrand. He lit the oil lamp hanging from the ceiling.

The witch opened her eyes again and watched him. She remained on her knees. She was weak and wounded. She had no magic power left.

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She watched, unable to act. Why hadn't he killed her?

Cassandra's astonishment was even greater when the knight seized two pieces of the door, breaking them further by using his mace on the table as if it had been a hammer and anvil. He also grabbed a cord that he saw next to the ointments.

He then came, with his two small boards and his cord, to kneel beside the witch. He made a splint for her broken arm. But then, with the cord, he began to tie the witch's two wrists together behind her back. Cassandra held back from screaming out in pain.

The knight stood up. Standing up, he faced the witch. He took his mace and used it as an extension of his hand to straighten the chin of the daughter of Satan. He forced the old witch to look at him.

"Where are your writings? Where are your formulas recorded?"

"I don't have any writings: I can't read. I learned everything I know from my mother, who herself learned it from her mother, and so on since ancient times."

"Including how to get to a Sabbath?"

"Yes. It's knowledge that we pass down from generation to generation."

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"And the power of a sorcerer or witch depends on the prayers he receives as a god of a world he has created? He is therefore Satan himself and not his son."

The witch could not help but smile, despite the pain, fatigue and threat of imminent death, "if you say so..."

"And so I destroyed the source of your power by destroying this world of Shaad?"

"Yes. All I have left is my knowledge of plants. I can always make filters."

The knight put down his mace on the table. He went around the room, lifting pots, lids, blankets... He did not find any writings.

But if he could have destroyed Shaad, perhaps Naheul could be his. Becoming a god was a lot nicer than being a wandering knight. The Count and the population of Heulbec were waiting for one witch, not two.

He seized his mace by the metal end and struck the witch's skull with the handle. Stunned, she collapsed. Stephen von Kirchburg carried her on his shoulders and, as he left the place, threw the oil lamp on the thatched roof. The knight did not turn around to see the fire.

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Chapter 19

Dawn had not broken yet. It would take a little longer for the first light of day to appear on the horizon. The sky was clear. The guards on duty could not help but admire it. The stars were shining. The Moon was even shining quite brightly on the Earth.

A light wind had dried the water on the Heulbec walkway. There were still a few puddles on the ground at the foot of the ramparts, reflecting the lights of the night. But the rain had only passed like a common storm.

A guard looked at the pyre erected a short distance from the ramparts. He shuddered. It was a horrible instrument of death. He hoped that it would soon be used and that the region would be rid of the witch who was rampaging through it.

Count Eudes had fallen asleep, sitting on his stone, his sword resting on his lap. He was snoring. From time to time, a guard would turn around and smile. But it was better for him to sleep. Otherwise he would be in a much worse mood.

In the church, Father Bernardo of Novara had been lying face down on the floor. But he had

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finally fallen asleep with the rosary in his hand. God had brought him a measure of peace.

Aches and pains woke him up. He knelt down. He felt strengthened by his prayers and penitential commitments. He had some difficulty getting to his feet. He had spent a whole night lying on the stone slabs and, at his age, that took its toll.

He went to the choir, crossing himself as he passed the altar. He sat down in one of the seats reserved for priests. He leaned forward, clasping his hands together as if in prayer, and fell back to sleep, trusting in God's mercy.

It was not quite time for Lauds yet. And a hard fight against Satan would be fought during the day. It was time to gather strength.

Adso of Ley was happy. He had forgotten the witch. Near the washhouse, he had found a girl with voluptuous breasts who was very disappointed that her lover, the blacksmith, had not been able to honor her. She had not been difficult to drag into his bed. A young fiery squire satisfied her beyond her hopes. Adso of Ley had forgotten to return in his room but not to flip and turn and the hoe several times in the night to make her cum.

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Chapter 20

The first light of day was turning the horizon red. Standing watch on the watchtower of the Heulbec ramparts, a guard yawned and struggled to keep his eyes open. It would soon be time for the next shift. The witch had not attacked. The dawn was looking good.

Suddenly, the guard's eyes were drawn to something strange at the edge of his field of vision. He turned and saw, in the distance, something like a fire. There was a fire somewhere in the forest. How could a fire have started in the woods when it had just rained?

The flames were rising high. What was being consumed was feeding the fire strongly. The guard called the other guard and showed him the fire. He was also surprised by the strange fire.

"What if it was the witch?" asked one.

"That's the direction of her cottage, from what I've been told," replied the other.

They eagerly discussed the interesting thing to happen that night. But, in fact, they knew nothing of what could be going on over there, deep in the woods. And their chatter woke up Count Eudes, who dropped his sword on the ground.

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"Well, what's going on?" he shouted, furious at having been woken up so abruptly.

The guards showed him the fire in the distance. The Count looked on, scratching his chin, thereby displaying intense thought.

"Alleluia laudate Dominum de caelis laudate eum in excelsis. Laudate eum omnes angeli eius laudate eum omnes virtutes eius."

Father Bernardo of Novara was awakened by the first sentences of Psalm 148. Years of monastic practice allowed him to straighten his head without seeming to wake up. Anyone unfamiliar with the tricks of the monks who saw the priest at that moment would have been convinced that he had been praying alone and was now simply joining in the common prayer.

"Laudate eum sol et luna laudate eum omnes stellae et lumen."

A brief and discreet circular glance allowed Bernardo of Novara to see that the priest was celebrating the office of Lauds for the two of them and three old women in the front row. Five people in the church. That was not so bad. The presence of a witch strengthened faith in neighboring cities. The other women would join the three old ladies later, for further celebrations designed to keep the witch away from their town and their homes.

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"Laudate eum caeli caelorum et aqua quae super caelum est. Laudent nomen Domini quia ipse dixit et facta sunt ipse mandavit et creata sunt."

On the watchtower, Count Eudes hesitated. What to do? This fire could be anything. It did not spread: the surrounding trees must still be wet, as is natural after rain. And, more than that, one could see the flames and the smoke going down from moment to moment.

Sending men to the site to inspect and teach him what had burned? What good would that do? And would they find anything without the column of fire and smoke to guide them, if it kept shrinking until it disappeared?

On the horizon, meanwhile, the goddess Aurora had opened the gates of Heaven to the sun chariot. Dawn was breaking. The sun was about to rise.

Adso of Ley had found the strength and the willpower to get out of the washerwoman's bed. It wasn't that he was in a hurry to leave her, but she had agreed that it would be best to avoid anyone catching them together. Her father was a violent man. And the blacksmith was no less so. If the

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young squire survived one, he would have to escape the other as well.

He discreetly left his lover's place, a simple room which had been built inside stables, on the ground floor. He was able to avoid the few puddles of water that were present in the courtyard and which reflected the Moon. Indeed, the light of the stars was largely sufficient to easily find his way.

Dawn was approaching. Was it really necessary to go back to the inn to sleep? On the other hand, in a remote place like Heulbec, it was a good bet that no tavern was open at that hour. This was not the Latin Quarter of Paris, Aachen or Frankfurt.

The young squire stood on the main street, his nose turned towards the sun. He filled his lungs with the fresh morning air. He coughed immediately because he hated the smell of dung and manure. The former student suddenly felt a deep nostalgia for his university. He knew well why he had chosen the use of arms instead of the Catholic church: girls were easier to find when one was a squire and then a knight than when one was a monk or a priest.

At least, Adso thought so.

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Chapter 21

Cassandra moaned in pain. Every bump in the road hurt her arm, every step of the horse was an ordeal. And Knight Stephen von Kirchburg was not riding slowly. He had thrown the witch across his horse and tied her to his saddle so she wouldn't fall off.

The cantle hit the fracture regularly and the braces did little to protect it even though they prevented the arm from tearing completely. The fracture was not open. There was only a surface wound where the mace had struck and the wound was not bleeding. The knight had measured his blow: he wanted to immobilize his prey, not kill or cripple it.

By the time she had regained consciousness, Cassandra was already tied up. The horse was moving away from what was left of what used to be called home. She had lived there happily with her daughter, but now it was a forest of flames. The beams were already collapsing in a great crash. It was only a peasant cottage, not a lordly residence, and the construction was not very solid. The chickens were fleeing the pen in panic. They would not survive long in the forest. The foxes would take care of them.

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Tamara must have obeyed. She did not try to interfere. Her mother did not see her. This absence, which she had always feared, reassured the witch. The girl could only survive by running away. She was far too small to defend herself or, worse, to attack the knight. Thus, a centuries-old line of witches would die out. The mother had not had time to teach her daughter everything she needed to know. And there were no other real witches around. At best, a day's walk away, there was an old woman who could cook some simple potions. But Tamara didn't know her.

To try to forget the pain, Cassandra returned to Shaad. But Shaad did not exist any more. She tried to reorganize the world, to make demons rise from the clay, to straighten the course of the lava rivers... But nothing obeyed. Her will had become too weak. Her disorder was too great. And her world was too damaged to be rebuilt in a few moments.

How many years did it take to create Shaad? Not far from ten. Her mother had guided her in her first steps. But her first real Sabbath was when she was almost twelve. Tamara's age today. But Tamara already had the powers of a well-developed world. Cassandra would have liked to visit it, just once. Maybe she could have borrowed it, just long enough to regain enough power to

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defeat the knight. But it was too late. Much too late. Cassandra's only wish now was that her daughter live. For her, it was too late.

The knight entered the green plain that sloped gently up to the wall of Heulbec. He could see the gate and the towers on the horizon. He kicked his steed in the flanks. The steed galloped through the wet grass and puddles, sending up sprays of droplets.

Cassandra moaned louder. The horse was bouncing on the uneven ground. Her fracture was killing her. She almost fainted.

The closer the horse got to the city, the higher the land became, and then the ground was dry. The rain had not lasted long enough to flood the whole pasture.

The witch sat up as much as she could. She almost screamed, but her scream stayed stuck in her throat because of an overwhelming feeling of horror. She had just seen the pyre.

The city gate was closed. The horse stopped in front of the closed doors. The knight called.

"Hey, lookout! Open up!"

At the top of the tower, a guard leaned over and answered.

"Sir of Kirchburg? Is that you?"

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"Of course, it's me. And I defeated the witch who I'm bringing you back."

"Then stay at the door. I'm going to warn the count, who has absolutely forbidden the witch from entering the city."

Stephen von Kirchburg shrugged his shoulders. His esteem of this Count Eudes was not rising. The victorious warrior dismounted and untied the witch from his saddle. He threw her to the ground without mercy. The pain made her scream and immobilized her. The knight used the rope he had just undone to tie the woman's ankles. He linked the ankles to the neck through the wrists. The witch was well tied and could not escape even if she was now struggling like a devil in a stoup, screaming. It is true that her face was turned towards the stake and that her gaze could not detach itself from the horror that was promised to her.

Suddenly, the doors of the city gate opened. The count was at the head of a squad that immediately surrounded the witch, pointing their spears at the immobilized woman. Eudes d'Heulbec took Stephen von Kirchburg in his arms.

"Sir, I thought you were dead."

Attracted by the commotion, Adso of Ley had run down the main street and followed the

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squad. He knelt down in front of his master, not paying attention to the pitiful state of the muddy hauberk and pourpoint or the torn braids. He would have to clean it all up later.

Already, the burghers were waking up and looking out their windows to see what all the fuss was about so early in the morning. The main street quickly filled with people as the sun began to rise.

Exhausted, the witch was no longer screaming. She was crying. No one dared approach her. The guards trembled as they pointed their spears at her, as if her bonds might not hold her back enough.

Stephen von Kirchburg entrusted his steed to his squire, ordering him to lead it to the stable. Then he bent over his prisoner. Taking her in his arms, he brought her to her feet. The crowd could see this woman soiled with mud and with a face deformed by pain. Her sudden ugliness could only be a sign that she was a witch.

The town priest and Father Bernardo of Novara finally arrived. They had to push the crowd aside with vigor to approach the witch. She was held up by the knight, surrounded by guards holding her at the end of their lances. And Count Eudes rubbed his hands with satisfaction.

"Is this the witch, sir?" asked the priest.

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"Yes, you have my pledge," replied the knight.

"How did you defeat her?" suddenly asked Bernardo of Novara.

"The struggle was long, and all night I thought I would never triumph, but in the morning, through faith and through iron, I broke her powers along with her bones."

The crowd applauded. Murmurs of admiration were circulating throughout the crowd. The story was short but it was enough for now.

Bernardo de Novare, suddenly reassured to learn that the she-devil no longer had magical powers, silenced the people with great gestures. Taking back his place of expert in witchcraft and in ways to eradicate it, he took the floor.

"Nevertheless, it is necessary to make sure that there is no mistake. If the woman does not confess, she should be tortured until the divine protection reveals itself to us or until she confesses.

The witch stirred around, trying to escape the knight's arms, and succeeding only in flooding herself with pain as she re-traumatized her fracture.

Bernardo of Novara took his new pectoral cross, found in his luggage, and showed it to the trapped woman, questioning her.

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"Do you admit to being a daughter of Satan, engaging in trade with the Evil One in exchange for powers?"

"Fool that you are, priest. I was a witch but I was never submissive to anyone, not even your God."

"This confession is enough for me. Devil's whore, do you repent of your sins?"

Despite the pain, Cassandra could not help but laugh. A deep laugh, a fat laugh. All saw there a satanic laughter. Bernardo de Novare turned to Eudes d'Heulbec. He shook his head and said: "She is indeed guilty".

Accompanying his instructions with a broad gesture of the arm pointing to the place of torture, Count Eudes ordered: "lead the witch to the stake".

Cassandra was snatched from the knight's arms and led away by two soldiers, or rather dragged away, since she was shackled in all her limbs. The two priests rushed to the front of the procession and began to recite the prayers. Count Eudes and the knight followed, the crowd accompanying them.

The executioner carried a ladder. He managed to run past the procession. When he reached the foot of the pyre, he put his ladder against the pile of wood. He climbed up and

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waited for the guards to come up, dragging the woman who was screaming and struggling. The executioner pressed her against the post and began to tie her up properly with all the necessary rope.

With a vague look, directed towards an indefinite point somewhere in the forest, the witch had suddenly fallen silent. She was no longer struggling. She had given up.

The executioner had his assistants send him bundles of wood which he piled around the witch. Soon, the witch was covered with the wood. He then decided to go back down. One of his assistants gave him a lighted torch. Presenting himself in front of the count, the executioner waited for the latter's formal order. This order was not long in coming. The face of the count nevertheless bore a mark of apprehension. One could feel that this mark would only fade once the witch's body was reduced to ashes.

At the foot of the pyre, simply in the front row of the crowd, Knight Stephen von Kirchburg was waiting. He too was apprehensive. He feared that suddenly the witch would be able to resurrect Shaad and regain her powers.

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Chapter 22

Why had she been tied up? Cassandra was paralyzed. Pain radiated from her arm. She couldn't move. She was in pain, so much pain. She couldn't move at all.

The ropes were so tight that they were biting her flesh all over her body as the burghers were afraid she would escape. Her dress was torn in many places, leaving her skin bare to the saw that the ropes had become.

And then there were the bundles that had been piled up around her. The twigs sprang out a little bit randomly, in the most perfect disorder. And they came to annoy what remained of her free skin, especially on the face.

Through the small branches, Cassandra could see the crowd growing by the minute. It wasn't every day that a witch was burned and the curious crowd came in great numbers. She could not see the faces or expressions, crossed by a thousand twigs. She did not recognize anyone. But she could make out the looks of hilarity or, at any rate, joy. A bonfire is a great spectacle, far superior to a hanging. Furthermore, a hanging would rid the country of a thief, even a murderer. In this case,

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we were dealing with a slut, a witch, a whore of Satan.

The sun was now well up. It was still early in the morning but the day had come. On the horizon, far behind the faggot fence, Cassandra could see the forest with a beautiful blue sky above.

Somewhere, in this green and brown immensity, Tamara was hiding. If a god existed on this earth, Cassandra prayed to him with all her heart and soul. May her daughter live!

The first wisps of smoke obscured the horizon. Cassandra heard the wood crackle. She was afraid. She began to breathe hard through her mouth as her body demanded fresh air. Already she was coughing. The smoke invaded everything.

And then there were the first red lights. They were dancing, far away. It must have been a magnificent sight from the plain or the city walls. The fire dancers rose higher and higher. The most daring ones went well beyond the top of Cassandra's skull but remained, for the time being, on the perimeter of this house made of twigs that had been given to her as a final apanage.

And then there was the pain. Worse than the pain of the broken arm. A thousand times worse than the pain of the twigs in the eyes. The pain of flesh burning.

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Chapter 23

Knight Stephen von Kirchburg was watching the huge fire burning. The witch had stopped screaming. Her screams had chilled the blood of all present. Even a good Christian could not help but feel compassion for this Satanic whore upon hearing such complaints. The pain she had felt when she died was nothing compared to the pain she would endure for all eternity in Satan's domain.

The smell was frightening. The wind whirled around and blew the fumes this way and that way. Stephen von Kirchburg was as bothered as the others, but he was hungry and wanted to grill a pork chop or a suckling pig on a spit. Meat was still meat. As the meat cooked, it always smelled pretty much the same. It was claimed that some pagan tribes ate men. Some warriors, lost in distant deserts, would also eat their dead friends. Stephen von Kirchburg shuddered as he thought of these sordid details. The witch's flesh, in any case, was no longer cooked but consumed. There would be nothing left to eat, even for the dogs.

The flames were beginning to die down little by little. A piece of still unburnt corpse could be seen still attached to the main mast. There

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remained a kind of big lump of coal the size of a trunk, hollowed out at the place of the guts. The bones of the limbs had fallen out or were completely burnt. Clinging to the trunk, a piece of blackened skull was barely recognizable without its jaw, without any piece of flesh, without eyes or nose. The straw and kindling were ashes. But there were still pieces of large logs, not quite burnt, still smoking as the last flames shot up.

Already the executioner was preparing, with his helpers, to shovel what was left of the pyre into a small handcart. Everything would be thrown into the river that ran through the county, at the level of a swamp. The water would wash everything away bit by bit. What was left of the witch's body would be lost in the reeds until it had gradually decomposed. The body of the hanged man had been thrown in the same place the day before. The count thought it unseemly to leave a corpse to rot in front of his castle. The executed were therefore promptly detached and thrown into the same river.

It was said that sometimes the family of the condemned man paid the executioner to leave the corpse on the shore. If the deceased could not reach a Christian land, he would still end up buried, usually in the forest. And the priest would also agree, for a fee, to make a quick and discreet service on the grave. Some wandering and begging

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monks would willingly say a mass for these lost souls. Families paid to reduce the sentence of the condemned in purgatory. However, no man of the cloth would venture to guarantee that the soul was not in Hell where redemption was impossible. From a commercial point of view, to assert such a hypothesis would have been bad for business. And to deny it would have been a matter of conscience. So, only God knew...

Count Eudes came to inspect the remains of the pyre more closely. The last flames were extinguished. The abominable smell was gradually dissipating. The good people had followed the priest and the priest sent by the bishop in procession to the church as soon as the witch had stopped screaming. A thanksgiving service seemed absolutely necessary to thank God for having rid the region of a dangerous and evil witch.

Count Eudes had ordered that a high mass be said at the end of the morning so that he, the knight, the executioner and his assistants could participate in a service. Between the two services, the burghers could return to their ordinary occupations.

Stephen von Kirchburg was at the Count's side, checking, as he did, that the witch was dead. It was a pity that Shaad had disappeared, but there

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was still Naheul. The knight wanted to get hold of it. If that was not possible, he had to destroy it as well. As long as the witch's daughter lived, she would want to avenge her mother. And she must have had some powers already. He would have to be careful.

It was useless to tell the Count about the girl. He had already explained that he had burned down the cottage so that no curse would remain. Eudes d'Heulbec had promised to send an expedition to make sure that everything was destroyed. The remains of the thatched cottage would be carted to the river and salt and holy water would be poured on the ground there.

Count Eudes was finally pleased with the turn of events. His management of the crisis had revealed itself to be excellent. The immense danger caused by the witch had been proven, no one could question his prudence. The witch had been living there for many years, but the Count had only become alarmed when the danger seemed to be out of control. His choice to call in experts from the Duke and the Bishop had resulted in the eradication of the threat.

At the inn, the knight was treated like a hero, like a prince. A tub was set up in his room so that he could wash himself, and maids poured hot

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water into it. He was given soap and a large towel. Stephen von Kirchburg was able to leave his shroud, his doublet and his torn trousers with Adso. The squire would clean and repair them, with the help of this washerwoman, who was very eager to help men.

But Stephen von Kirchburg preferred one of the maids who had come to bring him hot water. Although he was still dirty, he had no difficulty in dragging her into his bed to honor her with all his manly vigor. She withdrew quite happy when the knight decided to wash himself.

His luggage contained an outfit more appropriate than his armor for attending high mass. New braies, an embroidered pourpoint, elegant shoes...

Then he would rest. This would give Adso plenty of time to take care of the mounts and equipment. In the evening, the Count had planned a farewell and thank you banquet. The knight and his squire would leave the next morning.

They would not travel with Father Bernardo of Novara. He had given them a message for the bishop. He wanted to make a retreat in a monastery whose abbot he knew, not far from Heulbec. He would not return to the ducal capital immediately.

After this short mission without any profit except glory, the wars that tore the kingdoms of

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Christendom apart would also be an opportunity to shine in the spotlight in a more glorious way than by capturing a shrew and delivering her to the stake. Plundering often brought more wealth than a large farm.

The sun had barely risen when the expedition set out. In addition to the knight and his squire, it included the executioner and his assistants and carried a wagon. The knight had put on some of his armor, including his helmet.

Arriving at the ruins of the witch's former home, the expedition began its work. They had to destroy the last beams, take the ashes to the river...

The knight had much to do, too. The executioner took charge of informing him.

"Sir, the Hermit's Grotto where you wanted to go to pray is located just behind the small hill you see over there. The river bends and there was once a small path that allowed the holy man to go and draw water from it, at the Hermit's Ford. But the slope was rough. We are going to pass by another place, by a more convenient way. We will throw the remains of the witch and her cottage upstream from the ford, near the Marais aux Crapauds."

"Thank you. I entrust you my squire to help you cart away the debris. I will go to the cave

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alone. I will be back soon enough, before you have completed your work."

Adso of Ley moderately appreciated being forced to help the executioner and his assistants in a very tiring task. But, on the other hand, he was good at chopping up half-burned beams. And then he had to please his master until he was knighted. The knight had even told him that he was considering proposing the knighthood of his squire when he returned to the ducal palace.

The Duke would have to accept it, but after all, Adso would not be the youngest of the knights even if his birth was not prestigious enough to justify a quick career.

The knight left him in place as he rode away on his steed at a slow pace. The small hill was soon crossed. Behind a grove, a cave could be seen, just as it had been described to him.

As a precaution, he put his feet down. He tied his horse to a shrub. He closed his helmet with his face shield. He had to be careful. He grabbed his sword. He gave up the mace. The cave seemed narrow. And this time it was about killing, not immobilizing a creature to be burned at the stake. No one was to know that this girl's blood had ever existed.

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The knight spotted the old trail leading to the river. It would be a perfect place to dump the little corpse.

Finally, his spirit was invited to find his way back to Naheul. The creatures had gathered in the pagan temple. They were praying ardently to their goddess. But she seemed troubled, sad and unhappy.

She was worried about her mother who had not come to pick her up. And she was hungry and cold.

Tamara received the offerings of her worshippers. She did everything she could to remain attentive to their ceremony. They felt her presence. But Tamara was troubled.

She had fled her home the night before. So she had spent two nights in the cave. She had been able to drink from the river, eat some berries, but she didn't want to leave until her mother gave her permission. She didn't want her mother to come looking for her and not find her.

The cottage where she lived was beyond her extrasensory perception. She couldn't know what was going on there. The hill seemed to be in the way.

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And then, at the moment, she mostly had to follow what was going on in her honor. As a goddess, she still had some duties.

Suddenly, she felt like she was being watched. She turned around. And she saw the man. It was the knight. He was in her world. He was approaching her, smiling. But his smile was not a sign of kindness. It was a smile of evil triumph.

She shouted.

The ceremony stopped dead in its tracks. The creatures looked around. Something was happening to the Goddess.

Then, the place where the creatures deposited their offerings was nothing but a huge blaze. A voice spoke to them: "Your goddess has deceived you. You must worship the one true God.

Tamara wanted to push back the invader. But the invader set her on fire. For the first time, she was afraid in her world.

And her body was suddenly brutalized, calling her spirit back to Earth.

Entering the cave, Stephen von Kirchburg had rushed to the girl lying in a trance. One could not stand in the cave. So the knight threw himself on Tamara with his sword. He struck her with his sword, driving the steel into her small belly.

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Coming out of her trance, Tamara screamed as she sat up. She looked at the knight. She looked at her belly. She was seized with horror.

Stephen von Kirchburg threw her back to the ground violently. Surprised, the girl did not have time to remove her hands from her stomach. Her skull hit the rocky ground.

The sword split the little woolen dress from bottom to top, revealing childlike thighs and a lower abdomen that still had little hair. Stephen von Kirchburg tore the fabric to the point of pre-pubescent breasts.

"You will not die a virgin, witch" spat the knight.

Tamara's stomach hurt. Her head was hurting. She felt nauseous and couldn't even hold onto Naheul. Her vision was blurring. She tried to close her eyes and discover her surroundings using her extrasensory perception.

Suddenly, a new pain forced her to open her eyes again. Something was tearing at her lower abdomen. It had gone inside her. It hurt. It hurt so much. And all her other pains had been amplified by the appearance of this new pain. Breathing, even, hurt.

She could not feel anger. She was afraid. Simply afraid. Fear and pain. Pain, fear. Pain, fear. Pain, fear. That was all that was left. She didn't

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know how to defend herself. Even struggling was beyond her strength. Her eyes flooded with tears were useless to her: she could not see anything.

There was a hot, stinking breath against her cheek. This breath turned into a moan of pleasure. Then the man moved his face away from hers. Then the steel penetrated the white throat. Tamara couldn't scream anymore. She felt herself dying.

Stephen von Kirchburg wiped his blade against what remained of the dress. The girl was almost decapitated. She was dead and her blood was flooding the cave. The crotch was also bleeding between the legs, which were spread so wide that it looked like the girl had been dismembered.

"She was narrow, that bitch, but she will not have the excuse of virginity before the Tribunal of the Almighty. May she roast in Hell with her mother!"

The knight crawled back on all fours while pulling the corpse out. Once in the open air, he finished stripping the small body. He re-entered the cave with the cloth to soak up most of the blood and cover the rest with earth. There was no need to leave too many traces. With his sword, he dug a small hole in the soft earth at the entrance of the cave and buried the shredded dress.

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He then dragged the little body by the feet along the path once used by the hermit. When he reached the shore, he laid the corpse on its stomach. He stood up, took his momentum and brought his sword down on the girl's neck. The head separated from the body easily. She was thrown into the water first, as far from the shore as possible. She sank quickly.

Then the knight took his sword and thrust it into the small chest, in turn into each of the two lungs. He knew that in order to keep a body from rising too fast, he had to open the guts and the lungs. He then slid the small, tortured body into the muddy water.

Stephen von Kirchburg cut a tree branch with his sword and used the leaves to wipe away the traces of the tragedy as best he could. It was not to be seen that a decapitated body had been dragged here. Then he threw the branch into the river.

It was now time to join his squire and the executioner.

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Chapter 24

Many years had passed since Stephen von Kirchburg had known his first personal glory by defeating a dangerous witch. Wars continued to tear Christian kingdoms apart, or they dragged adventurers like the knight to the East. He returned several times to Normandy covered with gold.

And then, one day, he did not return. He, who was able to stop his opponents by looking at them, had received a bad blow from a sword. His enemies threw his body into the river. When the victory was won, his companions went to look for him, to no avail.

In a barn, Stephen von Kirchburg lay down on dry straw. He did what he used to do when he had to treat a wound. He became aware of himself and repaired the damaged muscles, vessels, bones and other organs. This time the alert had been quite extreme.

It was a good opportunity to disappear. Not growing old was becoming suspicious. Besides, when he destroyed part of his opponent's brain or heart by burning it out, he triumphed too easily. One day, the Inquisition might take too close an

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interest in him. Rumors were starting to circulate about him.

He had to learn to hide his powers better. And, already, he had to leave the kingdom, go far away. Find a job.

He could give fencing lessons, become a teacher (a "lehrer" as they used to say in his homeland), become a mercenary, or even go to the distant steppes and build a kingdom.

Although was able to use simple powers, it was clear that Naheul was a frustrating world. The powers it conferred were limited. Other wizards or witches must have existed, having created other more powerful worlds.

Cassandra's powers were far superior to those available to Stephen von Kirchburg. Shaad would have been a much better catch than Naheul. What a fool he had been to destroy this world of Shaad.

And, to take full advantage of his powers, he needed to better understand the laws governing the Earth. He needed to better understand how his own body worked. Many times, his perception of his body had given him an image that went against what he thought, like these vessels in which the blood circulated, animated by the heart whose only function seemed to be that.

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Intermission

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Stephen Lehrer took his smartphone in order to check the route to take. This assistance in finding the right route was most enjoyable in these cities with their countless streets.

It had taken him a while to get used to motor vehicles. Now that he had his own car and the license to drive it, there was more and more talk of restricting their use. Perhaps horses would return, as was the case when he was still called Stephen von Kirchburg.

Although life was incomparably easier now, the former knight sometimes regretted his armor. To get through certain neighborhoods, it could have been useful. On the other hand, a thug didn't bother him for long.

It was necessary to be discreet, today just as much as yesterday, even if the Inquisition had disappeared. But changing the gravity very locally was usually enough to disable the most aggressive thug.

In fact, Stephen Lehrer had managed to become virtually immortal. He repaired his body as it wore out or was injured. To know what to do, he had become a medical student in the 19th century. He had taken a few courses since then to keep up with the times.

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But all he knew about his powers came from Cassandra alone. Most of the time, he copied what he had seen Cassandra do. His immortality was relative, but it was very precious to him. He was therefore reluctant to take any risks.

The small world of Naheul had totally forgotten its creator and honored him as its only eternal God. Many generations had passed since Tamara's elimination.

At times, Stephen Lehrer felt regret at the memory of what he had done. But he quickly dispelled these qualms: different times, different values. One should not judge the acts of several centuries ago by today's standards. Rape and beheading a girl would get him into trouble in this day and age. Similarly, no one would consider building bonfires anymore. As for carrying a sword, that was just as much out of the question.

"You have arrived at your destination," said a synthesized voice.

Stephen Lehrer parked his car in an underground parking lot. Then he went out into the shopping mall where he had an appointment. The huge hall could have contained the entire church of Heulbec. But it was lined with stores selling clothes and other fashion items. Although the light was not divine, it was brighter than what once had been in the most beautiful and richest of houses.

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He strolled through the crowd. He was a little early. Finally, he found the "meeting point" totem pole. He stopped there, waiting for the appointed time to come. There was no one else near the totem pole.

Suddenly, there was like a fresh insistent wind that irritated his face. He was tempted to turn around to receive it in the back. Then, in a dark corner, behind a synthetic palm tree, he saw her. He only knew her photograph, the one deposited on the dating website. But he had no doubt.

He walked towards her.

"Hello, Katia."

"Good morning, Stephen. You're a little early and I was waiting for the agreed upon time to join the totem pole. But you found me and it's just as well. Shall we get a drink?"

"Gladly."

She was charming, as he had expected. And she was so naive about knights. Although she was mostly interested in science fiction, she combined the old lore, or at least what she imagined of it, with a space-opera universe in some very enjoyable short stories on her website.

It was while discussing chivalry that they had fallen in love with each other. Stephen Lehrer was not attracted to stories set in space, but Katia's

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stories appealed to him, as if they modernized and idealized memories.

What interested the former true knight was this ability to create a world. For him, he had to find people who could create worlds. Among all those, probably some had really done it. And among these, it was enough to find the one who had been able to develop a universe coherent enough to become a god. Then Stephen Lehrer could act.

The coffee they were served in a bar in the shopping mall was not very hot. In fact, it was almost cold. Stephen Lehrer was about to warm it up when he realized that his companion had taken the initiative. There was no doubt about the origin of the magical flows. When Stephen Lehrer's coffee was warmed up, Katia proceeded in the same way for hers while inviting the man to drink quickly, before it got cold.

Stephen Lehrer knew what he was getting into. They talked together about this and that, like any first date between a young girl and a young man of his age. It was no longer fashionable to catch a girl with five strong guys, four of whom held her limbs apart while the fifth did his thing. Those who dared to do so ran into trouble. Courteous love was no longer the order of the day either. And "sexual liberation" made women much

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more difficult and trapped in much more propriety than the maids and washerwomen who were laid in the hay or in the bed of an inn. Stephen Lehrer sometimes regretted the simplicity of the world of his youth.

It took almost a month, with four appointments and countless courteous or erotic exchanges, for Stephen Lehrer to share Katia's bed. It was a Saturday afternoon. They had to go to the cinema afterwards.

She shouted her pleasure as was appropriate nowadays. He discharged his semen into a small latex tank. And he waited. He wanted to know if he had found a witch this time.

Exhausted, the two lovebirds were dozing. When Katia showed signs of a trance, Stephen Lehrer gently took her hand. He discreetly entered the young woman's dream. He followed her into the world she had named Anakin.

The knights faced evil lords, as in the European Middle Ages, but their weapons were different. And, most importantly, they traveled from world to world in spaceships. They were not alone. On the roads of space, there were adventurers, smugglers, merchants... and priests. Very few priests. Too few.

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Katia obviously had no idea where her powers came from or how to develop them. Perhaps she had no desire to increase the power coming from this world.

