

PART THREE

EKRON

STORY I

The Fall of Ekron

1

A few years after the noxious effects of the first nuclear winter and its consequent ice age began to recede, commerce started between Ekron and Kish. The ghost of Lidya was forgotten and new generations barely knew that was the name of an ancient city. Nevertheless, Achish, King of Ekron, remembered the City of Plagues with vivid detail, as he led his own city of spawns with a soft and warm iron hand.

His children, as he called them, were part human and part machine, their souls were decorated with data that shone through their eyes in metallic strokes. Achish sent ambassadors to Kish, both to commerce and spy, with a growing fear for the plagues of the past. It was not a whim, but the result of a specific prophecy presented to him by his oracles, Heidrun and Baphomet; forever connected to large mainframes, fed with cards and tapes of infinite information. But his spies reported no trace of biological warfare being developed in Kish, only witchcraft and electronics.

Then he sent expeditions to the ruins of Lidya, but they could not enter the giant bunker beneath what once was Riga, it was still sealed from the inside; noises came out of its entrails as if someone could still live down there. The specter of Gog was seen in the Baltic shores casting spells on the sea, with a strange girl by his side.

Achish was restless in his throne, his crimson vulture head had become black, and his eyes were transitioning from black to red. He never wore a crown, he never needed one. Uneasy, he went down to the Mainframes' Hall, where a couple hundred functionaries typed data into tapes and cards to feed his oracles. From a cluster of machinery, thick cables made their ways to the heads of Heidrun and Baphomet. Heidrun was dressed in white, from her goat head, a pair of curved horns, pointing down still grew a little every year. Baphomet was wearing a red robe, his horns were large, sharp, and grew straight up from his ox head. They were both sitting on metallic thrones, filled with wires and rubber. Achish had been created by Gog centuries before, prior to the Annihilation War, conceived originally as an oracle himself. With time he created his own oracles, ruled Ekron and other underground cities, which succumbed to the vicious plagues of the war, so only Ekron survived under his rule. Baphomet and Heidrun had recently prophesized that the fall of Ekron was near, also caused by a plague, sharing the same destiny of her sister cities. Achish stood in front of Heidrun, who opened her green eyes and said:

- There's nothing you can do now, go to your throne, and let me suffer in mine. A city has to breath, even beneath the ground.

At that exact moment, a horrid eel, with white skin and red eyes, entered an air intake that provided oxygen to the subterranean city of Ekron. It chewed through the filters with black fangs and a sharp proboscis opening itself a path. When facing the enormous fans that sucked air into the city, it threw itself to them; the blades made several wounds on its pale body and spurts of blood

came out of them. But it passed through the fans and kept crawling deeper into the guts of Ekron. It emerged from an air duct to a cobblestone street, near the city's central square. Foam came out of its mouth, and from that foam, a thousand little spores scattered and traveled on artificial winds, finding their way to Achish's children. A black spirit came out of the eel's mouth and went back to the air duct. The eel's eyes became human, the beast collapsed to the ground and died from its injuries.

In the Mainframes' Hall, Heidrun raised her numbed arms and unplugged the cables from her head, rose from her throne and said to Baphomet:

- We must leave, our time here is over.

Baphomet opened his eyes and looked at Heidrun with resignation:

- I'm already missing this pain.

He unplugged himself too and followed Heidrun to an elevator located on a corner of the Hall. Hundreds of functionaries were so absorbed in their work that did not even notice the oracles were gone and kept typing data into an empty shell.

Once on the surface, they left the elevator and the remains of Isaakievskiy Sobor offered them a dismal view in a beautiful summer day. Heidrun said:

- It's a long walk to Kish, and we must get there before the new ice age begins.
- How will they receive us there?
- Their oracle is old, and never worked properly.
- I remember that she worked just fine.
- She has no eyes.

And the chimeric oracles, part animal, part spirit and part machine began a walk to another city born from the chaos of the Annihilation War, one with different inhabitants, very different rulers, but the same interest in unveiling the secrets of the future.

Not only transmuted chimeras and electronically enhanced humans lived in Ekron before its fall, but there were also sentient machines, humble servants for Achish and his children. They fulfilled multiple roles, from cooking to teaching and sometimes they even went to war. One of those servants, named Karl-11, was in an apartment at the central levels of the city, teaching history to a six-year-old blonde girl in her bedroom. The parents were chatting in the living room next to them, stupidly deliberating about who would win in a hypothetical fight between Baphomet and Achish.

The girl, named Briella, looked at her mechanical teacher while he talked, a humanoid assembly of wires, ceramic and metallic plaques, with shiny eyes like those of a mouse. She was thinking that her eyes had that glow too, as well as her parents' eyes; the same kind of wires that filled Karl's body sometimes emerged from her skin when she suffered an injury, so she asked Karl-11, interrupting his class:

- Am I a machine just like you?
- Not just like me, I don't have the organic parts that you have.
- Why not?
- The mechanical and electronic parts that you have, were installed in your body short after you were born, they can't do anything without your control. I was fabricated as a fully electronic and mechanical entity; I don't need an organic controller to my system. Our design concepts are totally different.

Briella was thoughtful for a few moments and then asked playfully:

- Do you love me?
- Yes Briella, I love you with all my heart. Shall we continue? There is some controversy about the first atomic bomb detonation, there was an accidental explosion before, but the first real atomic bomb was launched and detonated over Königsberg in...

A loud cry interrupted the machine and sounds of hissing came from the living room. Karl-11 looked up to the next room and closed the door with a bang. Sirens started to howl, and normal illumination changed into a red light. Briella shouted in panic as the door was charged from outside and Karl-11 was trying to keep it closed pushing it with both hands. Briella sat on the floor covering her ears from the sound of sirens and started crying. Karl-11 took the lamp cord and tied the door handle to a nail in the adjacent wall.

- I will protect you my child – said Karl-11 to Briella.

A powerful charge opened a hole in the door, and the head of a horrific snake or worm loomed up from it. Karl-11 stroke it with his mechanical arms, the creature opened its mouth and hissed with foam coming out of it. A second strike stunned the worm, which face looked strangely familiar to Karl-11. It was at that moment that he noticed a stream of spores was coming out from the foam in the creature's mouth. He looked back at Briella and there she was, convulsing and vomiting in a strange posture, slightly leaning forwards, he rushed to her aid and held her hands, but her eyes

had lost her bright, and her arms fell from her body, hanging dead in Karl's hands, who let them go, horrified. Her legs fused together, and her torso enlarged to triple its length, her face took a dumb, inhuman expression and her mouth opened wide revealing that her throat had amalgamated with her jaws to form a cavity, containing black teeth and a repulsive proboscis as tongue. Foam came out of her mouth as she hissed and squirmed like an animal.

The horrid worm whose name was once Briella, charged the door where the head of a stunned worm version of her mother still hung from a hole. Karl-11 opened the door, and the beast went through it in a rush, as if it had so much to do and so little time.

Karl-11's head made a buzz, that lasted a quarter of a second, in that time his electronic brain processed what had just happened, entry shock state and recovered. He slowly walked out of the apartment, while hundreds of pale worms, with cables and circuitry hanging from their bodies, bit each other in a lugubrious game, crawling on the walls with a never-ending hissing that had started to numb Karl's senses.

He got to the central square of Ekron feeling desolated, as other machines like him gathered there in the same state. There was no need to talk anymore, little antennas communicated their dark emotions with each other, as if human contact would have been just a dream, just an excuse to forget they were only machines, soulless, cold pieces of metal. Little red lights attached to their antennas had replaced human touch, and stillness has replaced the loving lullabies they once used to make babies sleep. All that was gone, and they couldn't even cry for their loss.

Achish appeared in the square, silent and unexpressive, just walking as little red lights in his neck connected him with his servants. "There will be revenge for our loss", he communicated them, because there was a plan, a simple and brutal plan, made a couple milliseconds after the last human in Ekron was transformed into vermin.

Enormous delta shaped airplanes and black zeppelins, fast as rockets crossed the shores of the Baltic sea, as unnamed monsters peeked up from the abysses. In three days, a hundred and twenty atomic bombs fell over the exterior armor of Lydia, pit of plagues, home of a witch that nested in a bunker below Riga, during the Annihilation War. In the night of the third day, a shiny crater was opened over Lydia exposing its entrails and Achish went down to bring final justice to those responsible for the fall of Ekron. He flew with wings he had not used in a century, wandered on passages full of dirt, roamed in abandoned warehouses accompanied by his army of servants, Karl-11 included, to find nothing, not a witch, machine, or monster to explain what had happened. As radiation started to fry their circuits, servants began to die and collapsed on those dark halls, like a physical representation of Achish's hope for justice slowly vanishing. At the end, near sunrise, only Karl-11 and Achish still walked on that tomb. There were thousands of living and undead creatures in Lydia during the War, commanded by a witch whose dead was never confirmed. They seemed to have evaporated, as there were no signs of them ever abandoning that bunker either.

Suddenly, from the shadows of an alley, a single worm came out hissing pitifully, evidently affected by radiation, it crawled a little more and died at Achish's feet. Only one, not enough to explain or justify anything. Achish fell to his knees as Karl-11 staggered behind him. The King of Ekron turned off all communications, put the barrel of his automatic rifle to a side of his head, and pulled the trigger. A mix of blood and circuitry spread to the floor. Karl looked at the corpse of Achish and fell to a side of it, waiting for dead.

Then Karl heard the noise of wires unraveling and a door opening. Like in a dream, a little blonde girl came walking as she would have appeared from thin air. "Is Briella's spirit, my angel, that comes to say goodbye" thought Karl, but quickly realized that her hair was way longer than Briella's, it reached the ground and dragged on it. The girl had her left eye completely red, her right eye was a black crystal ball, she had two fingers less in her left hand, and she was barefoot. Around her neck she had a black spider necklace. Behind her, there was a man dressed in black rags and his head was covered with a hood. As sun started to rise, Karl was able to see a part of the man's face and recognized him.

- Gog, Sorcerer of Constantinople...

Those were Karl-11's last words, as his eyes lost its shine and his mind died.

- Take his body, it may be useful as a replacement for you.

Said Gog to his little companion, so the girl took Achish by the neck and dragged him as they walked towards the stairs, and then out of Lidya. As Gog emerged from the bunker's entrails, monsters saluted him from the seas, and followed him across the shores in his journey to Ekron. Once at the entrance of the fallen city, the girl possessed by Anubis took a cable from her clothes, moved aside her blonde hair to uncover a black connector in the place where her left ear should have been and plugged one end there. Then she took the other end and connected it to Achish's head. The eyes of the vulture chimera shone again and the doors of Ekron opened for Gog and his company, as the clouds grew thicker in the sky and acid rain started to fall.

Inside, the place was transformed into a worm nest, where unholy creatures laid with each other in depraved and nightmarish ways. Gog took one of them, shredded it to take out its circuitry and sat by a side of the main central square. The girl unplugged herself from Achish, threw it on the ground and sat next to Gog with the cable still hanging from her head.

Gog soaked the circuitry from the worm with black oil that came out of his clawed hands, said some words in a language that humans are not supposed to understand, and the circuitry changed in his hands. Then he connected that circuitry to the cable hanging from the girl's ear, and the worms stopped hissing. Silently, the beasts approached Gog and the foam stopped emanating from their mouths, then they started to whisper, like in a prayer, to their new master.

Gog petted the girl's head, and she looked at him. "I should allow her to grow now" he thought. For a moment she tried to smile, but instead she only showed her teeth, it was what a dog would have done if you could ask him to smile.

STORY II

Maria's Cats

1

Lack of gravity has started to affect Maria Brühl's sleep cycle, she passed from sleeping six hours, to only four and lately about two or three hours per night; if you can call night to just turn off the lights of the metallic box you live in. Also, the Moon has a month of day and month of night; and being in the "dark" side means that you never see earth, but you have a great view of Mars and Venus from the outer part of the lab, that had a big set of panoramic windows with four inches thick hardened crystals that allowed vision of eastern, western, and southern horizons. It was not a good place to sleep, besides, Maria had cat eyes and she could see in the dark like in the brightest day, which didn't help her sleep either. However, she had acquired a good degree of agility in that low gravity environment. She looked like a teenager, or even younger sometimes, although legally she was over thirty-five years old.

Maria was there to develop a breed of trees that could survive without atmosphere, and create one by themselves, as subterranean cities on Earth had slowly gain surface presence, doing the same with colonies in other planets became a dream for some government authorities. She already had a small forest growing outside her lab and its atmosphere was comparable to that present nine to twelve miles high on Earth. A human without protection would die in a couple minutes there, but it would take more than in outer space. The trees emanated a dense gas, similar to Earth atmosphere but thick to almost the point of condensation, it spread in vacuum forming a thin bubble in its limits, from where it slowly dispersed into space. Inside the trees, bio-electronic circuitry connected to gross cables from an electric source, controlled part of the process and provided energy to heaters regularly distributed in the tree's trunk. Temperature inside the trees was kept constant to ninety degrees Celsius, so in the night month the trees would not freeze, and part of that temperature was transmitted to the generated atmosphere.

The base was constructed over the remains of a pre-human settlement found about a century before. In those ruins, two aquamarine gems of remarkable size, almost three feet of diameter, delighted chemist specialists for years before they were putted on display outside the base, without any known purpose or utility. They emanated a weak electromagnetic signal with a frequency of thirty-three Hertz, too low to for any practical usage that could justify a gem of that size, so they became just a curiosity.

Two dozen scientists composed Maria's group, where she worked directly with the forest and required tests and supplies from the rest of the team. Her sleeping problems were making hard for her to concentrate in the dangerous tasks involved in inoculate artificial trees outside the base. When Macsks started to be sent to that base, to protect them as well as keeping them away from human population, she was having memory problems and had started to hallucinate with a red eyed black dog. So, for a couple days she thought those animals were only a product of her imagination. The name Macsk is derived from the Hungarian word for cat, which is not an accurate description

for them, because even if they have some feline reminiscence, they can be more precisely described as tarsiers with horns. Besides, cats were not the same anymore.

An entire separate unit was constructed to shelter the aliens, under military custody and the scientists were not allowed to enter it. Macsk's home planet was, at first, treated as a reserve with only a few "ambassadors" to represent humanity there, then it became an administrative headquarter and finally a strategical military outpost. Direct contact with the Macsk's was justifiably considered dangerous for humans, so it was decided to relocate them somewhere else, supposedly to be studied, but in reality, they were just stored where they could cause the less trouble possible.

María did not even know what was stored in the new wing of the base, as a month passed and there was no news about its content, no requirements of any kind were made to her, so she just kept her insomniac routine as usual. Suited up and carrying her titanium extra-sharp hoe along with her hardened chrome-vanadium diamond blade scythe, she went to the forest, trimmed some bad tree branches, and started planting a new line of trees at the edge of her jungle. That kind of labor in a stiff space suit is not an easy task, after a couple hours the visor in her helmet was starting to blur with her sweat and wet strands of her blonde hair were constantly falling to her eyes, so she stopped for some minutes and sat under a tree for a short rest. She fell asleep. When she woke up, as the sun appeared to be in the same place, she did not realize at first, but she had been sleeping for six hours out there, and her oxygen levels were dangerously low. She stood up and continued working, but something caught her attention a couple trees from her position. A pair of big eyes were fixed on her. She approached and they belonged to a creature unknown to her, a little bigger than a normal cat, covered in dark blue fur, big turquoise eyes with vertical black pupils, two thin and sharp black horns coming out of its head, clinching the tree like a monkey. It started whispering something that sounded like a spell, and for a second Maria got lost in those eyes, until the oxygen alarm in her helmet started to sound, she crossed herself and ran to her lab, both to get oxygen and from the creature that she immediately classified as a hallucination caused by insomnia. Once inside, she looked at her blue cat eyes in a mirror, "Was I just seeing my own eyes?", "No, those were definitely green".

Days passed by and the Macsk was still on the same tree, so Maria touched it with the end of her hoe; it was apparently real, and its hands were fusing with the tree's cortex. Then she noticed that the tree was blooming more than the others and oxygen level was higher than expected in that area. The next day she brought an oscilloscope to measure the tree's internal circuitry and check for any changes that could explain the situation. The test was automated, and it took some time, so she sat by the next tree, and fell asleep. She woke up in a fright, the first thing that she saw was another Macsk face a couple inches from hers, then the creature raised one hand and one of those thin clawed fingers touched Maria's forehead. A moment of transcendental illumination was given to her, an ecstatic clarity followed by joy that made tears fall from her feline eyes, then she realized that her helmet had been removed from her suit and it was in the other hand of the Macsk. She took her helmet from the little beast's hand and put it on again, she stood up, disconnected the oscilloscope, and ran back to the station. When she was closing the lab's outer door, she saw that new Macsk at the edge of the forest, whispering to her, but then she understood every word that it was saying:

- I'll be waiting for you – said the little beast.

That night, she slept like a baby for the first time in months. The next day she looked for her mother's notes in some cardboard boxes under her bed; she found them, then contrasted those notes with the results from the oscilloscope test. The trees were fully functional, so she sent the data to the mainframes in Kish and Nineveh.

A new war came, as the last one never really ended, this time with alarming news of entire planets being destroyed by gigantic godlike creatures of celestial appetite. It was about that time that the first scientist was found blind and mindless, lurking on the corridors of the Moon Base like a child. He was sent back to Earth immediately, and a week after that, two more were found in the same condition. A military section arrived at the station, both to check the cause of the “disease” presented by the blinded scientists and because the new wing hadn’t answered routine communications in months. They docked their ship to a side hatch and took control of the station. The scientists explained that they hadn’t had any contact with the new wing, and a containment procedure took place.

Maria did not give much importance to that new military presence. She was completely absorbed in her investigation, outdoors in her forest, to which at that time the suit was only a precaution. She gradually got used to take off the helmet for a couple minutes and feel the horrible taste of that air that was delicious to her, for her it tasted like victory. She could then rest by the trees without falling asleep, and the Macsks talked to her with a strange familiarity:

- Let me suck your blood, and I’ll let you suck mine.
- I can’t do that.
- Of course you can, you are like us. I don’t want to end up like him.

Maria then realized that the first Macsk that she saw, was still in that same tree, now completely fused to the cortex. Its eyes were still open and looked black and dry.

- Can you save him?
- Only if you give me your blood.

Maria opened her suit, took out her right arm and offered it to the Macsk. The little beast bit the soft part of her forearm with sharp little fangs and sucked her blood with delight. When it felt satisfied, approached the fused Macsk on the tree, took remains of blood from its own mouth and spread it on those dry eyes with a finger.

- That would do. Now you can suck my blood.

The Macsk approached María with resolution and stretched out an arm towards her. Maria looked at it for some moments and asked:

- Do you have a name?
- No, but you can call me Astarte, as that is the name you have already given me in your mind, Maria...
- And how can I call him – pointing to the beast fused with the tree.
- Trimurti, now please, suck my blood, is necessary...
- But I don’t have fangs.

Astarte bit her own arm and a white, almost shiny liquid started to flow from the wound, then she offered it back to Maria. The cat-eyed girl sucked the wound and felt a fire in her brain that became a new beginning for her perception of reality.

- Do you see now?
- I do.

An alarm communication came from the station to Maria's helmet, so she putted her suit back on and ran inside. Nine of the twelve members of the military section had been blinded and mutilated trying to contain the alien breach on the new wing, and all scientists had been put in quarantine for possible contamination. Maria saw a small thermonuclear bomb in the hallway as she was guided by a soldier to a small living room to join the rest of the scientists quarantined in there. The soldier locked the door after she entered. Theresa Wittel, a redheaded chemist with eyeglasses was sitting on the floor and Maria sat next to her.

- Do you know what's happening?
- I think they want to blow up the entire station, and it doesn't seem like they intend to evacuate us first.

Lights went off, and a strange smell filled the room coming from the ventilation slits. In less than a minute all scientists fell asleep, narcotized by the remaining three soldiers, that were executing an extreme decontamination protocol. In a dream, Maria saw a black dog approaching her in that same room, walking as a human, his right eye was bluish white, and the left one was made of black crystal.

- No, not again – said Maria to the dog, recalling strange nightmares.
- I see you have dreamed of me, of course, you are so sensitive.
- What you want from me?
- A pact, transitory for you, but eternal for me, because you see, we will not always be allies, but we are today.
- But I feel such evil in you, that is overwhelming.
- Am not hiding it, there's no point with someone like you or your mother.
- Did you know my mother?
- No, how could I? But I'm knowing you now.

The dog stretched his hand and took a mug from a table by his side, bit his wrist and poured thick black blood into the mug.

- You can free yourself from evil and just die today, or you can join me and live enough to see the reach of your actions.
- What are really those creatures, in the trees?
- Gods and demons, beyond myth, they are reality in its humble and terrifying simplicity.
- Why should I believe you?
- Don't do it, live and see it for yourself, as you will never be able to trust me as much as I have trusted you. All you have to do is wash your eyes in my blood, and you will understand, all of it.

The black dog left the mug on the table, and Maria approached it.

- Wait, you have to wake up first.

Maria looked back and her body was still on the floor sleeping next to Theresa. All went dark, and she opened her cat eyes laying on the floor. She stood up and walked towards the table. The dog was gone, but there was a dark liquid in the mug waiting for her. She soaked her fingers in it and washed her eyes with the unholy blood of Anubis. Blood remains in the mug disappeared like black ash in the air, but the drops filling her eyes and rolling down her cheeks stayed liquid until her skin absorbed them. They mixed with her tears as she slowly fell to her knees and then laid down on the floor, embracing her legs and acquiring fetal position, crying, and choking like if the weight of all death in the worlds was on her. After that, she felt released, free, and furious at the same time. She stood up and took a chair, then blasted the door handle, opened it, and ran towards her lab. Behind her, electromagnetic bullets aimed to her body whistled and collided with the hallway walls; followed by rushing steps from the soldiers pursuing her. She got to her lab and grabbed her chrome-vanadium scythe. Then a scream came from the hallway. She approached silently and saw how a Macsk had the palm of its hand pointed to a soldier, as the soldier twitched and touched his helmet before falling to the ground. A second soldier was firing his electromagnetic rifle in all directions, as if he would had been blinded. The combat suit of the soldiers had metallic plaques in all places except articulations, that were covered with thick rubber, one of them on the neck. Maria came from behind and nailed the blade of her scythe on the blinded soldier's neck, she pulled it and the soldier fell to the ground. The Macsk walked towards her, and then she realized that the beast was walking in two legs, and that its eyes looked like human brown eyes. She left her scythe on the floor and removed the helmet from the head of the soldier laying on the ground, then she saw that his eyes had become white, almost transparent. The Macsk took her hand and they walked together. She could hear the drowning screams of a third soldier, laying on the floor a couple yards behind the hallway corner, blinded and stripped of his suit; while three Macsk's sucked blood from his arms. He finally died when there was no more blood in his veins. Maria went to check the bomb, it wasn't activated; the soldiers hadn't turned it on before they were killed. Then she and the Macsk went to visit the scientists, still sleeping in the living room.

Maria gently woke up Theresa and took her out of the room.

- What is happening?
- Nothing, don't look back.

And of course, Theresa looked back at the room and saw how the little beasts chewed on the flesh of her fellow scientists. Some of them woke up from the pain, opened their eyes in horror just for them to be bleached with the slight move of a Macsk hand; some others never woke up and died in nightmares that never ended. Theresa let go a scream that was more like a sob and a series of little shrieks before Maria would gently drag her away from there.

- I remember the day I arrived here; is easy to convince regular people that I'm a Crom, that my eyes are a mutation of that same type, but with scientists is a totally different story, they all looked at me with distrust, until you stood up and said that it was possible that my RNA would carry, blah, blah, blah and they all swallowed it, after all, you are the expert in chemistry. But I know that you knew it wasn't true, so, why did you help me?
- What is happening?
- Come on, you can ask me something better than that.
- Fine... what are you and what are those things?

Theresa was tied to an armchair and Maria was behind her, combing her red curly hair with her fingers, as if she would be playing with a new doll.

- My mother was a witch and a scientist, we always loved cats and these eyes were given to me by one of them. I've tried to be more scientist than witch, but the limit is just a blur for me now. About my cats, I can only answer what they were originally: simple animals that had a form of spiritual transmutation embedded in their ordinary life cycle, but now they are changing, impossible to know what they will become, because they should have never been taken away from their home. A sin that will spawn a million of sins.
- What... what will happen to me?

María stopped playing with Theresa's hair and stood in front of her. Looked at her beautiful green eyes, adjusted her eyeglasses that were a little tilted, and said:

- You'll not have to suffer anymore.

Theresa's face made a sour grin and she cried in silence, lowered her head while tears stained her eyeglasses. She looked up again and said to Maria in a sob:

- More soldiers will come, please don't kill me, we can just be victims of the attack.
- It's unlikely they'll send anyone up here; the war is over, the emperor is dead, and as far as I know, the new empress is craziest than Caligula.
- Another Crom?
- Unfortunately, yes.
- They scare me, more than your cats, and I studied in Saint Agatha's...

Theresa laughed for a moment through the red congestion of her face, and then regained the sad expression that she had before:

- How will you do it?
- I will prepare you, gradually, and I promise that you won't suffer at all. In the meantime, I will feed them...

Maria rolled up her sleeve and showed Theresa her right arm, it was full of bruises and fang marks. Theresa's eyes opened so wide that her glasses almost fell, then she looked back at Maria's face, calm and insane, and swallowed the accumulated saliva in her mouth.

In an improvised operating room that she implemented in her lab, Maria removed half of Theresa's brain replacing it with electronic circuitry and hydraulic hoses, connecting her to a small mainframe following her mother's notes and illustrations. Those specifications needed some specific animal to be connected to the mainframe as well, but that served an entirely different purpose and Maria only needed Theresa's blood to acquire superior healing properties as well as a different cellular structure, one that would allow her body to feed on electric power.

After some testing, the Macsks started to feed on Theresa's arms, and the results were almost immediate; their fur got shiny and lighter, they grew to reach three feet of stature standing in two legs, and their horns got smaller and thinner.

Maria's forest had grown to reach fifty hectares that provided an atmosphere almost the double of that size before the gases started to dissipate into space. In the day month, the sky over the Moon station looked green with low white clouds. Under the trees, a population of blue hydrangea had started to bloom, and they became Maria's favorite food. As the stars weren't visible, Maria did not notice until the beginning of the night month, that a big vacuum, an absence of stars had formed in the celestial equator; Orion and Taurus were gone, replaced by darkness. She putted down the hortensias she was eating and went inside, where she found the whole pack of thirty-six Macsks gathered in the outer part of her lab, visibly upset. They were looking at each other nervously, sensing that something was about to happen. Then Astarte asked Maria for the longest rope available in the station. At this point, Maria trusted Astarte's judgment so blindly that she didn't even question the reason behind her request and just gave her the rope that she was asking for.

A vibrational wave, almost imperceptible at first, gradually crescent, inundated everything, and space became white to a degree that it was blinding. Then a turbulence, like a gigantic broken wheel rolling, lasted a couple seconds until all came apparently back to normal. Nevertheless, the sky outside the windows looked slightly blue, something impossible in the night month. They gathered in front of the windows set and saw three blue giant stars shining in the western horizon, apparently several times further than where the sun would have been in the day month, but close enough to make the atmosphere turn blue. From the eastern horizon, a clear vision of Mars, that had apparently got closer to the Moon, haunted their eyes.

- Take Theresa to the army ship – said Astarte –, take one end of this rope, tie it to something solid inside the ship and leave the other end here with me... wait for me on the ship ... is time for you to show us your home, Maria.