She had a small scar next to her right eye. A jar that had fallen on her as a child, she said. But Katia had not seen fit to repair her body, even for such a tiny injury.

Lacking even the slightest ambition, she did not deserve Anakin.

The potential of this world was immense. Stephen Lehrer thought that he would have to study it carefully before developing a clergy devoted to him.

Then he would take this world, as he had taken Naheul. He would proceed with care. He would not make the same mistake twice that had cost him Shaad.

Above all, not to lose Anakin.

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Book Two
Trom

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Chapter 1

To glide through the air, at the speed of his choice, and to see the enchanting landscapes pass under him always gave Elijah a feeling of happiness. He was on his own world, and he traveled there freely. He did not have to limit himself by physical laws. He could be there and the next moment somewhere else. Gravity, the speed of light, the viscosity of air and all other constraints no longer made sense to him. And all this without anyone noticing him.

His favorite place remained a mountain, the highest in Trom's world. He had raised it many years earlier and shaped it to his liking. It was a kind of old extinct volcano. A gigantic peak defied the clouds coming around it. And this peak widened very clearly at its base where a gigantic crater collapsed on one of its edges. Thus, the mountain took the shape of a powerful being with its head in the clouds and holding in its stone arms the contents of the crater.

In it was a small lake and, all around, a forest. The lake emptied into a river passing through the collapsed part.

Elijah liked to take his human form and sit at the top of the mountain, the tip of which he had

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blunted for this purpose. From there, he could watch Trom. He admired his work. He rejoiced in the many lives he had brought forth. Elijah had come to terms with the obvious many years ago: he loved Trom as a father loves his son.

And that's why he enjoyed going there so much. Most of his dreams took place there, at least the ones he remembered. When he could, Elijah would relax, in his bed or on a lawn in the sun, leave Earth and go to Trom.

In college, some of his classmates were indulging in chemical and prohibited artificial paradises. He didn't need that. He had his own paradise. He had created it and could go there at will.

Elijah could not remember when he had actually started going to Trom. He was young, very young. At first, this world was vague, changing, unstable. It didn't even have a name. Depending on his mood, he would conjure up monstrous creatures or adorable little balls of fur.

Little by little, Trom had gained substance. It had acquired its name.

The foundation was set up during Elijah's preadolescence. After that, Trom never stopped growing in coherence, subtlety and precision.

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Elijah now visited his world with the meticulousness of a painter with a one-hair brush. When he saw something wrong, he made sure to correct it right away. From then on, this act of correcting became an eternal fact about Trom.

What a shame it was not to be able to do the same on Earth.

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Chapter 2

Leaving Trom. Elijah hated this moment. Yet he had to do it regularly. He had to eat, sleep, go to college. All sorts of things that Trom wouldn't let him do. He had to come back to Earth, bring his consciousness back into his body, stop moving without limitation in the ether of his world.

Leaving Trom was unpleasant in itself. When it was because his body was being shaken like a plum tree by his mother, it was even worse.

"Wake up, Elijah. We're waiting for you to eat."

Elijah merely grunted. But the grunt was affirmative enough for Susan Grubler to leave her son alone. She left the room, cursing her son's laziness.

If he didn't get up right away, Elijah knew she would be back. There was no point in resisting. Trom, in any case, was far away now. He was back on Earth.

Elijah began by sitting on the edge of his bed. Coming back from Trom was not only unpleasant but often tiring. It took a few moments for him to regain full awareness of his earthly

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situation. But, conversely, once that unpleasant moment had passed, a trip to Trom would give him energy for several hours. He could work tonight, after dinner, without difficulty. He still had to write that essay for the creative writing class.

The teacher, Stephen Lehrer, had a pleasant subject, to say the least. But he was able to make his students understand - except for the less gifted - the necessary rigor in the creation of a fictional universe. Trom owed him a greater coherence.

Sometimes Elijah thought he could write novels about his world. But he always recoiled when confronted with the idea of breaking the rule which he had never broken before: to keep Trom a secret. This world was his world. No one should enjoy it but him.

Elijah finally managed to get up. He avoided the sordid trap of the roof slope, thus keeping his skull intact, and glanced out the window. The sun had set a few moments ago and was still glowing on the horizon, over New Jersey and the city of Elizabeth. Closer to home was Bayonne, on the other side of East Reach.

The Grubler family home was located on the coast of Staten Island, New York City and New York State. It was made of red brick and the main

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rooms had this beautiful view, only spoiled by the presence of the main road, the Richmond Terrace.

The place was nice and bourgeois, although sometimes a bit noisy. It was also a bit far from the center of the city, from Manhattan and from the university: one had to take a bus then the ferry and finally the subway.

The house had two garages on the first floor. And each of his parents had their own car. He didn't. He had his license and could "borrow" a car if he needed to, but in order to go to downtown New York it was inappropriate anyway.

Elijah walked through the door of his room and headed for the stairs. Passing his parents' room, he took a look at it. Everything was neat and clean, just like his parents liked it.

On each of the two-night tables was a figurine of about thirty centimeters. On his mother's table was a representation of an elf, a certain Arwen Undomiel. His father had preferred Bilbo the Hobbit. His parents had always been fans of heroic fantasy in general and the works of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien in particular. Family legend had it that they met in the queue of a movie theater when they were both going to see a newly released movie set in that universe.

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Since then, they had remained attached to Middle-earth, cluttering up their home with statuettes, books and a thousand other useless objects related to their common passion. Elijah always found it funny to watch his parents spend nostalgic evenings in their room watching old movies about this universe, on average once a year. One of them had given him his first name: the one of the main actor.

Since he was a child, Elijah had been immersed in the world of heroic-fantasy like others go to catechism – whether it be Catholic, Protestant, Muslim or of other faiths. This had left him with a certain interest in fantasy universes. But Trom had never been home to an elf, a dwarf, a goblin or a troll. There had been monsters that looked like dragons, but he had made them disappear.

His world was to be his alone.

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Chapter 3

Mount Elijah. For some time now, he had not hesitated to name his favorite mountain on Trom by this name. After all, this was his world and he could have the highest mountain to remind himself of it. From there he could see his world spread out at his feet.

The forests covered the emerged lands. Defining the fauna and flora had been a long and tedious work, especially without taking any notes. It was necessary that its secret world not be violated, that its existence not be discovered through some paper.

Yet Elijah saw no reason to be ashamed of his passion for his world. Wasn't it beautiful? He couldn't help but wonder if he was alone in creating a world of his own where he was God. If everyone kept quiet, everyone could have such a world as well. Just as everyone had a sex concealed in clothes without, in general, mentioning it. To conceal Trom was modesty.

But Elijah was considered, especially at the university and before that at school, as an original person spending his time in lazy daydreaming. He must therefore be, if not unique, at least in a rare situation. It was undoubtedly this originality that

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he wanted to conceal as much as possible. He would rather be known as a lazy dreamer than as a God.

Being the God of the Trom world was a source of pride and joy.

At the top of Mount Elijah, it was cold. Such had been the will of the god. When he was younger, Elijah had tried to bend the physical laws of the Earth's universe, like reversing certain forces. But a repulsive gravity made the world strange and insubstantial, to say the least. Over time, a balance had been struck to make the world stable and interesting, making it quite similar to the Earth universe. Thus, at the top of the mountains, the drop in atmospheric pressure lowered the temperature.

Elijah had been disturbed to learn from an article in a scientific journal that the great constants governing the Earth's universe (speed of light, Planck's constant, etc.) allowed for a stable universe that would be irretrievably destroyed if they varied even slightly. It is as if a watchmaker had precisely adjusted these constants in order to create an interesting universe.

And the world of Trom was not only beautiful but interesting. Under its orange sky, the

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light of its yellow and red double star illuminated a predominantly blue forest and green oceans. One had to have a little fun, at least with the colors or lack thereof compared to Earth.

If the central star of the system resembled the sun, yellow, young and powerful, a second star gravitated in the manner of a Jupiter which would have succeeded in lighting up. The axis of rotation of Trom being right in relation to the plane of its orbit, the seasons were thus dictated by the proximity of this second star with a rhythm much higher than that of the year.

Elijah sometimes visited a few planets in the Trom star system. One, in particular, attracted him because of the strangeness he had developed there. It orbited close to the second star, but at a very different speed, and thus changed, in the course of the local seasons, from a quasi-liquid state to a ball of icy rock. Others were only gas giants or rocks without an atmosphere.

On Trom, Elijah had wanted to give substance to his revolts. Humans exploited the Earth's oceans beyond reason, and Trom's oceans were filled with a kind of small, highly toxic floating algae that gave their waters their characteristic green color. These algae fed on the

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sun and the atmosphere before returning their corpses to the bottom of the ocean, unless they were eaten by fish that lived in the depths but were unable to get too close to the surface.

Elijah had also conceived several intelligent races over time from various branches of evolution, including one in the oceans.

But there was one breed he preferred, the Schlagers.

In fact, this race had posed him heavy problems of coherence. He had to recreate it several times. He was attached to it as a craftsman is particularly proud of a difficult work.

He had first made them into a kind of angels. Beautiful wings covered with white feathers made them magnificent in their great migratory flights. Except that they were thus endowed with six limbs instead of four, a troublesome specificity in a world where all beings are built on a symmetry and a general model of terrestrial type. Moreover, the anatomy of such a being is a terrible puzzle for muscles to be able to attach to bony parts strong enough to allow flight without preventing breathing.

One day he had had enough and redesigned his Schlagers. But his special attention had led the beings of this race to settle around Mount Elijah.

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To escape the wild animals of the forest, a village had even been built in the center of the crater. Spontaneously, the Schlagers of the village had built a wall with a grate to block the collapse giving access to their shelter. The river flowed through the gate. The wall did not have a door: flying creatures, the Schlagers had no need for one.

Discovering this clever construction, Elijah was proud of his favorite creatures.

Perched on top of his mountain, Elijah looked out over his world. The icy winds had no hold on him. He did not feel them, but was aware of them. Sometimes he let them take him to other parts of the world.

And he liked that.

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Chapter 4

The icy wind whipped at Elijah's face. He hated winter. He looked up at the sky and saw that snow would fall later in the day, just as the weather forecast had said. He quickened his pace, afraid of getting caught in the gusts.

He had missed the bus passing by his parents' house and had decided to reach the ferry on foot. He would take the next one to the one he had originally planned. Then he would take the subway. Then he would have a few hundred meters to walk.

The streets of Staten Island were pleasant to walk in all seasons. Next to peers with less affluent families, living in the East End of New York, Elijah was lucky. He knew it.

The campus was modern. The university had been renovated several times since the time, not so long ago, when his parents had studied there in different fields. If it weren't for the famous meeting of their common passion, they might never have crossed paths among tens of thousands of students and thus never have given birth to a brilliant young boy.

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Elijah walked through the revolving doors. He entered the campus a little early. The wide corridors were still mostly empty.

Outside, in Washington Square Park, a few groups of students were chatting standing on the lawns. In the summer, they would lie down. Girls would demand to be able to take off their T-shirts to get a tan. And, like every year, the city would refuse to change the bylaw that prohibited it. The drunken student parties were more than enough for the boys to publicly admire the female anatomy. The reverse was true, of course. And it was not uncommon for a female student to be trapped, with a video shot live at one of these parties, with the cameraman avoiding filming his fellow student who was moving inside the girl. Men paid to see this kind of video, not women. This directed the market and the angle of view.

Elijah heard his name called behind him. He turned around. Adriana Putzig had caught up with him at a run and had thrown herself at him. Ostensibly, she had kissed him greedily. He hated these public displays of affection. She knew it. But he had felt obliged to hold her in his arms.

When their lips parted, he suddenly understood the reason for such a scene. Two of Adriana's friends had joined them. One of them

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had approached him in a fast-food restaurant where they had their habits, in the queue. Adriana had seen her do it. She might as well mark her territory. Kissing Elijah in front of the culprit clearly meant: "don't touch my man, bitch".

Elijah felt suddenly a deep nostalgia of Trom, even if the lower part of his body had, him, rather the nostalgia of the nocturnal embraces of the pretty blonde.

Elijah's entirety had no desire to part with Adriana. Adriana fulfilled all the necessary roles perfectly. She was pretty enough that Elijah did not look ridiculous in front of his classmates. She was a good student and cultured, and had a pleasant conversation. And her passion for realism, documentary and social painting often helped Elijah when the subjects of the exercises were not in the realm of the imagination. Conversely, Stephen Lehrer's classes were an opportunity for Elijah to do some minor favors for his companion.

But, on the other hand, to take his mind off of things, a few exchanges of fluid with the enterprising friend of his main mistress might be nice. It was a pity that Adriana was attached to exclusivity. She called it loyalty.

Elijah couldn't help but think of the ease of his life on Trom as soon as he looked at the

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thousand difficulties of a daily life on Earth. What could be simpler than being God?

He took Adriana's hand and led her after him to the modern literature section. This morning, the first class was about magic as a tool for breaking the rules of reality. And Stephen Lehrer was, of course, in charge of this lecture, which was to cover stories and the novel form, from the Middle Ages to the contemporary era. A few references noted in the preparatory work suggested that the university's most popular teacher would begin his course in late antiquity, with Apuleius' Golden Ass. We were on the edge of the modern literature program.

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Chapter 5

Elijah sat atop his mountain. He liked to sit there in human form. That morning, clouds came to caress him.

The vision of a god is quite curious. He could see the clouds, as he felt their cool caress, but he could see his world without encountering any obstacle. Nor did he feel the icy wind. He had no sense of Trom. He was aware of Trom.

He slid down the sheer wall that led into the ancient crater. The journey itself was part of the joy of visiting this world. No need to move his consciousness directly to where he wanted to go.

On the lower slopes, fruit trees were filled with large red berries. Elijah knew them to be exquisite. A Schlager had landed atop a tree. It was a young adult with very light fur, almost white, with just a few caramel-colored spots. It must have had a wingspan of just under two meters. Its prehensile feet clung to the branches as it picked berries.

He had made himself a basket out of tall, woven grass and hooked the handle around his long neck. He skillfully used the membranes

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linking his arms and legs to spread the branches and reach the most beautiful fruits.

Elijah approached to admire his work.

Suddenly, the Schlager closed his wings on his loot and began to look around suspiciously. He felt he was being watched. Elijah moved away a little. After a few seconds, the Schlager resumed his work. This upset the god. How could his creatures be aware of his existence?

Continuing to descend to the ground, he came face to face with a kind of tiger encased in a gray shell that made it look like a toothy beetle. Elijah smiled. It must have been that predator that the Schlager had sensed. This animal was not flying, but it could jump high. No doubt this particularly powerful specimen had managed to leap the barrier over the river flow.

For him, the ancient crater must have been a kind of larder: a whole tribe of Schlagers lived there trusting in their barrier, unsuspecting of predators.

The animal contracted and then leaped towards the top of the tree. It crossed the first barriers of leaves without difficulty but with a loud rustling sound. The Schlager heard it and flew

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away. The jaw of the animal closed on a deserted branch.

A knife caught the animal as it descended to the ground. The young Schlager had to flap his wings vigorously to regain altitude: throwing the knife had forced him to accept a fall of several meters. On the ground, the predator's body lay with a knife stuck in its mouth.

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Chapter 6

Elijah had wanted his world to be alive, that creatures be born into it, and that they also die in it. But witnessing a violent and deadly encounter between a predator and a Schlager had shocked him. He had not expected it. It was proof that Trom's world was evolving without him. The creation was now autonomous from the creator.

The young Schlager resumed his position on a branch next to the one he had abandoned, now broken by a blow from his jaw. He looked down at the ground. The predator lay on a bed of leaves, still twitching. The handle of the knife was sticking out of the bloody mouth.

Metallurgy seemed to have made tremendous progress lately. But it was true that time was passing more and more unpredictably on Trom. If Elijah was gone for a few minutes, several generations of Schlagers could be dead. Or, conversely, less than a moment had passed on Trom while Elijah had just spent an entire day in his university studies. This disturbed the god.

A few minutes passed before the young Schlager was reassured. He then descended to the ground using his wings as a parachute. He was

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ready to fly away at the first sign of trouble and carefully approached the corpse. He went around it. Still wary in spite of everything, he hesitated to advance a few steps towards the bloody mouth.

Elijah approached him. The god knew the creature was dead, as he could know everything that existed, lived or died in his world. But as he stood beside the young Schlager, he looked at the animal with the eyes of potential prey. The beast was impressive. The god felt a real pride in having conceived such a creature.

The corpse was longer than the Schlager's wingspan. A human would have seen a tiger whose hair had mutated into scales. The back and the top of the skull were covered with larger and thicker scales, often joined together, thus forming a kind of shell. But the animal did have an internal skeleton. The scales of the legs or the neck, on the contrary, remained particularly fine and flexible.

In close combat, it should be possible to stick a knife in the torso or to slice a leg. But then one had to avoid the dreaded jaws, not to mention the retractable claws, each of which was worth all the human knives. Elijah would not have wanted to meet such a creature on Earth without being very heavily armed and protected in a tank.

The god was proud of his two creatures, the predator and the prey who had defended

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themselves. Skill had won out over raw power this time, intelligence over strength, but it was not always to be so, on Trom as elsewhere.

The young Schlager looked around as if he still felt a presence. He then reached into the mouth of the corpse, took the handle of his knife and withdrew it forcefully.

He took a big step backwards and looked at the bloody blade in disbelief. He put his weapon back in his basket, still hanging around his neck. It was not so full anymore. Half of his harvest had been spilled during the adventure.

He cut some vines in the surrounding trees and began to tie a kind of halter to the corpse. When he had finished, he started walking, dragging the beast. Elijah watched him walk away.

The god then rose into the air, observing the scene globally.

The crater seemed impregnable, surrounded by the two rocky arms, just separated by a short gap letting the river escape. The colony of Schlagers settled near the small lake had partially blocked this breach with a barrier just letting the river flow through a grid.

The animal that had managed to jump this barrier was particularly powerful. Elijah went to

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the spot and realized what had happened. The top of the barrier was indeed destroyed. The beast had jumped and attacked the top with its claws and teeth, always in the same place, far enough away from the river to have a firm ground to jump from, until the pile of stones collapsed. The beast then climbed into the gap and jumped out the other side.

Trom surprised his creator a little more each day.

Elijah turned around, walking through the blue forest, looking around as if he had to fear other predators. Remembering that he was a god, he laughed to himself. The animals present were all peaceful vegetarians, whether they flew or not.

He finally reached the lake. The water was cool but pleasant. Some Schlagers were bathing in it, the younger ones romping in the corner. Elijah watched the scene with fondness. Peace and joy were still the rule on his world.

Suddenly, everyone froze, looking at the same spot on the shore. Females screamed loudly. Elijah looked with concern at what was panicking the tribe.

The young male had just arrived pulling the corpse of the predator.

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The females surrounded the young, who clung to their necks before they could fly away. The males approached the corpse and their mate in battle formation.

While the females laid the young in the sort of tree nests in which the colony lived, several males kicked the dead predator. At first the kicks were light, furtive, quick, and then they backed off. Then they became more confident. Soon they were so violent and repeated that the beast's carapace fractured in several places. There were cries of joy.

A discussion started. Females began to descend, having left their children in the shelter of the trees. Some males went up to get weapons and tools.

While several females began to cut up the beast, the young male who had brought it took the lead in a group heading for the wall. They were there in a few wingbeats. Others began patrolling in concentric circles around the colony, flying or on the ground. Each was heavily armed, ready to face another predator.

Elijah watched all this with joy and pride. His world was beautiful but not inert. The struggle for life left victims but also created heroes, like this young male.

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Chapter 7

On the shore of the lake, the peeled corpse of the predator was spinning on a spit. A young female was blowing on the fire to increase the flames and speed up the cooking.

The males had returned, both those who had gone to repair the breach in the wall and the patrolmen. It was time to tell the story.

The hero of the day sat upright on a large stone while the other Schlagers sat casually on the ground, nibbling on the exquisite red berries. But no one lost a word of the story.

"I, Chalg, was picking apfreds, perched in a tree, when I felt the Presence. I was afraid. I closed in on my harvest. And I decided to fly away. At that moment, a beetle jumped towards me and would have eaten me if the Presence had not warned me. I threw my knife and hit the beetle in the mouth. Its skull was pierced by the blade and it died within moments.

I continued to feel the Presence reassuring me as I approached the scaratiger. It was dead, there was no need to be afraid. So I took my knife back and saw that the Presence was telling the truth.

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I then decided to bring the corpse back to the tribe for our meal. And also as proof that a scaratiger had successfully penetrated our enclosure."

The oldest of the tribe came to stand next to the hero and then spoke.

"Our fathers led us into the plot because they felt the Presence on the top of this mountain more intensely than anywhere else. Perhaps our settlement is bothering her. She may have decided to get rid of us. Then we would have to return to the tall trees of the forest or the caves of other mountains, like the metal miners."

The young hero immediately challenged this version, but with respect.

"Venerable One, the Presence was friendly, proud and happy. She warned me of the arrival of the scaratigre."

"Could the scaratigre be a message? It managed to get through the wall. This is the first time."

"We thought we were invulnerable in the closet. We don't take as many precautions as our brothers in other colonies. This is a mistake. This attack, which did not cause any casualties, reminds us of this. The Presence has sent us a very clear message."

"You're probably right," the dean opined.

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Elijah was surprised at this talk about the Presence. Was he felt like that by his most gifted creatures, his favorite creatures?

The god faded away in the mists of his earthly sleep.

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Chapter 8

Elijah was tired. His day had been exhausting. A contemporary history exam on the collapse of the Soviet Union made him doubt his abilities, even though he had always done well so far. And Adriana's jealous maneuvers were making him tired. She had come between one of his girlfriends and him at lunchtime in the canteen. He had felt a real tension. He wondered if it was a good idea to continue dating this girl. Yet, he had agreed to join her at the gym the following Saturday.

Finally, there was winter. The city was cold. It was unpleasant to walk around in the early hours of the morning.

To get home, he took a ferry when it was already dark. But when he arrived, he saw that the bus he should have taken had just left. He decided to walk home along the coast road without waiting for the next one.

The road was well lit all along its length, with sidewalks. But the small perpendicular streets became dark just a few feet from the streetlights. At this hour, cars were moving fast, as were buses.

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It was cold. And the landscape was grim compared to the wonders of Trom.

He took out his earpieces from one of his pockets and placed them in each ear, turning them on. They made contact, via the proximity network, with his smartphone. Elijah took it out of his pocket to access it, looking at the time as he went. Yes, it was late.

He flipped the screen display to scroll through the list of music he had. He casually passed a bus stop. Someone called him. He turned around instinctively, without thinking, without considering in time to be the one who had not heard anything.

"Hey, man, you got a nice smartphone. You're a rich guy, you."

Three thugs, younger than him, were waiting for the bus. And the one who seemed to be the leader of the small gang had called out to him. His gestures were clear: he wanted the smartphone.

If he gave in for the smartphone, Elijah knew he would have to give up everything: his money, his earbuds, his clothes... and that he would be beaten anyway, maybe to death. There were horrible stories about what happened at night. Elijah started to run home. He ran as fast as he could.

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Behind him, the three thugs had started the chase. But they didn't do sports: too poor for that. They probably preferred to eat cheap, fatty hamburgers rather than real meat steaks with vegetables. They were obese, accustomed to taking the bus for no reason, to make an effort only to get up from a chair to get a bad beer from the refrigerator.

After barely a hundred yards, they had given up the chase, coughing up their lungs. Elijah, on the other hand, had picked up the pace and continued with short strides towards his house, smiling at their disappointment. Jogging, wasting time running for the sole reason of running, was indeed a rich kid's sport.

Elijah began to walk again as he approached his home. He needed to get his heart rate back to normal. Not to tell his mother. She would worry and demand that he no longer walk home when he missed a bus. Despite the risks, Elijah loved this route. And it wasn't that often that he finished his day so late.

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Chapter 9

Trom. Trom is calm. Trom is serenity. Trom is peace for the soul of Elijah. From the top of his mountain, he looked down on his creation.

He admired the thousand shades of orange sky. This strange hue for an earthling is only due to some gas clouds in the very high atmosphere, well above the water vapor clouds. And also well above one of these clouds of a magnificent blue-green which Elijah saw approaching.

There were two of them, not far from each other. It was probably a single formation that had recently broken up in a storm. This tearing had not been without pain but the two clouds had been able to continue to live, without reaching the fateful weight that would have made them fall on the ground and die.

However, one of the two, the larger one, was beginning to lose altitude. Elijah felt compassion for his creatures. He went to meet the larger blue-green cloud. He went to support it, morally speaking, because he didn't want to interfere with the inevitable fate, fixed by the rules of this world. Death is part of life. Even on Trom.

In the heart of the cloud, there were already many corpses of micro-algae which were

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clumping, growing and multiplying under the influence of the atmospheric water vapor, nitrogen, a thousand different compounds and the sun. Sometimes, a bird was even trapped in these terrible clouds which took its substances, literally devouring it.

But, on Trom as elsewhere, greed is a bad advisor. Too many micro-algae had reproduced and clumped together. This cloud had become too heavy.

When it reached the edge of the dense atmosphere, the vegetal cloud suddenly collapsed. A large blue-green wave fell on the blue trees of the immense forest. It immediately disintegrated. Most of the aerial algae died under the pressure and temperature found at ground level. But there were still some living ones, especially at the top of the trees.

A gentle Zephyr brought them back further. They returned to the highest heights of the heavens. And, while their sisters contributed to the enrichment of the humus of the immense forest, the few survivors returned to their paradise to grow and prosper again. Until the next alert.

Elijah let Nature do its work. He had created her. He could only be pleased that she was doing her job.

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The red dwarf was beginning to move away from Trom. The heart of summer was about to give way to what here was autumn. The main yellow sun also wanted to withdraw. The rotation of the planet sent it to light up other regions. The night was falling.

Suddenly, Elijah felt called. He was surprised. It was the first time. His consciousness turned back to his mountain. He was on top of it faster than ever.

But there was nothing. If Trom was a dream, this was a strange moment. Elijah could not believe in a false alert or an illusion. He felt the call. He knew something was coming.

And then he understood.

The altitude was too high for a Schlager to fly to the top of the mountain. Chalg climbed the mountain on his feet, all four feet. Never had a Schlager done this. Never had a Schlager felt the desire to do so. Or, at least, never had a Schlager dared.

Exhausted, Chalg reached the top as the yellow sun began to fall. Elijah knew that the Schlager had set out early, but even so, it was almost dark when he reached his goal. And he was cold.

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Elijah was looking at him. And the Schlager was looking back. The Earthman was disturbed by this look.

Chalg, though on the verge of total exhaustion, bowed in the most humble way he could imagine. Elijah was embarrassed.

"Chalg, rise up, I did not make you a skillful and upright creature so that you would deny the strength I have put in you."

The Schlager recoiled. Surprise, fear, a mixture of both. He immediately stood up, despite his desire to lie down.

"My name is Chalg and I have come to give you thanks," the Schlager said distinctly.

Elijah had sensed this from the beginning of the scene, but he was still surprised. At first he didn't answer anything. Then he dared: "I know who you are and I read in your heart what you wanted."

Chalg pulled his basket from around his neck. It was filled with the delicious berries found on the trees down the mountain. The Schlager had not eaten anything during his climb. He was hungry, but he had placed an unbroken basket at Elijah's feet. He waited.

Elijah wasn't sure what to say or do. It was still the first time a creature had treated him like a God.

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Chalg waited. Elijah felt a fear come over the Schlager, that his offering would not be accepted, that the Presence would find him too insignificant.

Then Elijah knew he had to act like God since he was a Creator.

"Chalg, your heart is pure and I thank you for your offering. I am proud of your efforts to come here, to the top of my most sacred mountain. Sit down and let us share this meal to which you have invited me."

Elijah sat down, followed immediately by Chalg. He wondered what eating a Trom fruit would do to him, how he would feel. So he took one of the berries that Chalg had brought and put it in what should be his mouth, inviting the Schlager to do the same. He was suddenly aware of how good this fruit was.

Chalg's joy was suddenly refreshed by an icy wind. Night was falling. He had to go back down into the forest or he would freeze to death.

"Get up, Chalg."

The Schlager obeys.

"The night will fall and the cold will be terrible for you if you stay here, for this is the way this world was created. The mountain tops are not for the Schlagers and they should not go there.

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But because you have dared to undertake this ascent, I make you my messenger.

This world may seem strange to you. At times it may seem hostile. But it is a balance. Life and death belong equally to this world. One generates the other. But it is up to me to fix the sequences.

Thou shalt not seek death, neither for thyself, nor for thy brother Schlagers nor for any other creature of this world. Thou shalt only give it to nourish or defend thyself, as thou didst in the face of this beetle.

You will generate life as much as you can, but you will accept when death comes to take its share without, however, doing anything to favor it, because it is up to me and me alone to say whom death must take and when.

Finally, you will honor me but never put yourself in danger."

Elijah wondered if he had said everything right, if he had not forgotten anything important. He felt he had been given a mission beyond his strength.

Faced with the silence of his god, Chalg asked a question.

"But, when my brothers ask me who sent me as a messenger, what should I answer them?"

Elijah smiled. Of course, this was missing.

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"You will tell them that I am the Creator of Trom. I am the One who made this world emerge from the Void."

There was a silence. Chalg took this as a leave of absence from his god. He bowed his head and tightened his wings, forming the most majestic salute of the Schlagers. Elijah suddenly thought that he had to take some precautions.

"You will also tell them that I will give messages when it is useful. Now the night will be here. It is time for you to go home."

"Yes, Lord Creator."

"Chalg, do you have faith in me?"

"Yes, Lord Creator."

"Then go back as fast as you can. Take support on this rocky point which you see advancing towards the void and jump towards the center of your village. When you are in the air, spread your arms and legs, straighten up horizontally. You will then glide more and more gently. You will be cold, dizzy and in pain, but you can return home alive.

So he did.

So it was.

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Human gods

Chapter 10

"Well, Miss Putzig?"

"I..."

Stephen Lehrer came down from his platform and leaned over the student, putting his fists on his hips. He was certainly more mocking than angry, but Adriana blushed with embarrassment, especially since even Elijah, next to her, couldn't help but giggle. Well what, wasn't she allowed to close her eyes for a few seconds? Well, okay, she had snored a little despite Elijah's nudging. This class was making her almost as sleepy as the fatigue from her short night.

She hated fantasy literature. What a shame that a good grade was necessary to move on to the next grade.

"So, let's pick up for Miss Putzig, ladies and gentlemen. What is the essential difference between Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity* and Herbert George Wells' *The Time Machine*?"

He surveyed the entire room with a circular glance. Most of the students found their notes particularly interesting. Elijah couldn't help but continue to giggle, despite his friend's murderous look.

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"Mr. Grubler, perhaps, can suggest something?"

"Me?"

It was Adriana's turn to smile.

"In both cases, they are fables that respect the basic principle: a pictorial story that serves to deliver a moral."

"I asked for a difference."

"Wells is concerned with the social situation in Great Britain at the end of the nineteenth century, and he makes his hero travel in time only to better discover the present, without bringing any solution beyond his indignation. Asimov, on the other hand, is concerned with the future. The moral is eschatological. He wants to show that humanity must accept the trials without trying to avoid them.

"Wells wants to change the fate of Britain, Eternity-style, doesn't he?"

"He wants to influence the future but not spare the trials. He knows that humanity will always face dangers. All his work is deeply pessimistic.

"What about Asimov?"

"I would say that he is rather optimistic, even a scientist. He has an almost unshakable faith in machinismo, in science in its broadest sense, from physics to psychology, from mathematics to history. Wells is suspicious of science."

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A bell rang in the building.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to ask for a few more seconds of your attention," Stephen Lehrer yelled to drown out the noise of students packing up their things.

"For next time, you will prepare a presentation for me on the topic of the power of science through literature. I want you to give more specific examples from various sources. The best ones will present to you. To help you, look at French science fiction, especially Barjavel, as well as the various American and English currents, such as Asimov and Wells. I hope that we will soon finish this module on science through science fiction. We will still have to see the influence of fiction on real technical progress. After that, we will move on to the myth of the vampire, and in particular its vision in psychoanalysis and sexopsychology. Have a good evening."

The teacher waited wisely until his students had left the room before leaving and locking the door. He felt the need to go back to his office, to isolate himself there, and to repair his tiredness. Something was calling him there.

The creative writing class was one of the last that day. The campus was already almost empty.

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Adriana was sulking. She walked in silence next to Elijah.

"Don't sulk: you'll still need my advice to write your presentation..."

The young woman answered with a murderous look. She hated this class, and on top of that, her lover came and reminded her how dependent she was on his talent. She could always retaliate in the news processing class, but Elijah wasn't as bad there as she could be in fantasy literature.

They left the building in the middle of the crowd. The group of students did not disperse. They could only go through the security gates one by one, each in turn. It was only afterwards that each one recovered his individuality, joining the right subway or the right bus.

Elijah accompanied Adriana to the parking lot. Few were going in that direction. She got on her electric scooter. But before she put on her helmet, Elijah's lips were on the young woman's.

She smiled. She liked the taste of her lover. But she did not pronounce a word. She had to finish sulking only at home, it was a matter of honor. Tomorrow would be another day. She put on her helmet and drove off.

Elijah watched her walk away then headed for the subway.

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Since the morning, he had been feeling cheerful, with a kind of positive energy. Even Adriana had noticed it. It was as if he was flying on a little cloud with every step, as if he had brought a little Trom to Earth. He smiled at the thought.