With the help of Trimurti and other two Macsks, Maria carried Theresa and the mainframe inside the ship, tied the rope to a pole inside the spacecraft and waited for Astarte with the rest of her cats. Astarte was in front of the window set, with the rope on the ground, looking at Mars, when a figure, almost the same size of the red planet appeared next to it. It was Vadállat, beast between the abysses, whose black eyes had six stars each, one for each system it had consumed. It was reminiscent of a dragon; in the same way a vulture is reminiscent of a dove. With claws as large as his legs, Vadállat clinched Mars, and opening his mouth like an ocean, shredded the red planet in minutes. Astarte began to breath deeper and deeper as the monster approached the moon leaving behind the remains of Mars. When Vadállat's face occupied half firmament, reflecting the light of the blue giants and some light from the sun, gravity on the Moon shifted towards him; Astarte walked to the window and stood over it, perpendicular to the ground, as objects in the lab floated and accumulated against the wall facing the monster. Maria's forest atmosphere was sucked into space by the massive presence of Vadállat, so darkness became predominant except for the light reflected by the monster. Then, Astarte knelt down on the window and put the palm of her right hand on the crystal, stared at those incommensurable eyes, and blinked. The eyes of Vadállat became white and the monster's advance became an inertial drift without direction. Astarte's eyes

became black, and six stars appeared in each of them. She tried to stand up, but her legs failed, and white blood started to emanate from her eyes and nose, she crawled from the window to get the rope on the floor but fainted before she could get it. Then Maria appeared hanging from the rope and took her. The cat-eyed girl tied Astarte to her back and climbed the rope back to the spacecraft, closing the hatch once they were inside. They escaped towards the underground city of Kish, on Earth, while Vadállat drifted to collide against and destroy the dark side of the Moon.

STORY III

The Prophecy

Cymra was dreaming in the deepest place of his abyss, the Humner, when a nightmare invaded his mind. A pair of eyes crossed by an eight-pointed star each, were in front of him, right there in the Humner. He had never perceived color, so its concept meant nothing to him. A voice coming from the wind over the mountains said to him: "From the abyss of madness I pray for you aid, Oh, Lord, have mercy of this creature and your servant" with such desperation and pain, that a shiver went through his spine and he woke up, with his mouth open and his tongue stretched in all its length. He realized that he had damaged his tongue while dreaming, again, that irritated him and for some moments he did not remember what an important day that was. Once every thousand years, the three blue suns of Qatra aligned in the sky to form a perfect horizontal row, the phenomenon was celebrated with a procession led by the three remaining Angels.

Cymra was a formidable beast, his general composition was reminiscent of a giant abyssal dragonfish; his body had a length of forty feet plus a thin articulated tail, fifty feet long, plus a venomous three feet long sting in its end, to make a total length of ninety-three feet. He had large fins or wings made of black lace with a wingspan of eighty-five feet and a pair of articulated clawed legs in the upper torso. His head had six feet of diameter, with two eyes in each side and a bigger one in the middle for a total of five eyes, all green. He had thirty fangs in the upper jaw and twenty-eight in the lower, that were between twelve to twenty inches long each. The fangs were straight, with a metallic core, like a needle, covered with a transparent layer of crystal that presented some superficial irregularities. Those fangs could display an electro-plasmatic discharge of considerable energy that projected the crystal layer some inches beyond the needle tip, transforming it in a semi-liquid mass that turned black and could cut almost anything, including the tentacles in his tongue. Cymra's tongue had originally over sixty white tentacles with green shades like those of a jellyfish, but accidental cuts had reduced their number to fifty. Those tentacles could be extended to reach over a hundred yards and had stings with the same composition of his fangs but smaller. His eyes, tongue, fangs, and tail sting could produce bioluminescence and be visible even through the dark oily waters of the Humner. His skin had a shiny black tone, with shades of dark blue.

The Humner was a sea of black water impregnated with oil which lower points could reach twenty miles of dept. The waste of all lands in that continent of Qatra, Sibara, ended up in the waters of the Humner. It was inhabited by souls of marine creatures, Cymra's acolytes; he fed on them and on occasional sacrifices offered to him as part of his cult. Cymra had two sons, but they preferred terrestrial life and had moved to the castle of Cymra's older sister, Llacme.

Cymra and Llacme were both conceived from an old beast, dead tens of thousands of years before and forgotten from memory. Alongside with Djaall, they were the leaders of both the government and the Angel's cult.

Cymra opened his wings and raised from the depts of the Humner to fly over the skies of Sibara in a feast of light and darkness. He joined Llacme and Djaall on their fly over the procession.

Llacme had a twenty feet long thin body, with the general disposition of a centipede. A hundred and eight legs were attached to her sides, with longer pairs in the upper thorax that functioned as arms. Her lace wings were black and foldable with a full extended span of forty-two feet. Her face was humanoid with two green eyes and her head was connected to her body with a thin neck. From her head, a pair of horns grew laterally, resembling black metal spikes. Another pair of horns, like those of a deer, grew upwards from her skull. Her exoskeleton was light green with shades of blue.

Djaall, Lord of Flies, had a ten feet long body full of large thick black hair, that made impossible to distinguish his legs and arms. He had at least one pair of legs that allowed him to stand on them like a human, but only the claws were visible under his thick layer of hair; and at least one pair of articulated arms that looked like arthropod legs. His foldable wings were transparent with long black veins and pointy ends, wingspan twenty-six feet. His head was almost identical to the one of a meat fly, except for a pair of black slightly curved horns growing upwards from it and the presence of a reptilian mouth, like that of a snake, with long venomous fangs. His eyes were extremely large, compounded, and light red.

Underneath the three leaders, a large procession of beasts and spirits was carrying the three angels in wood chariots, chanting prayers to material gods among them. Some of the spirits sent to Sibara survived long enough without being completely devoured through alliances and trade, and with time they developed sufficient intelligence to understand the sacraments, so they adopted the ancient faith. The three Angels were the last of a race that dominated a big part of the galaxy in times when the first insects were born on Earth. But their technology had become witchcraft as they had forgotten how it worked and could only use it exiguous ways. With a total height of four feet, including antennae, the angels were like chrysopas with two pairs of rounded lace wings but without legs of any kind. Their eyes were made of black crystal with a metallic point in the middle, they didn't have a nose and their mouths had black fangs in upper and lower jaws that stuck out even with their mouths closed. Their skin was completely white except for golden shades in their necks and abdomen.

All kinds of powers were attributed to them, contrasting with their fragile composition. Nevertheless, it was true that they could fly without moving their wings and were intricately connected and in control of the celestial monsters that took part in the alignment ritual realized every millennium. At a mountain summit, three stone columns sixty feet high each with stone thrones at their tops were waiting for the procession. Once there, the wood chariots were put in the ground, the Angels floated to the top of the columns and sat on the stone thrones, facing the crowd. Behind them, the three blue suns of Qatra were in perfect alignment. They seemed a little smaller than the apparent size of the Sun from Earth, because they were at a distance over twenty times greater.

Cymra, Llacme and Djaall descended and took their places at the head of the crowd, the first before the gods. Behind them stood Láthatlan, invisible beast except for a tiny spot of light, and his master Lepk, a primordial moth in black and gold, with a size of only one tenth of an inch. Then a mob of beasts and souls of all kinds knelt to the gaze of their Angels.

The Angels closed their eyes and shadows started to appear in the border of the suns until they were completely covered, a triple eclipse, in which obscure gloom was possible to distinguish the silhouettes of the three celestial monsters controlled by the Angels, drawn against the tenuous blue

glare of the giant stars. Four-thousand-miles long beasts, that had eaten entire systems on behalf of their masters. Their names were Teremy, Vadállat and Szörnyet, the same names of the Angels that ruled in their minds, they were one and the same with them.

The elder angel, Teremy, that acted as oracle and determined the shape of prayers for cycles to come, was sitting in the first column from the left. He opened his eyes, and said:

- I have dreamt and foreseen great calamity. In short time, the very strings of the universe will be broken and dissolved until the dying star erases us all.

Drowned moans of fear ran through the crowd. In the ecliptic twilight Llacme looked up at Teremy and asked with a voice like a ringing bell:

- Lord and Master, how will this happen?
- Your brother, Cymra, will ally himself with a demon, that will carry a destruction unknown to me or anyone else, until the dying star erases us all.
- Until the dying star erases us all – repeated the crowd.

Cymra opened his wings and elevated himself to the same height that Teremy was, his eyes shone green in the darkness as the crowd murmured disapproval under him. He replied to the Angel:

- Impossible! What is the name of that demon? Tell me and I will cast it away or consume it piece by piece in my abyss!
- I cannot tell you; his name is spelled in a language I can't understand or pronounce.
- You're lying!

Then the crowd got filled with disapproval exclamations, clearly altered by Cymra's attitude. Teremy's eyes casted a white light that made Cymra fall to the ground and squirm in pain. Llacme lowered her head and said to him: "Stay there and shut up, Cymra, before he turns your limbs into crystal". But Cymra opened his mouth and stretched out his tongue, whose tentacles trapped Teremy by a wing and the lower torso, dragging him down to where Cymra was. In a split second, Cymra closed his mouth with Teremy inside and his electro-plasmatic fangs made holes in several parts of his body, including both eyes, that profusely bled a white liquid. A flow of matter started to come out from the head of the celestial beast in front of the first blue star from the left. Then Cymra spat Teremy to the ground and grabbed his neck with the claws of both his front legs. Teremy didn't make any sound while his head was separated from his body, he was already dead; and so was the beast with the same name, while his horrifying head drifted away into the cold space, letting a ray of blue light be casted over the mountains of Sibara. That ray only got there seconds after everything had happened, because light can only travel so fast. By that moment, Cymra had already ran away to his abyss with Teremy's corpse and the crowd was scattering down the mountain. Only Llacme and Djaall remained in their places in front of Vadállat and Szörnyet.

- I can talk to him – said Llacme.
- Talk to him? – replied Vadállat – What for?... our time with you is over, I will destroy this planet to ashes, you can stay here if you want and pray for mercy, but you will die anyway.

That said both angels flew beyond Qatra's atmosphere and waited in orbit, while the beast Vadállat advanced slowly drawing his figure against the blue stars bigger and bigger. The beast

Szörnyet moved away and disappeared into the darkness between the stars, because it would only take one of them to destroy a system. Llacme looked at the sky resigned to her fate. Djaall said:

- We could use a portal; I have a good place in Aqir.
- Don't you know the gods that you pray to? They will destroy the entire system. I prefer to stay and purge my sins, and the ones of my brother.
- I will try anyway, there's no harm in it.

And the lord of flies flew away leaving Llacme alone in her atonement.

A powerful light shone for a moment behind the beast Vadállat and then it became subtle; a gravitational pull slightly dragged the beast back and Qatra moved a little closer to his suns in a new orbit, that caused a short tremor with a violent peak, but the planet's integrity was not compromised. A yellow dwarf, twenty times smaller than the aligned blue giants, appeared between the beast and the blue stars. It was orbited by four planets. The emergence infuriated the Angel Vadállat, who had remained calm and emotionless to that moment. The gravitational pull dragged him and the angel Szörnyet with the rest of the planet, and they barely managed to remain in orbit. He saw that as a lack of respect, an interruption to the execution of his sentence, that should be taken as an absolute. Not for a moment he stopped to even try to understand what had happened. Minutes later, when the yellow light got to Qatra, the Angel Vadállat saw the cause and subsequent target of his fury. The beast Vadállat turned around and advanced to a side of the dwarf's system, where the closest trespasser planet was orbiting. It was a red planet, and he destroyed it in minutes. Then he approached the pale satellite of a blue planet, and his fury was far from being appeased.

Suddenly, the angel Vadállat felt numb, his eyes became white, and his mind was no more. He started to fall like a meteorite into Qatra's atmosphere to Szörnyet's disbelief, who followed him but couldn't prevent him from crashing against Sibara's surface leaving a scorched crater. The beast Vadállat collided with the pale moon and destroyed a part of it, then he kept drifting and passed dangerously close to the yellow dwarf star, suffering severe burns and absorbing an almost lethal dose of radiation. The angel Vadállat became black, and his skin started to peel off with white blood coming out of his sores; his eyes were white, almost transparent, and he moved his wings in a clumsy, unconscious way. The angel Szörnyet looked at him floating in silence as Llacme appeared flying down and settled by their side. They looked at each other and then to the skies, specifically to that small yellow star between them and their blue suns.

STORY IV

The Parasite

1

It was day in the eastern hemisphere of Earth when Maria Brühl and the Macsks orbited over Eurasia seeking to descend over Kish. Something caught their eye shortly after they entered Earth's atmosphere while looking at the crater that once was an underground city known as Lidya, there was a large black line from the Baltic Sea to almost two hundred and fifty miles to the south, from the Gulf of Riga to near the outer limits of former Minsk. They flew over it to make a better observation and realized that it was some sort of serpent, at least five hundred feet of diameter and a visible length of two hundred and forty miles, as the rear end entered the Gulf and could not be seen. The head was scorched with a big crack of a couple miles lengthwise.

- That looks like a tenia with wings – said Maria.

Astarte was in an improvised bed while Trimurti cleaned the blood from her eyes and nose. Then she called for Maria and ask her to bring a notebook, as she had valuable information to share.

Then they went south and descended near Kish. The underground city was almost empty, with some humans hiding in the lower levels and Ekron worms lurking on the upper ones. Some abandoned ships, probably for evacuation purposes had been left behind or maybe the pilots had been killed before they could take off. They descended from the ship and explored the remains of Kish.

The Macsks stunned a worm, Maria tied its mouth and they locked it in a cage. They grabbed some food and raided houses looking for kid clothes, for the Macsks. Maria took some overalls and rugged leather boots for her. Then they went to the lateral sections of the middle levels, where mainframes were stored. With ropes, cranes, and tackles they managed to take out two big mainframes from there: ten feet long and half a ton of weight each, then they transported them to the surface; as well as several power cells to feed them. They loaded one mainframe and some power cells on an abandoned ship, and sent it to Qatra, piloted by a Macsk named Irkalla. The other mainframe was loaded in the army ship with the caught worm and the rest of the power cells, then they flew to the ruins of Minsk.

No direct bombing had taken place in Minsk, so a good part of the city was exactly as it was before the Annihilation War, the nuclear winters had covered it with a layer of ice that had melted a couple centuries before, but vegetation had not recovered its place due to the effects of acid rain and snow, so only residual dump stained the churches and buildings of the former city.

The ship descended on a valley north of the ruins of Minsk, with vestigial vegetation. Remains of trees with black and corrupted trunks framed the lower part of an enormous head, resembling that of an eel but without eyes.