When he got off the ferry, he gave up on the bus, without even checking that there wasn't one available soon. He decided to walk back, in the night, and forced the pace. He was anxious to be able to return to Trom but not by depriving himself of a good fast walk.

He walked home with a light heart. He was one of the last to walk home. But this was not an embarrassing oddity. He gave the impression of being a sportsman.

Suddenly, he found himself facing a small fat man who was smiling at him and blocking his way. They must have been more or less the same age, but the other one was dressed like a poor man from the slums.

"So, Richards, will you give me your smartphone or should I break your pretty little face?"

It took Elijah a while, frowning, to recognize the young thug and then figure out what he wanted. He turned around and saw that the path

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was blocked on either side by the thugs from the other night. There was even a fourth one on the opposite side of the road. It was hard to tell if he was really with them, but either way, if they looted him, it would be all four of them.

If he were on Trom, he would have made them disappear with a simple thought. But he was on Earth. Like all the kids at the University, he had done karate, boxing, judo... but there were three of them.

The three thugs remained at a safe distance, in silence. The leader approached, a toothy grin lighting up his face, even though he was missing some teeth. Elijah felt fear. But, oddly, he didn't feel it was his own.

Still, he was in for a rough time and would probably be sent home more or less naked, with a few bruises. And that was the optimistic outcome.

The fear came from the little fat guy. He was the leader and he was afraid he wouldn't live up to it. His authority seemed to be in jeopardy, his one small authority, the one small success in his life. And he was also afraid of Elijah. A middle-class guy who plays sports is capable of self-defense. The thug pulled out a knife.

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Elijah had been smiling at him since he felt his fear. It was a cold, contemptuous smile. It reinforced the fear in the opponent.

On his side as well as on his back, the other two thugs did not move. They stayed at a distance. The leader had to show his skill. Elijah was right.

He had only one opponent left, but that opponent was armed. He advanced slowly.

Elijah focused on the knife. Without it, correcting this little fatty would have been a breeze. A few inches of metal that changed everything. He wished he could see it destroyed. He wished he could see it melt. It became an obsession.

The thug dropped his weapon with a cry of pain. On the ground, the blade glowed in the night. Elijah realized that the three thugs were looking at the blade in disbelief.

He hesitated. Should he take advantage of the surprise to get the fat kid out of the way and run away? He was still thinking about the different scenarios when his attackers fled down a side street. Across the street, the fourth man was now wisely waiting for his bus. He had seen nothing, heard nothing.

Human gods

Elijah began to run home at the pace of a gymnast. He was definitely not one to stop jogging. But how had this blade been heated up to glow in the dark?

Human gods

Chapter 11

Trom seemed changed. Elijah had taken refuge there as soon as possible. He had hidden his misadventures from his parents. He didn't want to be lectured about the dangers of walking home. He couldn't understand how that blade had turned red. He needed quiet, he needed rest. He needed Trom. But Trom was not quite Trom anymore.

Elijah leaped from the top of his mountain to roam the planet. He felt something new running through the world he had created, something he didn't recognize but that couldn't really grasp either.

Many years seemed to have passed since his last visit. Another time warp effect. The red star was approaching its closest point to Trom, and it was summer. But it wasn't the heat that bothered Elijah. The cold, the heat, the shocks, the humidity, none of it mattered. He was aware of that. But he didn't feel anything in the human sense.

He passed a small cloud of algae. The blue-green wave moved through the upper atmosphere casting a large shadow over the blue forest. Elijah felt this teeming life. The caress of the seaweed was gentle even though he had no skin to feel it

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on. It was a young cloud, small in size. But what he was looking for was not there.

He went down into the forest. He saw Schlagers gathering in a clearing. The clearing was situated around a small, artificial hill in an arc. The hill (or is it better to call it a mound?) looked smaller than Mount Elijah. It was, however, large enough for a group of about 100 Schlagers to fit into its indented heart.

Facing the opening of the mound was a statue at the top of the hill. Elijah was intrigued and moved closer to get a better look, assuming that is an appropriate term. He was shocked when he looked at the statue. It obviously looked like him, although the facial features had taken on a peculiar Schlager-like shape. The statue's outstretched limbs were not joined by membranous wings.

The statue was smiling. She was standing on her two legs slightly apart and her arms seemed to be imitating the construction, as if catching good friends.

A Schlager leaped from the crowd and flapped its wings to climb up beside the statue. He wore a typical basket around his neck. He took a large red berry and placed it at the statue's feet, and

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another one he ate. Then he joined the crowd. Another one then started the same process.

Elijah sensed fervor in the crowd. The pile of berries was becoming impressive. So he went to taste them. The exquisite taste invaded what was most like his taste buds.

Immediately, the crowd of Schlagers knelt down. They felt his presence.

What to say? Did he have to speak?

Elijah withdrew from the place. He went around the planet. Everywhere he found similar temples. There was something strange about them. Was the creator proud or afraid? He was now clearly their god. And that troubled him.

On Earth, Elijah was not religious. Religion in the old sense tended to decline almost everywhere, except among the less educated population. Of course, there were always questions about the meaning of life, death, what surrounds us and so on. This was the passion of the lecture halls of the philosophy or history classes. Adriana loved these classes.

Perhaps the young woman would be of good advice.

The phenomenon seemed to be limited to the Schlagers. Animals were not affected. Nor were

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plants. To have a god, one had to have a conscience and a certain free will.

Elijah had been neglecting to visit the oceans lately. He promised himself he would go back.

But sleep was calling him. He needed to sleep. His day had been tiring and his evening most trying.

First, thugs, then worshipers.

Human gods

Chapter 12

Several months had passed without Elijah finding an explanation for the case of the burning knife. He had not seen the three thugs again. And he had not experienced the same phenomenon again. Keeping his secret, he had not asked Adriana for advice either. However, the cult was spreading over Trom. The rituals were becoming more precise without him having to intervene. And he didn't dare intervene. However, he couldn't help but to taste the delicious berries that were being brought to him. He was the creator of them and enjoyed them every time.

But semester exams were coming up. While his grades could satisfy him in all subjects, Stephen Lehrer's course remained his strong point. On the other hand, he did not mind getting a little help from Adriana for subjects too based on reality, from history to current events analysis.

Later, when he graduated, he wouldn't be able to rely on his girlfriend to help him with his work. Especially if he became a teacher himself, which was a possibility. So he had to work on his weak subjects.

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Lying on his bed, he gave up on Trom. He stayed awake. He grabbed his laptop, turned it on and decided to browse the web for the information he needed, jumping from site to site as he searched and hyperlinked.

He had work to do. He began by searching for documents on the demise of the Soviet Union and the evolution of the pieces that resulted from its explosion. What he quickly found would not be enough to pass his history exam with flying colors.

Suddenly, the live chat interface of a social network activated by default in a browser tab appeared in the foreground.

"Hi!" wrote Adriana.

"Hi!" replied Elijah.

"Are you reviewing the end of the Soviet Union? That was the subject last year. For the exams, I'm betting on the period between the first and second world wars and even on a subject about the birth of the Soviet Union. It's been years since any subject has dealt with this period."

He was about to answer when a signal sounded. It was one of his university classmates who also wanted to talk. He specified in his request that he wanted to talk about the psychoanalytical view of the vampire myth. He

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didn't understand anything about Stephen Lehrer's last lecture.

Elijah left the intruder answerless, pretending to be absent.

"I want to be in your arms," the young woman suddenly added.

Then there were no more messages. Adriana had disconnected herself. Elijah had no choice.

He first wanted to save the search results and download the documents locally, which he would consult calmly later on. And he took the opportunity to make a note to himself to launch another search, on the birth of the Soviet Union. Adriana often had good insights.

Finally, Elijah reluctantly agreed to disconnect from the Internet.

The Internet could survive his departure. It would continue to exist and live without him, all over the world. Like Trom. But the Internet had been created by others, many years earlier. His parents had lived through the birth of this new universe. He had not.

Leaving the Internet and not taking refuge in Trom, Elijah was left to face the most boring of worlds, what by consensus was called reality. Even if he had the opportunity to experience some joy tonight at the invitation and in the company of Adriana.

H u m a n g o d s

Opening the drawer of his night table, he took a box of condoms which he put in his pocket. Then he got up.

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Chapter 13

Trom was quiet. Mount Elijah was plunged into darkness, the main sun being on the other side of the planet. As for the red dwarf, it was far enough away to be no more than a vague glow. The planet was in the winter season. And to complete the darkness, a wave that might otherwise have been green passed between the stars piercing the night and the mountain top.

The flying algae undulated to the rhythm of the high winds. The cloud was beginning to reach a critical size: if it didn't break up quickly, it would fall.

Elijah looked at his world. He admired its harmony and felt a great pride in it. He did not need light to see. Was he not a god? He felt his world, every atom of it. He did not need eyes to see, nose to smell or ears to hear.

Was it the closeness of Adriana, on Earth, that influenced him? Elijah wanted to see life born. Adriana's skin rubbed against his own human skin, in a world where he was not a god. She breathed softly, but the earthly ears of the God of Trom hardly cared. Elijah's own breathing was quiet. It was so because he was traveling in Trom.

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She had fallen asleep after making love. He had not. He had preferred to know other pleasures. Satisfying his libido in the company of a pretty woman was not enough for him. He wanted Trom.

Elijah's consciousness focused on the top of her mountain, from where she descended. She soon found herself in the village of Schlagers, which was located in the heart of the collapsed volcano.

It was dark. Everything seemed so quiet. The Schlagers were all in their strange nests in the blue trees. These nests looked more like wicker huts. They were made by weaving the vines that grew in some of the trees.

Elijah scanned the nest lines. He soon heard what he was looking for. His conscience violated the intimacy of a couple. But Elijah wanted to see the vigorous male impregnate the female. She was experiencing extraordinary excitement. The male's efforts would indeed not be in vain this time. He expelled his semen into the female's body as his instinct pushed him to do. But the serendipity was truly miraculous. The semen would not have to wait as an egg presented itself. The semen enveloped it as the natural pathway of its exit expanded.

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Elijah felt his eyes, which he did not have on this world, moisten. A First Birth of a future Schlager was always a moving event. The egg was collected by its mother when it came out, while the natural conduits were closing down. The male's semen had already penetrated her soft membrane. The gametes had begun their race towards the heart of the egg, where the first, the best of them, would have the honor of fertilizing its female counterpart to create a new being.

The young god had devised this mechanism by taking care to correct anything he thought was wrong with humans and other land animals. Thus, the shell of the egg was flexible to prevent it from breaking. The early exit of the maternal body avoided all the inconveniences known by the mammals, in particular the great difficulty to develop a being with a skull intended to be larger than the space available to leave the basin of its mother.

The female Schlager, helped by her mate, massaged the glands covering her belly and then laid her egg. The milk flowed out slowly, at the right rhythm so that it was immediately absorbed by the soft wall. It was necessary to feed the new being.

Elijah then heard other noises, further away, which prompted him to leave the two Schlagers.

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The Schlagers also heard and smiled at each other, anticipating the happiness they and their neighbors would soon have.

Elijah passed a nest some distance away. Another pair was gathered together, the female lying on her belly carrying an egg large enough to cover all her breasts. It had grown since it was laid. And, above all, it was agitated. The female was having a hard time keeping it in place, and the help of her mate was not superfluous. The couple was worried. It was their first child.

The wall of the egg was thinning at the top. It took a long time for the baby to burst through it. As soon as the first opening was made, the father helped his child to enter the world.

"What a strange way to be born" commented Adriana.

Elijah was startled. He recognized his companion's voice. He was suddenly aware that she was there, just as he was, although a little less trained. The Schlagers could not see her any more than he could. But one does not hide anything from the god creator of a world.

He opened his eyes in the darkness of Adriana's room. The young woman turned to him and spoke softly to him, still in the mists of sleep.

"Oh, did I wake you up abruptly?"

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"No, I wasn't sleeping."

"I had a strange dream. You seemed to be there but not really. There were strange bat-like creatures living in nests hidden in the trees. And these creatures laid soft eggs from which the young came out tearing the membranes. And then... And then..."

Adriana's eyes slowly closed, she could no longer fight sleep.

Elijah's heart was pounding in his chest. How was such a thing possible? How had his companion entered his world, the one he had always closed to anyone? She didn't even know it existed.

It took him a while to fall asleep.

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Human gods

Chapter 14

Elijah was running around Trom in a panic. He managed to return there only in the evening after Adriana had suddenly burst into his best kept secret. No, his world was there, intact. There was no trace of his companion. Had he been dreaming?

Trom was a dream. To this question, he could only answer positively.

The young god decided to wake up, leaving Trom to its fate.

Lying on his bed, he grabbed his laptop and turned it on. He needed cyber reality, this Internet that belonged to the real world, to Earth. He did not move from the home page of his browser.

Elijah wondered if he was becoming paranoid. Sure, he had seen Adriana in his world, but Trom had nothing to do with Earth or cybernetic virtual worlds.

Could his world have had a security breach? And, for starters, had Adriana really broken into Trom?

In the live chat window, Adriana's presence indicator was green: she was connected and allowed her friend to know.

"Hi!" he wrote.

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"Hi Elijah. It's a good thing you contacted me. Last night when I fell asleep after we made love, I had a funny dream. The funny thing was that you were in it. And we were looking at weird creatures. They looked like bats in human form and seemed more or less oviparous. But the eggs were soft. You seemed very interested. I was rather intrigued. But neither of us were apparently visible to the creatures. Funny, huh?"

"Yes, indeed... And do you plan to go back?"

"Go back? But, Elijah, how do you want to go back into a dream?"

"You can try it by thinking about it very hard, when you like a dream..."

Adriana signified that she was exploding with laughter as she built up the emojis.

Then, regaining her seriousness, Adriana changed the subject.

"Well, can you come over tonight?"

"You know we have work to do. And then, every night..."

"I get anxious thinking about tomorrow. I don't like his material. Stephen Lehrer knows that."

"He is an honest teacher. He only judges the skills of his students. He's known for that."

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"I can't wait until it's over. Next year I won't have to take the literature of fantasy module anymore."

"For that, you have to validate it this year."

"I know..."

"What topic would you like to talk about?"

"I don't know. Something like character psychoanalysis. That was interesting. And the parallel with the psychosociology class was nice. On the other hand, I would hate a topic on medieval fantasy or some nonsense like that."

"Ah, reality... You'd do well to dream once in a while."

"And you a little less. Here, I'm going to try to think really hard about that silly dream yesterday. Let's see if it works, your thing. Bye, now."

"Bye."

Elijah logged off in a panic attack and turned off the computer.

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Chapter 15

Elijah had kissed Adriana and then entered the small room. Another student was in a corner preparing the subject that was due. The one who had just come out had smiled at them as they passed.

Stephen Lehrer greeted his next victim and handed him a clear plastic bucket where a dozen papers folded in four had just been shaken in all directions. Elijah sighed and stuck his hand into the bucket to remove one of the papers.

He unfolded it and read it aloud. "Classification of the causes of apocalypses".

"You have fifteen minutes to prepare," the teacher confirmed.

Elijah sat down at one of the empty tables while his predecessor worked on "time travel and its consequences". He couldn't help but follow his classmate's presentation. He found it rather mediocre and Stephen Lehrer's discreet grimaces seemed to show that the professor was of the same opinion.

The topic Elijah had to present was simple. It took only a few moments to create his plan (a general introduction on the etymology of the term, the literary genre in late antiquity and the semantic

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drift of the name linked to its exclusive use for centuries to designate the last book of the New Testament; a development in two parts: causes proper to humans, external causes; two subparts: fortuitous causes, desired or sought-after causes; a third part more or less concluding on the morality that the author was looking for...) Finding the examples was also simple.

His awareness drifted from the boring lecture of his predecessor to the plastic bucket. He did not immediately realize how strange it was to be aware of the contents of the papers, as if he were on Trom with perfect knowledge of every molecule. But he was on Earth.

Yet, he could read: "geopolitical management of resources in the saga of Dune, by Franck Herbert", "Visions and symbolic roles of aliens in different periods (early twentieth century and before, Cold War, modern period)", "political ecology through the work of Ursula Le Guin", "uchrony, a fable to exorcise the present", "comparison of the socio-political organizations and the modalities of totalitarianism in *1984* (George Orwell) and in *Brave New World* (Aldous Huxley)", "use of the rupture of reality in Marcel Aymé's fantastic works", "use of genre codes : cyberpunk, steampunk, medieval fantasy..."... The

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last subject would make Adriana despair, Elijah mused.

But there was one last paper: "psychoanalysis of the vampire myth". This is a subject for Adriana!

It was after several minutes that he became aware of what he was doing. He was startled.

It was at this point that his predecessor got up and walked out, grumpy.

Adriana entered in turn, greeted the professor, and dipped her hand to a paper that read, "use of genre codes: cyberpunk, steampunk, medieval fantasy..."

But the paper with "psychoanalysis of the vampire myth" was right next to it. Right there. It would be enough that this paper arrives in her hand rather than the other.

Adriana looked surprised. She withdrew her hand from the bucket a little abruptly, with a paper at the bottom of her palm, not gripped with just her fingertips. Stephen Lehrer looked annoyed and quickly looked around before staring at Elijah for a few seconds. The student looked down and checked his plan and examples.

The teacher, suddenly in a less cheerful mood, exclaimed, "well, miss, what's your subject?"

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"Excuse me, sir."

And she read, with great joy drawn on her face: "psychoanalysis of the vampire myth".

"You have fifteen minutes to get ready," Stephen Lehrer repeated once more.

Elijah waited for his friend to leave the room. He was worried. The teacher's questions had been harsh, his tone severe. Yet he was sure he had covered his subject well.

Finally, Adriana, all smiles, went out as her own turn had come. She kissed him. Her oral exam had gone wonderfully well.

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Chapter 16

Stephen Lehrer was tired. Oral exams were not his favorite thing. But this time, something had happened. Something he had been looking for years. He knew that if he chose to teach this subject, he would eventually find someone with this profile. He didn't think, however, that it would take this long. Were gods so rare?

It wasn't the girl. He knew her. She hated her subject. The boy? He was sleeping with the girl as everyone knew and might want to help her. The motive held water. And then he was indeed a bit of a dreamer. And again, his reputation was well established.

The teacher had seen the paper literally spill from the bottom of the bucket into the girl's palm. He felt the magic at work.

The small office was one of the last lit offices in the entire university. Stephen Lehrer was tidying up his notes on the students. The excuse held for showing up a little late at the doors. He needed to regain his strength...

He locked the door and then unfolded on the floor a kind of small carpet that he hid in a cupboard but big enough for him to lie down on.

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He placed a cushion under his head and closed his eyes.

The space was dark, just pierced by the luminous pinheads that are also called stars here. Stephen Lehrer's consciousness focused on his favorite planet.

It had no native life. But it had become the capital of a vast empire. All the races of this cosmos sent representatives there. The richness of the soil and its strategic position at the heart of the most frequented roads had attracted all the adventurers and then all the great merchants. Then the industrialists. Then the families.

As the only populated planet without an intelligent race that could claim it as its own, it had been chosen as the capital by all. Stephen Lehrer had told a few influential ambassadors who had come to worship him in the planet's main temple.

So much time had passed since that foundation...

Stephen Lehrer traveled the planet Anaquine. Everywhere, factories, chimneys spewing toxic fumes... There was no nature to preserve here, so why bother?

Spaceships were coming out in droves. Farther on, a hydroponics center was growing large green strawberries rich in protein. A wide

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variety of people, from all races of this cosmos, were crossing the streets. Most wore suits of varying weight. Some moved with difficulty, regretting the heavy weight, while others bounced happily with each step.

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Chapter 17

As soon as he turned on his computer, Elijah logged into his social media accounts. Then he typed the address of his university's website in the navigation bar. The typing ended by itself, as it was usual.

Elijah typed in his login and password and then went to a prominent section, the table of his test scores. His grades were good. As he had hoped, his "Literature of the Imagination" test remained his greatest achievement. The strange feeling he had had when he took the exam had not had any consequences. He downloaded the result sheet, digitally signed by the university. He could brag about it to his parents tonight.

Then he went to the live chat interface and called Adriana. In return, he got an automatic answer: the young woman announced her arrival at her lover's house at a specific time and demanded that he clean his room, take a shower and take the condoms out of the drawer so that he wouldn't have to look for them. Elijah looked at his watch and screamed. He didn't even have fifteen minutes left.

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Less than fifteen minutes! A quarter of an hour to clean his room! And to take a shower on top of that!

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Chapter 18

Adriana's warm lips had parted from Elijah's. The two young people were full of each other. Their respective successes made them feel great.

Adriana was validating, albeit barely, her literature of the imagination module. She got much better marks in the subjects that interested her. The journalism program was waiting for her. During the summer, she was to do her internship at a magazine. Elijah would be doing his at a web design and online game studio, despite his only decent grades in computer science.

Elijah's hand flattered the side of his companion lying beside him with his fingertips. He kissed one breast and then the other while continuing to read her in braille. She smiled at him as only a satisfied woman can smile.

"Oh, while I think of it..." exclaimed Adriana suddenly.

She changed her position to settle down comfortably against her lover by tightening him strongly in her arms. She continued only after.

"I tried to go back into that strange dream I had with you the other day. It's true that it works when you think hard about it. But you weren't there this time. It's a really weird world. There are

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even plant clouds. I wonder where I came up with all this."

"Really?"

Elijah had stopped caressing the young woman. He hid his worried grin in the hollow of his shoulder. She had returned to Trom. How was that possible? He was interrupted in his thinking by a noisy slap given on his left buttock.

"Well, we've dreamed enough. Let's get up. Let's go have lunch at the university. We'll probably meet everyone else there."

"Should we take your scooter?"

"Of course. I'm not going to let you walk, am I? Even if you don't use yours anymore, I assume you still have your helmet..."

Elijah took care to print out his exam results and put them on the living room table before leaving. But less than fifteen minutes later, the electric scooter was bouncing down the road. Elijah didn't like being Adriana's passenger so much: she drove like crazy.

They did not take the ferry but the bridge to Bayonne, from where they drove to Jersey City before taking the bridge to Lower Manhattan. It was the shortest route overland between the university and Elijah's house.

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At the university restaurant, the two lovers met their friends. The successes were widespread among those present. The absent ones ruminated their failures alone.

The group split up to fill out the pre-registration forms for the following year in the different sections.

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Chapter 19

"Mr. Grubler, can I talk to you?"

Elijah turned around. He was carrying the application form for the next year of general literature. Stephen Lehrer smiled at him.

"Mr. Lehrer?"

"I see that you are staying with us next year. That's great news. I precisely wanted to talk to you about your future. But let's go to my office, shall we? We'll be better off there."

Stephen Lehrer closed the door and invited Elijah to sit down while he took his professorial chair. The desk separated them as it should be between a master and his student.

"What professional future do you envision, Mr. Grubler?"

"I'm doing an internship in a web design and online game agency. My father insisted that I work in the company for a while."

"But that isn't a choice you are comfortable with?"

"I would prefer to devote myself solely to literature."

"Teacher-scholar at the university?"

"That would be my dream, yes."

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"You fit the bill if your grades are any indication. But maybe you're still a little too dreamy. Even though I was before you."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm going to be straight with you, young man. You cheated on the exam."

"What? But..."

"Not for you. But for your friend. You handed her a topic in which she could best defend herself. The paper squirted into her palm. She hadn't asked for anything and didn't understand it. I did. I didn't sanction you because you didn't try to take advantage of your gift and I didn't sanction her either because she didn't ask for anything and wasn't aware of what you had done."

"But, this is... This is ridiculous!"

Elijah got up, furious, and opened the door. He didn't have time to cross the threshold. He felt the door close despite all the strength he put into pulling the handle.

"Come back and sit down. This will save us from damaging the university's equipment."

Stephen Lehrer's voice was resolute but carried a slight amused accent. Elijah let the door close and obeyed. He felt a strange sensation around the door, as if a force from behind his back was pressing against the wood.

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"You are beginning to understand. I know you felt what closed the door. I myself felt that same force when I was holding the bucket with the test subjects. I am interested in you, Mr. Grubler."

Elijah held his folder in his arms against his chest. He was now afraid of his favorite teacher.

A book sprang from the bookcase to his right. But it had clattered against the wood first for in order for Elijah to hear it. It didn't take off until the student had first turned his head toward it.

Fear. Aggression. Dangerous object approaching. No time to think. Act. Now. Paper. Destroy paper. Heat. Heat like that of the knife, the famous evening. Shake the molecules of the paper. Fire.

The book caught fire and fell at Elijah's feet. Instinctively, the student stomped on what was already a pile of ashes.

Stephen Lehrer half stood up to admire the pile of ashes with a slight smile. Then he sat back down.

"Not bad. I'll change the carpet, don't worry about that. You see I wasn't wrong."

Elijah trembled as he looked at his teacher. He remained silent.

"Don't be stupid. And, above all, don't be afraid. I just forced you to do a little demonstration. The book wouldn't have hit you

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either way. I hate violence. I hope my esteemed colleague, Professor Sohle, will forgive me for burning his best-selling book on alien vegetation in fantasy novels to the ground. But it is a dull book. And not just when it springs from libraries."

Elijah stood up and, trembling, walked backwards to the door, which this time opened without difficulty.

The professor smiled, "We'll see each other again soon, I think."

The student ran away. The door closed on its own behind him.

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Chapter 20

Elijah dropped off his file at the secretariat without speaking to anyone. The administrative officer who took it from him even asked him if he was okay. The student answered by the affirmative, in an unconvincing way. But he was free of administrative considerations. That was the main thing.

As soon as he was outside the administration building, he started running again, occasionally glancing in all directions to check that Stephen Lehrer was not following him. He did not think to look at the windows. Behind one of them, in his office, the professor was watching the panicked student run away.

"To think I was like him..." he sighed.

He downloaded Elijah Grubler's education file, with his home address, into his laptop. He would study it in detail later. But for now, the teacher wanted to see what the place Elijah was living in looked like, as he was the student who had the gift he had been seeking for years. So far, he hadn't had much luck. Shaad, Naheul, Anaquine and now a world yet to be discovered. Four gods in over eight centuries.

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Stephen Lehrer packed up his things and headed for his car in the university's indoor parking lot, taking his slightly burned carpet with him in a plastic bag. He would have to buy a new one before the next school year started. He made sure to lock his door.

Rushing to the subway, Elijah didn't know what to think, who to take advice from. Had he simply gone mad? On the street and in the subway corridors, he walked strangely and too fast, often bumping into people who protested and to whom he apologized. On the train and then on the ferry, he was forced to wait, to let himself be carried along. However, he was visibly nervous. So much so that, despite the crowd, an empty circle had developed around him.

Once the ferry arrived, he began to run home, forgoing the bus at the outset. But his pace was not that of a jogger. He was running too fast, too unevenly. He kept looking behind him. He ran out of steam when he was only halfway there. He sat down on a bench at a bus stop. His breathing was ragged, irregular but ample. His heart was pounding.

And he could not combine two coherent ideas. Should he try to find calm and serenity on Trom? It was probably not a good idea to go there

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with his body in a public place, so fragile, so vulnerable. No, he had to go home first. But he was so exhausted. And so worried about his world, his child.

"Aha, the rich kid!"

Elijah turned as he heard the exclamation. The three thugs were there, armed with baseball bats. The fat kid was in the background this time. He had lost his rank but his eyes shone with a fierce hatred for the young student.

To run away? No way. He was no longer able to do it.

After all, hadn't he been in a situation like this before? Wasn't he capable of facing them? Desperation and madness can combine to create miracles.

Elijah stared at the new leader's bat. It wasn't made of wood. It was a mixture of synthetic resins with a metal frame. Cheap but solid. Elijah felt every component of the weapon. He felt the atoms move in Brownian motion. The atoms felt Elijah's anger. Their agitation increased sharply. The molecules began to break apart.

The thug dropped his flaming bat.

"Fucking witchcraft! But how does he do that?"

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"You see? That wasn't a joke I was telling the other day with my knife on fire!" exclaimed the former chief.

The third thug had jumped in the air toward the student, brandishing his bat, and was about to strike him in the skull.

"I don't give a fuck about wizards. I bust them."

The door had been pushed open by the wind, the movement of the air, less than an hour ago, in Stephen Lehrer's office. The air was abundant here, near the New York Bay. He felt Elijah's anger. A cyclonic depression appeared in the back of the third rogue. The air from the surrounding area rushed in. The attacker was thrown backwards and found himself sitting on the ground several feet away, his bat exploding on the floor.

Elijah heard a car stop on the road. But he didn't have time to worry about it. The former leader of the gang had managed to get close enough to punch him in the temple. The student found himself lying on the ground, half unconscious.

"Now you're going to pay, wizard!"

The former leader was no longer concerned with regaining his primacy. He acted only out of hatred. He held at his mercy the one who had caused his downfall, the loss of his only social

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achievement, having been the leader of a small gang of thugs. He raised his bat, the last one to be intact.

But the weight of the bat suddenly became enormous. The thug had carried his bat behind his head, to gain momentum, but he could no longer bring it back in front of him. It was dragging him backwards. He dropped it.

"Gravity can vary, sometimes," smiled Stephen Lehrer.

The professor stood at the side of the road, hands in his pockets. He had parked his car and got out as quietly as possible. And there he was, still calm, with his student with a bloody face at his feet.

The three thugs gathered around the newcomer, but did not dare to get too close.

"Fuck! Suck your mother!"

The former gang leader wanted to jump at the professor's throat. His hands could not reach the desired neck. He had been thrown backwards by a most bizarre wind.

"That's enough. You three know too much now."

Stephen Lehrer was no longer smiling. The three thugs writhed in pain and began to scream. But their vocal cords caught fire first, making it impossible for them to utter a single sound.

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In a few moments, they stopped moving as their flesh turned black. Flames shot out of their bodies and devoured their clothes.

Soon there was only a charred carcass in the place of each thug.

Elijah, on all fours, watched. There was nothing else he could do. He felt like vomiting. The agony of the attackers had been brief.

The student felt a hand grab him under the armpit. The professor forced him to get up. But he could barely stand. He had to sit back down on the bus stop bench. He could not speak. He looked alternately at the three burned bodies and his teacher.

"Yes, I killed them. Is that what you're blaming me for with your frightened virgin look? I understand your scruples. But they had already attacked you and they were going to do it again until they had you killed. Above all, they knew too much now. We have to be discreet, Elijah. Wait for me here. We need to clean up before someone comes by."

Elijah did not answer. He was no longer able to answer. He lay down on the bench. His breath was short, rapid. His heart struggled to keep up with the pace demanded by the rest of his body.

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Stephen Lehrer changed the gravity under the bodies, with a slight gradient between the heads and the feet. The three corpses lifted and moved forward under some trees in a small park. Air bubbles trapped in earthworm tunnels began to swell considerably, pushing out the earth around them. In a few seconds, a hole of sufficient size was created at the place wanted by the professor.

The three corpses were lifted to the top and then returned to ordinary gravity. A wind then rose up to blow the earth over the bodies. To crush the mound, gravity was again modified a little lower, a few meters below the ground, for a few moments. The earth was thus well compacted.

Atmospheric water, suddenly cooled, condensed a few centimeters above the places where the three thugs had burned. The runoff washed away the last traces. A localized increase in temperature allowed the water to dry almost instantly.

Lying on his bench, Elijah hadn't needed to look in order to be aware of his teacher's actions. Like in the exam room, he was aware of his surroundings. He felt weak. His heart was failing. He was aware of that, too.

Drops of tears ran down his cheeks as he whispered, "Trom. Trom. Trom."

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Stephen Lehrer came and whispered in his ear, "Calm down. It's all right. It's all over. I'm taking you home in my car."

Elijah felt himself being lifted in a pair of arms. He was being lifted out. Soon he was sitting in a comfortable seat. A seatbelt was placed on him. Then the car started, forcing acceleration on a body that could take no more. He fainted.

Trom. Trom. Trom.

The sky of Trom appeared to him. It reassured him. At last something known, usual, understandable, controllable. Elijah had returned home.

He felt himself sliding in the air currents, letting the blue forest slide under him. He crossed a cloud of seaweed that he crossed to feel its soft caress.

A call came to him. He went down among the representatives of his chosen race. He was in a temple, in the middle of a forest. He was given exquisite berries. He was comforted by this. If he had had eyes, he could have cried with happiness. He was content to spread his joy among the officiants.

Seized by the grace of their god, the Schlagers suddenly knelt down. They were seized

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with ecstasy. Yes, he was their god. And he loved them.

Letting them complete their mystical orgasm, Elijah needed to get to his sacred mountain. He did not rush there. He preferred to cross the distances in all conscience. He enjoyed the landscape of his creation.

He saw an ocean. There too, life teemed, even if the god went there less often. He repeated to himself his promise to go back down there. But, for the time being, he needed comfort.

Something, however, disturbed him. Elijah felt like a presence at his side. An impalpable, incomprehensible presence.

Finally, Elijah arrived at his mount. He stood up. He opened himself as if in a deep immaterial breath to feel the softly perfumed air of the planet. And he admired his creation.

"A beautiful place, this Trom," admitted a voice behind him.

Elijah turned around. Stephen Lehrer was there. Vapid, not really material, probably invisible to all eyes besides his own, but definitely there.

The student became afraid. His world had been violated for the second time.

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"Calm down, Elijah. I don't want to hurt you. Your body is right now in my car, which is parked in front of your house. I'd like you to get out of it: I'd like to go home. I will let you come to your senses in peace. Don't forget that you have passed your exams with flying colors. Have the right attitude towards your parents and friends. As for the rest, we'll talk about it later."

"But how are you here? How can we enter dreams in this way..."

"You have created a world, Elijah. It is more than just a dream. Very few humans are capable of doing this. Fewer still are capable of sustaining it until it gains an autonomy of its own, when creatures with reason begin to worship their creator. It is their worship that gives you your magical powers, Elijah. Nothing more. Now come back to Earth."

Elijah left Trom with an unusual nausea. He was indeed in his teacher's car. Stephen Lehrer was holding his hand.

The teacher unhooked Elijah's seat belt. His was already off.

"Feeling better?"

Elijah looked at him with some fear. Should he tell him about their meeting on Trom? It was he who took the initiative.

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"No, you weren't dreaming, Elijah. I was on
Trom with you. When you have the proximity
required, you can enter the world of a god. As I
told you, you must first recover from your
emotions. Then we will talk."

"What time is it?"

"Not far from five hours. You should hurry
up. Take a shower, it will make you feel fresh.
And before I forget: congratulations on passing
your exams. That's the important news you have to
spread. Nothing else."

Elijah opened the door. He got out of the car.
But as he closed the door, he looked back at his
teacher.

"Before I forget, I thank you for saving me
and bringing me home."

"You're welcome. See you soon, Elijah."

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Chapter 21

Located in Lower Manhattan, not far from the university, Stephen Lehrer's apartment was quite large for a bachelor. In keeping with his profession, the walls were covered with bookshelves containing all kinds of books. He had indeed kept from his youth a carnal need to possess paper. A book was valued first of all by its binding.

He liked to caress the soft leather of rare and old editions. He would stroke each side with the whole of his hand. Then he would gently spread the covers, never too much, so as not to damage them. The pages usually opened randomly. Then, with his fingertips, he would slip into the opening, reaching what he was looking for. Only then could the pleasure begin, or at least his search.

The soft or even rough paper gave him a sensation that he did not find in modern utensils. He pitied the young people who knew nothing of the strange sensuality of handling a book.

Even though he was not officially forty years old, he remembered a time when electronics did not exist, when the mere possession of paper, in some places, could mean death. The books he owned were sometimes from that time. They could

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also be simple paperbacks. Sometimes there were relatively recent luxury editions with leather covers. Of course, in order to be able to study them with his students, he had to acquire the current books in electronic format. But he was always reluctant to use them.

Over the centuries, Stephen Lehrer had seen various authorities burn books, sometimes in his presence, sometimes he had heard about it. Each time, from the Holy Inquisition to the Nazis, the crowd was required to give a certain sacredness to this destruction of forbidden knowledge. But in the present time, it would be enough to erase files. That would be less spectacular.

On his way home from the parking lot of his building, the professor glanced at a mirror in the lobby. He was tired, and perhaps that explained the reappearance of a wrinkle near his left eyebrow. He concentrated on his skin. He was aware of every fold, every weakness in the layers of the dermis. The wrinkle disappeared almost immediately.

The teacher stood still for a few minutes. He examined himself from head to toe, just closing his eyes and becoming aware of his body. It took him only a few seconds to find the source of his concern. In his right lung, a few cells had started to

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proliferate in an uncontrolled manner. They were deviating from their genetic programming. A cancer. The immune system had not reacted, as usual.

Fortunately, the tumor was still very small. There were plenty of healthy cells around. Destroying this small portion of lung would not be a problem. The heat spread a little beyond the tumor, destroying a little more tissue than necessary. Stephen Lehrer winced as he felt the small burn.

He also needed to re-stimulate some cartilage if he didn't want to experience the throes of osteoarthritis again. But that could wait. It was better to be lying down to modify his body on the locomotor system. It could be painful. In spite of his training, in several centuries of practice, he had not yet succeeded in perfectly controlling nerve impulses. Pain remained his enemy.

And it was an insidious and perverse enemy. It pushed towards laziness, towards decline, towards a body that was gradually returning to its natural decay. Pain pushed towards the death that should have been his for so long if he had only been human.

But he was a god. And a god must be immortal. Even on Earth.

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Before eating, he decided to look at Elijah Grubler's education file in detail.

He had mixed feelings about electronic devices. First of all, he was wary of them. He had known their emergence. He had to learn to use them, to pass from one technological generation to the other. He sometimes hated them. Technological progress was accompanied by increased traceability of individuals and concealing his immortality became more problematic every day. Any kind of record made him nauseous. And he was too afraid of what might happen if his secret was discovered. Finally, in spite of everything, he caved in to the charms of technologies, to the advantages which they allowed.

Thus, browsing the web had become a pleasure for him. He could consult anything he wanted or meet many people in the world with much more efficiency than in the days of epistolary exchanges. And being able to carry all kinds of documents or works in a simple USB key was quite practical.

Stephen Lehrer sat down at his desk and turned on his laptop.

In a few minutes, he had verified that there was no information that suggested the student's divinity. Perhaps it was recent. Or perhaps he had

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always been discreet. If he hadn't been a god himself, would he have noticed the little trick at the time of the exam? Probably not.

Even so, the response to the three thugs smelled like low-level amateurism. Had he not intervened, the student would probably be dead by now. What a likely mess. To Stephen Lehrer, it seemed clear that Elijah Grubler was discovering his divinity. He was only a very young god. And that divinity made him uncomfortable. He had not yet learned to enjoy it.

That said, Trom's world seemed interesting. Primitive, no doubt, but interesting.

Stephen Lehrer then felt like seeing Naheul again.

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Chapter 22

The green mountain was broken by a thousand lush valleys where icy rivers flowed. These were fed by the melting snow. And in this early spring, like all the others, there was still a lot of snow and ice. Only the wide and deep valleys were beginning to emerge from the white gangue.

Trees, giant ferns of some sort, already covered the open areas. Elsewhere, their life was limited to the ground. When the snow fell each year, their leaves died and they had to make do with the reserves accumulated in deep roots.

Humanoids with long blond hair and big blue eyes were going about their business in a small village built around a small river. The houses were a mixture of stone and wood. They too had recently come out of hibernation. They were still weak, even though young children had already been born this year, having been conceived in autumn, as it should be.

The spring vegetables had developed during the winter, underground. They were roots. It was necessary to avoid eating everything so that the reserves could be replenished for the following year. And it was still too early to eat trees. As for the animals, most were still in hibernation.

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The great winter sleep remained for all a sacred truce: no one could be disturbed during this annual pause. And, to protect themselves, all species went underground. The humanoids had, for this purpose, cellars under their houses.

Naheul was a strongly cyclic world. Its creator had wanted it that way. A long time ago.

Stephen Lehrer observed the little tribe. Sometimes he came here to enjoy the absolute quiet of winter. But in general, he preferred spring or summer.

The blacksmith had just lit his forge for the first time this year. There were shouts of joy. He gave a kind of strong alcohol to drink to all those who were near his shop. Everything in this world was an excuse to share in the celebrations. But the level of technology was not rising.

The ore that was found nearby was poured into the chimney. It began to melt quickly. But it would be a good hour before a blade of liquid metal would flow into its mold.

The god turned away, anticipating trouble. He went to his temple. The priest had just cleared the snow from his roof. Only a little incense was burning at the moment. The great ceremony to open the year would not take place for a few days.

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Since Stephen Lehrer was prayed to on this world, the religious drive had never been enough to provide him with powerful magic. The world of Naheul, somehow, retained the memory of its ancient times. The current god of Naheul was struggling to love this world. And, in return, the humanoids had trouble praying to him.

But spring had arrived for everyone. Stephen Lehrer looked forward to what would be a small distraction. The humanoids had heard the grunt. The children had gone back into the houses, along with the women. The men, on the other hand, had come out with their swords and pitchforks.

The animal was devouring a pile of roots formed behind a house. It looked like some kind of giant lizard to which a demented creator would have added scaly wings and powerful pointed teeth. But he heard the peasants approaching.

He turned away from his meal to face the advancing party. It spread its large wings and opened its mouth. Then it spat a mixture of hydrocarbons and sodium salts into the air. Spontaneously, the mixture caught fire, keeping the attackers at bay.

The animal was young and inexperienced. It did not look out above itself. A strong warrior, passing by, jumped on its back and thrust a

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metallic sting between its wings. A terrible cry burst from the flaming throat. The animal collapsed. It was dead.

Stephen Lehrer was disappointed that the fight was so brief. A larger or more experienced dragon would have put on a much better show. Sighing, leaving the humanoids to enjoy the delicious meat that came to them by surprise, the god returned to Earth to sleep.

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Chapter 23

Elijah rarely drank Champagne, even from California, and hardly ever drank alcohol. His head was spinning even as he lay in bed, while the whole house slept. He had had to celebrate his success. And, decently, he couldn't spoil the evening with his weird stories.

How to tell his parents that he is actually a kind of god because, since his childhood, without telling them anything, he had created a coherent world? How to tell them that he seemed to have magical powers on Earth because creatures resembling bats were praying to him? Under the effect of Champagne, he considered the most absurd hypothesis. His mother could tell him straight out: "Well, darling, I'm glad you finally figured it out. Everyone is a god in our house. Realizing it is just like a virginity. We don't talk about it any more than we talk about sex in the family."

No, it was absurd. The thugs who had assaulted him were not gods. His friends were not gods. Adriana was not a goddess, well, not in that sense anyway.

He needed to know. Had he been dreaming? Had he gone mad? Had he simply fainted and been

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driven home by his teacher who found him on the street?

He stood up quietly. He put his bare feet on the carpet and walked as quietly as possible to the window. If he was a god, what could he do that was implausible but that would leave an indelible and noteworthy mark? And it was necessary for him not to be spotted either. Being a god... Obviously, if that was the case, it had to be hidden.

He made his conscience travel around. He went down to the yard and then to the street. There were garbage bags on the sidewalk. The collection service would come early the next morning.

The half-decaying garbage stank. Elijah didn't have his nose in it, of course, but his conscience felt the pestilential gases. Unless it was his imagination. The garbage stank in his mind because a garbage can always stinks.

Elijah was suddenly seized with hatred for this garbage that defied him, a god, denying that he knew how bad they smelled. He felt the greasy paper shake. The molecules clashed more and more. The temperature rose in his heart. Then the greasy paper lit up. The flame spread to other packages, labels of metal cans. This cursed metal wanted to resist a god, but Elijah wanted no resistance. The atoms resonated. The metal melted.

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The water in the peelings evaporated. The fire spread throughout the garbage can without Elijah having to do anything. The pressure of the hot gases was enough to burst the bag. The cool air reignited the flames.

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Chapter 24

A police siren woke Elijah. He opened one eye. He was lying on his stomach, his face buried in his pillow, the bed a mess. He pressed the button. The bedside lamp lit up. The student glanced at the clock. It was barely five in the morning. He groaned.

Half asleep, he got up and went to look out the window. In the next room, his parents were also getting up. Through the window, a police car could be seen stopped in front of the house. Its flashing light was still illuminating the night. But the siren had fallen silent.

Further down the street, other flashing lights of a different color could be seen, signaling that the garbage collection vehicle was slowly moving away.

Elijah went out onto the landing. His mother, worried, was looking at the stairs where his father had disappeared.

"Are you awake, Elijah?"

He grunted affirmatively. Mothers always have stupid questions. Of course he was awake since he was standing in front of her without ever having sleepwalked.

"Your dad went to see what's going on."

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Elijah went back to his bedroom window and pulled the curtains aside. He saw his father talking over the fence with a policeman who was carrying something. His curiosity pushed his conscience to the side of them. The policeman was carrying a fire extinguisher.

"Don't worry. Just a trash can fire. Thugs passing by, no doubt."

Another police officer was kneeling, looking at the damage. Metal had melted to the ground.

"It burned pretty good, you know. The metal in the cans even melted."

The kneeling policeman picked up the ashes and melted coins and placed them in a kind of large black bag. Which one was explaining something to his father? The one standing.

"We take the remains to the lab. Just to make sure there was no explosive device. But it's probably just a lit paper that was thrown in. I don't even know if the lab guys really do any analysis when you bring them trash. But the orders..."

"Do I need to come by the police station to file a complaint?"

That was his father. The standing policeman answered. Now Elijah could make out the voices.

"No, don't bother. I'll make the record immediately. Just go get your identification. I did

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the same with the garbage truck guys who found out about it."

"All right. I'll be right there. I'll take this opportunity to reassure my wife."

His father was running back to the house. Elijah returned to the first floor. His father was running up the stairs four at a time.

"Well?" asked her mother.

"It's nothing. It's just some thugs burning a trash can. I'll sign the report right away. And then I'm going back to bed."

"Is there no more risk?"

"No, no, a police officer put out the last of the flames."

"I'll go back to sleep then," sighed Elijah.

He went back to his room and lay down again. But he couldn't sleep. Not right away. Not now. What if the fire really had been started by thugs? Elijah would do another test, in the light of day. If possible in front of someone he could trust. Something less shabby than a trash can fire.

Being a god had to be used for something else than setting fire to garbage cans.

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Chapter 25

Adriana and Elijah still had a few days of peace before they started their internships. The young woman was an ideal witness for the budding god. But it was not necessary to tell her too much. Just make her a witness to something weird? Why not?

Elijah went back up to his room after having had breakfast. He had gotten up late. His parents had gone to work.

He turned on his laptop and logged into various social networks. On one, Adriana's presence indicator was green. She was connected. He used the live chat interface.

"Hello. It would be nice if we went for a walk, just the two of us..."

"Precisely, I wanted to suggest the same idea! How about a tour of Silver Lake? I can be there in an hour."

"One hour? But it's going to be time to eat! Should we get sandwiches?"

"All right. I have some ready-made ones in the freezer."

"See you in an hour, at the lake parking lot, then."

"See you in a bit."

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An hour was enough time for him to look at the place where the three thugs had attacked him. And it was on the path. If the bodies had been buried there, there would be tracks.

He ran into the kitchen and grabbed some frozen sandwiches to cook. They would stay warm enough in the appropriate compartment in his backpack. He also took a small bottle of mineral water and a tube of applesauce and pineapple for dessert. Then he took his shower and got dressed.

As he pulled on the straps of his backpack, he felt a certain fear. He knew that by crossing the threshold of his home, he was about to face his destiny. He was going to know.

Elijah walked quickly. The lake was a little less than two miles from his house. He followed the road to the ferry first, the same way he had walked all through school, so he made a small detour. He knew this path by heart, but today it seemed frightening.

Finally, he arrived at the bus stop. He looked at the sidewalk and saw nothing in particular. Then he walked into the small garden. There was an area of dried mud where the grass seemed to have forgotten to grow. A few square meters, at most. An irregular shape where three bodies could have been at ease lying in disorder. But there was no sign of any paranormal phenomenon or fire. The

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earth was well packed. There was nothing to suggest that anyone had dug here.

Yet Elijah felt something. Magic had been at work right here. He let his consciousness sink into the ground. He didn't have to go very far. Barely two meters below ground, there were three bodies piled in disarray. Three bodies burned to a crisp. Earthworms were getting in and enjoying the cooked, and frankly overcooked, meat. Arthropods were also beginning to carve out bits of flesh or lay eggs, blessing this gift of fate.

Elijah gagged. He could even feel the "feelings" of earthworms and arthropods! This madness was obviously just a figment of his imagination.

Stumbling for a few feet over the slightest irregularity in the terrain, he walked away, subject to a nausea he was not accustomed to. It took him a few moments to regain his senses, walking as quickly as possible through the streets of Staten Island.

As he pulled into the parking lot at the entrance to the park surrounding Silver Lake, he saw that Adriana had just arrived. She was putting her helmet away in the trunk of her electric scooter and had already taken out her backpack, which she had put on. Elijah came to embrace her. She

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hugged him and he did the same. Holding hands, they engaged on the tarred alley which made the turn of this small lake.

This little romantic walk was one of their favorites. They had done it a thousand times.

Yet, this time, something intrigued Adriana. She stopped, causing her companion to stop. She showed him the lake. About ten meters from them, the water was boiling. There was a strong release of steam. And it was a very localized phenomenon, not more than two meters in diameter. Suddenly, there was a sudden change in the phenomenon. The steam stopped spreading and came down as snow on a now frozen area.

"Do you see what I see?" inquired Adriana.

"The water that was boiling?"

"And which is now frozen."

The rays of the summer sun quickly melted what turned out to be a tiny disk of ice. In a few minutes, no trace remained of the curious phenomenon.

"Probably a cold water release by the park employees," Elijah explained with a concerned smile.

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Chapter 26

Elijah had to face the facts: he was indeed a god. But Adriana had complained about his performance when they had slept together at her house after the walk. She had accused him of not thinking about what he was doing or, perhaps, thinking about someone else. He made what he could to reassure her, increasing the intensity of his caresses, but, in fact, he thought of his divinity more than of the pleasure of his companion or even of his own.

When he got home, he turned on his computer and used a search engine with concepts like "God-man" or "divine man". He got some Hindu legends among the first answers and then some Satanist documentation. Being a man who thinks he is a god (psychoanalysis), being a man of God (join the priesthood), etc. But nothing that remotely resembled what he was experiencing.

The search engine ran for hours but found nothing relevant. That left Stephen Lehrer as the only source of information.

The student logged into the university directory and searched for the professor's contact information. He found the address of a small, basic

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website, almost a default page with just an e-mail address, the one also listed in the directory, and links to profiles on the main fashionable social networks.

It was strange. Most professors are also consultants or write books and therefore have to promote themselves in some way. They therefore take care of their websites. Not Stephen Lehrer.

Elijah had some difficulty finding the professor's complete contact information. Even the social networking profiles were minimal. It took cross-referencing information from several directories to track him down, including the domain name owners directory and the phone book.

The student entered the information found in his contact list, shared between his computer and his smartphone. This way he would keep the information with him. Above all, he looked at the exact location of the address.

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Chapter 27

Trom was experiencing a hot period. Summer was approaching. Elijah was worried. He felt a disturbance in his world but could not pinpoint the source.

Sitting on top of his mount, he admired his work. Yes, he was God. At least here. He saw Schlagers all over the world worshipping him, sacrificing delicious berries to him. He fed on this worship more than on the berries.

But not far from Mount Elijah, there was a shadowy area. The young god finally realized that what he was worried about was coming from there: a clearing. But why worry? Wasn't he God? Wasn't he all powerful?

He focused his consciousness on the place. But he could see hazily. The plants seemed to have changed. Some were green like on Earth instead of the usual blue. There were even red roses. How was this possible? Was it an overlap area with the Earth?

Finally, he understood.

A family brought in a young Schlager who had broken both legs when he fell from a tree. A sharp branch had pierced his abdomen. He was

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going to die. He had to die. That is the rule of this world. Life and death are part of it.

But the family laid the child on a strange altar, which was not like the temples erected in honor of Elijah. Here, there were no buildings imitating Mount Elijah. No officiant ordering long processions of Schlagers to offer berries.

No, the altar was made of logs just stacked together. And, between the logs, Schlagers had wedged red roses.

Adriana placed her hand on the young Schlager. Smiling, she amused herself by making the stake in the young Schlager's abdomen disappear. She tightened the broken legs and laughed. Being a goddess was a lot of fun for her.

She applauded herself as she was cheered by the family and blessed by the youngster who walked and bounced as if he had never been injured. Adriana was becoming a goddess of Trom, but without following the rules.

Elijah screamed and fled to his mount. The Schlagers present became frightened. Adriana was shaken and disappeared.

Everywhere around Mount Elijah, the Schlagers were looking at the summit with concern. An abominable howl could be heard. A fiery cloud seemed to explode and pierce the clouds of algae passing overhead, opening a path

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of fire to the celestial depths. Then everything suddenly calmed down.

Elijah sat up in bed. He had screamed. What he had feared had happened. His mother entered his room.

"Did you yell, Elijah? What's going on?"

"A nightmare, Mom, a nightmare."

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Chapter 28

Stephen Lehrer lived in an apartment in a chic, but old, building in Lower Manhattan. It was easy to get there by using the subway line to the university. Elijah waited until the morning after his discovery. But he really needed to talk to his professor now.

The student looked around the apartment. He let his consciousness drift. He felt his professor sitting at his desk, reading papers written by first-year students. He sometimes smiled at unseen idiocy. A huge laugh nearly toppled his chair when the professor came to a paper stating that the absence of blood in the bodies of robots had prevented Isaac Asimov from dealing with the vampire theme.

Elijah could read the briefs at the same time as the professor and caught himself laughing with him. But he was on the street. He stifled his hilarity in his hand placed over his mouth.

Suddenly, Stephen Lehrer interrupted his work. He said, "Well, Elijah, come up here if you've come to see me. There's no need to wander around with your perception to spy on me on the sly."

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Elijah retreated from the apartment and blushed. Then he approached the door of the building. He did not have to press the doorbell. The door opened by itself.

When he reached the right floor, he found his teacher waiting for him on the landing.

"Come in," he said.

"Good morning, sir."

"Hello. But don't call me sir anymore when it's just the two of us. After all, we are gods, you and I."

Stephen Lehrer closed the door when Elijah returned with him and then took him to the living room, seating him on a couch.

"What do you want to drink? I have soda, coffee..."

"I'll have a coffee, thanks."

"Are you in trouble?"

"Yes, I have several troubles, I must admit. First of all, what happened at the bus stop, with you."

"Your second thoughts are to your credit, Elijah. Killing is not a good thing. But, in this case, we had no choice. They knew too much to go on living."

"Why not erase their memories?"

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Stephen Lehrer smiled. But he didn't answer right away. He waited for the two coffee cups to levitate from the kitchen and land on the coffee table. As his student tried to pretend that nothing surprised him anymore, the professor resumed his explanation.

"The coffee is cold: I made it over an hour ago. But you know how to heat it up to the right temperature, don't you? In the same way, you already know how to levitate things or people, or you will soon. What is it all about? Nothing more than the manipulation of some physical constants, of some simple phenomena. This is what we are capable of on Earth. Nothing more than that. To erase a memory would imply to know precisely how the brain works, to locate the concerned area and to modify the configuration of the neurons. But I don't know how to do that.

"But when I can project my consciousness, it's not..."

"No, indeed, it is something else. The more powerful you are, the more you can become aware of a wide area around you. It also takes practice. You have to know, for example, how to distinguish voices in a conversation."

"My question may seem silly, but why hide this? Why not reveal to everyone how to become a god?"

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"In reality, very few people are capable of being gods. You have to be able to focus on creating a world and making it coherent, stable and sustainable enough for consciousnesses to emerge. And it is necessary that these consciences endowed with free will start to honor you. This is very complex. Even creating a single world is not within the reach of anyone. From then on, you understand that you have to be discreet. How do you think the good people would react if they were told that certain individuals are able to become aware of the universe around them - to read thoughts, as the bad journalists would say - and even to modify it by magic? It would be a hunt. Extermination. No, Elijah, trust me, we have to be discreet. And keep our secret. No matter what. Even if we have to kill to do it."

Elijah nodded. He understood. He didn't approve of this horrible world called Earth, where everything is so cruel and complicated. But he understood.

He brought his cup to his lips. The temperature was perfect. Elijah was beginning to master the art of manipulating heat and cold.

"There's also something else, sir..."

"No more sir between us. Call me Stephen when we're not in front of other people."

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"Excuse me. But you said, on Trom, when you were taking me home, that it is the prayers that give me magical power?"

"Indeed. The more ardently you are prayed to, the more powerful a god you will be. That's why it's good to have a rich world with many worshipers. And, if you can, many worlds."

"Several worlds? When it is so complicated to make one already?"

"I mean several planets in your world."

Stephen Lehrer coughed.

"Excuse me, I swallowed wrong. But I'm sorry: I have to finish correcting the first-year students' papers. We can meet again..."

"One more thing, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead, please."

"My friend, Adriana, entered my world, just like you. She entered it by accident, without wanting to, when we had just made love. And now she is disturbing Trom. She shows a compassion that disturbs the world and draws the worship of some of my creatures."

Stephen Lehrer's expression changed. His smile faded.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely. She saved a young Schlager in front of me and she transformed part of their planet to make it look like Earth."

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"This is very serious. The consistency of your world will suffer. A war of gods can destroy a world."

"She doesn't realize what she's doing. I need to go talk to her."

"Chase her. Now."

The professor had almost shouted, startling Elijah. The student nodded. Once again, he had understood.

"Good," Stephen Lehrer concluded as he stood up.

Elijah followed him to the entrance, and thanked him as he left. He had to go home and try to contact Adriana.

Stephen Lehrer returned to his office. He sat down but could not resume his work. If Trom were to disappear, years of research would be brutally wiped out. No, now that he had found Elijah and Trom, he had to save this world, whatever the cost. Naheul and Anakine had survived. Shaad had not. He could not make the same mistake twice.

But to achieve his goals, Stephen Lehrer had to get stronger first.

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Chapter 29

In the world of Anaquine, there was a planet at the edge of the created planets. It was called Dahibah. Although very arid, it had a large and varied population. The dominant native race, however, was marginalized on its own world. It lived in the desert, in troglodyte cities.

The real cities were built around the astroports. Dahibah was a place of crime and trafficking. And the entire economy was built around smuggling. From the spaceship repairman to the food manufacturer, everyone lived on crime, even if everyone there could claim to be honest.

As in all the worlds of Anaquine, each city had its temple to the God. It was important to pray well. It was essential for the God to close his eyes on the acts of one or the other.

The natives, a kind of religious mantis with a pair of prehensile legs, also had their temples, far away in the desert. If they had nothing to hide from the God, they still prayed.

Stephen Lehrer sailed his conscience over this world. He knew that he would get what he wanted most easily here. Hadn't the Great Rift been designed practically for this purpose?

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This depression largely cut the surface in two, slowly pushing two continental plates that collided on the other side of the planet, creating a large mountain. As the sliding was anything but regular, there were hills, fractures, small mountains and large valleys everywhere.

The fingers of the God penetrated the great rift and began to spread its lips. Everywhere on the planet the earth shook. Buildings began to collapse in every city. Even the rock-cut cities of the natives were damaged.

As always, in such a situation, the reflex of the whole local population was to rush to the temples. The prayers were chanted with the greatest fervor.

When the whole planet was in prayer, Stephen Lehrer's fingers released the Great Rift. Immediately, the earth stopped shaking.

Orbiting around the planet where he had been unwittingly guided by his teacher, Elijah was seized with horror. How could one mistreat one's own creatures in this way, just to be prayed for? The student felt his teacher leave this world. He returned to the sidewalk of his city. Fortunately, he was sitting on a public bench. Otherwise, he probably would have fallen.

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He who just wanted to be able to laugh again with the freshmen's memoirs had found himself in the middle of a cosmic drama. And his teacher was so busy that he hadn't even noticed.

Elijah expanded his awareness again. He wanted to know if Stephen Lehrer was going to do something that explained his sudden cruelty.

The teacher was still in a trance at his desk. But he was no longer in Anaquine's world.

Seven large dragons were flying in formation towards the small village. The world of Naheul was used to battles against dragons. But seven at once against a single small village was a lot. It seemed as if these creatures wanted to avenge their fellow dragon that had been killed a few days earlier while devouring an entire supply of edible roots.

The dragons had come out of nowhere. No one knew them. They had appeared, suddenly, in the middle of the sky. A migrating herd, perhaps.

A dragon could not breathe fire while diving: it would burn itself. But, by practicing a V-flight, the pack could capture peasants, either in its mouth or in its talons.

Faced with the threat, the women and children took refuge in the village temple.

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Accompanied by the priests, they sang the sacred melodies.

Satisfied, Stephen Lehrer guided the men's spears and arrows to the weak points of the attackers' armor. The peasants had been right to pray: there would be plenty of delicious, fresh meat for dinner.

From the top of a mountain, Elijah could not believe his lack of eyes. He left Naheul even faster than Stephen Lehrer. The latter did not notice anything.

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Chapter 30

As he drove home, Elijah went over in his mind everything he had seen and heard. His favorite teacher appeared to him in a much less sympathetic light since he had seen him torturing his creatures to make them beg. The urgency, in any case remained to dislodge Adriana definitively from Trom or to force her to respect its coherence.

Would sharing the Schlagers' devotion really be a problem? Elijah still wondered what his powers were for, other than to do some fun tricks. On the other hand, if Adriana didn't play by the rules, Trom would be destroyed by losing its consistency.

Adriana remained to be convinced. To contact her online? To talk to her in person? That might not work: she didn't believe in Trom's reality. She might not even want to listen. So she had to be talked to in Trom.

He ruminated on his speech for the rest of the day. Sharpening his arguments, planning responses to objections, he prepared to convince his friend to leave Trom in peace. It shouldn't be that hard to be a god, after all. He had succeeded in doing so!

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Elijah woke up late the next day. He tossed and turned for hours in bed, putting off confronting Adriana. Then, finally, he got up. It was time for breakfast.

Elijah took a beer from the refrigerator to give himself courage and prepared a quick meal of frozen food. Then he went back to his room, lay down again on his bed and decided to enter Trom.

First of all, he had to ensure the coherence and solidity of his world by reconnecting with all its parts. The long-delayed visit to the bottom of the ocean was necessary.

Elijah swam through the deepest, darkest waters with the same ease that he flew through the air or Trom space. He was a god and his consciousness was not of this world.

He began by feeling the caress of surface algae. Cousins of the green clouds, they were however extremely toxic to all organisms on the surface of this world but not to the creatures of the deep. The emerald color of the oceans and clouds of algae contrasted with the turquoise blue of the forests covering the continents. This color inversion with the Earth had amused Elijah. There was no other reason for this strange pictorial harmony.

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The toxicity of surface algae, on the other hand, was part of an ecological and eschatological plan. Elijah had always been saddened by the outrageous human exploitation of the earth's oceans. He had therefore made sure that this was impossible on Trom.

Leaving the surface, Elijah sank into the dark liquid. Unlike Earth, where light penetrates reasonably deep, the presence of the algae cover made the water black almost from the surface.

There was no species that had developed organs that created light: it was simply unknown. If ever, by accident, an avalanche of photons were to burst forth, no one would notice it here. No creature had been endowed with anything to enjoy or be offended by it.

So Elijah descended into the darkness, following the dying seaweed as it fell. They were feeding fish, or at least sea creatures that took their place. They had a shape that could, depending on the case, make them look like a ray or a jellyfish.

Here, death meant falling. The creatures all sought to reach the toxic surface, driven by a strange instinct. And, to make things clear, ecological practices reinforced this tropism. The deeper one went, the more formidable the

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predators became, feeding on the stratum just above.

Finally, the last corpses covered the bottom of the ocean and decomposed there. Once reduced to fine dust, by simple convection, the substance would then rise to complete the food of the creatures near the surface.

However, there were times when the upward movements were more pronounced. From remained a volcanic planet. Terrifying underwater explosions reminded us of this from time to time, sometimes creating a small island on the surface, just as, further away, parts of the continent could suddenly sink into the oceans, annihilated in deafening deflagrations.

Some kind of big sea lizards, with prehensile legs and a mouth surrounded by multiple tentacles, were slowly crawling on the ocean floor. Their shape broke with the aesthetic codes of the ecological strata closer to the surface. They were the ultimate monsters, for all here as well as on Earth. They were the product of Elijah's nightmares and their presence was not for nothing in the young god's weak attraction to the oceans.

Among themselves, however, these creatures were perfectly peaceful. They fed on whatever their god dropped from the heights. And that was

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good enough. They were a reminder that fear and repulsion were more often related to aesthetic appreciation than to real danger.

In time, Elijah had admitted them into his divine love. But that love was a little distant. Somehow, these creatures felt suffering.

Yet Elijah had endowed them with consciousness. And this one turned towards the inaccessible surface to seek answers to their questions in their strange undulatory language. They had two large ears that were fused on both sides of their mouths, forming a collar. They had the possibility to listen to the undulations produced by their fellow creatures with their tentacles or even, for the most coarse, with their legs and the rest of their body.

The subtle language obviously did not know color, the very idea of light being unknown to them. But a comparable color chart described the ripples and other movements of water and even of the ground, when a volcano awakened or when something simply fell to the bottom of the ocean.

While he rarely tied his consciousness to the depths of the oceans of Trom, Elijah, despite everything, was as much at home here as he was among the Schlagers. This was his world.

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Yet something worried him. At first, the young god had not paid attention. He was always uncomfortable in the midst of giant lizards that could swallow a Schlager whole like a human would swallow a peanut. But he soon realized that something other than vague memories of his childhood nightmares was coming to taunt him in those depths.

A small troop of lizards converged on a volcanic lava spring. Officials were throwing in fish brought by the participants as they arrived.

Above the spring, breathing in the ripples of a lizard in trance teaching others, Elijah recognized Stephen Lehrer.

The young god then approached his conscience with fury from the place of this odious and unnatural cult. Stephen Lehrer suddenly disappeared. Had Elijah been dreaming?

He had to take no chances. He chose this place to reveal himself. Grasping that the lizard prophet was entirely devoted to his teacher as he listened to his undulations, as transparent as human language to the god, he was seized with a divine anger.

Elijah chose another lizard, a venerable and enormous old one. He grabbed him in a bubble of volcanic gas. His ripples of fear suddenly became calmer as the entire crowd turned to him,

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wondering how to save him from the agonizing death to which the volcano seemed to have doomed him.

Having become quiet, its undulations were understood by the others.

"Cursed are we for having sacrificed to a false god. Wwuii drew us here because the false god seduced him. But the true God has revealed himself to me. The true god is the one who created Trom, its surface and its depth."

"What are you talking about, you lunatic?" offended Wwuii.

From the lava sheet, an arrow of fire shot through the officiant, killing him. The body collapsed too close to the crevice, one leg even falling into it. A convection of water, almost unnatural, drew the corpse into the underwater flames.

As they fell, Wwuii's tentacles formed words that everyone felt.