A Macsk named Osiris climbed the five hundred feet to the top of the head aided by wood stakes, he got into the opened crack to tie some ropes to the cranial and vertebral bones of the monster. The crack was two miles long and fifty yards wide, it had at least twenty vertebrae in naked bone that could be used as a workshop for Maria. Using the ropes secured by Osiris, they pulled up the mainframe and the worm to place them inside the crack. Maria approached Astarte's bed and gave her to drink some of her blood, then asked:

- Their pineal gland... is it here or here – pointing to a sketch in her notebook.
- There – answered the Macsk, rising a trembling finger – the only one left has it there, the others have it deeper, but one is dead and the other is blind, so it doesn't matter.

In a couple days, Maria had the mainframe connected to the worm, and the worm connected to the monster. When they turned it on, the monster convulsed for some seconds as well as the earth beneath him. Then he slowly regained blood circulation, and the crack started healing. Modifications in his proboscis proved to be working well and soon the cables could be removed, as he started feeding from the energy stored in his body.

- How will you get to the dog? – asked Astarte to Maria.
- The same way he got to me, in dreams – she answered.

Llacme was laying over a stone platform that once had a throne, in a castle so old that it was reduced to a stone cave. Sleepless for many days, waiting for a resolution from Szörnyet, she closed her eyes for a second and conscience started to leave her. It was obvious that they could not get anywhere near the yellow system without risking the beast Szörnyet, but then how could they recover Vadállat? Then she felt a noise, opened her eyes a little but saw nothing in front of her and closed them again. Then a voice clearly said: “We didn’t mean to interrupt your dreams, your Holiness”, so she opened her eyes again and still didn’t see anybody in front of her, but paying more attention, she saw a point of light ten feet from the ground and an infimum moth standing in two legs. She adopted a more decorous position, with at least her head vertical, and said:

- Don’t worry, dreams hadn’t come to me yet. What is your concern?
- My disciple Láthatlan – said Lepk, with a powerful voice for such a tiny being – was called for a spiritual transmission, as it is our job to carry souls across our dominions, and he found some disturbing anomalies in the soul acquired.
- Explain.
- The soul acquired was heavily charged with exogenous material.
- Sex?
- Female.
- Maybe she is with child.
- The exogenous material was not of her own species and was attached to her with forbidden rituals.
- Did that happen in our system?
- No, far away.
- Nothing, except for us, can do or even know any ritual, allowed or forbidden, you are delusional.
- Am afraid not, and that is the issue, she was intelligent while she was alive.

Llacme stayed in shock for some seconds, not sure to understand what Lepk was saying.

- What did Láthatlan do with her?
- He let her here in Sibara, but I carried her to Dobruj when I found out.
- Good decision, until we know what is really happening, we must be cautious.
- Is it possible that she is the demon that will seduce Cymra?
- Sincerely, I don’t think Cymra will actually ally himself with a demon, it must had meant something else. Szörnyet is now meditating and trying to dream about it, even if he has never had the gift of clairvoyance... Well, you can leave, and punish Láthatlan for his lack of judgment.
- Your Holiness.

They left and the golden skin of Lepk reflected the yellow rays of the sun, as the blue giants were not on the firmament. The stones on the ground moved away and trembled by every step of Láthatlan, as if a giant spider would have plugged its claws between them. They got to their

cave in complete obscurity except for the shiny spot over Láthatlan and Lepk's yellow fluorescence.

- How could you be that stupid? From now on, all souls with signals of intelligence go to Dobruj, not Sibara, understood? – said Lepk, lecturing his apprentice.
- I understand.
- And as punishment, you will not eat in two years.
- I can eat now.

And Lepk's tenuous shine disappeared in the darkness of a cave, inside an invisible beast. Láthatlan later said that he had eaten Lepk because he was idolizing demons, as it was Lepk's idea to take Agatha to Dobruj.

Anubis was severely affected by Gog's death, something difficult to understand to any other Chimera, as they barely remembered their life as animals. Gog meant many things to Anubis, a father, a master and above all, a guide. Now Anubis ruled Ekron and all their creatures but had no path in front of him. Kish was abandoned, letting only a few hundred humans hiding inside it and the mindless worms playing around the city that once conquered the stars. He wasn't in the mood to do anything with the couple thousand humans kept prisoners in Ekron either, Gog would already be consuming them, or giving them to Hoszusárnyu, but that beast was dead too, thrown along northern Europe like a wall. Without a reason to leave the guts of Ekron, he hadn't even noticed the three new blue suns on Earth's sky. In his depression, he hadn't noticed either that the content of a transparent box, like an aquarium, captured by himself and Gog, had disappeared. Hiding in the shadows of a metallic corridor, he fell asleep because he could not cry.

In a bicolor dream, he was again a dog in the streets of Constantinople. A butcher at the end of an alley had broken his front right leg with a stick for trying to taste some meat, it hurt but he kept walking because thirst and hunger had never forgiven him. Humans passed by his side as if he didn't exist, as if he was just a nuisance in their path. He moved his tail, but nobody noticed. He kept searching for food, water, care, and connection in that yellow-blue nightmarish world. Limping down a street he found some garbage from a restaurant, he managed to eat some but then two other dogs came barking at him and showed him their teeth. Anubis fighting instinct was always exceptional, years and centuries later he was able to defeat more powerful and prepared entities in combat, even when he never received any formal martial instruction, just relying in his instinct. So that was not a fight that he would run from, even with a broken leg. Without even barking, the black dog pounced on an ear of one of the other dogs and ripped it off its head with one bite, the third dog attacked him biting his wounded leg, so he receded and escaped. At least he ate some meat that day. Then he saw a glass on the street, part of a bottle maybe and it still had some water in it, so he licked it, but the edges were sharp, and they cut his tongue. It didn't matter because it was water, and the thirst was burning his throat. He kept licking the glass with the broken leg in the air and the blood from his tongue mixing with the water until there was no more liquid in the glass. Then he looked up and saw a human face, he moved his tail and showed his tongue, lacerated in the name of thirst. It was a girl with blonde hair and beautiful blue cat eyes. She offered him food, and of course he accepted it, then he felt sleepy and laid on the ground, extremely tired, and all went black. He woke up and the girl was by his side, they were in a park, and his leg didn't hurt anymore, he looked at it and it had a stick attached to it, a little longer than the leg itself; she had splinted it for him. He stood up and it worked perfectly, like a walking crutch, he jumped and ran almost the same as before. She looked at him and the happiness that he felt was not comparable with any emotion a human can experience. She talked to him, and then he was able to understand her:

- My name is Maria and I come to you with an offer, because is the only way you and I can survive. And there is gain in it for both of us; you get to conquer a planet and I get to rule

Kish, from the shadows. Of course, you would have to liberate all the human prisoners that you have in Ekron.

- You want my help to become Empress of Kish?
- Wear a crown, sit in a throne, and fake fantasies to the lambs so they don't destroy themselves? That is not my kind of job. I can get a puppet to do that.

Then Trimurti appeared by their side and Anubis started to tremble like a child.

- No, not them – said Anubis, terrified.
- They are with me.
- No deal, not if they are involved.
- Listen, is only a matter of time before they realize that we can't blind another of their planetary size monsters, and when they do that, what is left of the Solar System will become dust.
- This is just a dream, a nightmare.
- It's not... get outside your hole at dusk and look at the horizon, three blue suns will be on the firmament, debris from Mars and the dark side of the Moon will be orbiting Earth like a ring. If that is what you see, you'll know this was not just a dream.
- If that is the case, how do I find you?
- Meet me where the head of Gog's snake lies scorched and gutted. And be prepared to trust me with your life.

Anubis woke up soaked in sweat, his red eyes shone like fire in the darkness of Ekron. He climbed to the surface and looked at the sky. It was an hour before dusk, and there were no blue suns up in the firmament. He sighed relieved, but then he looked closely and saw a ring of debris crossing the skies from east to west. A blue light emerged from the eastern horizon, three stars, significantly bigger than the sun dawned before the incredulous eyes of the Black Dog of Ekron, who understood that he only had one choice.

Maria opened her eyes, she was sitting on the ground holding hands with Trimurti in front of her, with a lit candle between them. The high blue flame that the candle was giving while María was in Anubis's dream, returned to its normal shape, and Trimurti opened his eyes too.

When the suns finally went down Maria and her cats gathered around a bonfire. A pair of red shiny eyes emerged from the shadows of a former forest and Anubis; Black Dog of Ekron and Spirit of Possession, revealed himself. He had the head of a black dog and his body was humanoid, with black fur, metal and ceramic irregularly spread on it. His eyes were bright red, like the ones of a meat fly. Maria stood up and said to him:

- Just consider, that you will never be able to trust me as much as I have trusted you.

Dobruj was a continent on the western hemisphere of Qatra, surrounded by an ocean different from the Humner, that was an inner sea of Sibara, the continent on the eastern hemisphere. While in Sibara lived the sentient and intelligent beasts and spirits, Dobruj was a place of suffering designed to lesser souls that served as prey for many native predators, remarkably for the Osmógreh, octopus with enormous foldable lace wings by the side of their heads. They had five big dark green eyes, two to each side and one in the middle, eight arms and six tentacles. Interspersed between the tentacles and arms, they had eight arthropod legs, thin and black that helped them move on the ground. That is the origin of their colloquial name “spider-octs”. They were fast and efficient predators in water, air, or land; they were possibly related to Cymra. Although they had big brains, they never developed higher intelligence, or at least that was common belief. They were between six and thirty feet high.

The same way some spirits in Sibara learned the faith of the Three Angels, some souls condemned to Dobruj learned to feed on other spirits and lived there for decades without even know the name of the continent.

When a foreign spacecraft entered the atmosphere over Dobruj, only some Osmógreh raised their heads in awe and then quickly forgot about it, to keep feeding on condemned spirits. The Macsk named Irkalla, landed his ship in a valley hidden by mountains; took some cables and a short spear with three sharp electrodes at the tip, connected with wires; and went out for a hunt. He hid at the top of a tree near a pack of hideous polychaetae souls until a twenty-five-feet tall Osmógreh flew down to eat them. Irkalla took a moment, as it had to be an accurate hit, then jumped over the head of the spider-oct and stucked the spear on a specific place in its nape, then jumped to the ground behind it with a cable in his hands. The beast turned around and approached Irkalla to attack him, but the Macsk pushed a switch in the cable connected to the spear at one end, and to a small metallic box at the other. The Osmógreh fainted and fell to Irkalla’s feet. The polychaetas started chewing on the Osmógreh’s tentacles, so Irkalla took one of those horrifying spirits and ate it. The vermin had an awful taste, but it was very nutritious; the rest ran away from there as fast as they could.

The box was just an interface with limited options, so he connected it to a keyboard and waked the octopus up. He made the beast unload the mainframe and power cells from the ship, and take them to a cave, where further connections were performed.

Irkalla then gave himself to meditation inside the cave, calling for the soul of Agatha. Days later, a human woman appeared at the cave’s entrance in a black lace dress, with light red curly hair long to her knees and blue eyes. In her neck, an old wound showed its scar. She had no right hand and her left arm was severed to elbow height. Her mutilated arms were covered by the dress and she was barefoot. Irkalla went out to receive the soul of Agatha, Saint of Halych. Her voice was like a harsh whisper, she asked the Macsk:

- Was it you, calling me? I heard my name in the warm wind, it came from here.

- Come with me, this will be your home now.
- I sense only suffering for me in that cave.
- I'm sorry about that, there is no healing without suffering.

Agatha understood what Irkalla meant by that, as her mind felt uncomplete and her pate felt damaged. The Macsk approached her, and almost by instinct she stretched her right arm towards him showing the stump coming out of the lace sleeve.

- All your powers are now under Anubis's influence.

That said, he clinched her stump with the claws of his left hand, and she fainted.

- I don't get it – said Anubis to Maria – why don't we just put an antenna on it and remote control it from here?

The Macsks looked at each other, Astarte was sitting on a chair, she laughed a little and began to cough. Maria went to give her some water, and then replied to Anubis:

- You mean control it with electromagnetic signals?
- Exactly.
- Because electromagnetism travels in space approximately at the speed of light, a signal from the Moon would take more than a second to reach Earth. For the signal to go and come back, and effectively establish a control loop, it would take double that time. If we were to control it from here to the Sun, the delay would be more than sixteen minutes. If we actually want to destroy one of their planets, we'll have a control delay of about an hour. We must have a spiritual link to the creature, and that link can only be performed from that planet. Agatha is already there, this is your plan, not mine.

Anubis laid back on a stretcher and was tied to it. By his side there was another stretcher of equal dimensions. Outside the stretchers, two modified transformers, six feet high, and two Megawatts of power, scavenged from the old armory in Württemberg, were located one at Anubis side and the other at the opposite side of the empty stretcher. That way, any electromagnetic interaction between the transformers would pass through Anubis and through the empty stretcher.

Maria approached with a knife in her hand and took out Anubis right eye from its socket, then put it on the empty stretcher, where the head would be. She turned on the transformers and Anubis started to squeal as his image blurred and scattered between both stretchers. When Maria turned off the machines, Anubis remained in his stretcher, with only his left eye, and a black dog with a red right eye, breathing heavily, was laid down on the other stretcher. Maria covered Anubis with a blanket, and said:

- They must not see each other.

Then she took the black dog with the help of Trimurti and other Macsk and sat it at the center of a circle made of Macsk blood. She stood outside the circle with the knife in her left hand. In a dialect of Qatra's language, she recited verses specially prepared for her by Astarte:

- "Láthatlan, his shadow is yours, his hands are yours, his eyes are yours; carry him to the lace of light, to warm the grave of those who are no more, until the dying star erases us all."

A dot of light appeared over the dog's head, and Maria introduced her left arm and the knife into the circle. Her arm started to frost, and she stabbed the knife in the dog's throat. The dog reacted and bit Maria's hand severing her index and medium fingers. She took her arm out of the circle, the dog bled and choke to death seconds later. Nevertheless, it did not immediately fall to the ground, as if something would be holding it in the air. Then its right eye, the only one it had,

disappeared like ash leaving a black trail as finally the animal fell to the ground, inert, and the dot of light over its head vanished.

Maria disinfected her hand and bandaged it. Took the blanket off Anubis and untied him. He seemed disoriented and weak.

- Now you should see what it sees, and with a little training, you'll control it without problem.

When the black dog entered the cave, Irkalla already had Agatha and the Osmógreh connected to the mainframe. Just a little part of Agatha's brain needed to be extracted to implant the electrodes and chemical hoses into her skull, so she was awake and could sense the brain signals from the octopus like her own, it was a disgusting and painful experience. Irkalla putted some sort of crown on the dog's head, it was connected to the mainframe through a bundle of wires. The control signal passed from the dog's brain to the computer, where it was recoded, to Agatha's brain that made a psychic link back to the dog; allowing the signal to feedback on itself and oscillate in frequencies changing several times per second according to the dog's commands but maintaining the original reference. Even Maria was unaware of the real dynamics behind that part of the system as she was mostly following instructions given to her in a dream, that's why the dog and Agatha were indispensable for the control system, that relied heavily in their psychic power. That oscillation was modulated by Agatha in a way that the octopus could understand and then passed to the octopus' brain. Finally, the Osmógreh performed a spiritual connection with the worm inside Hoszusárnyu.

After a short test where Agatha screamed and the Osmógreh trembled, Irkalla said "don't mess it up", he took a bag from the floor and headed out of the cave.

- Where are you going? – asked the dog.
- Next phase, you don't need me here, behave and don't break anything.

Irkalla entered a forest, covered with shiny leaves and black fog, he climbed to a tree and waited for a goat to appear. All religions need a nemesis, a demon, evil incarnated to project the imperfection implicit to nature, that they dare to defy. The Three Angel's faith was no exception, they projected absolute evil in a creature incapable of speak or build, only attack, possibly the original inhabitants of Qatra. They hunted them for millennia, until only a few hundred remained confined to Dobruj. They avoided extinction thanks to their resistance and the lethal accuracy of their instinct. The goats of Qatra reached a length of ten feet, their hind legs were long, with three joints and had exoskeleton. Like flea rear legs, their impulse was so powerful that could project the animal a hundred yards ahead, with a force ten times its weight. Their front legs were short and had sharp claws to cut their prey's meat. On their heads they had two pairs of massive, curved horns, hard as iron. Their necks were almost as thick as their heads with a robust set of near metallic bones and muscles to endure the impacts of their attacks. That almost metallic protection continued down their backs, protecting their spines. Their eyes were black and compound. A pair of vulture wings that could reach a span of twenty-five feet on their backs, allowed them to fly long distances and nest on the tops of mountains.

Irkalla spotted a goat fifty yards away. The moment he looked at it, the goat looked back at him, it made some carving on the ground, and projected itself at half the speed of sound to reach the trunk of the tree Irkalla had climbed in a little more than a quarter of a second. The tree collapsed and Irkalla jumped to the nearest one, then the goat jumped up and stabbed Irkalla's left leg with its claws and dragged him down. When they were falling, Irkalla bent down and touched the goat's

forehead between the horns. He fell over the goat that had fainted and then carefully removed the claw from his leg; it was broken so he had to splint it with a stick and rope from his bag. Then he whispered verses in the goat's ears, while giving it white blood from his wrists to drink. With more rope from his bag, he made reins to mount the goat like a Pegasus.

Irkalla went back to the spacecraft riding his goat, made it sleep and hid it in an armored compartment in the back of the ship, near the engines. Then he flew on his ship over the oceans of Qatra until he reached Sibara. He dived the ship into the Humner and emerged back near its shores shooting electromagnetic blasts to the undead creatures and ghosts. Some of them ran, but some others pounced on the oiled ship and Irkalla simply landed it, as if they would be inflicting some damage on it.

In her flat throne, Llacme was informed of the foreign attack from the shores of the Humner and rushed her flight to face the enemy, followed by a myriad of acolytes that quickly overrun the ship, covering it from every angle and hitting it with sticks and stones like cavemen killing a mammoth.

- Whatever is inside that thing, I want it alive – said Llacme to his army.

After a couple hours, Irkalla opened a side hatch of the ship and came out, limping with his hands in the air. A ghost grabbed him by the neck and took it to Llacme, that pierced one of his arms with her arthropod claws and lifted him in the air like a doll. Strangely for her, Llacme felt that a quantum of energy left her the moment her claws touched Irkalla's flesh. If she had known that that creature could leave her blind and stupid just by blinking, her attitude would have been much different. Irkalla looked at Llacme and said in her precise dialect of Qatra's language:

- No matter what you do to me, I will not reveal the secrets of my master.
- We'll see – replied Llacme and dragged him to her castle, clearly biting the hook.

In a wide pit used as dungeon, Irkalla had his arms chained to a wall while Llacme pierced different parts of his body and had eaten one of his fingers. The torture had lasted about an hour when Irkalla decided that it was convincing enough.

- Tell me, who is your master?
- Never.

Llacme pierced the splinted leg and Irkalla exaggerated a cry of pain.

- No, no, please, not there.
- Who is your master?
- I serve Cymra, Beast of the Abyss.

Llacme hesitated for a moment but remembered Teremy's prophecies were always accurate.

- Why are you here?
- I'm a scout, but my ship malfunctioned, and I got stuck in the shore.
- What were you scouting for?
- I... I can't tell you.

Llacme pierced his wounded leg again.

- We have plans to invade this planet in the next few days, I've come to identify your castle to attack it first when we arrive. We will come through a portal that Cymra has opened for us in the depths of the Humner and take you by surprise.
- What is your planet?
- The third, blue one.
- Where is your base?
- There is a sea at the north, with a big, scorched crater south of it, that is our base.

Llacme thought twice about her next question, and finally asked:

- How did you blind one of our gods?
- What are you talking about?

She sank her claw so deep in Irkalla's leg that almost separated it from his body. In a whisper, the Macsk answered:

- Cymra said that he would eliminate them, one by one. We don't have the power to do something like that, but he is the most powerful being in this planet, after the gods.

Llacme stood in silence for some moments, then she climbed out of the pit and ordered "eat him" to a couple ghosts guards standing there. She left her castle and ordered an attack on the Humner. The ghost guards went into the pit and smelt the banquet before them, but then Irkalla blinked, and they collapsed to his feet.

Cymra had not eaten since the alignment ritual, almost a month of fasting and praying to the corpse of Teremy. He had sunk a stick in the neck of the corpse and nailed its head on the other end. He put the “recomposed” Teremy’s corpse in a hole on a wall inside his submarine cave like a doll on a shelf. He had closed the entrance of his cave with a big rock and had not moved it in his month of fasting. Then he heard the noise of something trying to open it accompanied by shouts and bumps. He was under attack.

Cymra came out of his cave and found dozens of marine beasts and spirits throwing rocks at him. A couple of Osmógreh attacked him piercing his wings with their arthropod legs. He threw his tongue at them and cut some of their limbs with great effort. He was too weak from fasting. Those creatures were supposed to be loyal to him, Ruler of the Humner. An eel bit his neck and discharged a painful electric shock that almost made him faint. He pierced the eel with his stinger tail, some of its organs liquated and it let him go. He went back to his cave and closed the entrance again with the rock.

He approached the corpse of Teremy, humiliated himself and prayed once again. The corpse moved and a ray of hope inundated Cymra that opened his eyes as wide as he could to behold the miracle he had been praying for in the darkness of his cave. And then the ghost of a polychaetae appeared behind Teremy’s head, it was liking coagulated blood from his neck. Cymra took the polychaetae and ate it in one bite. Then he realized two facts: his fasting was over, it had no point anymore, actually none of the repentance he had gone through that last month had had any point, and he was starving, weak and under attack. So, he took the corpse of Teremy and devoured it. It burned like moonshine in his guts, his tongue became black, and his four lateral eyes became black crystal with metallic points in their centers. His central eye remained bright green.

The marine horde outside his cave managed to take off the rock and entered with spears and maces. A white ray went through ten of them, leaving their blood and entrails scattered in the black water. Then his black tongue like a hundred worms reached out to them transforming the surroundings of everything it touched into glass, including limbs, fins, eyes, and tails. The mob ran away and Cymra fed on the corpses inside his cave.

News got to Llacme that Cymra had new powers, like those of an Angel. Then Irkalla’s story made sense completely and Llacme visited Szörnyet at the top of a mountain.

- If we let them invade us, we’ll have to face both them and Cymra, but if we attack them now at their planet, they will be gone and then together you, Djaall, and I can fight my brother.
- What about the blinding of Vadállat, can they do that to me?
- Unlikely, Cymra somehow acquired new powers, he did it.
- Fine, get your portal prepared; if they surrender, we may get useful information about Cymra. If not, they’ll be destroyed.

And with that magnificent plan, Szörnyet closed his eyes in his mountain and from the dark vacuum, his beast appeared. The beast Szörnyet could be described as a black whale with crimson stains in his back. His mouth had curved fangs showing out of it. From right behind his eyes until the end of his tail, his sides had long and thick arthropod legs like those of a centipede. His tail was extremely long and had three clawed tentacles in its tip, it could reach beyond his head when bent forwards. His black eyes had only three stars, as he had been the less active of the three beasts. He crossed the space between Qatra and Earth in three hours. As the blue suns went down, in the depths of a forest, Llacme asked not to be disturbed while preparing her portal between worlds.

It was dawn near the crater of Lidya where Anubis and Maria waited for Szörnyet. Maria controlled Hoszusárnyu, favorite snake of Gog, with a keyboard and a mainframe. She had commanded the beast to hide in the Baltic sea. Maria wore a space suit, something that gave no reassurance to Anubis.

- You'll do fine! – said Maria and Anubis tried to smile but only showed his teeth.

The celestial beast first appeared as a small figure on the blue sky, as he reflected the light of the rising sun. He got close enough for his body to cover a fourth of the firmament, like a nightmarish vision. He was a little closer than Moon orbit but as it was much more massive, gravity in eastern Europe got reduced to a fifth of its normal value. People in Ekron gave three-feet-high jumps when attempting to walk. The beast in the sky had his tail bent to a side of his head, he moved one of its tentacles in an apparently meaningless gesture. Minutes later, a pair of huge aquamarine gems, of about three feet of diameter, fell to the ground like meteorites a hundred yards from Anubis; they had been expelled from Szörnyet's tentacle. This was relevant to Maria; as the Angels did not understand their own technology anymore, Astarte couldn't get any information from Vadállat's mind about their portals' mechanism, and Maria wanted to study them up close. The agreed signal for Maria, was Anubis kneeling before whatever came out of the portal. He approached the two gems; an electric arc between them formed a door in the air that became black, and a putrid air emanated from it.

In Llacme's castle, a reptilian creature passed by the dungeon pit and Irkalla asked him:

- Where is her Holiness? She promised me mercy.
- Is in the woods, using her portal, no mercy for you.
- Neither for you.

That said, the Macsk blinked, and the reptile fell to the ground. Then Irkalla closed his eyes and whispered a song to a friend. Inside Irkalla's ship, in the armored container, the goat woke up and pressed a switch on the wall with a claw, opening the container's door. He jumped out of it and then off the ship through the hatch. At the shores of the Humner, a crowd of beasts and spirits shouted in awe at the sight of the goat. There haven't been goats in Sibara for at least a millennium, but the stories about the destruction they were able to inflict had become legendary. The goat jumped to the sky, and opening his magnificent vulture wings, he flew over the caves to finally land over Llacme's castle, impacting against a wall that disappeared into dust. The creatures crossed in his way found a quick and sanguinary death. He found the pit, jumped into it, and stepped over the blinded creatures shredding them. With his claws, the goat liberated Irkalla from his chains, the Macsk petted his head and mounted him. Making another hole on the castle's side, they flew back to the shore and entered the ship. To the aghast gaze of Sibara inhabitants, the ship took off, heading to the ocean and then to Dobruj.

From the portal before Anubis, Llacme emerged from the shadows looking at him with scorn, then she examined her surroundings and said in a contemptuous tone:

- If you give me information about Cymra, you may not die today.

Anubis knew a rudimentary form of Qatra's language, as it was the tongue Gog used for most of his spells. He knelt before Llacme, and Maria entered a series of commands in her keyboard. The roar of ten earthquakes came from the Baltic as Hoszusárnyu raised its head seventy miles from the ground, into the ionosphere, aided by its fifty-mile-long wings, used as front legs against the shore. Its total length was three hundred miles and it looked like a horsehair worm emerging from its host. Then it buried its wings a little further, leaned its tail in the seabed and gave itself the impulse to take off the planet. The torque applied caused that watches had to be turned back five minutes. Hoszusárnyu flew from Earth to Szörnyet's face in eight seconds. The celestial beast tried to grab it with a tentacle, but it was already entering his eye socket, clinging to the optic nerve and then to his brain, deeper and deeper, until it found the gland it had to work with. Its modified proboscis nailed three electrodes in the gland and the snake nested.

Anubis closed his eyes, and in a Dobruj cave a black dog closed them too. The same did Agatha, the Osmógreh and the worm inside Hoszusárnyu. Szörnyet moved away from Earth until it wasn't visible in daylight. In the mountains of Sibara, the angel Szörnyet fell unconscious to the ground.

Anubis stood up and looked at Llacme's very unsatisfied face.

- I have different idea – said Anubis in a definitely not fluent Qatrian.
- Speak your mind beast.
- I am your Emperor now. I allow you to live and you pay me.
- Pay you with what?
- Osmógreh, fifty.
- No, I have different idea too – said Llacme mocking his accent and attacked him with her tail.

Anubis jumped leaving a black oil blur on the ground, he became purely spiritual and entered through Llacme's eyes, she fell to the ground and convulsed, choked by something invisible, touching her neck with her upper legs until she stopped moving. Then the spirit of Anubis came out of her mouth, reached the oil blur, and regained physical form. Llacme breathed again and looked at Anubis with a mix of anger and fear.

- Fine, fifty Osmógreh, and you are now our Emperor.
- Good, and only for demonstration, we destroy one planet. Small one. Now go, before I kill you.

Llacme stood up, crossed her portal, and closed it behind her. Hours later, in Aqir, the Lord of Flies had to cross his portal back to Qatra as the beast Szörnyet appeared in the sky and destroyed the planet.