"I am Elijah your God, creator of the deep and the surface. And you shall have no other god but me. I let you discover me for yourselves, but you chose the error of worshipping a false god. I reveal myself to you today to repair that mistake. All worship is due to me."

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Fear gripped the lizards. Some retreated, about to flee. But the cult was quickly resumed, this time for Elijah's benefit alone.

The young god awoke on Earth without continuing his tour of Trom. He wondered what what he had seen meant.

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Chapter 31

During dinner with his parents, Elijah did his best not to let his emotions and worries show. He hastened the moment when he could finally return to his room under the pretext of connecting to Internet in order to contact Adriana.

He managed to get some mocking chuckles from his mother and "ah, there, there, I was young too" from his father. But he managed to isolate himself quickly enough. However, he was too upset to be at ease on Trom.

He had chosen to focus his consciousness on his mount in order to patrol his world from that sacred point. And the place where Adriana had conceived her warp was not far from there.

As he inserted himself into Trom's substance, he felt a sharp pain. Waves of horror were spreading across the world. The Schlagers were fleeing the region. Elijah's consciousness could hear them screaming in terror.

At the place where Adriana had designed her temple, there were only flames as high as her sacred mountain. These flames were taking on the face of Stephen Lehrer. But the professor's gaze was turned to the inside of the perimeter. At his feet Adriana was screaming, trying to preserve her

Human gods

little paradise with all her might. Its size was rapidly shrinking.

Two false gods were fighting in this world where the true god was aware of the carnage.

Elijah suddenly faced his teacher, taking the same size as him. Adriana, seeing him, cried out in dismay, wanting to understand this nightmare, and called for help.

"What are you doing here on Trom?" thundered the true god.

"I told you that you had to eliminate the warp from Adriana and Adriana herself. Did you do it? No ? Well, I'll take care of it."

"Take care of your worlds and leave Trom to me. Here, we don't torture creatures to make them worship you. I love my world and every being I have created!"

"I have already lost a world by not being able to keep it together. Its goddess died, its world too. For two other worlds, I did not make the same mistakes and I am now the owner."

"And what happened to their creators?"

"That doesn't matter. I got their worlds. But how do you know my worlds and my practices to make myself worshiped with passion?"

Human gods

Elijah decided to hide whatever he could from his teacher from now on. His answer was therefore evasive.

"You were thinking about it very hard the other day."

"That's right."

"And, therefore, you are about to take possession of Trom..."

"It's true you're a smart boy, Elijah..."

"But why did you already eliminate two gods and capture their worlds when you already had your own world?"

"I explained it to you: the power of a god is linked to the cults that honor him. The more worlds there are, the more cults there are, the more power there is."

"But for what?"

"Which you will never do, Elijah."

The student felt violently pushed back. His consciousness had to recoil. The area submitted by Stephen Lehrer escaped him completely.

Suddenly, there was a final cry from Adriana. A huge flaming mass crushed her completely, destroying her temple. The presence of the young goddess had ceased. Stephen Lehrer lifted the tornado of fire into the air to let the ground surface cool. There was nothing left but ashes. Elijah felt his teacher's powerful dark magic

Human gods

at work. He felt as if he were being stabbed with a thousand daggers as the forest recomposed itself.

Above all, the tornado shouted in a loud voice: "I am your new god. You will bow down to me and worship me." It repeated the message over and over, driving more daggers into the conscience of the attacked god each time.

Elijah left his world. The pain stopped immediately.

Human gods

Chapter 32

Elijah forced himself not to scream as he sat up in bed. He put his hand against his mouth so that his gasp would not be heard by his parents. His heart was pounding against his ribs like a hammer on a bell carried by a storm.

Adriana. He had to talk to Adriana. Right now. He turned on his computer, the slowness of the maneuver increasing his stress. Then he connected to various social networks. But none of Adriana's connection indicators were green: she was not connected anywhere. He sent her direct messages that should turn her smartphone into a chime, but there was no return.

Elijah stormed into the family room like a madman. His parents stared at him in amazement. They had never seen him in such a state of excitement, barely able to speak.

"Something happened to Adriana. I have to go see her."

"Now? At this time of day?" her mother wondered.

"Yes. Is my scooter still in the garage?"

His father remarked, "But you haven't used it for months! By the way, you should take better

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care of it: it will come in handy when you go to work in a week."

"I need to go to Adriana's now."

"Now?" his parents repeated, bewildered, as they looked at each other.

He went back up to his room, running like crazy. He grabbed his helmet, which was on top of a closet, and went back down to the garage. He turned on the scooter. The batteries were full.

As soon as he put on his helmet, Elijah left the garage without even taking the time to close the door. His father sighed and went downstairs to take care of it. His son was madly in love and madly worried because his girl hadn't deigned to respond to his advances all evening. That was all.

On the way, Elijah regularly looked at his watch, waiting for a contact request from the young woman. But nothing came.

Adriana lived in another Staten Island neighborhood, Sunnyside, near the highway that connects to Brooklyn via the bridge between Fort Wadsworth and Fort Hamilton.

As he approached Adriana's house, the air was torn apart by the wail of a siren. Elijah stopped short and let the ambulance pass. Taking advantage of the path cleared by the emergency vehicle, Elijah's scooter slid in its wake to go faster. The young man was surprised to see the

H u m a n g o d s

ambulance pull up in front of Adriana's house, a two-story brick and wood house surrounded by a lawn.

Elijah quickly parked on the grass. He slipped in behind the rescue team, setting his own course to theirs.

Human gods

Human gods

Chapter 33

In the family living room, Adriana's father was holding his weeping wife in his strong arms, almost hysterical. Beside them, her young sister was biting her nails, her eyes red.

Leaving the rescue team in Adriana's room, Elijah greeted his friend's family. They were all surprised to see him.

"I tried to reach Adriana and..."

"I turned off her smartphone that was breaking our ears," her sister explained.

Her father said in a matter-of-fact tone, "She had been lying down to rest. She had been doing that a lot lately. We should have been suspicious. Even though she denied having any health problems, trying to reassure us with her happy smiles. Tonight, she suddenly let out a loud scream. We all went to look. She was lying on her bed, inert, and with a... with a..."

"With a trickle of drool dripping from her mouth. And it was impossible to make her regain consciousness. Her eyes went blank, pupils dilated."

Upset, Elijah turned his eyes silently towards the room he knew well. He let his consciousness drift. He saw Adriana on her bed, the doctors

Human gods

bustling around her, taking her pulse, checking her breathing... The body was dying. The soul was gone.

"There must be no trace, ever," said a voice in Elijah's head. Then he felt the magic at work.

Had the doctors felt something too? They had stopped in their tracks, abruptly.

Elijah suddenly understood: a trickle of blood was coming out of one ear.

"She is not transportable. Major stroke. We're going to have to use a trephine and to puncture here before we take her in. Notify dispatch immediately: we need an operating room as soon as we arrive. How is the heart?"

It was a doctor who was in charge. That voice was spoken with vocal cords. The voice inside was magical. It was Stephen Lehrer's.

"The heart gave out: there is nothing on the electrocardiogram," replied a nurse.

"Holy shit. A girl so young and so far in great shape according to her health record. It's not possible."

A resuscitator had ruthlessly torn off the young woman's clothes. He placed the defibrillator plates on her soft chest. There was a shock. Muscles twitched, causing the body to jump back to the bed.

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"Still nothing," said the nurse.

Elijah felt the young woman's heart compressed by a powerful force that prevented it from beating. And this force was out of all proportion to his own. He could do nothing. He chose to run away, crying.

Human gods

Human gods

Chapter 34

"Adriana is dead."

"Excuse me?"

His father did not want to believe Elijah when he called him. And Elijah couldn't explain anything to him. Not here, not now.

"Are you going home?" he asked.

"No. Not right now. I have to take care of her. And get some rest here."

He cut the communication.

He had to face Stephen Lehrer. He had no choice. Or he would be the next one to have a small stroke, the next one whose heart would be compressed by some unknown force.

The young man put his helmet back on. And he started his scooter again. He hated to make a long drive on his vehicle. He decided to go to the ferry.

Human gods

Human gods

Chapter 35

Elijah's consciousness entered the lock of the door. It gave the necessary impulse for the electronic mechanism to open. Elijah's body immediately entered the building, heading almost as if by instinct towards the teacher's apartment.

Rage made Elijah finally aware of his divinity. Necessity gave him the opportunity to use his powers. Indeed, to be a god is not to set fire to garbage cans. To be God, it is not to accept any obstacle. To be God, is about power. Being God is immortality. Elijah was going to fight to keep himself from dying.

Arriving in front of the professor's apartment, Elijah projected his consciousness through the door. Stephen Lehrer was lying on his bed.

To be God is to be omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent.

Elijah threw himself into Trom with rage. His world had not changed in appearance, but all the creatures were confused. Elijah's consciousness was blocked in many places. Trom was switching allegiances.

"Come to take your beating, kid?"

Human gods

The pillar of fire was still there and was addressing him. He faced it despite the insane laughter.

Omnipresent. Elijah materialized in the main temple of Dahibah. An explosion of divine fury brought it down completely. A huge column of fire and fury rose into the air as the earth shook.

"A new god is given to you" thundered the column.

Omnipresent. In one village in the world of Naheul, people rejoiced at having killed seven dragons while they mourned the dead. But both the weeping and the rejoicing ceased when the town's temple exploded.

A huge column of fire and fury rose into the air as the mountain was shaken by the divine fury.

"A new god is given to you" thundered the column.

On Trom, Stephen Lehrer suddenly realized that something was attacking him in his own worlds.

"How dare you?"

Elijah faced him.

"Why did you dare?"

Human gods

"I'm going to crush you like I crushed your girlfriend."

"Why?"

"For immortality, you fool! You're just discovering your powers. You won't go any further. You won't rejuvenate your body like I can. I'll make you..."

Elijah knew enough. He retreated from Trom, letting the fireball hit a now empty corner of the forest.

Elijah's fury concentrated in Stephen Lehrer's body. A hot spot developed in the teacher's chest. The pain brought his consciousness back to earth.

The door to his apartment opened. A gust of wind blew Elijah inside. Then the door slammed.

Stephen Lehrer was on his feet. Furious.

"Since you have incurred the wrath of God..."

Elijah said nothing. A flame pierced the professor's shirt. He let out a scream and collapsed to his knees. The teacher's strength focused on his chest, easily cooling what the weak magic of his attacker was trying to heat.

"Since the chemical force is too weak..." mused Elijah.

Human gods

His consciousness went down a level. He saw the molecules. His teacher's magic was trying to bring them together for a battle. We were still too close to his consciousness. Elijah moved on to atoms.

His teacher was old. He had admitted it. He was getting younger. But by how much? Had he been taught nuclear physics before he studied literature? Elijah took a chance. Neutrons and protons were mating under the impulse of one of the fundamental forces. Too close. He had to go down further. The cohesive force of quarks was suddenly disturbed. Perfectly stable atomic nuclei began to explode.

The energy released was considerable. A first core, a second, a third... Not enough for a nuclear chain reaction to annihilate the surrounding area, but enough to release large amounts of heat locally. The chemical disturbances were nothing. Stephen Lehrer, whose education was too old, did not understand where this terrifying energy came from.

He released his attention from the molecules to try to understand what was happening at a much smaller level. Elijah felt it. He could see his teacher's body, on his knees, while he himself was lying on the carpet, still in the position where the gust of wind had put him.

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Then the student killed the master. All the molecules in the fatty layer of his skin began to shake. Stephen Lehrer burst into flames, screaming.

Magic was stirring the place. But sanity had left the panicked burning body. Stephen Lehrer was no longer able to order a counterattack. He had been surprised. He waved his magic around like a drowning man waving his hands. Gusts of wind swept through the apartment as if a typhoon had been unleashed.

The pre-frontal lobe was reduced to ashes.

The wind stopped immediately.

Elijah got up. He came to see the blackened corpse. Stephen Lehrer was dead.

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Chapter 36

Elijah quickly left the apartment, pushing the front door open without bothering to lock it. He walked down to the building's atrium and saw his face in a mirror.

He had a bump on his forehead. Elijah smiled. He had hit the ground or a wall, he didn't know, a little roughly when the gust of wind had taken him away. But that was all in the past. Elijah had regained his composure. He concentrated on his bump and made it disappear.

Alerted by the screams, neighbors had entered Stephen Lehrer's home. The door had been pushed open. They discovered the charred body.

The next day, the newspapers announced in the pages devoted to the facts the strange case of spontaneous combustion of a professor of the university. The address and name were not published. But Elijah knew who they were talking about.

Adriana's funeral occupied enough minds that only the tragic and inexplicable death of the young girl was remembered from that evening.

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Intermission

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Trom had regained its calm. The frightened Schlaggers returned to their usual homes. There was nothing left of Adriana's temple. Stephen Lehrer had even reconstructed the forest. Elijah had nothing to do. The Schlaggers who later ventured into the area found nothing.

From the depths of the oceans to the peaks of the highest mountains, Trom was calm and Elijah admired it. Elijah loved it.

Elijah learned to love the world of Anaquine. To do this, he had to discover its many planets, beyond the capital planet and Dahibah. He began by remodeling the temples of each planet he visited, following this ship one day, that ship another, or simply wandering through the dust of space. He revealed to the Illuminated their new god.

Soon he felt called more and more often to this or that planet. Spontaneously, a temple had been remodeled and he was being worshipped. The closing of the Great Divide of Dahibah had probably been responsible for the rapid spread of his new religion. The love of a god, in every way, is felt.

Human gods

How nice it was to be the god of such a technically advanced world where going faster than light was not a problem.

In the same way, Elijah discovered Naheul. It was a world which was the opposite of Anaquine. It had everything that Elijah had refused to include in Trom.

"This world would please my parents so much," he often thought. But Elijah always refused to reveal his divinity to anyone, starting with his parents.

Here, too, the temples and religion were modified to please the new god who had revealed himself. And all this was good.

Despite this, Elijah still had a special attachment to Trom. This world was his personal creation. And when he wanted to rest from his emotions, it was to his sacred mountain that he came. It so happened that, after Adriana's death, he often needed this comfort.

"I salute you, Chalg," said the young god when he saw the Schlager coming.

Once again, he had climbed the sacred mountain and brought berries. He laid down half of them, which Elijah consumed like a God while his worshiper consumed the other half.

Human gods

"Lord Creator, I have come to You because we were afraid the other day while gods seemed to be fighting."

"Chalg, you will be my messenger again. You will tell your brothers and sisters that false gods have tried to take over Trom. But I am the only God. Remember, Chalg, what I told you: I am the Creator of Trom. I am the One who made this world emerge from the Void."

"And this fight..."

"This battle has seen the True God and False Gods confront each other and it will always be necessary to fight. That the path which false gods propose is more pleasant, can happen. To heal, to never suffer, that may seem good. But, on a world scale, it is not.

The Laws that I have made are good for all and so for everyone. All of you must accept these rules that give true happiness. Even if, at times, it is necessary that some suffer or die. What would be a world where imprudence would be repaired by a simple prayer? Where eating and therefore killing would be impossible?

Chalg, I entrust your people to you. Bring them wisdom. But do not be more demanding with them than your God is. Forgive their faults as I forgive them. And love one another."

Human gods

"Lord Creator, I will obey Your Commandments."

After the warm exchanges, Chalg stood on the rocky peak. He took one last look at the most sacred place on the most sacred mountain. Then he jumped, spreading his limbs to spread the membranes that served as wings.

Elijah followed him. His consciousness became attached to the trail of the Schlager in the sky. The creature suffered from the cold on the way down, but it had already suffered so much on the way up that it didn't matter.

The god admired the faith of his creature. He followed it in its zigzags. He flew over the blue forest. He sighed with ease at the countless lives that were stirring there. He felt the softness of the leaves that cushion a landing.

When Chalg returned to his people, he delivered the Creator's Message to them. All recognized great wisdom in it.

One evening, when Elijah had returned to the village of Chalg, His Presence must have been felt. There was a kind of holy atmosphere in the village.

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At the top of the highest tree, Chalg looked up at the sky. There were no clouds, no water vapor, no algae. And the stars were shining.

The Schlagers, observing two stars with very different motions, had quickly reached a certain scientific degree in astronomy. It is not impossible that Elijah helped them a little. In any case, the true nature of the stars and planets was known to them.

And Chalg looked at the immense sky studded with stars.

And his god was watching with him.

"All the same, if our world were the only one possessing life, hosting a race capable of loving the Lord, how much room there would be lost."

Elijah sighed to himself, "then I'll have to get on with creating other planets and races..."

Human gods

Human gods

Third book
Hyonteinen

Human gods

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Chapter 1

The shell was not, by definition, very flexible. Exerting too much pressure on it could only result in breaking it. This was the purpose of the ritual fight. To break the opponent's carapace and then to finish him off by tearing out his entrails. Each abdominal section had a heart and a lung (with its own breathing holes), but the esophagus went through all the sections, digesting little by little the nutrients swallowed by the head. And the blood circulation was also common to all sections of the body. Hemorrhage caused a painful and slow death. If the winner was merciful, he had the right to finish off his opponent by tearing off his head. Death was then instantaneous.

Voimakas knew that his opponent would not give him a chance. He knew that a request for mercy by submission would not be accepted. Both had fought too long in the arena. They had inflicted too much pain on each other. In the best-case scenario, that of victory, Voimakas would keep the marks of this fight on his dark green carapace with thin red stripes for years. And his opponent, in the same way, would have dark scars on his pretty blue carapace if he triumphed. No, Voimakas couldn't accept his opponent's

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submission either. The duel would be to the death. And probably neither of them would want to show any mercy. Death would be slow and painful as well as inevitable.

It was necessary to triumph. No alternative.

In the stands around the arena, thousands of Rukoilis, male and female, watched the fight. They clung to the bars with their claws and waited to see who would be their next king. Old Paatoi had been killed at the very beginning of the Challenge. He had hardly fought at all and had chosen the one who had fought him.

He knew he was old and unable to lead the tribe anymore. He had preferred to call a proper challenge instead of being murdered in his nest at night. He had chosen the path of honor and had been decapitated with a sharp gesture as soon as his limbs had been immobilized by the opening of his carapace. His body had even been eaten by his victor, as a sign of respect.

The remains, mainly the carapace and the head, had been led in procession to the great central square of the capital where they had been incinerated, the pyre being lit by the victor. But the latter had not triumphed very long. He was killed in the next battle and no one remembered his name.

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The succession of duels had led to this final fight. Voimakas had triumphed as much as his opponent. Both were tired. But only one of them would become the new chief of the tribe. Voimakas could not remember the name of the one who tried to kill him. Why even try to find out who it was? If he lost, it did not matter. If he won, Voimakas would not have the leisure to remember anything, that name or anything else.

In his head, Voimakas named his opponent "the blue". The color of his carapace could make a valid name. It was rare to have an almost monochromatic carapace, with only darker or lighter shades.

The blue was bold. He must have been really tired and looking to cut the fight short. He kept his wings glued to his body. Taking their attachments from the central abdominal section, as with every Rukoili, they protruded from the rear section. But they were thus relatively protected. As a result, his four limbs, two on the front and two on the back, could be mobilized to simply pounce on Voimakas.

The latter was surprised by the maneuver and found himself plastered to the ground, wings spread, each limb immobilized by the counterpart limb of his opponent. The claws of the blue tried to

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penetrate the carapace of Voimakas. But, to succeed, the blue would have to release his grip.

So Voimakas was suffering while waiting for an opportunity to break the deadlock. Suddenly, the blue's wings unfolded and he lifted his opponent into the air.

There were squeals of admiration from the stands. It was a bold move. Everyone expected the blue one to climb as high as possible and then throw his opponent to the ground.

But Voimakas didn't let him do that. He moved his four legs backwards, thus letting his opponent penetrate his carapace. But before the blue understood Voimakas's tactics, he tore the blue's wings to shreds.

The blue one cried out in pain and dropped Voimakas. The two opponents were not very high. A fall wasn't too bad. But Voimakas whirred his wings, flying on his back, jostling the blue in his ascent.

In the stands, spectators were on the verge of hysteria. No one dared to take sides, but everyone recognized a great fight.

The blue had collapsed to the ground, wings torn. He had probably been injured in the fall because he was not moving much. Perhaps he was half knocked out. He didn't have time to recover his senses.

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Voimakas had carried himself quite high. He stopped flapping his wings after positioning himself vertically, head up. He placed his hind legs in line with his body, claws extended. As he fell, the claws penetrated the blue's carapace. Voimakas began to flap his wings again and began to rise again, spreading his hind legs. This time, it was done, the blue was open, almost cut in two. His internal organs were spilling out into the arena.

"I am defeated, finish me off" cried the blue.

Voimakas landed next to him. He seized the head of his opponent between all his mandibles. The blue was submissive. He did not move. His own mandibles were loose, dangling. They did not attempt to make contact with Voimakas' face in a final confrontation. There was a thud. Voimakas had snatched his opponent's head and sent him rolling a little further away.

He then plunged his mandibles into the shattered body of his opponent to feast on his flesh. It was the greatest tribute he could pay him. The blue had been a quality opponent.

The cheers of the crowd were as much intended to recognize the victor as to salute the vanquished.

But Voimakas was now overcome by weariness. He was exhausted, beyond all fatigue.

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He then felt God, who was satisfied. God did not shout, but he did not need to. It was enough for him to simply be there and communicate his feelings. The Chosen ones felt the divine presence.

The Challenge was not only a social ritual for the emergence of a new king. It was also a cult dedicated to the creator god of Hyonteinen. At the end of each battle, the winner had to bow to the Sacred Stele, thank God for his success and pray for new victories.

The one who had killed the old Paatoi, it was said, had hardly shown any devotion, reducing the cult to a symbolic gesture. Some thought that his arrogance towards the creator god was the cause of his quick defeat in the next fight, even though he had shown a certain talent in the arena to defeat Paatoi.

Voimakas did not make the same mistake. He showed great devotion, repeating the ritual prayers many times, far beyond what was necessary.

Human gods

Chapter 2

Awakened by the shrill alarm which he had programmed, Elijah Grubler sat up abruptly in his bed. He gave a more violent blow than necessary on the big top button of the alarm clock placed on his bedside table. It was time to get up. Automatically, the light had started to turn on in the room. For the moment, it was little more than a glow. It would reach normal power in a few minutes. According to the fashionable discourse among psychologists, such a progressive light upon awakening was preferable. It recalled the sunrise, nature, the circadian rhythms of the animal buried in human nature.

Elijah's apartment was modern. It was equipped with the kind of gadgets that Elijah didn't really care for, but on the other hand, it was part of a certain social standing.

His previous apartment, in a more popular neighborhood, was less modern. But it was a home that matched his first teaching position. Now he was a full professor at New York University, where he had been a student a few years earlier. Living in Manhattan was necessary. And it wasn't far from Winona Verfurt's house.

Human gods

Taking over Stephen Lehrer's position, even though there had been several other tenured professors between them, bothered him a bit. But how could he not apply? How could he not seize such an opportunity?

After the sudden death of Stephen Lehrer, a teacher had to be found in a hurry. He was not very good and had only kept the position for one year, returning to a smaller university in a less prestigious position the following year. Two other teachers had been appointed in succession before Elijah learned that the position was open again. Winona had taught him. She often worked for the university where she had also studied. Yet they had not met on campus. After Adriana's death, Elijah had started a first internship at Gameworld. It was during his second internship, a few months later, that he met the woman who had been his companion for all those years.

A brilliant computer scientist, she worked on the technical part, sometimes a little on the ergonomic design, of websites and game applications. She also managed sites for large companies and institutions such as New York University.

Gameworld had the idea of combining two promising young talents into one team. A brilliant universe designer, Elijah, and an equally brilliant

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technician, Winona. The alliance had quickly gone beyond a professional relationship. Since then, both had remained faithful while living in their own apartments.

When Elijah had left town for his first teaching-research position in Chicago, Winona had sworn that she didn't hold a grudge. They told themselves that their story would end there, like so many others. There are some things you can't simulate digitally and remotely. They had organized a last big romantic evening with restaurant and walk. Then they made love all night long.

Afterwards, they continued to communicate almost every day on the Internet. They encouraged each other to seduce someone else. But they didn't really want to. When Elijah had returned to his parents, he had had dinner with her. They weren't supposed to sleep with each other again, but they had both ended up very naturally in Winona's bed. And so the story had continued.

Now that they lived in the same city, buying a house together instead of each renting an apartment seemed like the next step. Then, a joint child would probably come along. Both of them feared this fate. They would stop being young. And then they were accumulating more than enough savings. The game worlds created by

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Elijah were selling well. The royalties from them were a major supplement to the teacher-researcher's salary, who also regularly published scientific books and popularized content on his favorite subject, fantasy literature.

Elijah had an appointment that day with the Gameworld boss for the annual renegotiation of his contract. Perhaps he would run into Winona, who was still working there. They could have lunch together.

Grabbing his laptop, he turned it on and logged into his various social networking profiles. He looked at the live chat windows. But, according to her online status information, Winona wasn't logged in yet. So he sent her an e-mail.

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Chapter 3

On Hyonteinen, a simple thought was enough for Rudolf Luoja to change this or that element which he did not like. But on the Internet, it was more complicated. And on Earth, it was almost worse. It all depended. For the moment, the man was scratching his unkempt blonde beard. How to properly set up the homepage when the interface of his personal website's damn content manager had just evolved again? The automatic updates were a pain in the ass. The image was overflowing, the text was not positioned the way he wanted.

But what was the point? No one ever visited Rudolf Luoja's social profiles or website, nor did they visit him in person. On the other hand, the site was quite ugly. Looking at it as an exterior, Rudolf Luoja agreed.

So he went to the Gameworld online store and bought an interactive theme. The world had been designed by a well-known designer, a certain Elijah Grubler, who was much talked about in the chat rooms of social networks. He had worked on this interactive theme with a usual colleague, a certain Winona Verfurt. She too had a good

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reputation. And Gameworld was a serious company.

Yet Rudolf Luoja was struggling with a dragon spitting flames all over his site. And Rudolf Luoja was not used to setting up fun interactive themes. He had already neglected the basic modules of his site. And he was trying to install a state-of-the-art module! Rudolf Luoja threw his computer back on his bed in annoyance.

Lifting his left arm, Rudolf Luoja sniffed the old sweat. He would have to take a shower. And change his shirt. He hadn't left his bed for at least three days.

He looked around. The bed occupied the center of the single room of his shabby studio. The sheets hadn't been washed for along time either. Dust was accumulating. The landlord didn't bother him too much, even when he was late with his rent. Rudolf was the last occupant of the building. When his last neighbor had left, she had said that the landlord wanted to tear down the whole building and rebuild something modern.

For the moment, nothing official had reached Rudolf. On the other hand, a very irregularly paid rent would be a good excuse not to renew his lease. The due date would have to be found.

Rudolf's hand left the beard and scratched the top of his head, diving into the greasy hair. To

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find a job, he would first have to take a shower and cut his blond hair.

The man closed his eyes and immersed himself in the world around him. He observed the whole building, starting with the apartments at the top and ending with the cellars. Everywhere was deserted. All the humans had left the place. The only things that moved were rats and insects.

But he had to eat. The extrasensory vision dwelt on the refrigerator located a few meters from the bed. There was a piece of meat of dubious freshness, some vacuum-packed vegetable mashed potato and some cheap beer. The meal would be frugal.

Pushed by a pressure build-up inside the refrigerator, the door opened. The pre-packaged plates flew out and onto the bed thanks to a gravity gradient between the two sides. The refrigerator door closed with another gust of wind. Once he had the plates in his hands, Rudolf opened the plastic lids, grabbed the disposable cutlery hanging on them and accelerated the Brownian motion of the food molecules. Today, Rudolf wanted to eat something hot.

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Chapter 4

Elijah's mind sailed across the sky of Trom where he met clouds of seaweed. The sweetness of these encounters pleased the god. He was angry at himself for leaving his world behind. But how could he do otherwise?

He enjoyed his work as a teacher-researcher which took up most of his time. On top of that, he worked as a theme and game designer. Finally, there was Winona. And she didn't like being at the bottom of the list. So, Trom...

Since Adriana's and Stephen Lehrer's irruptions, Elijah had been more cautious. He had been really traumatized by what had happened. He would never go into a trance again when he was not absolutely alone.

In addition, he had to visit Anaquine and Naheul from time to time. Elijah felt responsible for these worlds that he had inherited when Stephen Lehrer died. Would they disappear if he forgot them? What if he died? Being a god bored Elijah deeply. He had never wanted to become one. He imagined a universe for his own pleasure and now he was responsible for billions of conscious beings with free will.

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As for the powers he derived on Earth from his divinity, Elijah continued to search for their real use. The necessary discretion of which Stephen Lehrer had convinced him made these powers globally useless.

Certainly, his divinity had saved him from thugs, murdered by Stephen Lehrer. And then it was fun to make ice cream by lowering Brownian motions without going through the freezer stage. Sure, a little cheating on exams... On the other hand, when he had proctored tests, he had been able to expose some very clever cheaters. His reputation for supernatural vision in the exam rooms made all his fellow teachers smile.

During the last geopolitical crisis, he had thought that he could intervene. Finally, a use for his divinity! But his extrasensory vision did not reach far enough to know more than what was said in the newspapers. Before finding a way to intervene, the crisis was over. And the young god had then understood that the villain was not necessarily the one his country presented as such. Elijah had deduced that it was preferable for men to solve their problems without the gods getting involved as long as they were not directly threatened.

Immortality was still there. He could examine human bodies, including his own, with far

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more precision than the most sophisticated medical apparatus. And intervene at the slightest alarm. But what would the world be like without death? How could he ask the Schlagers on Trom to accept the cycle of life and death and not accept it himself on Earth? Whom to save? Only himself? His parents, his friends, his companion? Why them and not others who were worth at least as much if not more? Why not save from death some doctor devoted to the needy, or some great scientist?

So Elijah didn't do much with his powers. He had just taken the liberty, a few months ago, of repairing his arm after a nasty fall down a flight the stairway. The universe wouldn't change if he had a broken arm or not. But his daily life was made easier by this express care.

This weariness of his divine powers disappeared very quickly when Elijah walked in his worlds. Being a god had the enormous advantage of being able to travel in exciting universes without any limits.

The young god sat atop the Sacred Mount that had taken its earthly name on Trom. No flailers had come here for a long time. Chalg was growing old. He had become a venerable and a saint, much listened to by his people. And Elijah was happy and proud of that.

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From the top of this mountain, Elijah looked down on his world. He still took great pride in being the god who created Trom. He was prouder of it than of any theme or game application that had sold millions of copies.

The great cloud of algae passed by the mountain but not at a sufficient altitude to pass over it. The winds diverted it and it went around it. Elijah saw this wave of vegetation pass under him. Further down, in the sudden darkness, in the main temple of the planet, the prayers suddenly became more intense. The darkness, on Trom as on Earth, was frightening. Whether it was just a cloud of seaweed or the setting of the sun, darkness was still synonymous with evil.

Remaining in a trance, taking advantage of the fact that he finally had a few free moments, Elijah left Trom to go to Naheul. He had recently discovered that, in an isolated cave, some beings of this world worshiped a little human girl named Tamara. On the other hand, the cult of Stephen Lehrer had completely disappeared. No doubt this Tamara was the one who had conceived Naheul. But the young god learned nothing about this and Tamara seemed to be long dead.

On Anaquine, Elijah followed some space expeditions between some of its temples. He made

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sure that everything went well. In that world, no parasitic cults seemed to exist. Perhaps Stephen Lehrer had really designed it without stealing it.

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Chapter 5

The red sun of Hyonteinen was setting. Since his victory, Voimakas had abandoned his outlying nest. He now lived in the middle of the hundreds of thousands of individual nests, in a permanent building built specifically for the king and allowing him to fulfill all his prerogatives.

Like the temple, the royal palace was built on a small natural mound. The walls and roof were made of mud mixed with plants. This method gave excellent results without any excessive effort.

The architecture did not allow for flying into the building or even arriving from the air. The halls had low ceilings and all entrances were at ground level. This made it difficult to attack the palace or the temple, or even to fight in it.

When a challenge was made to the king, the fight usually took place in a very formal way, in the arena. Symbolically, it was erected between the palace and the temple. It was in fact only a double circular enclosure. The spectators were seated between the two walls, on the suspension bars of the woven fiber bleachers, the inner wall being low enough not to obstruct the view. Within the inner enclosure was the combat zone.

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Apart from ritual fights, the place was not used much. Occasionally, some ceremonies justified gathering most of the Rukoilis and this was done in the arena.

Since there were no doors, you could only get inside by flying. So it was very private. Nevertheless, meetings that were intended to be discreet sometimes took place there. The enclosure and the shade of the steps allowed a greater secrecy than the different nests, which were mere accumulations of branches and also not very high.

Few people came just to walk around or to meditate.

At this late hour, most of the Rukoilis had gone home, some of them already asleep. The king flew to the arena, accompanied by his bodyguards. Some of his subjects looked up at the sky as he passed. Such an evening outing was unusual.

Voimakas landed in the center of the arena. He shouted his orders and his bodyguards spread evenly around the battle area.

The king was alone, in the place that had seen his victory. In the place that could have seen his defeat and his death. He spun around, looking at the entire empty stands. There was no one left to salute a good fight and rejoice at the death of one of the opponents. What difference would it have

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made if one rather than the other had won? Voimakas had won. He was therefore king. If Blue had won, he would have been king. What would have changed for the people?

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," thought the king. He promised himself to write a poem on this theme.

The red sun was beginning to disappear on the horizon. It would soon be dark. Voimakas had to hurry. He took off and flew towards the temple. His bodyguards, who had not lost sight of him for a moment while keeping watch over the stands, flew after him.

Among the people, Voimakas was increasingly called "the pious one" because he often went to the temple. He had even revived a certain fashion for prayer. The elites now attended the temple more assiduously than before. By contagion, members of the lower classes were also making their way to the Sacred Stele more and more often.

Voimakas landed right next to the Sacred Stele. A priest was waiting for him. A messenger had come to warn him a few moments earlier.

The king placed his four limbs on the ground and kept his wings folded. Even the king had to be humble before the god. The king's head turned

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toward the priest who was holding out an earthenware bowl filled with blessed water. Voimakas' mandibles grasped the bowl. As they did so, they met the priest's for a brief moment. The king had time to decipher the pheromones of this stooge. He read fear in them. Yes, the priest was afraid of the king. This fear was a substitute for respect. No one loved the king, despite all the praise he received. But he was feared.

Voimakas poured the contents of the bowl onto the stele that had been heated by the sun all day. He laid the bowl on its side and placed his head above the stele, spreading his mandibles in the fine steam that was beginning to rise. This vapor rose to the olfactory orifices of the god, it was said. It provided a link between mere mortals and God.

Rudolf Luoja liked Voimakas. He would be a good king. The vapors rising from the stele were charged with a pheromone of congratulations.

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Chapter 6

Finally, the meeting was over. The graphics development team was late again. Winona Verfurt's progress on the coding of the new Gameworld game was therefore blocked. The only things left to do were to integrate the textures and check the general usability.

Winona was about to leave the company premises perhaps a little too happily. The director of development, Alexander Geld, called her before she left. He asked her to stay in the meeting room for a while. He let the designers leave, heads down, and closed the door.

"Let's sit down, Winona," he said as amiably as possible. He looked as bad as he could on a bad day, but he tried to smile.

"Right, sir."

She and the director sat in two adjoining chairs.

"Winona, I'm sorry for the delay again."

"It's not your fault, sir."

"Yes, I do. I'm not trying to shirk my responsibilities. As the person in charge of this store, it's my job to keep it running. And you're an important part of it for us. We're counting on you."

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"Thank you, sir. But what do you want to tell me? Can't we get to the point?"

"If you like. Perhaps you have an appointment?"

"Indeed."

"I am aware that this delay in the project is causing a lag in your own compensation. Would you like an advance?"

"No, that is not necessary. I'm going to have some free time and that's fine with me. But I thank you for considering it."

"I am very disappointed in this team of graphic designers. I'm thinking of parting ways with them. Do you know Pineapple Juice?"

"Of course, Pineapple's graphics studio. Their teams are very good but dedicated to their parent company's tools. And business is bad right now. When you try to rip off the customer by making them dependent on proprietary technologies instead of using interoperability standards, eventually..."

"One of their best teams has left them to come to work with us. But on one condition."

"Which one?"

"To work with you and Elijah Grubler. If they all agree to come to us as a block, with their talents used to working together, it's to work with you two."

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"On the other hand, this team was in danger of losing its job pretty quickly..."

"Not this team, no. If Pineapple Juice had only kept one, it would have been this one. I can assure you that Kevin Worx is furious."

"Who is the team leader?"

"Geoffroy Stark."

Winona Verfurt was speechless. If there was one designer she dreamed of working with, it was Geoffroy Stark. He was the man behind all of Pineapple Juice's latest successes. He had created extraordinarily rich and complex yet totally consistent and beautiful worlds. Yet he was only slightly older than Winona. Five years at most.

Alexander Geld looked the young woman straight in the eyes. The expression of bliss on her young face was already an answer, but the man needed confirmation.

"Winona, it's not just Gameworld that wants an answer. It's me too. I need to be sure I can count on your loyalty. So, Winona, can I?"

"Sir, how could I walk away from Geoffroy Stark when I'm finally going to get to work with him?"

"Thank you, Winona."

The director sighed and relaxed. He had finally assembled the best of the best in all categories. Gameworld was definitely going to

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crush its competitors. Starting with Pineapple Juice. He wasn't supposed to know this (or at least not supposed to take this into account) but having Elijah as Winona's partner had simplified things. Now that they would soon be living together, keeping one also meant keeping the other.

Winona ran out of the Gameworld building. She dexterously slipped through the crowds on the sidewalk and made it to the nearest subway station in record time.

She was glowing. Men would turn around when they saw her walk by, which never happened usually. Winona was a discreet girl. Smaller than average, with a short boyish hairdo, she always dressed in plain colors. Who would notice her?

A subway train arrived almost immediately. It was not quite rush hour yet. Winona was able to find a seat without having to stand the whole way. It wouldn't take very long anyway.

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Chapter 7

The table was covered with a white tablecloth. Beautiful plates of resinated porcelain, crystal glasses and bright steel cutlery had been placed there in harmony following the state-of-the-art. On the side, a bucket contained crushed ice. A bottle of excellent California Champagne was half buried in it.

Hands on hips, Elijah Grubler contemplated his work. Only the most important thing was missing: Winona.

Abandoning the monitoring of the Brownian motion of the ice to prevent it from melting, Elijah Grubler's consciousness moved to the bottom of his building. He felt many people pass by on the sidewalk. Finally, the one he was waiting for was there.

He was tempted to trigger the electrical impulse necessary for the door to open. But such a magical intervention was of no use. It even risked to awaken suspicions in the young woman.

Sighing, he walked to the intercom like any other human being.

The door had hardly been closed that Winona took Elijah in her arms. She put her warm

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lips on those of her lover. His right hand slipped voluptuously in her short brown hair which he liked so much to caress. The other arm wrapped itself around the young woman.

He was about to let go when a hand was placed behind his skull to force him to keep his lips glued to those of Winona. The question now was who would run out of breath first. Elijah had to struggle first.

As his companion looked into his hyperventilating eyes, Elijah's only thought was to get his blood oxygen levels back to roughly normal.

"You should work out more, darling: you're short of breath these days!"

Elijah just shrugged. But this was at least his third consecutive defeat in this little game.

With a broad smile, Winona announced to him: "I have great news to tell you."

"And I have some extraordinary news to tell you, hence the Champagne chilling on the table."

"Me first. Geoffroy Stark..."

"...I left Pinapple Juice for Gameworld on the sole condition that he would work with both of us. I also had a meeting with Alexander today!"

Winona pouted as she lowered her eyes. "I thought I was going to be the one telling you the news..."

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"And that's extraordinarily good news."
The two lovers kissed again.

Controlling the exact level of Brownian motion of the molecules to get a particular temperature had taken some practice. But, by now, Elijah was a master at getting the temperature right. The champagne was perfect. The petits fours were perfect too. A salmon trout with beurre blanc, grilled with small diced vegetables. And a chocolate mi-cuit.

Elijah still wondered how to properly make this last recipe without being a god. The outside temperature had to be high enough to bake the cake, but the core had to stay much cooler in order to remain liquid.

Maybe that's what being a god was all about: knowing how to cook with perfect control of the temperature of each element. It was the only concrete use Elijah had found for his talents in recent years. In addition to having the right to travel through universes more extraordinary than any that would ever exist on a computer.

Unlike Adriana, Winona had never had the opportunity to experience the worlds where Elijah was actually a god. The young teacher was now careful to protect his worlds from any further intrusion. But could he go on lying forever? Even

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if it was only a lie of omission? How could he hide what was an essential part of his personality from the woman he loved?

And so many questions remained unanswered. Perhaps Winona could help the young god. What happens to the worlds when the gods die? Was the Earth also the fruit of a creator god?

Winona had fallen asleep in her lover's arms. Elijah continued to caress her. He had the nostalgia of the moment when she had pushed a small cry of enjoyment. It was thus that he saw from now on his life: an eternal enjoyment in the arms of Winona.

The man gently removed his arm from under the woman's head. He pulled up the comforter so that it covered them both. Then he placed a kiss on her forehead. She smiled.

And then, in turn, he fell asleep.

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Chapter 8

The shutters had not been closed for a long time. The sun awoke Rudolf Luoja as it did every day. His mouth was pasty. He was also very thirsty. He felt a kind of nausea as well. And his bladder was aching.

He did not need to examine himself with his extra-sensory abilities. He staggered to his feet and went to the bathroom. This immediately solved one of the problems.

He scratched the top of his head. Something seemed wrong, but he couldn't quite define what it was. He looked around with his human eyes. The room was quiet, silent even. Too quiet. And the lights that dotted all the electrical appliances were all off. The usual hum of the old refrigerator had also stopped.

He tried to turn on an electric lamp but could not. His computer was also out of order. A quick extrasensory inspection of the electrical outlets confirmed that there was no voltage.

Puzzled by the continuing silence, he turned around and found that the flush tank was not filling. He opened a cold water tap and the water did not flow. Rudolf Luoja grumbled.

No water, no electricity.

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As he thought about it, he realized that he hadn't paid anything, rent or bills of any kind, in connection with his apartment for at least six months. The last thing he had bought was probably his medieval-fantasy theme for his website. He remembered that his bank account was almost at zero after this operation.

He walked over to the refrigerator and opened the door. The temperature inside was similar to that of the room. There was no cool breeze coming out of the appliance when he opened it. The few things that were left inside were starting to get moldy.

How long had he been asleep? The last thing he remembered was activating parts of his brain with his extra-sensory abilities. He'd had a hell of a good time on massive doses of endorphins. A little too much perhaps.

The nausea came to recall to his conscience. In fact, he was hungry. And still horribly thirsty. Not to mention that he stank like a herd of goats as his nose suddenly told him.

In a cupboard, he found two cans of soda. The drink was not at the right temperature to enjoy the taste, but that didn't matter. It contained a good dose of sugar and water. It would allow his body to wait a few moments. It was necessary to put the machinery back in motion step by step. So he

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didn't even bother to lower the Brownian motion so that the drink would be fresh.

He took off his old T-shirt and shorts and threw them in the corner of the room. Projecting himself into the hot water tank, he saw that it was full of water at almost the right temperature for a bath. He filled the bathtub and managed to find some shower gel and shampoo. Washing was the first thing to do before going out. And going out was necessary.

Once clean, he found some usable clothes in a closet. So he got dressed. And, finally, he presented himself in front of the door of his apartment. He stood there for a few seconds. How long had it been since he had been out? He had his groceries delivered most of the time.

He grabbed the door handle and turned the mechanism. The door opened. He thought about grabbing the keys that were hanging on a nail and closed the door behind him.

The landing and staircase were pitch black. Even the emergency lights seemed to be out. Rudolf Luoja had to use his extra-sensory abilities to get down the stairs without missing a step. The door to the building was open. It was even unhinged. It was necessary to push it with force to pass. There must have been miserable people who

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had forced their way into empty apartments. Or maybe drug dealers.

People were passing on the street. Some were using vehicles, individual or collective, and speeding along the road. Others were walking on the sidewalk. Rudolf Luoja was breathing hard. He was paralyzed. Yet he had to go to a store. He had to eat.

Trying to remain as natural as possible, he inserted himself into the crowd. Well, let's say he slipped in among the few people passing by on the sidewalk at this hour. He just looked up to see a sign announcing the upcoming demolition of his building.

A little further on, on the front of a store, he saw a luminous sign indicating the time, the date and the temperature. Reflecting a little, Rudolf Luoja thought that he must have slept at least three days.

Eating and drinking were now his only goals. He would deal with the rest later.

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Chapter 9

For three days now, Winona had settled in. She had connected her computer to the network of Elijah's apartment: it was the clear sign that the move was serious. On the other hand, she had to work while her companion was giving his first classes.

She had only brought with her the bare minimum. A few clothes and accessories, her computer, her virtual reality glasses... enough to fill two large suitcases carried in a simple cab. The real move would come later, to an apartment or a shared house. A house would be better, in a nice neighborhood. Staten Island? The disadvantage would be the proximity of the in-laws, but from that point of view, Winona was rather well suited. And then, if there was to be a child, people who were not yet old and still able-bodied could prove useful for babysitting...

The computer scientist logged into the dashboards of her creations. Her latest medieval fantasy theme was selling well. The customer feedback was excellent according to the semantic comment analyzers. Connection rates were close to 100%. In fact, there was only one buyer who hadn't connected their theme. When she tried to

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see if there was anything wrong with that copy, she found a disconnected site.

She observed the market trends. Elijah was not wrong when he said that there was a lack of games in pseudo-savage worlds. The last ones to hit the market were several years old. She looked at the list of Geoffroy Stark's creations and the types of worlds he had already created with his team. In fact, he did not seem to have worked on this type of virtual world before, but he had already created pseudo-farming, including fantastic animals, and obviously had a perfect command of natural and pseudo-natural graphic elements.

Elijah had left some notes on what he was planning to create. The ergonomics would be quite complex. And the limits of current tools would be quickly reached. Creating a whole planetary ecology on a sylvan world would not be easy. This could be a nice challenge to impress the market. A challenge worthy of Geoffroy Stark's first collaboration with Gameworld.

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Chapter 10

By mid-morning, the small fast-food restaurant was empty. Rudolf Luoja entered, attracted by the smell of hamburgers and other fast food. To reach the counter, he had to cross a room where one could sit and eat on plastic tables. But Rudolf Luoja didn't want to linger.

He could see behind the counter the stock of drinks and food, including a series of burgers ready to be eaten. Right next to it, bottles held cheap sodas.

The salesman waiting behind his cash register instinctively stepped back as Rudolf Luoja approached. The movement was hardly noticeable, but nevertheless very clear. It also took at least a second for the salesman to adopt the smiling and engaging attitude that his employers demanded of him.

"Hello sir, what can I get you?"

Rudolf Luoja was startled. He was no longer used to hearing a human voice addressing him. He pulled himself together. He looked up from the menu as if he were trying to find an answer. At the same time, he made sure that the vendor was alone. By mid-morning, the kitchen staff was

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gathered in the break room, further back, behind a heavy door.

Then Rudolf Luoja focused his attention on the salesman's throat. The movements of the throat betrayed an unusual stress. The salesman suspected something. He sensed a threat in Rudolf Luoja. The god of Hyonteinen smiled. The salesman was right. Rudolf Luoja was indeed a threat. He was a penniless guy who was hungry and thirsty. And a god among all things.

Suddenly, the salesman grabbed his own throat in his hands. He staggered. He was choking. He couldn't make a sound. He couldn't understand what was happening to him. He didn't even notice that the metal curtain protecting the store during its closing hours was beginning to come down, as if the fast food restaurant was actually closing its doors. The metal curtain locked as the vendor collapsed to the ground, having lost consciousness. Rudolf Luoja went behind the counter, helping himself to burgers and drinks.

The god of Hyonteinen liked the breath-holding trick. It was a trick he had seen in old science fiction movies where the evil lord of a galactic empire used it repeatedly. When it came to knocking someone unconscious, it was quite practical and easy to do. The god was soon fed.

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Rudolf Luoja had taken a bag in which he had placed a few hamburgers that he had not eaten right away as well as a few bottles of various drinks. His stomach was full, but he would have to eat again later in the day. Until then, he could rest and think about his situation.

Hyonteinen gave him satisfaction but the Internet frustrated him and, above all, the Earth posed serious problems. He had to act.

The metal curtain was back in its high position, the fast food restaurant was reopening. The vendor was gradually regaining consciousness. But he wouldn't see anyone in front of his cash register anymore. Nobody would have stolen any money either. Only a few hamburgers and drinks were missing. Rudolf Luoja was already walking briskly home. He was no longer nauseous.

He took a better look at the sign in front of his building: the destruction was going to start very soon. The Brooklyn Heights neighborhood was just across the street from Lower Manhattan, to which it was connected by the Brooklyn Bridge over the East River. And the neighborhood was in the process of completing its gentrification.

The landlord was probably waiting for Rudolf Luoja to stop paying his rent long enough

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to evict him. He was the last occupant of the building.

To enter the hall, he had to force the door open again. He passed the mailboxes.

He didn't have his key to open his, but each mailbox was locked only by a small latch. A small piece of metal. Metal that heated, heated, heated... Soon, the Brownian movements of the metal atoms caused the latch to liquefy. Rudolf Luoja tore off the door. A drop of burning metal fell to the ground, a few centimeters from the god's shoes. He swore. He could have been hurt. He had to be careful with his powers. His mishap with the endorphin stimulation should have taught him a lesson.

In the mailbox, there were several letters with guaranteed traceability, the kind of letters that lawyers use when they want to be able to prove that the recipient has received the information they want to transmit. There was no need to open the letters to understand their content: reminders of bills, a court summons, an order to pay the rent and to leave the apartment, an eviction notice... He should have left the building almost a month ago. Rudolf Luoja took it all away in the bag that already contained the hamburgers and drinks.

He began to climb the stairs while projecting his extra-sensory awareness into the building. He

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first examined the highest floors and then gradually descended. Several doors had been forced open, smashed open even. More exactly, all the doors had been destroyed with a sledgehammer starting from the top of the building until two levels above the residence of the god. The few pieces of furniture which could remain here or there, abandoned by the last occupants, had been knocked down, or even destroyed with a sledgehammer.

People were breaking down the doors just above Rudolf Luoja's house. It didn't take a god to figure out that they were going to attack his apartment in a few moments. There wasn't much to steal there, but it wouldn't protect Rudolf Luoja's remaining wealth from the looters of ruins.

The god started to run. He arrived on his floor at the same time as the three men he had detected. They used flashlights and shone them into Rudolf Luoja's eyes.

"Who is this guy?" asked one of them.

"Who the hell are you, man?" the second one snapped.

The third had left his comrades to worry about the surprising presence of Rudolf Luoja in the abandoned building. He attacked the door of the apartment with a sledgehammer. The door literally exploded with the second blow.

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The one who had opened the passage exclaimed: "Hey, guys, there's stuff in there. We won't have come for nothing after all."

The first of the looters brandished his own mace at Rudolf Luoja, threatening him: "Get out of here, man. The building is ours. No room for two teams of looters."

Rudolf Luoja felt anger come over him. Since the building had to be destroyed, he might as well have fun and make things easier. He might as well destroy what little he had left and start again somewhere else. To become free of all ties. But these looters were threatening him. It was an intolerable insult. He alone had to destroy his own property.

The gravity suddenly became so great on the landing that the three raiders were thrown to the ground. The landing collapsed onto the lower level. A chain reaction began. The landings above also began to collapse, covering the three thugs with rubble as they screamed in terror.

But the whole building was destabilized by the collapse of part of the stairs.

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Chapter 11

In front of the abandoned building, the real estate agent was enthusiastic. Elijah Grubler listened as he tried to find usable information within the laudatory descriptions of the future building that would be built within six months.

"The building will be demolished as of tomorrow and in its place will rise a residence of great standing with the latest technology..."

"In fact, my partner and I were considering a house a little further away, but the location of this building is indeed ideal. The price of the apartments is a bit high, though. Even with my royalties, I'll have trouble paying my share. And I can only borrow with the guarantee of my regular salary."

"Our financing offers are very advantageous..."

"What the hell is that noise coming from the building?"

In the residence now abandoned by the former inhabitants, the three looters expired under tons of rubble. Their bodies were barely recognizable. Rudolf Luoja felt the stairs give way beneath him. He was in danger of suffering the

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same fate as the thugs. Manipulating gravity again, he jumped into his apartment, over the gap left by the collapsed landing. Then he let the laws of the Earth take their place. The stairs collapsed, floor after floor. The concrete dust invaded everything.

Rudolf Luoja coughed. But he did not need to see with his eyes to know where he was. His extrasensory vision allowed him to find an old oil tank in the basement. It had never been dismantled, nor even cleaned properly. The building was more than a century old and very little work had been done on it.

Since everything had to be destroyed... The residual gases heated up. They were mixed with air, enough air to explode. The remaining fuel oil vanished, carrying the fire wherever the blast took it.

The blast had thrown the realtor and Elijah Grubler into the middle of the street. Cars had come to a screeching halt. Concrete dust filled the neighborhood in the form of an opaque fog.

Rudolf Luoja landed softly on the sidewalk, hidden by a fog that fell to the ground slower around him than elsewhere.

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Chapter 12

Magic. Magic was at work. Elijah Grubler felt it. Gravity was being manipulated. A strange man was at the center of the distortion of the universe. He seemed to be enjoying the destruction.

But Elijah was in pain. He examined himself. Several broken ribs. Some of his lung alveolars were torn. One of his legs was broken. Nothing too serious. He ordered his cells to do the right thing. He stopped the internal bleeding by cauterizing the torn vessels.

Rudolf Luoja felt he was being watched. Someone was watching him. He shrugged his shoulders in disdain. An illusion, no doubt. He turned back to the already weakened building. This time it was threatening to collapse at any moment.

Manipulating gravity was beginning to tire the god of Hyonteinen. He concentrated on the irons reinforcing the concrete. By raising their temperature, he softened them. The concrete exploded around them. He chose to collapse the first few levels on the side opposite the street. Soon the whole building was a pile of rubble in what had been his backyard.

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The god of Hyonteinen was about to leave the place, covered in the remains of the concrete fog, when he found himself confronted with a man about his own age as far as he could tell. The intruder was indeed covered in dust and bruises. And the man's eyes were staring at Rudolf Luoja.

"Who are you? Why did you destroy this building?"

Who was this weird dude? How did he know what had happened? Rudolf Luoja did not answer the questions asked. He was a god. He did not have to stoop to answering questions from a stranger.

Elijah Grubler felt his throat tighten and lock up. The man in front of him was indeed a god who was using his magic to try to kill him. But he didn't seem very powerful. It didn't take much effort to free his throat.

Rudolf Luoja saw his magic countered. The guy in front of him was at least as much a god as he was. That changed everything. So there could be several gods on Earth. What a mess this world is! How to get rid of it? After all, we might as well go back to the old ways.

He grabbed a piece of rebar, a sort of braided stake made of metal fibers, which was lying on the ground among some rubble. He grabbed one end

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of it and used it to try to hit his opponent in the head.

But his adversary quickly moved away, increasing the gravity where Rudolf Luoja was standing. The sudden increase in weight of his weapon surprised him. With a small cry of distress, he collapsed to the ground, the metal bar hitting his head.

Leaving the inanimate god for a moment, Elijah turned back to the real estate agent's body. He had lost consciousness. Both legs broken. When the building had exploded, he had been standing with his back to the wall, carrying a backpack containing paper documents and various personal belongings. His back had been protected. A little dust in his lungs but nothing too serious. Bruises all over. Ah, a small blood vessel had exploded in the brain. There was the beginning of a hemorrhage. Cauterize. Coagulate the effusion.

As the firemen's siren drew nearer, people began to dare to enter the remains of the concrete fog. Most of the dust had settled. The whole neighborhood was covered with it.

A woman in her fifties approached Elijah.

"Are you all right, sir? You shouldn't be standing around. The fire department is coming. Sit down on the curb."

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Elijah nodded his head in agreement. He pointed to the body of the real estate agent, to whom three young boys, possibly high school students, were busy applying first aid protocols learned in school.

"This man was with me and he has two broken legs."

A middle-aged man had knelt down beside Rudolf Luoja. He had laid him down, placed an object under his head and checked that he was breathing.

There did not appear to be any other victims. Some of the passers-by were covered in dust, but he must not have been close enough to feel the blast.

Elijah looked at the ruins of the building. All that remained was a pile of rubble. This would speed up the construction, perhaps. Unless an interminable lawsuit would bring it to a halt. Which judge, which insurer, would accept to believe in the existence of gods? Who would want to assume an explanation of this nature?

What disturbed the god of Trom was the fact that he had discovered another god here, still in his city. How many others were there?

He needed to know more about this unknown god.

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Chapter 13

The web did not allow itself to be mastered. The Earth had only caused him problems since his childhood. Only the big red sun of Hyonteinen reassured and soothed him. Rudolf Luoja was happy on this world.

The god was flying over the largest of the cities built by the Rukoilis. Around the royal palace and the temple, innumerable nests were placed in concentric circles, with alleys that served to evacuate rainwater and also served as sewers.

Except for the two small artificial mounds where the two official buildings stood, the place was pretty much flat. The Rukoilis were not bothered by the rain, which washed over their shells without any damage. At most the drop in temperature was unpleasant. But the climate of this part of the planet was warm.

Other cities, further away, in colder climates, used different architectures. The nests were then covered and one reached them by a door arranged on the side. They were thus gathered by small groups around a square where the inhabitants could land or take off before entering or leaving their nests.

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But here, the nests were open towards the top. There were just small holes for water to drain from the sky. Most of the nests remained inhabited by a single individual. The female nests, on the other hand, were much larger and could accommodate the young, from the larval stage to adolescence. But the older the young became, the less time the young spent with the mother, who usually had many other young ones to care for.

Life was swarming. Death was close behind. Many young people, victims of the countless duels and trials that marked their education, would never see adulthood. To give death or to receive it. And when victory was theirs, they had to thank the god who admired their world.

Rudolf Luoja was proud of the world of Hyonteinen. This world was his creation. He had built it day after day, trance after trance, hiding it from everyone. In the beginning, he had told his mother about his dreams. At first she was amused, then she openly mocked the world when the boy was old enough not to dream like that anymore. This is how Rudolf Luoja discovered his divine powers. His mother had died. He had to accept living with his father, while the doctors could not understand what had happened to his mother, whose heart seemed to have been consumed.

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Then came the age of discretion. His father, who had been away from home for years, knew nothing about Hyonteinen. He did not learn anything. He wouldn't have been interested anyway. As long as he could drink alcohol, eat pizza and watch television, he was happy. Or so it seemed.

Being less and less often at school, a fact that his father was indifferent to, Rudolf Luoja had chosen to spend a maximum of time in trance. He missed his world when he was away from it. His father never responded to summonses from teachers or educators. When a social worker showed up, he would shut the door in her face.

After several years, Rudolf Luoja decided to leave when he was about fifteen years old. His father died shortly afterwards, as his son found out by chance when he passed by the neighborhood again. A heart attack story.

Modifying his identification papers by destroying the ink he wanted to remove and lightly burning the areas he needed to recompose the correct characters, Rudolf Luoja found a place to rent. A few odd jobs, petty theft and various expedients allowed him to survive.

But as time went by, he preferred to devote himself more and more to his world. There he was God, he was all powerful, he was happy. The

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voluntary reclusion ended with this eviction notice and the destruction of his building.

So he had taken refuge again under the reddish sky of Hyonteinen. What did the Earth matter. Never mind Internet. Never mind all the frustrations he lived in these worlds. He was a god. He might as well stay that way.

He didn't pay attention to the soul that was sailing not far from him. Elijah Grubler observed this strange world, so different from his own, so violent, so primitive. Now that he had established the connection, he could return when necessary.

On Earth, the doctors were unable to resuscitate the stranger who had been knocked out by a concrete bar. However, there was no trauma of any kind. They decided to place the stranger under observation, with intravenous feeding.

The real estate agent and the teacher who had been caught in the same incident had woken up a few meters away from Rudolf Luoja. A few wounds and bumps but nothing serious. Elijah had indeed taken the liberty of repairing the real estate agent's body, feeling guilty for having brought him there at the wrong time. And then, it was only a matter of suppressing the intervention of another god.

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Chapter 14

The turkey was almost cold. Elijah could feel it. Discreetly, he revived its Brownian movements, just enough to make it enjoyable to eat. It had taken so much time to reassure his parents while eating the starter... The turkey had gotten cold.

After two days in the hospital for observation and some tests, the doctors agreed to let him go home. His parents, of course, rushed to his bedside. And, now that he was officially well, they invited their son and his girlfriend to dinner.

Winona would have preferred to rest more these few days. But she could not accept her companion's request to leave him alone on his hospital bed. She had brought him his laptop and his smartphone with shared connection. Like many people, even next to each other, they often communicated via digital interfaces.

In their case, they had an excuse: to set the foundations for their next virtual game world. Work with Geoffroy Stark's team was about to begin. The market would not understand if the best talent on the planet did not come together to create the best universe.

Elijah was also able to keep in touch with his students and the university. He had switched

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classes with a colleague to avoid losing teaching hours.

Finally, everything was going to be okay. Elijah was back in school. Winona had also started looking for a new place to live. Being more fortunate than her companion, the house she had visited the day before, in Clifton, on Staten Island, had not exploded at her approach. The house wasn't very big, so it wasn't too expensive, but the land around it was large enough to build a new room or two if need be.

William and Susan Grubler were delighted that their son's girlfriend liked the place. Without expressing it openly, they hoped that she and their child would move there. It was not far from their home. They could expect to see their son often in person, not just by video conference.

Elijah was to visit the little pavilion in a few days. Winona had described the place in such a way that he would want to see it.

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Chapter 15

Trom. Trom, at last. Elijah could finally return to his world. Winona was sleeping, one hand on her lover's chest. But the god was not sleeping. He had returned to his creatures and was wandering here and there.

The soft caress of the seaweed clouds filled him as much as the delicious air. But Elijah wanted to go beyond his world. Didn't the Schlager Chalg find this world too small, too lonely? Wasn't there so much space lost if his planet was the only one to honor the creator god? Elijah had been drawing entire galaxies for some time. He placed civilizations in them. Their past had always been, even when he had just invented it. Being a god also allowed him to free himself from time. Each one, then, lived its life. Some civilizations disappeared very quickly, often because of a generalized war. Others swarmed on various planets. The god had conceived them as technically evolved. A large part of the universe remained vague for the moment but sufficiently defined so that no creature suspected these imperfections. And all of them had, at one time or another, revelation of the god who had created them.

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Chalg had become a wise old man. But his god still paid special attention to him. He too would have to die, soon, like so many others before him. No one was to escape, for such was the order of the world of Trom, as was the order on all the renewing worlds. In the face of births, deaths were necessary.

Chalg could feel when his god was paying attention specifically to him. That night, the Schlager was weary. Life was slipping away from him.

"I would like to continue to live," the creature murmured like a prayer.

His god heard him.

The Schlager was sitting in a nest perched in the trees. He was looking at the sky. He was looking at the top of the mountain, where he had met his god. The winds were eroding the rocks there. There was no vegetation growing up there. Chalg knew he no longer had the strength to climb to the top. But perhaps his god would still agree to perform this miracle.

Elijah flinched.

Chalg flew up to the path that led to the top. He couldn't fly up there. But he could climb the rocks by following the path of the runoff, as he had done many times before. And, tonight, he felt he had to climb to the top of the mountain.

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A dozen young Schlagers came to land beside him. They wanted to dissuade him from enduring such an ordeal.

"Master, you are now too old to overcome such an ascent," the only one who dared to speak said to him with respect.

"I feel God's presence upon me and I must go up to where I met Him," Chalg replied.

"Master, you are going to die!"

"Perhaps, if it is God's will."

"How can you agree to go to your death like this?" questioned a young female.

"Death is a part of life and my own life, in any case, will soon come to an end. I would so much like to meet my God again before I pass away that perhaps He will be willing to grant me that grace."

Chalg set out on foot on the way to the summit. It was dark and cold but nothing could stop the old man. The starlight was enough to guide him. He wanted to be at the summit for the main sunrise.

The young people looked at each other. They hesitated for a few moments and then, one after the other, they went behind their master. They knew that many of them would probably not return alive from this expedition behind an old fool. But this

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old fool was their master and the goal of their expedition their god.

Probing the resolute heart of his creature, Elijah gave up trying to dissuade his worshiper. Since he had to die, the last tribute his god could pay him was to allow him the ultimate freedom to choose his death. And that this choice had the sole purpose of going to meet him pleased Elijah.

The dawn came faster for the god than for his creatures. They had to climb the mountain first in the icy night of Trom's world. Sometimes a cloud of seaweed blocked the sky, preventing the starlight from reaching the ground. But the winds soon blew away this hindrance.

A young female and a male who cared for her were the first to give up. They had spent the previous day harvesting fruit for the clan. They were exhausted. They stopped in a hole inside a rock and huddled in each other's wings. Those who continued simply saluted them. All felt their god around them. The couple became aware that their union was blessed by the creator of all life. The two young Schlagers embraced even more and fell asleep, exhausted.

At dawn, they would make love together for the first time as they felt the desire together. And this union of bodies would also be a union of their

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souls. The god revealed to them in their sleep that this union would not be sterile.

Further on, in another rock hole, another disciple gave up. He fell asleep without even having the strength to salute his companions. They continued their way. It was like this every time the little group got smaller.

Always, in front, Chalg walked.

He didn't feel the cold. He didn't feel the hunger. He didn't feel the thirst. These prices of life no longer affected him. He was going to die and no longer needed to eat, drink or even be warm. Now he wanted only one thing in this world: to reach the top and, if his god agreed, to be able to meet him once more, one last time.

Behind him, his last disciples followed him. When, at last, the summit appeared and the last few meters of the ascent had to be crossed on all fours, there were only three of them left behind their old master.

Far, far away, the main sun was beginning to be visible. The first rays of its light were reaching the horizon.

On the weathered platform, Chalg stood up. He watched the dawn break. His heart was gripped by the beauty of the spectacle. For the world that his God had created was magnificent.

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The three disciples knelt down behind their master. They were exhausted but happy to have made it this far. They admired the majesty of their sun as their master could.

Then they became aware of the presence of their God. A presence that went beyond what could be felt in any part of this world. The attention of God was fixed on the top of that mountain, on Chalg and his disciples.

"Well, Chalg, there you are again," said Elijah.

The Schlager knelt down and answered: "Yes, my Lord and my God. The hour has come to place my life in Your hands."

"Death is part of life. Why did you accomplish the feat of this climb again?"

"I wanted to admire, one last time, the beauty of the Creation of my God, and, if my Lord consented, also to converse with Him one last time."

"I had read that in your heart, Chalg, and I am proud of your faith."