When night fell on Earth, Maria disposed herself to examine the portal aquamarines, in absence of sun light to avoid electromagnetic interference. She placed a scanner in front of the gems, specially modified by herself to read their extra-dimensional composition. She found Llacme's

portal gems oscillated at thirty-six Hertz, a different frequency than the signal from the Moon Base gems. She also found a diffuse figure embedded in the gem, that could not be analyzed in four or five dimensions, so pushing the scanner to its limits, she discovered a stable configuration on six dimensions, a Hexacross, more precisely a Hexacontitetrapeton, a regular polytope. She figured that with special equipment, to develop by herself, she could even replicate the structure from sand. Then the scanner gave a supplementary lecture, it had detected more hexa-dimensional objects nearby. Following the signal, she found two objects superficially buried eighty yards from the gems. "These must have been under the snake" she thought and dug them out. One was a black tiara with two broken gems in it, the other, a giant vulture wing transformed into a weapon, with long crystal covered metal needles. She put them in her bag and then hid them under key in a lab that she was preparing at the lower levels of Kish.

STORY V

Crystal Statues

1

As time passed, Llacme and her acolytes soon realized that Anubis did not have the heart of a tyrant; a symbiotic relationship grew between Ekron and Sibara, in which the fallen kingdom provided technology to the sour creatures of Qatra and they in return provided a never-ending supply of special organic material to advance bio-electronic development. Besides spacecrafts, Anubis provided enhancing prosthetic limbs to semi spiritual beings in Sibara. Llacme was given a set of raw mechatronic arms with three-fingered hands taking energy from her body to function, that allowed her to swing a sword and produce handcrafted objects; her castle was renewed, and a proper throne was installed for her. Djaall became a messenger, as he had developed the ability to travel between worlds with portals much simpler than those made of gems. Láthatlan was ordered by Anubis to carry the souls of intelligent creatures to Sibara instead of Dobruj, to avoid any information leak about the content of Agatha's cave. The cult to Cymra was reinstated and human souls began to be counted among his acolytes, some voluntarily, others by human sacrifice. The unconscious bodies of angels Vadállat and Szörnnyet were cleansed and displayed behind a crystal in a temple specially built for them at Llacme's renewed castle. The goats went back to Sibara and thrived in the high mountains near the Humner. When the Osmógreh received in payment from Qatra, Anubis didn't need the corpse of Achish to produce electromagnetic fog in which his worms could float and move freely anymore, so he gave Achish to Maria, who repaired it and made him work as an artisan in Kish. Either way, Achish haven't been used for such purpose since Gog's dead. Anubis released his human prisoners and sent them to Kish, as promised, where a renewed human society started to bloom. A new age had begun in most places of this hybrid system. But universe is binary, good and evil coexists in ways that, at some levels, make them indistinguishable from one another. Human society in Kish was certainly the healthier, happier, and fairer than humanity had had in centuries, perhaps millennia, or ever. The governors, senate and judges were elected by universal vote and almost no crime, corruption or inequality had grown beyond a threshold, in nearly magical harmony. But there was no magic in it, just mystery. Maria Brühl, that haven't aged a day since she biologically turned twenty-one, demanded a price of human sacrifice to keep her cats happy, in a low, forbidden level of the city. There she had her laboratory, had replicated the portal gems, and taught the Macsk how to produce them, that and a lot of other processes. In a lapse of ten years, her "cats" had grown to reach four feet of height and developed their own taste in clothing. Their fur had begun to recede and blend with a pale blue skin under it, except in their heads, where it grew longer every month. Their horns became a mere pair of needles in their heads. Theresa's arms, their primary source of food for years, had long started to decompose, so Maria threw her away like an old doll. The Macsk needed fresh human blood to survive, and the process applied to Theresa was considered unnecessary while having an entire city of humans to prey on. Maria took the homeless at first, when they ran out, she started to ask governors for a monthly quote. Organized crime and drug dealing intended to thrive in the city many times, but their unaware representatives always ended up eaten alive by Macsk. Prostitution and witchcraft were

considered necessary vices by Maria, so they were not special targets for her, after all, she had grown up in Nineveh.

There are different levels for evil, Maria never tried to hide her own, as she knew it was pointless, especially hide it from herself; but recent attitudes in Astarte had Maria concerned in an undefined way. For days she discovered Astarte staring at her in a strange mood, and it had begun to undermine her spirit. She finally asked her closest ally:

- Is there something you want to tell me?
- I want to know what is in that drawer, the locked one. I can feel you don't want us to access it.
- Is dangerous.
- Tell me anyway – said Astarte in a compelling way.

Maria took out a special key chain that she kept hidden and opened the drawer, then she took out a black tiara from it and gave it to Astarte. The Macsk's black starred eyes shone like never before.

- There is someone's soul trapped in this.
- Not just someone, a Crom.

Astarte left the tiara on a table very carefully, understanding that it was not a toy.

- I drank Crom blood once, back in Assuan, I felt high for a month, after that my senses became sharper and I understood concepts I haven't even imagined before. I think that is how I was able to blind Vadállat.
- That's what I was afraid of, now you want to give that Crom physical form again, to suck its blood. But is not just a Crom, is Queen Carmina of Nineveh.
- And what is the problem?
- Several problems. First, she was the one who killed Gog, so Anubis will not tolerate her to live, in any form.

Maria took a giant vulture wing with a handle from the drawer.

- This is her weapon, The Black Vulture of Kish, if this is anywhere in this planet, she will call it and kill us with it before we can make any move.
- Then send it to Qatra.
- No, in the wrong hands this could be too dangerous.
- To the Moon then.

Maria hesitated for a moment.

- The Moon portal gems were destroyed by Vadállat, they are inoperative, we would have to travel there to install a new portal... but Venus may be an alternative, we have already placed a portal there for testing, the electromagnetic interference would make any other communication impossible – said Maria, suddenly losing her fear.
- Anubis never comes down here, how will he find out?

There was another problem that Maria didn't want to discuss with Astarte; the effects of drinking Crom blood would be unpredictable in the Macsks, and they were already becoming something else. Besides, they haven't showed any signs of ageing, and none of the thirty-six in the original pack had died yet. Maria agreed to the experiment having no arguments to oppose it, keeping her growing fear for what the Macsks could become to herself. Astarte of course, sensed that fear but had no issues with it, and said nothing.

Near the crater of Lidya, wearing a space suit with hydraulic exoskeleton and a backpack, Astarte placed a small but powerful transformer by the side of one of the aquamarine portal gems left there by Llacme. After some settings, she turned it on, and an electric arc passed from that gem to the other and formed a door in the air. From that door, a gale of hot dust came out and Astarte entered the portal to appear in the middle of an obscure Venusian paramo, whipped by torrential winds and lightnings. From the backpack she took a small shovel and dug a hole in the ground, inside it she placed The Black Vulture of Kish, that she was also carrying in the backpack and refilled the hole. Then she came back through the portal and closed it.

Maria had a two feet long rat stunned in her lab, she touched its belly and said: “she definitely has been eating some carrion” and proceeded to bleed it out, took out its eyes, washed them with rat blood and some chemical compounds, and then glued them to some empty sockets in the black tiara. Then she placed the tiara inside a cage covered with electrified metal mesh, that allowed to look inside it. The cage was a cube measuring seven feet on each side, mounted on a wide platform. At each side of the cage, Maria placed a transformer of two Megawatts of power connected to electromagnets in the mesh. Astarte had dressed up for the occasion, she wore a long blue dress, she had painted her claws blue, and combed her blue mane backwards, that was almost reaching her shoulders. She looked as if a little girl had played too much with blue watercolor.

They turned the machines on, and the tiara started to tremble, absorbing energy from the magnets. The rat eyes in the tiara crystalized and became gems, maintaining its form and color. When the tiara started to float upwards, Maria turned the transformers off. The tiara stood still at five feet and five inches from the cage’s base and a figure started to solidify under it. It was a woman with dark-red curly hair, long to her knees, in a long black lace dress, shiny leather boots, long sharp nails painted blue and a sapphire ring in her right index finger. Hidden under her hair, a pair of vulture wings were folded in her back. Her skin was almost white, and she appeared to be no more than sixteen years old, although she had lived for more than three centuries. She had two eyes, and they were a mix of compound and reptile visual organs. The sclera was blue with a dark-blue eight-pointed star instead of iris and pupil, which rays crossed the eye to its borders; superimposed over the star, a white vertical line passed through its center, coinciding with its upper and lower rays. The blue sclera was in turn composed by thousands of ommatidia. Below her eyes, she had two black moles, each centered under one of her eyelids. The moment she appeared, she extended her right hand downwards, as if she would be calling something to her hand. Somewhere in Venus, a mound of earth trembled. Carmina observed Maria in silence for a couple seconds, analyzing her and the situation that she was in, then said:

- You are Rebekka Brühl’s daughter, don’t you? Why do you have me in a cage? Release your Queen immediately – and looked aside, acting offended.
- We are not in Nineveh; you are not Queen of anything.
- Where are we then?
- Kish.

- The same, my authority is recognized in the whole Empire. I'm still Queen of Nineveh.
- I have no idea where Nineveh is.
- What do you mean? You know where it is, orbiting Saturn... you grew up there.

Carmina touched the cage with her left hand and a mild electric discharge made her remove it. Then she emitted a short, high-pitched, and slightly sensual cry showing her little white fangs.

- I mean I have no idea where Saturn is, now.

In Venus, the Black Vulture emerged from the ground and the wing extended, floating in the wind; the needles between the feathers started to shine, the crystal layers over them became black and liquid, projecting themselves eight inches further than the needles' tips in a plasmatic mass that reached three thousand degrees Kelvin, tied to the needles by thick electric arcs. Venusian lightnings got closer to the portal as if the Black Vulture would be guiding them.

- Are we not on Earth? What happened?
- You tell me, I was in the Moon for a year. The last I knew, after the war ended, was that Ekron had attacked Kish, the upper levels were evacuated but most of humans living in the lower were left behind.
- I was fighting near Lidya.
- And you killed Gog.
- We killed each other, I just happened to be dead already.

Lightnings reached the aquamarine gems and the portal opened, the Black Vulture of Kish passed through and appeared near Lidya. It flew over Eastern Europe, heading to Kish, as the portal closed itself.

- We are on Earth and in the Solar System, but we are not in the same place in the galaxy. And only the inner planets are here, except for Mars that was destroyed.
- Where in the Galaxy? And how was Mars destroyed?
- My best guess, Orion. Mars was destroyed by a planetary size beast.
- So, they are here... no, we got closer to them. But how?
- I made some star mapping approximations, assuming that we are in the Orion Belt, but time framing doesn't add, is like we would be twenty-five to thirty thousand years before our time.
- Something is wrong – interrupted Astarte.
- Oh, hello there, you're all blue – saluted Carmina.
- Thank you.

A noise, like metal soldering was heard before the Black Vulture entered the lab and cut through the cage to reach Carmina's hand. She held it in an unaggressive posture, so everyone kept calm.

- We can't blind her; she would be useless blind – said Astarte.
- Shut up – replied Maria.
- I have more questions – said Carmina – did you put rat eyes in my crown?
- I don't kill cats, as you can imagine.
- You couldn't find a bird or a human for that?
- There are no more birds, not even vultures and I use humans for other purposes.

Actually, Maria had a vast variety of beasts from Qatra whose eyes she could have used, but she knew rat eyes would be diminishing for Carmina's vital force. That could be useful to submit her, and to attenuate the effects of her blood on the Macsks.

- Fine... now, where is The Empress? – asked Carmina.
- I have no idea, but you should know, that now... we are in trade with Orion natives, I factually rule over Kish and Anubis is Emperor of Ekron and Orion.
- What? The Black Dog is Emperor? Does he wear a crown? – Carmina laughed with scorn.

Astarte took advantage of the distraction and approached the hole in the cage made by the Black Vulture, introduced a hand in the cage attempting to touch Carmina's skin, but her boots were too tall and the dress was too thick, Carmina noticed and rotated her weapon. From a vulture eye near the wing joint of the Black Vulture, a white ray was casted against artificial illumination in the lab roof. As lights went down, Carmina cut a hole in the cage side and escaped. Then, in darkness, she made a wide gap in the walls of the lab and opening her vulture wings, she flew to the upper levels of Kish.

When they finally got the lights back, Maria started to fix the lab mess, and Astarte approached to help.

- I didn't know that Crows had wings.
- Only a few of them have – then Maria made a pause and added – this will not end well for anybody.

From the upper levels, the easier way to exit Kish without being noticed is through the Necropolis and take the elevator to surface. Carmina walked between the graves, some of them familiar from her childhood in Kish, and noticed a glorious mausoleum she had no memory of. She approached the monument, twenty feet high with gorgeous ivory columns, four bronze statues at the entrance: a dog, a vulture, an ox, and a goat. In black letters carved on stone: "In memory of Gul Goker Gokshe". She laughed a little and thought "So much to bury half a man", then looked at the statues and remembered "He did not create the ox and the goat, a thief, even after death". She took the elevator and got to the surface.

Then she flew to the shores of the Baltic sea, unsure of what path to take in her situation. Night came and she felt the stings of hunger and thirst. She lit a fire rubbing her nails on the sand and recited verses in Qatrian, a language that she learnt at an early age due to witchcraft practice and was fluent in. The fire became green and reached higher than Carmina's head; sand under the bonfire began to melt into glass and following Carmina's verses it grew upwards forming a transparent cauldron. She stopped her spell and the fire disappeared, then she took the cauldron and washed it in sea water.

She sat on the sand, with the cauldron by her side and the Black Vulture in her hand. She gazed deeply at the sea and the moles under her eyelids became bright red, and her eyes turned black disappearing in the night. Minutes later, a dark-red shark came out of the sea, barely advancing on the wet sand, asphyxiating but resolved to advance towards Carmina. She casted a ray to its head with the Vulture, leaving a hole across its body, then dragged it out with the needles of her weapon. She bled out the creature on the cauldron, and mixed its blood with her own, from her left wrist. She Drank half of that mix, ate the shark's raw head, and fell asleep. At dawn she had an idea, a stupid but simple and feasible idea: communicate with the Empress, wherever she may be, by using a summoning spell that the Empress herself had taught her, designed to call an ally. It wasn't completely absurd, as the ally was so close, that a part of him had permeated into the Empress's soul; so, even if the ally himself may not be available, the Empress would definitely perceive the calling. Under different circumstances, it would have worked the way she expected.