As the sun began to shine on the mountain top, Chalg did not speak. His heart had stopped beating. His disciples lay him down and wept as their master's face showed the most intense joy for eternity. Elijah felt the need for a miracle. Then

H u m a n g o d s

Chalg's body was consumed and the ashes scattered to the winds.

When the disciples came back down, they had an even stronger faith in themselves. Elijah was crying in his bed.

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Chapter 16

Without the graphic textures, the forest world looked mostly like a very gray, wireframe world. In the restricted area of his server, Elijah began to lay out the elements of his personal forest, using his imagination to estimate the final effect. The work of Geoffroy Stark's team would be fundamental, but Winona had already done wonders. This forest world was going to excite the market.

Elijah placed the first automatic creatures, some sort of bird and feline chimeras. Their final design was not quite set. The animal's movement was jerky as it leaped from branch to branch. Elijah placed a voice note in his tracking application: if a server like the teacher's didn't keep up with the computing power, the average consumer probably wouldn't be able to start this game. So optimization was a must.

For a few hours, Elijah continued his tests before inviting Winona to visit the result. For the moment, this part of his universe was very restricted. It was not to be leaked. Gameworld's competitors were waiting for him. And the trade journalists were all wondering what the combination of the best available talent would turn

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out to be: a dark dreck, with overly strong talents that could only annihilate each other, or a summit that would set the market standard.

Winona, on this day, was working in the Gameworld office. She was in the process of transferring all of her belongings from her old home to her companion's and her home server was not necessarily in the best of shape.

Moreover, in the age of digital civilization, there were still unbearable administrative delays for certain official acts such as the purchase of a house.

Elijah pushed his laptop away. He had just logged out of his local server. He blinked to get back to the real world, at least his home world because all worlds were real.

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Chapter 17

Hyonteinen was a harsh, even cruel world. But Rudolf Luoja was proud of it. It was the only world where he felt good. It was his world. On Earth, doctors were trying to keep alive a body that no longer wished to remain on an unpleasant world.

The soul of the god had approached a female Rukoilis. She had flinched and offered herself to him in mystical exaltation. It was the first time the god had mingled with his creatures in this way. But he felt the need for a more intense union between himself and his world.

While his human body was massaged to avoid dermal necrosis and fed intravenously, the god had taken refuge in an egg. There he discovered the simple joy of eating the supplies provided.

Then had quickly come the larval stage. To be able to move only by crawling. To feel his body growing by bursting little by little the proto-shell. The pain of each stage of growth could have been terrible but it was, for the god, only an information. Little by little, the god grew in his body. Time passed quickly.

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His mother had named him Ja Sirkka. The name came naturally enough: it meant God's anointed. More than any other mother of her children, she was proud of her son's dark green, red-striped body. She had more affection for this little one than for the others. Even though he was rather frailer than average.

But there was something special about Ja Sirkka. It was like an echo of that strange night when the mother had felt the presence of the god of her people deep in her flesh. An indefinable echo, as if young Ja Sirkka had a sacred imprint.

His brothers and sisters attended the teachers' workshops in earnest. They were learning everything that would make their future life. But Ja Sirkka always seemed to know the content of the teaching already. When a teacher asked him a question, he could answer without hesitation, even though everyone knew that he did not pay any attention to what the teachers said or demonstrated.

More and more, the others were moving away from Ja Sirkka. Not only the other children but also the adults. The teachers were happy to take care of his brothers and sisters, but found a thousand excuses to avoid teaching Ja Sirkka.

During the first few games, Ja Sirkka proved to be quite good. He was able to outwit his

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opponents while keeping them off balance. But he didn't hit them, just held them down.

Rudolf Luoja was discovering the lives of his creatures in a way he had not thought of. But being one of them changed many things. He was no longer a mere spectator enjoying their adventures. He was in their midst. He was living what they were living. He loved them even more.

And this world he had shaped was his own. Here, he could not complain about not understanding it. Nor could he complain that everything was hostile to him, as on Earth. Hyonteinen was his. Hyonteinen was him. Hyonteinen included him now.

Never to return to Earth. To abandon his rotting body that a medical team was trying to maintain in state. This was now his ambition.

Hyonteinen was a magnificent world whose thousand wonders he observed. For the time being, he was still young and therefore had to live in his city, with his mother, in her nest. Soon the time would come to join the hunters. Soon would come the time to live fully, as an adult, in a Rukoilis shell. It would have to make a nest.

And every evening he watched the great red sun set as if he were discovering it for the first time.

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The vast red sphere was millions of miles away, yet it occupied a good portion of the sky. The star was giant but not very hot. And it rubbed off on the color of the sky by giving it this eternal pinkish tint, a tint more or less darkened in the course of the day or the seasons but always in the same tones.

Only poets and fools could spend time looking at this sun. Wasn't it there since eternity? Wouldn't it always be there? What was the point of looking at something that was the same every day?

This added yet another oddity to Ja Sirkka's already busy record. But Rudolf Luoja's soul needed this observation. He needed to admire the star, the sky, his world.

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Chapter 18

"In accordance with regulations, as you are one of the direct victims, we inform you that the investigation has been closed."

The policeman gave Elijah a small stapled folder with a barely cardboard cover. The teacher couldn't remember how long it had been since he had been given a paper document. When he had received a summons from the police station, he had feared that he would be implicated in some shady affair: a jealous colleague seeking to antagonize him, a young student who thought his sympathy was too enterprising, another author attacking him for plagiarism, and so on. Seeing himself summoned in this way just to be given a document in exchange for a handwritten signature had deeply surprised him, then almost made him angry at the waste of time, and finally amused him. Things that seemed natural in all areas, like exchanging signed electronic documents, were still pipe dreams in some areas. Sometimes, as he grew older, he found himself in the shoes of his father and perhaps even his grandfather. Paper! What an antique thing!

Elijah thanked the man. Then he walked out with his file under his arm, not sure how to hold it.

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It was bulky. Not really heavy: a few pages, a light cover... After a few attempts at various positions, Elijah decided to bend it into a sort of half-tube to hold it in one hand.

When he arrived home, he found Winona staring wide-eyed at the curious pile of leaves. Elijah had to explain to her what it was all about. Yes, there were still occasions when documents were transmitted in paper format against a handwritten signature. She shrugged, indicating, "It will be the same for the purchase of our house."

"Here, that's right, I had to call the agent..."

"Don't worry: I did it this morning. Everything is ready. All what's missing is the seller's final agreement, who is a bit stubborn because of our price negotiation. Then it will go quickly."

Like two children discovering an antique in the attic, Winona and Elijah placed the document handed to them by the police officer on the table and began to physically examine it before reading it. The police considered the collapse of the building to be an accident related to the explosion of an improperly cleaned oil tanker. They had closed the case because of its legal complexity: the owner had been put into liquidation and the building bought back through an auction by the developer. Therefore, there would be no

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prosecution for not cleaning the tank. The document specified that the victims could, however, bring an action themselves.

Elijah took his smartphone and called the police officer in charge of the case whose number was mentioned on the file. They quickly went through the usual greetings.

"I would like to know what happened to the other two direct victims."

"I'll be frank with you, Mr. Grubler. The reason the case was closed is that it will be difficult to hold the developer liable. The real estate agent is going to be marketing the new building and he understood that it was better not to try anything. As for the other victim, he is a homeless man who was evicted from the building that blew up a few months ago. In fact, it is not impossible that he was responsible for the explosion, as an act of revenge. In fact, the bodies of other tramps were found in the building. If that were the case, he would have no way of compensating you.

"And what happened to that homeless guy?"

"He's still in the hospital, in a coma."

"Thank you."

Elijah waved and hung up. He had little desire to take legal action against the promoter anyway, knowing full well what had really

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happened. But the case of this tramp intrigued him. He would have to return to his world, Hyonteinen.

He summarized his conversation with the policeman to Winona. Then he inquired: "but by the way, weren't you working at Gameworld today?"

"It's not necessary. I integrated the first textures from Geoffroy Stark's team. I've also optimized the code to avoid the bloat you saw. I'll run a build from here."

"Doesn't Gameworld have its own computing servers?"

"They haven't had any internal capacity for a long time. Like all companies, Gameworld buys the capacity they need when they need it. Link encryption and splits between different virtual servers make hacking illusory."

Putting her money where her mouth is, Winona picked up her console and showed her companion how she reserved computing capacity in a farm of multiple servers.

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Chapter 19

Not very nice. Elijah had not appreciated the reaction of the nursing staff when he had gone to the hospital to check on the tramp injured in the same accident as him. Medical confidentiality. He was not a relative and therefore had nothing to know. If it was to find out if the homeless man wanted to join a trial, it was useless as long as he was in a coma.

But now he knew roughly where this guy was located, in what building and on what floor. Elijah made himself comfortable in the first-floor bathroom. He locked the door and projected his extra-sensory awareness. The people who were hospitalized in this ward really didn't look good. Coma was the most common condition. Many had suffered serious injuries, especially to the head.

That was it. Elijah found the one he was looking for. And his consciousness was no longer in his body. The man had reduced himself to the condition of a god from another universe. He had totally turned over.

How long could it last? Would the divine soul manage to survive if the body died? Elijah would have to examine Hyonteinen in more detail.

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But this was not the time. He flushed the toilet and left. First, he had to leave the hospital. Then he had to take the subway to the university. He couldn't keep his students waiting when he demanded perfect punctuality.

The university hadn't changed much in appearance since Elijah had been a student there. The halls had been repainted, the seats sometimes changed. And the students, like the teachers, had faster networks.

A few students were already in the lecture hall when Elijah entered. He greeted them before connecting his laptop to the ceiling projector to project whatever he wanted onto the large screen mounted on the wall above the teacher's podium. Elijah had no doubt that one day the big screens would disappear. More and more teaching was taking place at a distance. In technology, this was common. In more literary subjects, where intense discussion was the rule, physical presence was still more comfortable. For the time being.

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Chapter 20

The big red sun was rising on an extraordinary day for all the youngsters of Ja Sirkka's generation. Already, the teenagers had scouted out where to build their nests, marking the location with their pheromones and sometimes after a few struggles for the best spots. Although they were still living with their mothers for the time being, some had started to build their nests.

Ja Sirkka had chosen a quiet place, a little on the outskirts, not far from the forest. No one had competed with him for the place. Other locations were also available nearby. He had started to build the foundations. Normally, no one should complete his nest before being adult.

And, for that, it was necessary to cross an important stage: the Reception.

All the young people had gathered in the arena. The parents were crowded into the stands. The teachers lined up next to the altar at one end.

The Callers had perched themselves on top of the circular wall. They sounded their horns together. The young people responded to the call by forming a circle around the edge of the arena.

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As his bodyguards dispersed to join the Callers, King Voimakas landed in the center of the circle formed by the young people, followed shortly by the High Priest. Rudolf Luoja smiled inwardly. He was about to be initiated into his own cult by a priest who was his creature. But on Hyonteinen, he was no longer a God: he was simply a youth named Ja Sirkka.

Practicing ritual calling gestures, screeching his imprecations with appropriate pheromones, the king would call the youth to fully join the tribe. The Callers would blow their horns in response to certain ritual calls. Everything was highly codified and monitored by the High Priest.

Rudolf Luoja did everything to prevent his Ja Sirkka body from laughing, but the situation was still funny. He had always hated any kind of ritual, but now a ritual was being imposed on him, designed and performed in his honor alone. And those who were imposing this to him were his own creatures.

The king had finished his part of the ritual. A special ringing of the callers signaled to the young people that they should now line up facing the altar and thus facing the teachers.

In turn, called by the High Priest, each young person would come and prostrate himself before the altar and then turn to face the crowd and his

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fellow students. He then shouted the ritual phrase: "I answer the call of my fathers and my mother, I answer the call of my tribe, I answer the call of my king and my god". The High Priest then symbolically raised him and used his mandibles to coat him with the pheromone of acceptance.

The ceremony went on normally. Finally, it was Ja Sirkka's turn. Very moved, he came to prostrate himself before his own altar and then turned around. He then began the recitation but could not help pausing after "my king. He had to say "and of my god," even though it meant "and of myself.

His hesitation didn't last, but it was enough for him to be interrupted by an old pedagogue who didn't like him.

"Reject!" the pedagogue shouted as he emitted a pheromone reinforcing the message. He flew up to land next to Ja Sirkka with a menacing look on his face.

The incarnate god was taken aback and did not finish his ritual sentence. He looked at the king, who was impassive. He looked at the High Priest, who was as stunned as he was. He looked at the crowd, which was agitated, and at his mother, catastrophized.

"Why do you reject Ja Sirkka from our people?" the High Priest suddenly asked.

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The pedagogue bowed to the High Priest and the king and justified his interruption: "He is not healthy and behaves like an apostate. Moreover, he has not completed his acceptance by refusing to answer the call of our god."

"You interrupted me!" offended Ja Sirkka.

"You have hesitated for a long time," said the teacher. He continued: "And this rejection of our god is not a mistake due to the emotion of this special day. I have seen this many times. You are an apostate and a blasphemer who can only bring misfortune upon our people."

How could Ja Sirkka react? How could he be accused of not believing in himself? He thought about how to respond as the crowd's roar grew louder. The pedagogue didn't give him a chance to think of an answer. He smashed his chest with two of his claws. Immediately, he took him with him as he flew away.

The pain was intense. It started from the chest and spread to the whole body. Ja Sirkka was suffering in his rukoilis body. And Rudolf Luoja was suffering with him. On his hospital bed, his body twitched.

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Chapter 21

For the first time in months, Elijah Grubler and Winona Verfurt were going to see their old friend Leonardo Fabricci. It was to celebrate the signing of the purchase contract for their house in style. After sharing the ritual bottles of champagne with their respective parents the previous weekend, the two happy buyers celebrated with their old friends. Leonardo Fabricci was one of them: the three of them had met at Gameworld several years before.

Nevertheless, the long-awaited arrival of this friend was a cause of concern for the hosts. They had been careful to keep everything out of the way between the apartment door and the table. They both feared that their mutual friend had become totally blind because of his disease, a type of eye degeneration, which had been progressing rapidly for a little over a year. Elijah had had the mechanism of the disease explained to him, but he was reluctant to use his divine powers because he was afraid of disturbing the natural order of the Earth.

The invited friends arrived one after the other and the state of Leonardo Fabricci's health became a topic of conversation each time.

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Finally, he was the only one missing. And when the doorbell rang again, Elijah got up and turned on the video camera. Leonardo Fabricci was wearing sunglasses.

"Do you want me to pick you up at the front of the building?" asked Elijah.

Leonardo answered with a smile: "That won't be necessary, thank you".

He crossed the door and went without hesitation to the door of the apartment where he was invited. He greeted his host who had come to open the door and walked directly to the available seat at the table.

"Don't you have a white cane anymore?" a guest asked.

"No, indeed," confirmed Leonardo with a smile of someone playing a little joke.

Stared at by all the friends present, the black glasses looked very strange. They had a thick top bar with a small module in the center, above the nose. Finally, two earpieces were attached to the branches. The friends remained silent for a few moments while Leonardo smiled in a joking manner.

He eventually explained, "In fact, today, instead of being disabled, I am an enhanced human, a physically connected human. My glasses include a radar and tell me with sounds how to

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navigate. And so I can direct myself even in total darkness."

The topics of the evening's discussions alternated between transhumanist prostheses and Winona and Elijah's new pavilion.

These exchanges left Elijah wondering. What use were divine powers in a world where technology could solve all problems? He, who rarely used his powers, could only see the vanity of divinity. Becoming immortal and healing himself from every incident were both the only proven uses and the greatest dilemmas for Elijah. Changing the rules of the game of life in this way had to be ruled out. The only disadvantages of divinity were an overwhelming responsibility and the risk of attracting the jealousy of the other gods.

What is the point of being a god? What would happen when he finally died? Would his worlds disappear with him? What had happened to the worlds created by other gods that had necessarily already existed?

How many gods existed on Earth? How many universes had been created? How many had disappeared? How many had changed owner ?

All these unanswered questions...

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Chapter 22

The fact that what had been science fiction a few years earlier should pop up for good in his entourage gave Elijah the urge to visit his technically advanced universe, Anaquine. Of the three universes he found himself a god of, it was perhaps the one he cared least about, the one he visited least. It is true that Elijah devoted less and less time to his divinity because it was complicated for him to enter into trance alone, without risking that his companion also enter by inadvertence into his universes.

Religion was disappearing there little by little. Many worlds no longer had active temples. Spaceships crossed considerable distances without the questioning of why this universe existed being a relevant question for the multiple races present.

Elijah was almost certain that Anaquine had been conceived recently. It was too inspired by the science fiction worlds of the late twentieth century. Who had created it? Stephen Lehrer could not have been the creator. But no trace seemed to remain of its true creator god, unlike in the medieval universe of Naheul where a small sect continued to worship a goddess named Tamara in secret.

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As with every world and every universe, creation was accompanied by a story. There was thus a past created with the present of the moment of creation. This past was considerable for Anaquine. But this did not prevent the creation from being recent in terms of earthly time.

Religion did not seem to be an important component of the rules of this universe, apart from a kind of pantheistic belief that did not justify any cult, except for the existence of an order of chivalry defending a certain moral order against the most varied of troublemakers.

The creator god of Anaquine must not have wanted to be worshiped or recognized. He must have been a simple observer, unlike Stephen Lehrer who developed his religion to increase his divine powers.

Elijah drifted along the trade routes frequented by multiple spaceships. He quickly visited many worlds in a very short time. To be here and the next moment elsewhere, without taking into account the physical constraints imposed on the universe considered, remained a divine attribute particularly appreciable in any of these autonomous space-time locations.

He was suddenly surprised to feel a sense of discomfort on an isolated world where his random wanderings had brought him. Something was

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happening on this world that was disturbing the texture of the universe. Elijah focused his attention on this strange sensation.

The world in question was a desert planet with no indigenous life. There was little water and few living beings outside the planet's capital, in fact a simple astroport with the dwellings of the personnel maintaining it, a few hotels and a few shops. The planet was a stopover and a place where raw materials were extracted in highly automated mines. Why fix his attention here? There was nothing there. The capital temple had been abandoned for years, if not centuries, in local time.

The disturbance came from the heart of the equatorial desert. Sandstorms regularly occurred there, circling the planet and cutting it in half, as it were, between two hemispheres with milder climates.

The knights, guardians of the moral order of the universe, had strangely gathered in large numbers on this planet. They went on patrol, two by two, and returned to report to the local headquarters of their order, in the capital. They too had felt this disruption in the rules of the universe. And their role was to restore order, to re-establish the normal rules.

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Elijah was a god. He did not have to search endlessly in sandstorms. In fact, he didn't mind them at all. The sand didn't get into his lungs and tear them apart from the inside, or into the turbines of motor vehicles and destroy them by abrasion of the most fragile parts. The wind did not prevent him from moving forward. The alternation of hot and cold at different times of the day and night, the rise and fall cycles of the sand-laden air, and the thousand rules of local meteorology did not bother him at all as long as Elijah was comfortable in his bed on Earth.

The god thus arrived well before the knights at the place they were all looking for, even though they had not slackened their efforts for months in local time. It was a cave in a small mountain range eroded by the endless sand winds. The cave was well hidden, very discreet. And its occupant did everything to remain discreet. Or almost.

The gravity and temperature of the cave varied without logic. The little water passing by could be captured, sucked up and precipitated in liquid form in a sort of small underground lake.

Elijah approached the creature. It was obviously in a trance. And she felt the divine presence. She dared to address her god without hesitation.

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"I knew that You existed and that You would come to me, recognizing me as Your equal!"

"You are only a creature from a forgotten world in a universe that I own. How can you be my equal, I who am your god?"

The creature started to laugh.

"What does it matter what you were born with? You may have been born God. I was not. I became one. I, your creature of a forgotten world. Today I am a god myself."

Elijah became frightened. What was this creature talking about? Then he understood. He entered the creature's trance and discovered a fertile forest world. Anaquine had now generated her own God.

Disturbed, Elijah moved away from the cave, leaving his own creature's universe as it laughed at the surprise of the god of its universe. She manipulated, perhaps less carefully than usual, some physical variables. Elijah took altitude. He saw several patrols of knights coming from various places.

The creature was unsuspecting. It remained in a trance, enjoying its divinity in its forest world. It only sensed the presence of a pair of knights when they were right next to it. Too late. The creature was brutally disintegrated.

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Elijah was shocked by this violence. But he refused to intervene, as he was deeply disturbed by this chain of events.

But with every misfortune can come something good. Elijah had entered the forest world created by this now annihilated creature. His mind knew the way.

So he went back.

This universe was still there. The disappearance of its creator did not seem to have disturbed it. Elijah found this world rather frustrating and limited, even more so than Naheul: a few planets and a single intelligent race honoring their creator with primitive devotion. Nothing interesting. Except its very existence.

The disappearance of a god did not seem to impact the universe he had created, even in the absence of a new god. Elijah was relieved. He now knew that his own universes could survive his death as long as their coherence remained perfect.

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Chapter 23

Thrown unceremoniously on a small mound away from the city, Ja Sirkka suffered. He was the incarnation of the god of Hyonteinen. He was Rudolf Luoja. He forced himself to remember this. But he was above all a Rukoilis. He had wanted to be a Rukoilis.

His wounds, two holes in his dark green carapace with thin red stripes, had more or less closed up. In any case, they were no longer bleeding. But it would take time for the internal organs to heal using only the natural principles of this world.

This is how it had to be, however. It was Rudolf Luoja's choice. He had to be a Rukoilis to the end. If the Earth or Internet had given him nothing but annoyance, he could not complain about the universe he had created himself. And that meant not changing the rules of this world. There would be no miracle.

Ja Sirkka first climbed into a large tree fern. Its top would not be as comfortable and safe as a real nest, but it would do. First he had to rest.

As soon as he was settled in the hole, which he did not fit in, he fell asleep. He had no more

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dreams than the other times, except for his human dreams. On the hospital bed, the lifeless body of Rudolf Luoja was suffering from another world. The earthly doctors could not understand what was going on and were trying to wake up a body that refused to be awakened.

The big red sun rose and set several times before Ja Sirkka awoke. His body was suffering less except for thirst and hunger. The Rukoilis raised his head to the sun. His mandibles were drawing what looked like a smile. He had survived. He shouted his joy.

Its claws tore the leaves from its refuge. The paws carried the food to the mouth where the mandibles tore it apart before allowing it to be swallowed.

The plant was bleeding a rich sap. The Rukoilis drank from the wound. Already, what took the place of a trunk was beginning to sag: the plant was wounded by the one it had protected and that, now, it fed.

That was the rule on this cruel world: kill or injure to live but in the end always die. Just like on Earth. Perched in his increasingly precarious shelter, while eating, Ja Sirkka meditated along with Rudolf Luoja.

Was such a world necessary? Yes, without a doubt. Life and death had to go hand in hand to

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ensure the renewal of generations. The existence of life implied the existence of death. Rudolf Luoja tried to recall all his courses in ecology and biology.

But the cruelty? Wasn't it the fruit of his own perversity, the one he had cultivated on Earth through his frustrations? Was it necessary for the Rukoilis to kill each other?

Ja Sirkka felt his lair collapse. Sated, he flew away for a few moments to land a little further away. His body was sufficiently healed. He decided to take a better look at where he was.

The pedagogue had taken him away from the city, into the great forest that surrounded it. The place was suitable for the beginning of an exile. The message was clear: go away and don't come back. No one had supported him. No one had the right, not even his mother, except the king.

To return to the city would in itself be a challenge. It would mean defying the pedagogue who had exiled him and defying King Voimakas. Victory against the king who had accepted the request for exile by his silence would be the price to pay.

Violence. Violence. Violence.

Ja Sirkka had no desire for all this violence. Rudolf Luoja loved his world and did not want

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there to be so much suffering. Did such a world deserve to exist?

For a moment, Rudolf Luoja considered destroying his work. He was a god and this universe was his. The exploding star would solve the question. Or even, with a simple thought, Hyonteinen would never have existed. This universe was the fruit of a man's brain. It was enough that this brain decided to destroy this universe. There would be no suffering. It would be the end of all sufferings. There would be no suffering at all: by losing his present and his future, Hyonteinen could also lose his past. The only trace of this universe would exist only in earthly time, in the memories of a deranged brain located in a body plunged into a voluntary coma. It would be enough then that this human body dies in its turn and all would cease. Nothing would have ever existed.

Ja Sirkka cried out in pain. No, he could never destroy the one world where he had the power to do everything. If this world did not suit him, it was his sole responsibility. He could not, here, turn his back on it.

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Chapter 24

As a student, Elijah Grubler would get to college first by bus, then by ferry, then by subway. This would soon be the case again. He could also, as in those days, walk between the ferry and his house. There were several possible ways: inland or along the coast.

The house he had bought with Winona in Clifton had, on the first floor, a large living room with a built-in kitchen, a bathroom, a toilet and a bedroom. The attic was unfinished, but could be accessed by a staircase that had already been installed. "Later, for the children, for their rooms" had said Winona while smiling. Elijah had not upset her. He had smiled and nodded.

They were going to create life, together, not in some world but on Earth, not as gods but as ordinary humans, like billions of humans before them.

They had made love on the thick carpet of the room before they had even begun to unpack. It was to bless the place, Winona had said. Elijah had found this ritual to his liking.

Electricity, water and telecommunications had been connected before the couple even moved in. Winona had decided to turn on her local server

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just after having made love to Elijah. He was still lying down, in the mists following the orgasm. She had escaped from his arms with a kiss as a pass.

She had opened the dedicated cabinet, inserted her local server, connected it to electricity and the network, and then started it up. A few moments of waiting and anxiety. New tests. Relief. The server was properly inserted into the network.

It was time to start opening the countless boxes carried by the movers. The house was ready to receive its new residents.

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Chapter 25

Being so close to the City that rejected you can only be the beginning of an exile, just the beginning. Rudolf Luoja, of course, knew the entirety of his world. Other, smaller cities were scattered all over the continent, more or less subservient to the king of the main city. The few scattered islands in the vast ocean remained untouched by advanced life.

After taking a last look at the vast fields of tasty fruit that surrounded the city and sometimes followed some river or comb, Ja Sirkka turned around. He saw only the immense forest. The further he looked, the wilder the world he saw. The next city was far away, after many hills.

Were there other creatures in exile? Yes, of course. It is difficult to count them. Some had fled a duel or a challenge. Others had been rejected. Meeting any of them would be difficult and not necessarily desirable. No doubt some tried to get into a city different from their home city, but unless it was a feat or an extraordinary set of circumstances, such a fate was undoubtedly rare.

Ja Sirkka took flight. He flew straight ahead, without looking back. He had nothing more to do in this city that had rejected him, the god of this

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world. At least, for the moment. He knew that his purpose would require him to return. But a lot of local time was going to pass.

On the hospital bed, time passed much more slowly for the earthly body of the god. But months followed months, while on Hyonteinen the years went by.

The doctors continued to be at a loss. The brain remained blocked, refusing to make contact with the Earth. But the body was functioning almost normally. Some physiological difficulties occurred because of the immobility but nothing that modern medicine could not solve in one way or another.

And that the body was alive could not be questioned in any way. The brain was working. The heart was working without assistance. It simply worked for the benefit of a world that was not on Earth. And the doctors could not imagine that their patient was a sleeping god.

The medicine of the time was not used to treating gods.

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Chapter 26

The forest world created by this being from Anaquine's universe continued to exist. It had no name that could be pronounced by an earthly throat. It was frustrated and limited. There was less and less prayer to a god who had disappeared and was therefore silent. But this world existed. Elijah walked in it but did not reveal himself.

He met creatures he would never have imagined. The ecology in place was complex. But how small this universe was! No more than on Earth, would the creatures meet beings from other worlds: there were none. What would have happened if this god from Anaquine had lived? Not to alter this universe, even marginally, was a form of respect for this god. It made Elijah smile, but indeed, somewhere he recognized the creature of one of his universes as his equal. Both were gods.

For the time being, there seemed to be no similar phenomenon either on Naheul or on Trom. Art was recent there according to the scales of their respective times. Imagination came well after free will. It would probably take many more generations before gods appeared on these other

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worlds, but Elijah had no doubt that the phenomenon would eventually occur.

Setting up his new home, teaching classes, developing his new game world for Gameworld... All of these tasks were already taking up so much of his time. Elijah couldn't walk around his worlds like he used to on Trom. At least not as much.

And this abandonment left the god with a feeling of guilt. Can one thus abandon the universes that one has created? After all, they were great, these universes. They could manage very well without a god. Anaquine, in particular, was doing just fine.

The commute to and from college was often the perfect time for Elijah's solitary musings. Walking, looking out over the hypnotic Manhattan skyline on the ferry, holding a bar on the crowded subway, Elijah thought. Elijah would get lost in his thoughts. He was known to do this, and no one cared anymore that Professor Grubler didn't greet him as he passed by but not directly under his nose.

That day, he was early. The weather was nice. Elijah had chosen to actually go for a walk using his usual route. He had left much earlier than necessary. He made a detour to Silver Lake and its park. He even sat on a bench by the lake. During

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the week, there were not many people in the park. In fact, Elijah was alone. So he decided to have some fun.

In the center of the lake, he froze a certain area of the water to a depth of about one meter. The fish that were around naturally fled. The laws of physics were not altered more than necessary: the ice cube rose one tenth above the surface of the water like any good iceberg. Then the god decided to vaporize the surface of this huge ice cube.

The smoke rose from the lake. It was clearly visible from the shore. Elijah was amused by this poor little magic trick.

And then, suddenly, he remembered why he had had this idea. That was how he had proved to himself, in front of Adriana, that he was indeed God. This was the beginning of a drama that led to the death of the young woman.

Elijah was no longer smiling. His throat was tight and tears were close to flowing. He had to remember that divinity brought jealousy. Adriana had died for powers that he no longer used, except to enjoy himself.

Annoyed, upset, the god jumped from his bench. He fled, from now on, this lake which reminded him of these painful memories. He was running away from his memories. The iceberg did

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not take long to disappear completely. The laws of the terrestrial nature took their rights again.

To calm himself, Elijah forced himself to abandon a running pace. He had plenty of time left. He adopted a slow walk again, the one of a walker, the one he wanted.

Little by little, the pain of the memories faded. The place remained beautiful. It calmed any irritation.

At the bend in the road, Elijah came across an old abandoned chapel. It had probably been a long time since anyone had prayed there. The temples and other churches in the city were already becoming more and more deserted, so it was not an old chapel lost in a park that could attract people.

It had probably been built in the middle of a garden long before. Trees had since grown all around it. Some of the roots were even lifting stones from the foundation. Plants were climbing up the walls.

The path Elijah took passed within a few yards of his porch. The god left the path to approach the abandoned chapel. He became aware of the place. He saw the stones. He saw the worn beams beginning to rot. He saw the roof that was letting the rain in.

The lock on the door was locked. The key had probably been forgotten somewhere by

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someone who didn't even remember having it. Elijah saw the primitive mechanism of the lock. The weight of the door was changed from time to time, on this gear or on that one. That's it. Child's play. The lock was open.

Only the peg remained. Elijah played with it. The door opened.

The place was dark. It was deserted. It was gloomy. Empty.

Elijah walked into the nave. On the floor were roots, mold, and lichen. Many of the plants present were dead. The light had dried up over the years. The stained glass windows had become opaque with dirt. In front of some of them even trees had grown.

Several benches had collapsed under their own weight after rotting. The others were not much better. Elijah refrained from trying to sit down. Through the roof, the sky could be seen in several places. Every rainfall must have added to the havoc in this abandoned place.

The plan of the chapel was simple: no transept. The single nave led to a choir reduced to its simplest expression. The cross fixed at the back of the chapel had fallen to the ground. The statue of Christ had broken.

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The place was deserted, abandoned. The cult was barely a memory. This is what happens to gods over time.

On his way out, feeling melancholic, Elijah closed the door. He was not at home. He had cavalierly invited himself there, but the polite thing to do was at least to close the door when leaving the place.

Going back to the university, the professor remembered his travels around the world. He remembered those ruined temples. Of all these forgotten gods.

Had either of them dreamed the Earth? Perhaps the world was so pretty and complex because multiple gods had successively taken on the task.

What could he know about it? No God had invited himself into his trances to reveal his existence, his history, the story of his creation.

Before she died, at least, Anaquine's creature had had this opportunity. She had met one of the gods of her universe. But if she had asked questions, Elijah would have been unable to answer: he didn't know who had created Anaquine.

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Chapter 27

The place where Ja Sirkka had built his nest was away from the big cities but had a splendid view of the ocean. He could no longer benefit from the crops or livestock of a city, so he needed to settle in a place that was not only pleasant but also able to feed him. Rudolf Luoja wanted to remain faithful to his principle of not intervening in a divine way on this world of which he was the only designer and thus the only one responsible.

Like a city, his nest was built on the ground. But he had made a covered and enclosed version, as the Rukoilis were accustomed to do in cold climates. The entrance was even enclosed by a door made of woven leaves. Here, however, the climate was pleasant and mild. This weak door had another purpose: it should be enough to ensure his safety.

Ja Sirkka was proud of his work. He landed next to it after flying around it. He looked at it again and again with satisfaction. The nest was solid and, according to the aesthetic criteria of this world, rather beautiful.

His rukoilis body was crying out for food and water. Ja Sirkka closed the nest with the woven leaf door and walked to the stream that

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flowed nearby. He didn't bother to fly away and walked to it on his feet. Settling on the bank, he bent over until his mandibles dipped into the water. The cool water flowed down his throat. It did him good. The simple joy of simple things, the ordinary pleasures of an ordinary body. Rudolf Luoja had been incarnated as Rukoilis to experience these sensations, to be one of his creatures. Once his thirst was satisfied, Ja Sirkka would go to the forest to pick fruit. Perhaps he would hunt on that first day and eat the flesh of wild animals.