Using the remaining blood in the cauldron, she drew two concentric circles in the sand; inside the inner one, she drew two eight-pointed stars to the left and two to the right. As she had no candles, she lit four fires on the outer circle with her fingernails, one pointing to each cardinal point. In the center she drew a cross and knelt in a space between the cross and the inner circle, facing the cross. Then she closed her eyes and visualized the Empress's image. When she opened them, she was at the bottom of a cliff, on a black stone platform, at the shores of the Humner. By her side, a beautiful blonde girl, apparently in her twenties or younger, dressed in rags and fur from unidentified animals, had her arms chained to the platform and cried in desperation. Carmina stood up and saw the same symbols she drew on the sand carved in black stone beneath her. The fetid stench of the Humner made her nose itch. She looked at the girl by her side, thought of asking her something, but Cymra emerged from the black water in front of her, suspended in the air without

moving his wings. She recognized him, although they had never directly interacted. Cymra seemed confused by her presence, and took a moment before asking:

- Are you the demon am supposed to ally with?
- Of course not, I've seen the corruption you can inflict on a soul.
- I am not corrupted, the Black Dog made us abandon our faith.
- Then help me destroy the dog, and you will pray to any god that you want.
- So, you propose an alliance after all? I will not concede truth to that prophecy, or Teremy would have died in vain.

That said, Cymra projected his tongue towards Carmina, and she, having fought against worms several times, moved swiftly to her left, and energized the Black Vulture. The tongue passed by her right side, impacting the rocky wall behind her, and she severed twenty-five yards of Cymra's tongue with one swing of her weapon. The pain made Cymra shake and dive again into the black water. He went back to his cave having the sour feeling of being hurt beyond repair. A year passed before he could eat again, and even then, it was a painful process. The sore never completely healed, and Cymra never fully recovered from his encounter with Carmina Drekkva.

Carmina looked at those twenty-five yards of tentacles still slightly trembling on the black platform, then observed that the spot in the wall impacted by the tongue, had become a piece of crystal, and had an idea. She touched the tentacles with her boot to make sure they weren't dangerous and started untangling a couple strings to collect them. Then asked the blonde girl by her side:

- How long have you been in this... territory?
- I've wandered Qatra for two years, my Queen.
- Finally, someone with manners.

Carmina cut the chains that imprisoned the woman, realizing she could be a good source of information. She gave her the tentacles collected from Cymra's tongue and said:

- What is your name?
- Sephia, your Majesty.
- Hold this for me, Sephia, I will hug you very tight so don't worry.
- What are we doing?
- Getting out of here.

Carmina opened her wings and flew holding Sephia until they reached a valley, where they rested and had a conversation. When Carmina asked Sephia, how had she ended up chained there, she answered:

- I lived in Kish, practiced cartomancy, necromancy, necrophilia, and some prostitution, I sold my soul to several entities and when I died, I ended up in Sibara, then wandered eating worms for two years until I was captured by spider-octs, who offered me as a sacrifice for Cymra.
- Where did you get the time to do all that, how old are you?
- I died at ninety-two, I performed a rejuvenation spell, it worked but it also killed me. I guess I did it too many times before.

- Well, you don't have to worry about that anymore, your soul was naturally transmuted to get you here; you will keep this form until your eternal soul is destroyed. For me, unfortunately, is a totally different issue.

Sephia smiled and Carmina smiled back. Their relationship looked mutually beneficial, a loyal servant with vast occult experience for Carmina; protection and status for Sephia. They kissed under the blue light of Qatra's bigger moon and drank their blood mutually.

- Anubis is Emperor, but Llacme, Cymra's sister, is the local Queen – explained Sephia to Carmina.
- Llacme is Cymra's sister?
- Yes, before invasion she was high priestess, along with Cymra and Djaall, but Anubis took control of the only Celestial Beast left, and the faith of the Three Angels was abolished, only regular necromancy lingers. Two of the angels, between life and dead, are still in display in Llacme's castle. She also has some spacecrafts, provided by Anubis.
- What does Llacme fear over everything else?
- The same everybody fears, the goats.
- Goats?
- Vicious and powerful beings, they live in those mountains, like vultures.

Carmina looked at the mountains and smiled. She killed some bear-like creatures that lived in a cave, fed on them with Sephia and made her a bed with their fur inside the cave. Then Carmina used those creatures' bones to make a handle, mixed her blood with Cymra's tentacles for three days and lit little fires around them at night, until they became rigid and sensitive to her thoughts, then she assembled them into the handle, making a short spear, that could extend its blade to twelve yards of length, at Carmina's will.

- I'll come for you in a couple days, then we'll go back to Kish and live forever – said Carmina to Sephia, then kissed her mouth and forehead and left the cave.

Carmina flew near the top of a mountain where goats had a nest of almost fifty members. She floated three hundred yards away from them, covered by clouds; her moles shone red, and her eyes turned black. Then she approached them and laid between the rocks that formed their nest. They approached her too, and she touched their horns and wings. There were twenty more mountains in that range, and all of them had goat nests.

Llacme heard a commotion that made her come out of her castle, now a shiny mix of glass and stone. The old caves and the rock houses built in the last decade were being destroyed by a goat stampede, a nightmare come true. At least a thousand furious goats were on attack; some soldiers with electromagnetic rifles managed to kill some of them, but the goats quickly overrun the settlement and their defenders. The stampede got to Llacme's castle. She took an electromagnetic weapon Maria had designed especially for her; a pair of wide swords, tied to her mechanical hands with chains of electromagnetic links. The links allowed her to throw the sword, control its movement in the air, as the distance between the links was variable, and recover the sword directly to her hands. With those swords she killed twelve goats, until Carmina came down from the sky and confronted her.

Carmina stood in front of Llacme at twenty-five yards of distance with the Black Vulture in her hands and the spear tied to the left side of her waist. Llacme threw her right sword, Carmina evaded it and tried to cut the chain, but only destroyed one link and the system remained functional. In its way back, the sword cut a slice of Carmina's left shoulder and damaged her left wing. Then Llacme threw her left sword, and as Carmina evaded it, the chain made a circle around her head and grabbed her by the neck. Llacme dragged Carmina across the ground between them as the chain and sword were coming back to her, preparing her right sword to hit her head. Carmina thrustured with her wings against the ground while being dragged, to get vertical again, held the Black Vulture in her left hand and grabbed the spear from her waist with her right hand. When she was eight feet away, Llacme threw her right sword towards her and Carmina cut it in half with the Black Vulture, then struck again and severed Llacme's left mechanical hand, to avoid any contact with her. Then Carmina pointed the spear at Llacme's stomach, and the blade expanded long enough to touch her and receded back. Llacme and the immediate soil under her became crystal as Carmina fell to the ground backwards.

In the sky over them, Djaall appeared, and Carmina used her wings to stand herself up, without moving her legs or arms, with her gaze fixed in Djaall; and the Lord of Flies flew for his life once again.

- For all those witnessing my actions, I am Carmina of Nineveh, Vulture of Kish, and I have destroyed your place and turned your Queen into a crystal statue! I am your Queen now! Whoever defies my rule will find certain death! Now I will destroy the Black Dog that turned you into a herd of lambs!

That said, Carmina took possession of a large cargo spacecraft and filled it with goats. She passed by the cave in the valley to pick up Sephia and together they set course to Earth, in hyperdimensional mode, to get there before Anubis would have news of the attack.

Carmina's ship landed besides the ruins of Our Lady of Kazan cathedral. After Sephia drank a fair amount of Carmina's blood from her neck, the Queen of Nineveh asked her to stay in the ship and hide if anything unplanned happened. Advancing a couple blocks Carmina got to the overly armored entrance of Ekron, followed by two hundred goats. With the spear in her right hand, thirty yards away from the entrance, she activated the blade, that grew up to its medium size, and threw the spear against the structure. The spear touched the metallic walls and came back to Carmina's hand. Hundreds of tons of iron and concrete became crystal, and the goats smashed it, entering the fallen kingdom.

In his throne, once the throne of Achish, Anubis heard the thunderous stampede approaching his chambers. He stood up and went to a locker in a wall next to him, from where he took a weapon he had not used since Gog was alive. "The Lizard" was made from the skull and backbone of a horned alligator, it still had the crystalized original eyes of the animal in its meatless sockets. A pair of horns like those of a bull grew sideways from the skull and bent forwards with the tips pointing in the same direction as its jaws and nose; the horns ended in crystal covered needles like those in the Black Vulture and they worked the same way. It had a six feet long bone handle, with a sharp metallic awl in the lower end that enabled it to be pierced on the ground and keep standing by itself.

As the worms were massacred by goats, Anubis stood in the middle of his royal hall with the Lizard activated in his hands. Only a handful of creatures in the hybrid system could face a goat up close and directly, one of them was Anubis. The goats entered the hall through the walls and Anubis killed a couple of them, but then realized they were not attacking him, just passing by his side, and destroying everything else, like an invitation. He pierced the Lizard on the ground, became a spirit and entered one of the goats coming his way. Then, as a goat, he took the Lizard with his claws and jumped his way out through the gates of Ekron. When he reached surface, Carmina was waiting for him half block away, with the Black Vulture in her hands, and the spear in the left side of her waist. The goat approached her and pierced the Lizard on the ground, then fell sideways, pouring blood from its eyes and nose; then, in a final exhale, black oil came out of the goat's mouth, followed by the spirit of Anubis, that possessed the oil and became material. Then he attempted to possess Carmina aiming to her eyes but got caught and contained in the rat eyes in her crown. He came back to material form and said:

- I had to try, witch.
- I understand, such a vengeance it would have been for you.

Anubis took the Lizard from where it was pierced and activated it; Carmina unfolded and activated the Black Vulture, assuming fighting stance.

- How did you come back? – asked Anubis.
- The cats.
- I guess I can't trust her as much as I thought... Are you aware I have the power to destroy this entire planet?

- Yes, and I know you can't do it before I kill you. I also know you wouldn't do it, even if you had the time.

In fact, Anubis hadn't even considered waking up Szörnyet from his sleeping in the empty abysses, and not only for reasons known to Carmina; Maria would never allow him to destroy Earth.

- If you were to destroy Earth, – continued Carmina – why are you out here? Why aren't you hiding down there, preparing a ship to escape? I've seen the mausoleum you built for Gog, and I know you won't destroy it, it means too much for you.
- Then you'll know how much I want to avenge his dead.
- Indeed.
- What I don't understand is why are you out here, I can only kill so many goats, you could have overrun Ekron and bury me inside.

In fact, Carmina could just point her spear towards Anubis and transform him into glass with a minimum risk and effort.

- Taking Ekron will only mean more power to me, and I've had power for three centuries. At some point, you start craving for things power can't buy. I saw you dominate Bermillion in a fencing combat. Apart from you, only three entities could have done it; Nimrod, Ninkur, and me.
- So, you want to test yourself against me, knowing I would not hesitate to kill you. You will regret it, when you are cut in a half inside a blood circle, like my master was.

That said, Anubis swung his weapon and Carmina blocked the hit. Then a series of hits and blockages from both entities continued until Anubis backed a couple steps.

- Your left shoulder is wounded, this is disrespectful.
- Oh, sorry, I should have waited for it to heal before destroying your city.

Carmina attacked and Anubis blocked, moving to her right, knowing that she would tend to protect her left side, and stabbed her with the lower end of the Lizard in the right side of her abdomen. He took the awl out of her flesh and kicked her, making her fall ten feet away. Before she knew he was already by her side preparing to strike, so she grabbed the spear with her right hand and pointed it to Anubis from the ground. Before she could activate it, Anubis had severed her right hand, that fell to the ground with the spear and disintegrated around it in black oily ash, because it could not maintain its molecular cohesion while physically separated from the black tiara. Then the black dog raised his weapon again to a final strike, and the spear moved swiftly from their side, flying until it reached Sephia's hand, twenty yards away from them, and activated. She was able to control it because Carmina's blood was vastly flowing through her veins. She threw it to Anubis, the spear touched him and came back to Sephia's hand. Anubis and the soil under his feet became crystal, and so did the Lizard, the black dog in the Dobruj cave, the cables in the crown it was wearing, the mainframes, Agatha and the Osmógreh connected to her, even a part of the cave's walls became glass. Sephia threw the spear to the ground and ran to Carmina's aid, hugged her, and offered blood from her neck, to help her recover from her wounds.

Days after, they arrived in Kish, whose taking was easier than they imagined. It only took a conversation with the human governor, surrounded by goats, to obtain the unconditional surrender

of the city. There were no signs of Maria or her cats outside the forbidden levels. That way Carmina became Queen of Kish, Ekron and Sibara. She ruled from Kish, and besides her throne, she had the crystal statues of Anubis and Llacme. Fortunately, the secrets of Dobruj remained a mystery to her.

STORY VI

Crepuscular Lullaby

1

Carmina ruled over Kish the same way that she once did over Nineveh, in gloom. During the day, the lights of the underground city became just a little brighter than in the night, maintaining a constant twilight, when not just darkness. She said the eyes would get accustomed and energy savings were remarkable, but the truth is that she just liked it that way. She could by all standards declare herself Empress, as her reign was composed by several kingdoms, on Earth, and above; but by doing that she would be admitting that the real Empress had died, something she refused to accept to her last day, so, she was Queen Carmina Drekkva; Crom queen in a city of humans.

In the fifteenth year of her reign, nuclear electric generators failed, and the city went dark for a week. The problem was fixed reopening Hedvika coal mine in Moravia and installing a thermo-electric plant a mile north-east of the city's entrance, with old machinery from the nuclear generators. It became a source of hard labor for Kish inhabitants.