But suddenly the wave became turbulent. Ja Sirkka quickly retreated to the shore. The creature had not been sharp enough. It was an elderly specimen that suddenly rose out of the water. A long body with over twenty sections, each with its clawed legs but also its heart and lungs. The beast did not have many mandibles suitable for manipulating objects or making tools. The head was just endowed with a few strong, sharp mandibles, made for killing and cutting. The long body was as big as a dozen Rukoilis put end to end but it had no wings.

Ja Sirkka flew away quickly, letting the predator crush the now empty shoreline with his weight.

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Chapter 28

The new forest world was now installed on Elijah and Winona's local home servers. Of course, it was also installed on the servers of each member of Geoffroy Stark's team as well as on Alexander Geld's. It was accessed each time through a secure interface. Only the Gameworld boss and the members of the project team were allowed to enter the demonstrators as well as some testers.

Everyone had set up his copy to his taste, trying to take advantage of the universe's possibilities. The result was particularly successful virtual worlds, all built on the same model with the same basic bricks but all different from each other. Winona had built a kind of labyrinth of trees with branches and lianas creating passages and even meeting rooms. Elijah, on the other hand, emphasized the ecological variety and the autonomous virtual animals that the visitor of the universe could meet in the vast forest. The graphic designers of Geoffroy Stark's team had rather tried to harmonize the different shades of leaves, the shapes of trees, etc. Finally, Alexandre Geld had tried to see how to create a simple world without reading the complete documentation. He had the

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opportunity to congratulate Winona for her work on the ergonomics.

The project was coming to an end. The commercial release of the game world was starting. The only thing left to do on the design side was to carry out some technical tests and optimizations. As usual, the graphic designers and technicians had struggled: a small pixel could give a graphic object a nice touch, just a small pixel or two (or, let's be honest, a hundred or two hundred), but this detail required a consumption of computing resources out of proportion to the effect produced for the ordinary consumer. Elijah and Alexander Geld had to be the ones making the final decisions.

Finally, the pre-launch meeting was called by the Gameworld boss. Winona and Elijah sat down across from each other in the publisher's large meeting room. All the team members quickly joined them.

Using their different laptops, they all logged into the copy deployed on a company server simultaneously. They appeared as avatars in a clean, clear clearing.

The clearing was vast. A lion came to lie at the feet of Winona's avatar, purring. The young woman could not help but have her avatar pet the virtual animal.

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"Familiarity set to maximum" noted the programmer.

Elijah's avatar shrugged. The place seemed to have been designed to be totally inviting, a kind of Eden. Around the perimeter of the clearing, monkeys leaped in the trees, but their cries remained limited. Alexander Geld hated noise. The lion moved sluggishly from one team member to the next in the manner of a big cat that liked to cuddle.

"The lion's attitude is not at all feline. We should review its behavioral engine."

The graphic designer who had complained was interrupted by the boss: "I set him up to act like this. The important thing is not that the lion has the attitude of a real lion, but that it does what our customers want it to do. I can assure you that I tested the behavioral engine set to a natural mode. I had to switch back to setting mode after having my avatar eaten three times."

Each participant laughed. The main thing was that the client could make his virtual animals adopt a credible mode. Then he had to be able to modify the creatures as he saw fit. One of the designers had created a relatively friendly triceratops monkey that he was very proud of.

Alexandre Geld took the floor again to announce: "The launch will take place in one

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month to the day. The marketing team has defined the name of this universe. It will be Sylvania. The advertising campaign is underway. For the moment, we are showing my copy to journalists who are committed not to say too much. Their first articles are laudatory and fuel the expectation. The name of the product will be revealed in two weeks, at the same time as the launch of pre-orders."

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Chapter 29

Elijah could finally breathe a sigh of relief. The academic year was coming to an end. The work on Sylvania was coming to an end. His new home was settled. He could think about himself again, about his desires, about his divinity.

In her office, Winona was working on fixing all the little bugs that were still lying around here and there. She was, unlike Elijah, in the middle of an overload. He still came to greet her with a chaste kiss on the forehead, to which she only replied with a grunt. He was going to take a walk in the Silver Lake Park. Despite the upset he had experienced there, Elijah sat down on the bench facing the lake. He stretched his legs. He breathed in the warm, fragrant spring air with all the strength in his lungs. He was happy.

He checked that no one was around. Finally, he could dive into the worlds he knew.

A quick tour of Trom. Elijah wanted to start there, but he also wanted to see how certain situations were evolving elsewhere. He promised himself to come back to caress clouds of seaweed, to attend births or to accompany the dead... Later on.

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Anaquine continued her quiet existence. A few wars did break out here and there. A planet had been ravaged by nuclear bombs not long before. Elijah was furious, but he did not intervene. He simply made sure that the situation had stabilized and that the entire universe would not self-destruct in the near future.

On the Naheul side, dragon hunting methods had improved significantly. Metallurgy had progressed a lot. From now on, these immense predators were careful to avoid villages that had become too dangerous.

The universe he wanted to visit most of all was Hyonteinen. Due to lack of time, he had not been more interested in this strange world, apparently created by this tramp whose name he had finally learned through an indiscretion of a nurse. His name was Rudolf Luoja. And he was still in this very strange coma as Elijah had seen when he went to the news.

Obviously, Rudolf Luoja had taken refuge on his world. He was probably better off there than on Earth. But his body would eventually die. He had to be found. He had to come back.

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Chapter 30

Ja Sirkka, shaken by his encounter with the predator at the river's edge, had first taken refuge in his nest. He had closed the door. He had remained prostrate. If he had been human, he would have cried. But he was not human. He was a Rukoilis. A Rukoilis like the others.

One day. Then a second. Ja Sirkka was thinking. Rather, he was meditating. Life, death, violence. All of these topics swirled in his mind. Why was this world he had designed so violent, so inhospitable? Certainly, death was needed to balance life. But now he refused to allow people to kill each other in his name.

The ritual fights that he had once enjoyed so much, now that he lived in the shell of a Rukoilis, horrified him. He loved his world and wanted to love all its creatures. Death would have its place only when it was necessary.

After three days of fasting, driven by hunger, he opened the door of his nest. He looked at the ocean. His world was beautiful. He was right to love it.

But something was bothering him. He instinctively looked up, searching the sky. But

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soon he saw the human beside him. He recognized him, even though he had only seen him briefly on Earth, many years ago, at least according to local time. That was before he was even born. His birth as Rukoilis of course.

"I had a hard time finding you: your divine trace is weak and it is still curious to see you here in the guise of a native," announced Elijah.

"Who are you? What are you doing in my house?"

"My name is Elijah. Like you, I am the god of universes. And you see that we can visit universes, provided that a spirit takes us there at least once. I met you when you destroyed your building. And I followed you the first time, only to know how to return. I came to look for you. Your human body will die. It's been in a trance for too long."

"Go away. I don't care about my human body. May it die. And I don't have time to argue with you."

"No time? But, if you wish, you can be eternal!"

"No. Life must end in death. But what does it matter? Right now I'm hungry and I have to go get fruit or hunt animals."

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"But what for? Look at this stone. All you have to do is want it and it will be the most delicious food."

"I don't want to feed on such food. My food must come from my world."

Then, Elijah, amused by the turn of events, allowed himself to intervene on this world. He manipulated gravity. He carried Ja Sirkka into the air, who was more stunned than anything else.

"Shall I restore the coherence of your world? You are God, here, and one thought from you will be enough to land you softly as if angels were gathering your body."

"If I fall, if my wings get stuck, then I would die. It's that simple."

Putting him on top of a high mountain from which multiple cities could be seen, including the capital, Elijah addressed Rudolf Luoja.

"Look at your world. Be a God and your power will dominate each of these cities. You do not have to suffer their law."

"Go away. This world is mine. I will fight for it."

"That won't be necessary. Since you don't assume your rank, who cares? I warned you about your body. I can't force you to come back. Farewell."

Human gods

Then the parasitic god that had disrupted Hyonteinen's universe disappeared. This did not change the fact that Ja Sirkka had to find food.

He landed in the forest and gorged himself on fruit. It seemed to him that he had never been so happy. For the first time, he met a Rukoilis who was as lonely as he was. They hit it off in a few minutes, exchanging some fruit for a piece of meat from a local animal, which turned out to be very tasty.

This Rukoilis also had to leave his city. He had refused to fight against a friend during jousts. He did not want to kill him. So the friend pierced his abdomen and took him into the forest with orders never to return.

Others lived here and there in the forest. Each one had its story. Each one had its pain.

Even here, on a world that he had designed and for which he was responsible, Rudolf Luoja saw misfortune. He lived it or saw it.

As the small band that had formed was having dinner together one evening, Ja Sirkka stood up and shouted, "How can one love the creator of this world without sharing the love he has for his world and each of his creatures? How can one love God if one does not love one's neighbor?"

Human gods

Chapter 31

"We are about to finish the year," Professor Elijah Grubler announced to his students.

Not taking offense at the satisfied sighs he heard - he had been a student too - Elijah described the rest of the program.

"First, we'll finish the cycle on the hero and the superhero, from Homer to Marvel and DC Comics. We still have a few things to look at on the coherence of universes and the trick of the multiverse or uchrony in the late twentieth century CE. We'll end the year with a course, or rather a directed assignment, on religious mythologies, a bit on the fringe of what this course is about, but we'll only look at the topic from a literary perspective."

Elijah Grubler paused. He looked at his students. Some were glaring at him. To dare to approach religion from a historical, psychological, archaeological, anthropological, or, worst of all, literary angle was considered by some to be a serious offense to their increasingly minority beliefs. The decline of the great religions that have dominated the last two millennia often provoked in their followers a feeling of personal aggression as soon as the subject was broached. As if they were

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being taken personally for fools. Which was not always wrong, by the way.

The professor continued.

"So, here, neither philosophy nor theology. We will not deal with the theses defended by my dear colleague Carlos Joven, from the chair of ancient history, in his last book *The Cross, the Fish and the Apple*, a book that unleashes passions even in the Vatican. To defend that Christianity, and especially Catholicism, is a syncretism between not only the Essene neo-Judaism, the celto-Germanic cults and the oriental mystery cults like Isis or Mithra (with the goddess of Heaven Anahita, immaculate virgin, mother of Mithra, as later Mary was mother of Jesus and proclaimed *Queen of Heaven*), but that it also borrows a great part of its doctrine from Orphism, will not interest us as such. If you want to please Carlos Joven, you will be able to be interested in the crossed reading of the myths of the descent to the Underworld of Orpheus and the evangelical account of the Passion and the Resurrection, even the accounts of the fall and the original sin by the fact on the one hand, for Adam and Eve, to bite the apple or, on the other hand, for the Titans, to kill and devour the flesh of Dionisos whose ashes gave birth to men. But no more.

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We shall therefore endeavor to see how gods of all kinds, and especially the accounts of their feats, meet the criteria of fantastic fiction in terms, above all, of coherence and completeness, but also of cross-references between accounts by different authors, at different times, in order to identify archetypal trends. Is the fourth chapter of Genesis such an incongruity as is often said? We will see together. Until then, I wish you a good end of day."

The class was over. The students gathered their things and left the room. A few of them glanced at their teacher with anger as they passed. Considering religions as mythologies and from a literary angle, there was something to be said for that. Elijah did not care. Was he not a god himself? Of course, he could hardly admit it.

When the professor found himself alone in the classroom, he had some reckless fun. Talking about gods amused him madly. He did not forget that he was one.

He made remote controls used to operate the video-projectors fly in his hand before bringing them by levitation, with precision too weak for the exercise to be successful on the first try, to find their place in the closets designed for them. He smiled. Then he decided to leave the room, too.

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As soon as he walked through the door, he found himself on the floor with a violent pain in his head. Someone had hit him. Someone who was hiding behind the door and waiting for him.

"God is not a fiction, you bastard."

The individual started to run. He was fleeing the scene of his crime. The hallway was deserted. He had covered his head with a hood.

Without thinking, by reflex, Elijah became aware of his attacker. He recognized him at once. And he made him fall, simply by playing on gravity. At once, Elijah regretted his too visible gesture. But this gave him time to get up and go to meet his attacker, whose hood he removed.

Elijah had recognized him without having to look at him with his own human eyes. But the aggressor had to know that he was recognized. And in a completely human way.

The student was suffocating on the ground, under the pressure of gravity he was not used to. And he didn't understand what was happening to him. Elijah Grubler looked him straight in the eye. Gravity returned to normal.

"Idiot!" the teacher said distinctly before walking away.

Human gods

Chapter 32

The small group of outcasts that had formed had eventually migrated to the ocean, each creating a nest near Ja Sirkka's nest. The food was abundant and the climate mild. There was a lack of females to consider this place as a city on the rise. They were very rarely subjected to exile, so attracting females to a renegade camp would not be easy, except by force. Or a miracle. But both solutions disgusted Ja Sirkka.

Then, one morning, the incarnation of Rudolf Luoja got up first. He meditated while looking at the ocean, while his companions gradually woke up. One by one, they came to stand beside him and to meditate following his example. The last one had been meditating for a short time when Ja Sirkka stopped and faced them.

All were surprised. But their master mind shouted at them to be quiet and listen to him while his pheromones were reassuring. He was obviously going to make an important statement to them.

"I cannot hope to change this world by staying on its margins. It is not enough for me to comfort the outcasts. So I will join my City and train the Rukoilis to love one another by renouncing killing one another."

Human gods

There were squeals of horror, pheromones of panic. By all accounts, it was a suicide. Still emitting soothing chemical messages, Ja Sirkka confirmed his intentions but asked them not to accompany him into the City.

"It's my job to go out and carry the message, my reason for being. Not yours. If you want to come with me, we'll meditate on the hill where I was dropped off by the pedagogue who excluded me, and then you'll wait for me there. I will return alone to the City.

The pheromones emitted were those of acceptance of fatality, of sadness. There were no protests: everyone knew that it was useless to try to change the mind of the one who had become their guide.

The first mate came forward and smeared Ja Sirkka's head with pheromones of friendship and support with his mandibles. He shouted that he would accompany Ja Sirkka to the hill, as his master had suggested. Then he stepped back to return to the others.

One after another, each in turn, the other disciples did the same. Ja Sirkka felt comforted even though he knew he might die. Even though he felt that his death was necessary for his role to be fulfilled.

Human gods

The whole group went to the woods to eat fruit and drink from the river. The silence was heavy. Death seemed to hover over them.

Then they did a final meditation together before flying away. They flew in a travel formation, Ja Sirkka in the lead and each of the others shifted both to the right or left and backwards from the one in front. The result was a beautiful, blistering triangle across the skies.

They did not rest until they reached their goal. Exhausted, they landed on the hill where Ja Sirkka had been rejected.

They rested and meditated, looking at the great city that had expanded since Ja Sirkka left. Ja Sirkka was looking especially at the temple. That was where he was to go during the next great thanksgiving. He knew it. He, who had been accused of impiety, had to conquer the temple with his Rukoilis body. The temple where people prayed to his human soul, the one who had created this world.

They fed in the vicinity and built a temporary collective nest. In the city, if anyone noticed them, no one did anything. No one cared about outcasts camping on a hillside in the middle of nowhere. And no one was supposed to care.

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As his companions watched him walk away, Ja Sirkka flew over an almost deserted city. It was the holiest day of the year. The entire population was gathered, except for the sick and a few females who had to care for very young larvae. Sentries were also on guard, but they did not take notice of a lone Rukoilis flying toward the temple.

Leaving the stands, Ja Sirkka circled the sacred precinct as high as he could. The High Priest stood beside the altar. He carried the vase of sacramental water. Facing him was the king. He had his bowl already filled, the first song having been intoned. As the second song was sung, he walked slowly forward, the bowl held above his head with his mandibles.

Finally, as the echoes of the end of the second chant resounded, Ja Sirkka charged into the temple and came to stand right behind the altar before anyone could react. The crowd was startled. The third chant did not start. The king had stopped just as he was about to pour the sacramental water on the altar.

Then, taken aback by the reactions of the king and the crowd, the High Priest turned around. He let out a squeal of amazement and horror. An outcast had returned to interrupt the ceremony of the most sacred day of the year.

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Ja Sirkka knew he had little time to act. The king's guards or the temple guards would intervene.

"You claim to honor and serve a god who created this world. But have you asked yourself what that god wants from you?"

The High Priest and the King were about to speak. No doubt to demand the intervention of their guards. Ja Sirkka did not give them enough time to pause. He continued his speech.

"I tell you the truth. Your God is displeased with your practices and morals. He expects you to love one another as he loves you. He expects you to stop the ritual fighting. He expects you to help the weakest and welcome all Rukoilis into the City."

The pedagogue who had wounded and exiled Ja Sirkka landed before the king. He bowed to the monarch and turned around, standing between his lord and Ja Sirkka. The pedagogue spoke to the exile loudly enough to be heard by all.

"I refused you in our city because you are a godless man. And this day is the proof that I was right because you blaspheme the most sacred day of all."

The High Priest immediately said: "Who are you to dare interrupt the ceremony and question our rites?"

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The question did not expect an answer. Rather, it was a way of taking offense at the interruption by someone who was less than nothing. But Ja Sirkka answered.

"I am the incarnation of your god. I created this world when I was only a spirit. Then I chose my mother to take body and come to deliver my message to you."

The roar of the crowd became deafening. They demanded the death of the blasphemer. The pheromones that invaded the temple marked the disapproval, the feeling of scandal.

The pedagogue leaped up, spreading his wings, claws outstretched toward Ja Sirkka. But then the first disciple dived from the sky and dug his own claws into the first section of the teacher's body.

"No, there must be no violence," Ja Sirkka shouted.

The first disciple, confused, flew backwards behind his master. The teacher had fallen on the altar where his blood was spilling.

"I dare you," the pedagogue shouted at Ja Sirkka as he stood up.

With this formula, he forbade anyone to intervene in the fight. His wounds made him suffer but they were not enough to prevent him from fighting.

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"There should be no more challenges and I will not fight you" said Ja Sirkka.

The answer didn't matter. The challenge was on. The High Priest shouted a discreet encouragement. The King, for his part, was reluctant to call in his guards immediately, hovering above the temple.

Ja Sirkka did not move as the pedagogue's claws tore into his abdomen. He just cried out in pain, the pain he felt throughout his Rukoilis body.

The claws were about to open the chest as well when the first disciple grabbed Ja Sirkka in his paws and took him away. He flew away as fast as he could. The pedagogue collapsed behind the altar, dragged down by his momentum.

The King then began to sing the third song as if he had not been interrupted. The message was clear. The High Priest and then the crowd sang the song after him.

For lack of orders, the guards did not pursue Ja Sirkka and his disciple. What was the point? The blasphemer was dead, or at least would die in a few moments, in excruciating pain. While the king poured the sacramental water on the altar, thus washing the blood of the pedagogue, a servant of the temple took the pedagogue away for treatment.

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Elijah did not understand what had happened. Rudolf Luoja had deliberately confronted his enemy without defending himself. And it was a near-corpse that his first disciple was bringing back to the hill outside the city.

He focused his consciousness on the body of the incarnate god, now lying on the hillside surrounded by his grief-stricken followers. No one could see Elijah but the god of this universe.

"Rudolf, what are you doing?"

"I am Ja Sirkka, I incarnated because I love this world that I created."

These were his last words. Ja Sirkka's body ceased to live.

His followers grabbed him, and in groups, taking turns on the long journey, they flew to their nests by the ocean. They laid Ja Sirkka's body in his nest, closed the door, and sealed it completely with a mud seal.

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Chapter 33

A machine gave a long, high-pitched whine before falling silent again. Rudolf Luoja opened his eyes. He was dazzled by the very dim light, barely a blue nightlight. Outside, beyond the window of the hospital room, it was dark.

The lungs demanded air. The man's mouth became a chasm where a maelstrom rushed in while the chest rose. The jaws recalled their existence with a sharp pain. They had not worked for so long...

The body was seized by a tremor. He was waking up from a long night. Every muscle was trying to relax. In spite of the care given, suppurating wounds had appeared. The necrosis of immobilization. The man god received the information in the form of irritations, the wounds rubbing the bandages, themselves sliding on the rough sheets.

Something was bothering Rudolf Luoja. A long transparent tube was sticking through his nose and forcing its way down his throat into his stomach. This was how he had been fed for the last few months. The man god gently tore off this link. It hurt. His throat was not meant to be forced. His nose was not meant to receive such a tube.

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Rudolf Luoja sat up, leaning his back against the pillow. Sitting up in bed, he removed the electrodes from his arms, chest and skull. His head was spinning a little. His body was no longer used to harboring a spirit.

Warning beeps sounded from the various machines around the bed. The sleeper had awakened.

A nurse suddenly entered, turning on the main lamp, creating a day brighter than sunlight. She gave a small cry of surprise. The sleeper had woken up. She rushed to him, wanting to prevent him from getting up. He looked at her. She was an obstacle. She brought her hands to her throat. She was choking. She collapsed on the ground, fainted. The sleeper had woken up.

The naked body had placed its feet on the cold ground. The toes wiggled. He was ready. The sleeper had woken up. The first steps were hesitant. The gait resembled that of a zombie. The muscles were no longer used to working. The sleeper had woken up.

Rudolf Luoja went to the small bathroom. He took off the diaper he was wearing and threw it in the garbage can. He entered the shower cubicle and turned on the water. Warm, soft water. The sleeper had woken up.

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He remained for long minutes like that, passive. Then he grabbed the shower head and began to spray all over his body, ripping off the bandages, cleaning the wounds. The pain was proof that he was alive. The sleeper had woken up.

Finally, he turned off the water. He activated the hot and dry air drying mechanism installed to avoid towels that were bacterial colonies.

He left the cabin and stood in front of the mirror above the sink. He wiped away the fog that had formed with his hand. He was surprised by what he saw. The face had lost weight. The hair had been shaved. His face was perfectly hairless. Her chest and limbs had also been shaved. Never, no doubt, had his body been so cleaned. The sleeper had woken up.

The nurse was getting up. She coughed reflexively to clear her throat. Before she could even think about what had happened to her, she looked at the bed and screamed in horror. Her patient had disappeared.

But she had heard the shower running. She rushed into the bathroom, still staggering. He was there, facing the mirror. He was staring at himself. The sleeper had woken up.

When she collapsed on the floor again, her throat blocked, he simply stepped over her. He

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then went out into the corridor. He needed clothes. He especially needed information.

Using his extrasensory vision, he easily discovered, a few meters away, the staff locker room. To force the lock hardly required the time of a sigh. He found what he needed.

He walked out of the small room and into the nurse's office. He searched for his name in the hospital files. He was unsuccessful. The software spontaneously offered to provide the registered persons without known identity. Then he found himself. The date of admission was the last date he could remember.

He accessed his complete file and saw references to two other files, that of a real estate agent and that of a university professor. The photograph of the latter matched the one Rudolf Luoja was looking for.

The address at the time of admission was reported as obsolete. It was updated by searching online databases. A new address appeared. A house in Clifton, on Staten Island. Not far from Silver Lake. Rudolf Luoja knew the place. At one time, he liked to walk there.

Without anyone asking him any questions, Rudolf Luoja walked out of the hospital through the almost completely deserted corridors. The sleeper had woken up.

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It was night. A beautiful night. Rudolf Luoja first walked away. The slow pace allowed him to examine himself from head to toe. He stimulated the cells that had thought they were allowed to relax. The purulent wounds closed up.

When he was ready, he was in a deserted place. He had walked straight ahead, just to get away from the hospital. There was a highway ramp. A few rare vehicles were passing by at high speed.

Manipulating gravity, he kicked the ground and quickly flew to a height of about 100 meters. He saw the hospital. He saw Manhattan. He remembered the map of the area. He looked in the appropriate direction, and beyond the bay, he saw Staten Island.

The low gravity bubble accompanied him. He leaned over and slowly made his way towards Silver Lake Park. It looked like he was flying. In fact, he was falling slowly. He was moving forward, waving the air around him. His engine consisted of mini-tornadoes that he created under his hands or feet by acting on the Brownian movements of the matter.

Finally, little by little, he went down to the shore of the lake. There was a bench for the rest of the walkers. There was a path that led straight to

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the neighborhood he was going to. He knew where he was. The sleeper had woken up.

Then he began to walk more confidently than when he left the hospital. His muscles had had time to remember how to function. His earthly body had become operational again.

The street lights in this area were bright enough to get around without any problems. A street sign. Rudolf Luoja had not been mistaken. A few more meters.

Elijah Grubler suddenly woke up. Something was searching him. He felt the magic at work. He got up quietly so as not to wake Winona. He went into the living room, turned on the light and sat down in an armchair.

He then launched his extrasensory perception. He quickly found what he was looking for. The man was not hiding. He was in front of the door. The lock was unlocked. The man entered the house and closed the door behind him.

He faced Elijah, standing silently. The sleeper had woken up. Elijah had no trouble recognizing him, even though he had lost weight and been shorn. His eyes, especially, had changed.

"What do you want?"

"Have you lost your familiarity? What I want is simple: a world to be happy in. Neither Earth

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nor Internet satisfies me. I created Hyonteinen and I want to stay there."

"You are a human, even if you are a god on Hyonteinen. Your body needs your mind or it will die."

"I don't care about my earthly body. I will destroy it. But, before I do, I want to know who you are and how you got onto Hyonteinen."

Elijah walked to the bar. He reached for two glasses and a bottle of whiskey.

"Will a whiskey do? I'm going to have to explain a lot of things to you. Follow me. Let's not wake up my wife."

The two men left the house. They walked to the bench next to the lake. They sat down next to each other. The glasses were filled. The liquid warmed their bodies.

And Elijah told him what he knew.

When she woke up, Winona noticed that her companion was not at her side. His place was cold. He had been up for a long time.

Distraught, she looked at the clock on the nightstand. No, it was not late. It was even very early. It wasn't even normal time to get up. Where the hell was Elijah?

The woman put on her robe and slippers. Then she went to the living room.

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Elijah was there. He had just put away a bottle in the bar. Two dirty glasses lay on the counter.

"But what are you doing?"

Elijah looked at her. He bit his lip. Could he lie to his partner, to the one who would be the mother of his children?

She looked at him, worried, stunned, without understanding.

"Why are there two dirty glasses on the counter? Who did you drink alcohol with?"

"We had a visitor."

"A visitor? Or a girlfriend?"

Elijah smiled, "No, a visitor. It was an unexpected visitor. A tramp who was a victim of the building explosion like me. He had been in a coma. He had found me and I heard him trying to enter. I took him in and took him out for a drink so we wouldn't wake you up. He left. We won't see him again."

"Did you give him money?"

"No, answers to his questions."

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Chapter 34

The body was dead, its entrails spilled out of the shell. Putrefaction had begun. Rudolf Luoja did not want this death. He wanted to live on Hyonteinen. He was its god. Ja Sirkka was his vehicle to deliver his message to the Rukoilis.

The disciples always lamented the loss of their guide. They lamented his death. They also mourned for themselves. But they hesitated over a judgment concerning the blasphemy committed in the temple: how could a Rukoilis, even a wise one, claim to be a god?

They had locked the corpse in its nest. But the smell of its decomposition was coming out. Three days had passed.

The red sun had risen. All the Rukoilis began to wake up. Before going to feed, the disciples looked around the closed nest, which had become their master's tomb.

Suddenly, the door of this closed nest opened. The dried mud that sealed the entrance had been thrown away.

Ja Sirkka came out, standing up as if he was getting up normally on an ordinary morning. He greeted his astonished disciples.

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"I wandered in the other world and came back."

Ja Sirkka's body had a mark on the abdomen where the shell had been opened. Rudolf Luoja had not wanted any trace of his death to disappear. He had just closed the shell, put the body back together. A miracle, yes, but a miracle limited to the bare essentials.

He ate and drank with his disciples. In the evening, he flew back to his home city. His disciples followed him.

The formation did not stop on the hill like the first time. It went directly to the temple.

Sentinels shouted the alarm. It was indeed an organized band crossing the City's skies. They surrounded the small group as it landed in the temple.

Alarmed by all the commotion, the High Priest introduced himself. Ja Sirkka looked at him. The High Priest looked at Ja Sirkka and then emitted pheromones of panic without being able to squeak anything.

"You recognize me, don't you? I who was dead, am alive."

"This is not possible!"

"Nothing is impossible for God."

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Chapter 35

"I am Ja Sirkka," the Rukoilis said to himself in the privacy of his room in the temple.

Where years of preaching would not have sufficed, a small miracle had done... miracles! Ja Sirkka had transformed the society of the Rukoilis in a few months according to local time. And the Change was spreading across the planet with prodigious speed.

The teacher who had rejected him had disappeared. He had run away. Ja Sirkka had forbidden anyone to chase him. Finally, this adversary had been necessary for the Revelation. Some theologians were even beginning to build a discourse around the necessity of the existence of this fallen one for the Truth to be revealed.

Voimakas, who was getting older, was not fiercely hostile to the disappearance of the challenges. He knew that with the old traditions, his time of reign and life would have been counted.

"I am Ja Sirkka," repeated the Incarnation.

He went into a trance, as he was now able to do on Hyonteinen. He saw the Earth where time passed so slowly. His mind saw the lifeless body on the floor of an old abandoned chapel.

Human gods

Ja Sirkka did not need Rudolf Luoja anymore. He could die. He had to disappear for the god to become a full god on Hyonteinen. This body was dying, in every way. Several days on the ground without food or water, lying in a cold, damp place, after months of coma, would kill anyone.

The spirit had incarnated on Hyonteinen. He no longer needed the earth. Ja Sirkka kept telling himself this. He tried to have faith in himself. But he hesitated. A touch of nostalgia? No, certainly not. How could he be nostalgic for the earth? Fear, yes, the god dared to admit it to himself. He was afraid.

Then he was seized with an immense anger. A god could not be afraid. And he was a god. He should not fear the destruction of a body in another universe. Rudolf Luoja was soon pierced by flames. His skin turned black. The bones resisted much more than the flesh. But the anger of the god was enough. Soon everything was nothing but fine ashes. The first rain would wash away the last traces. A condensation of water in the damp chapel made a first cleaning.

Ja Sirkka was then appeased. He came out of his trance. He went to drink some water and then returned to his room to sleep.

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Chapter 36

The years had passed. So many years. Voimakas had died in his nest. He was the first king in history to die of old age. Ja Sirkka had refused to intervene to choose another king. Since challenges were no longer appropriate, the Rukoilis gathered and listened to those who proposed to become king. One of them was more attractive than the others.

Even before the result, Ja Sirkka was already in exile. His time as an Incarnation was coming to an end. Many of his first disciples, including the Very First, had died. The others accompanied their master on his final journey.

There would be no other miracle.

They had returned to the place where they had built their nests together, in front of the ocean. There was little or nothing left of the nests from the time of their exile. It didn't matter. They had enough energy left to rebuild them. They even built nests for the dead, in their memory.

Ja Sirkka was happy looking at the ocean. The world of Hyonteinen was so beautiful! He was proud of his creation.

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One by one, the disciples died. As they died, they were locked in their nests, just as Ja Sirkka had been locked in his first death. Most of them, when they felt that the time had come, returned of their own accord to their nests, which then became their graves. All that was left for their companions to do was to keep them company and then, when all was done, to close the door by sealing it with mud.

Finally, it was Ja Sirkka's turn. The last two disciples used their mandibles to surround him with pheromones of compassion as well as sadness. In return, he cried out to them that the world of Hyonteinen was finally going to live as it should. The end of the Incarnation was necessary.

The air escaped from his lungs one last time. Ja Sirkka's body was finally going to rot for good.

Ja Sirkka was glad to be dead. He admired Hyonteinen without having to worry about the physical limits of this universe. Here, there, elsewhere, in the same instant.

Dead, he was finally fully God.

H u m a n g o d s

Epilogue

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This time, the academic year was over for good. In a few days the summer vacations would come. Teenagers and students alike had flocked to Sylvania. The launch of this game world had been one of the most successful in the history of video games. And almost all users were full of praise. Now, for Winona Verfurt, Elijah Grubler and Geoffroy Stark, the case was closed. The only thing that concerned them was money. And the money was indeed starting to flow.

Elijah had not returned to Hyonteinen on his own. But Ja Sirkka had invited him to his death. He had told him about the death of Rudolf Luoja. Now the two worlds were no longer connected. They were drifting apart. Elijah could no longer access Hyonteinen, but the phenomenon had been sufficiently progressive that any doubt was forbidden: Hyonteinen persisted. And his god resided there, probably for eternity.

For the teacher, explaining in detail what he knew about the gods became necessary. But how to avoid attracting malice? He resolved to explain everything in a fictional novel. His memoirs would become a fantasy novel. Only the most perceptive would understand that it was all the truth. He would write it under a pseudonym. Officially, the teacher did not want his research or creation of

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playful universes to suffer from the inevitably harsh judgment that would be passed on such a booklet.

Finally, the last class of the year. Since the assault, the student involved had not appeared. He had not returned to the university at all. The administration had been concerned. But he had taken his final exams and passed. He was going to another university.

All that remained was to complete the grading of the tutorials. Elijah had been particularly interested in the reflection of one of the students. He invited him to come and present his work to all his classmates.

"What interested me most was your conclusion," the teacher indicated.

The student then continued. "If one accepts that the universe is created by a perfect god, theologians agree that the universe is then itself perfect, and rabbinic schools therefore deny the existence of miracles that break the order and coherence of the world. Thus, a good god ceases to intervene after the Creation. In other words, the only good god is a dead god."

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