Electromagnetic and fire weapons were prohibited and ceased to be manufactured under her rule, the only source of old weaponry, a former arsenal in Wurttemberg, was dismantled and sealed. In that environment, organized crime started to rely in cold steel to function, and that diminished their reach considerably. The only sophisticated weaponry in the city were the Queen's personal weapons: The Black Vulture of Kish and a short spear. Besides that, Royal Guard in charge of palace's security merely used MA-1895 rifles, and ancient, bolt operated fire weapon. They also served as police, but their rifles were necessary only in rare and specific situations. The inner part of Carmina's palace, including the throne room, was accessible only for the Queen and the witch Sephia, her lover and closer ally, to whom she had granted the title of Duchess. The palace was guarded by two Qatrian goats, and insignificant number compared with the legions she commanded in Ekron and Sibara, but more than enough considering that threats to her security in Kish were inexistent.

For fifty years she sat on Kish's throne, accompanied by crystal statues of past enemies; all that time she fought against the shadow of her past, with the priceless aid of Sephia. Carmina's affiliation to necromancy and dark arts in general, made her especially susceptible to spiritual decomposition, and her past battles against a powerful necromancer, Gog, had let her soul damaged beyond repair. Moreover, her spirit had already been artificially transmuted into physical shape two times, the last one, intentionally diminishing her molecular cohesion using rat eyes instead of cat ones, the original and suitable configuration. That difference made her spirit gradually reject the cohesion achieved by her transmutation.

The first years of her second incorporation, that coincided with the first years of her reign over Kish, quickly became nightmarish as molecular disintegration manifested as flesh and bone decomposition, with painful consequences. She was literally rotting from the inside out. It was around the fifth year that Sephia came with a simple, but brutal idea: transfer her soul into a new

vessel, a young and physically alike her, new container; that would allow her to impose the same shape that she had as a girl on the new vessel and keep her own identity. This process was, of course, to be performed by Sephia.

The first vessel was a homeless redhead girl whose absence was almost unnoticed, as homeless disappeared continuously by the action of a cat-eyed scientist at the forbidden low levels of the city. It was a complete success, the Queen looked younger and happier from one day to another, and not many noticed that her height had diminished an inch, and that some years later, it had returned to be the same as before. Her red curly hair, her blue sclera eyes with dark-blue eight-pointed stars instead of irises and pupils, white vertical lines crossing their centers and the moles under her eyelids, all that remained the same; only her vulture wings were lost, as they were a feature too heavy to replicate. Her black tiara was no longer necessary, in fact, it was incompatible with her new incarnation.

That state lasted twelve years and then internal necrosis started to attack her organs again. Three years later she occupied a second vessel, an orphan girl of age twelve. It brought some social complications, as her appearance was clearly younger than before; even if she was barely seen in public and Sephia ruled in her name for all administrative purposes, she was still occasionally spotted by her guards and had to appear in some official ceremonies. Rumors and speculation began, especially when some years later she grew up and became a woman again. She obviously never issued any clarification statement. But nothing happened, she was strange and fearsome enough to be beyond human comprehension and scrutiny.

Eight years later, that body started to decompose too, so in two more years, she occupied a third vessel, a ten-year-old redhead orphan. By that time, her “transference” was a formal urban legend with all sort of grotesque details, but never as grotesque as her reality. The problem with vessel replacement was that girls not only had to be redheads, but also occult sensitive, a rare feature in Kish humans, and of course, they had to be fifteen or younger.

When she had been forty years on the throne and was in the tenth year of her third vessel, a redhead girl, ten years old, daughter of an important citizen disappeared. The Queen remained unseen, even for her guard for four years, until she appeared for a ceremony, and looked less than fifteen years old. The father of the missing girl used his connections to try to initiate an investigation, but he appeared stabbed to death a couple days later.

This way, Carmina was serving fifty years on the throne, almost ten years occupying her fourth vessel, and haven’t been seen in public for the last two because, she had been rotting inside for the last three.

Vladimir had worked at the thermo-electric plant, since he was eight years old. With sixteen years of age, he already had back problems, but supplemented them with a powerful and lean musculature. He had shaved his head during a recent lice epidemic at the plant, to avoid bringing them home. As he had been practically raised in that plant, it would be fair to say that Lev, an older work partner, was like a father to him. They had transported the coal and fed it to the boilers together every day for the last eight years; Lev was one of the few people in his world that Vlad trusted.

They were throwing shovelfuls of coal at the industrial fire, on a Thursday evening, when Vladimir took a time to ask Lev about something:

- I want to ask you something, but I don't want you to make fun of me.
- Never! – Lev made fun of him every day, but never in a mean way.
- What is a Harlequin? – asked Vladimir and Lev held back his laughter, then replied:
- Why you want to know?
- Alondra's birthday is this Saturday, and she wants a costume party.
- Wow, fancy girl.
- No, it will not be expensive, her little friends will bring food and refreshments, I will only have to make her a cake and a costume. The problem is, when I asked her what costume she wanted, she told me that she wanted to be a Harlequin. I have no idea what that is, and I don't want her to see me as an ignorant, so I just said yes. Now I need to know what in this world that is.
- Do you play cards?
- A little, yes.
- It looks like a joker, like a classy clown or something.

They kept feeding the boilers until sunset, then walked together the dusty way back to Kish. Ruins of a city before the Annihilation War were scattered before them.

- What was the name of this city before the war?
- Which war? There were so many.
- When people lived on the surface.
- I believe it was Wien (Vienna).
- Did they have costumes in Wien?
- Well, they certainly had dresses, lets scavenger around, we may find something you can use for that costume.
- But, what about radiation?
- There isn't, things would glow in the dark if there was.

They wandered forgotten streets with broken crystals in their showcases. Inside one of them, a black dress with green and red stripes, little bells on the waist and lace flowers on the neck, caught their eyes.

- This would do – said Lev.

Vladimir put it in his backpack, and they headed home. Lights were already down when Vlad picked up his sister Alondra at Sonja's house, a gentle neighbor lady that took care of the girl while Vlad was at work. Alondra was almost eight, curly red hair to her knees, wearing a green beret matching her eyes and school uniform. Vlad kissed her forehead, thanked Sonja, and took her hand to walk home. Inside, he prepared her some milk, and saw her take care of her school homework. Then, while she was studying, he took the black dress, collected its bells, washed it, and let it dry in a place that he knew she would not notice. Then he took her to bed and under Kish's eternal gloom, sang her a crepuscular lullaby until she fell asleep. As he had no time to wait for the dress to dry completely, he carefully finished the process with hot iron. Then he cut the dress in the best pattern he was able to imagine, tested, sewed, and stitched it until three in the morning. He woke up to work at five and the next night he finished the costume at four. The next morning, was Alondra's eighth birthday.

Most people have an idea of how much they care for their loved ones. Some even understand what unconditional love may mean and are lucky enough to never encounter a situation where that love is really put to test. Vladimir's love for Alondra was not only unconditional, but it was also hardened by desperation. He never knew his father, and his mother died when Alondra was born; he was eight. He left school at that age and entered workforce at the thermo-electric plant. With Sonja's aid, he managed to raise his sister, providing her food, clothing, and care. Most of all, he prevented her from entering public childcare system, a certain death in Kish. He projected his own sense of abandonment and unprotectedness onto her, the more resenting and aching his own lack of parental care became, the more his love for her got impregnated with melancholy and compassion, that reflected the compassion that he felt for himself, but could never consciously acknowledge in a world that demanded him to be made of stone, an iron tool, a beast of burden. Like a minuscule point of light between countless abysses of darkness, his love for Alondra was something that Vlad's soul desperately clung to stay afloat, to stay alive. He was barely aware of it, as he did not see her as an idealized or perfect child, but with all her defects, because he needed her to be real, not just an idea. It was in fact her normality, her unaware lack of self-pity and her indulgent determination, so similar to his own, that made him love her the most. He had the distant hope that if managed to save her, he could save himself too, as they shared the same disgrace. Deep in his heart he knew that any joy or transcendence achievable in his humble life, would invariably be through her. That's how Vlad loved Alondra.

That Saturday, Alondra woke up at noon with her hair all over her bed, as usually. She stood up and went to the kitchen, in that state that children can allow themselves to be: unaware of when or where they are. She sat by the table and Vlad served her a cup of milk while she tried to keep her hair away from her face, with her eyes only half open. Vlad stared at her and suddenly she remembered, her eyes opened like apples and Vlad smiled:

- Happy birthday!
- Yaaa, Happy birthday to meee!

Vlad hugged her and gave her a wrapped package, she opened it and took out her harlequin costume, black, red, and green; a three-pointed hat with a little bell in each point; pointy shoes

made of the same fabric with rubber soles and a bell in their toes. She screamed and smiled, and Vlad said:

- Drink your milk and go to change, your friends will arrive soon.

Alondra drank the milk in a couple seconds and flew to her room to try her costume. Her friends started to appear with cookies and chocolate milk. Vlad served them some sweets while they waited for Alondra. There were six children in the kitchen disguised as cats, rats, and squids, when Alondra showed up like a little joker moving her head and making the bells ring. The kitchen became absolute madness with the kids jumping and Alondra stomping the floor to make the shoes' bells ring. They went out and played with balloons, blew whistles, and chased cats and rats for three hours.

Vlad observed them, just in case one of them would get injured in that whirlpool, then he noticed something slightly unsettling. When playing to catch a rat, in a sudden turn of the chase, Alondra momentarily suspended herself in the air, changed direction without touching the ground and advanced four feet before stepping down again, then continued her run. The children didn't notice and kept playing as if nothing had happened, but Vlad knew that what he saw wasn't natural.

Vlad had heard the stories about the vampire Queen, eater of children and possessor of girls, gifted girls; but had always discarded them as fantasies. As most people do when they are young, he often clumsily simplified universe dynamics to those rules applying in the limited frame of his own experience. In previous Crom ruled societies, as Kish not so long before, humans had a routine contact with Crows as they were an important part of the population, so, humans had a continuous glimpse into the dark pit of their souls and were able to believe that kind of stories. But Vlad lived in a human society, ruled by only one Crom, so that kind of obscurity was unknown for him. Besides, he had never seen the Queen in person, only in photographs and video. So, he let that thought fade away and kept enjoying Alondra's birthday party.

Vlad called the children inside and presented a small birthday cake he had baked, with eight lit matches as candles. They sang "Happy Birthday" to Alondra, and she blew until all matches were off. Vlad distributed the cake to all those red faces and his happiness was complete.

When lights went down and her friends were gone, Alondra collapsed on her bed and fell asleep with her costume on. Vlad covered her with a blanket and went to sleep too, unaware that Sunday had a nightmare prepared for him.

On Sunday morning, an old car parked outside Vladimir and Alondra's house. Inside the car, Duchess Sephia and two local gangsters were having a conversation:

- This would never work; it would be better if we just kill him and take the child – said one gangster to the Duchess.
- Hope is blinding and everyone has a price, future can be a deceiving mirage when you have nothing.
- Why risk having a loose end like this?
- Because they have no parents, the house would be empty one day to another, it would call too much attention. If it works, you can kill him later; if it doesn't, you can kill him now. Not much of a difference.

They came out of the car and knocked on Vlad's door. Alondra was still sleeping, and Vlad was breakfasting. He opened the door and immediately understood what was happening; the unknown darkness he refused to acknowledge had become tangible in front of him. He made a reverence for the Duchess and invited them to come inside. He knew the gangsters, and he knew they were gangsters. He made them sit in an old sofa and apologized for the mess.

- We had a birthday party yesterday, I haven't been able to clean, my apologies My Duchess. Can I offer you something to drink, tea, coffee, just water?
- Tea.
- Coffee.
- Water.
- Well, then just give me a minute.

He went to the kitchen, prepared the drinks, and hid a knife in his pants. He came back to the living room, let the drinks on a coffee table in front of the sofa, and sat in an armchair in front of them. The coffee table was between Vlad and his guests.

- To what do I owe your illustrious presence, my Duchess?
- We, the Queen and I, have a great interest in your sister.
- I can imagine.
- How so?
- She has remarkable grades in school – she was barely average indeed.
- Exactly, we came to offer you as scholarship for her, with private tutoring, all expenses paid and a new house for you in the upper levels, but she would have to live in the palace, where the tutoring would take place.
- What's wrong with my house?
- No, nothing ...
- You can send the tutors here.

The gangsters got nervous, and Vlad realized that he was at the end of the line.

- Well, let's stop playing. I know what this is about... I want three million marks, cash, and you can take my sister. I'll wait for you here until you bring them.
- We have ten million marks in the car, go get them please – said Sephia to one of the gangsters.

The gangster stood up, Vlad took the coffee table and threw it at them. Then he ran to Alondra's room and locked the door from inside. He woke her up and opened a window.

- You must escape, go to Sonja's house.
- I don't understand, what's happening?
- Hurry up and go.

She was going out the window when the gangsters forced the door lock and entered the room. One took Vlad by the neck and threw him against a wall, then kicked him on the floor until he passed out. The other one grabbed the girl before she could escape and took her to the car; she was crying with her harlequin costume still on. They put her in the car and Sephia sat by her side.

- Don't cry, baby, you will meet the Queen.
- Where is my brother?!
- He will come with us too.

The gangsters put Vlad in the trunk of the car and drove away. They left one gangster and Vlad in a vacant area near the forbidden levels, the other gangster drove to Carmina's palace and left Sephia and Alondra there.

Vlad was still unconscious, the gangster left him on the floor near a big crack in the structure that reached the level below them; with a fall of two hundred feet. The idea was to stab Vlad and throw him into the crack. Vlad woke up laid on the ground and took the knife from his pants; when the gangster approached to stab his neck, Vlad kicked him back on a leg and the gangster tripped over him, they struggled, and both fell to the crack. The gangster let go his knife to grab a metal rod coming from a wall while falling, Vlad clung to him and stabbed his knife in the gangster's stomach, the gangster let go the rod and both fell to the ground in the inferior level. Vlad fell over the gangster, took the knife from the gangster's stomach, and stabbed him in the neck. Vladimir was injured but could still walk. Giant rats of the size of dogs crossed his way in a dark passage, so, he took a metal rod from a pile of debris and hit them with it. That only drove them away momentarily, but he managed to reach a more illuminated section. Then he found a store, a small and peculiar handicraft shop.

Vlad threw the metal rod away and sat on the floor near the shop's entrance, took his head between his hands and cried almost in silence. The shop's door opened, and a humanoid vulture came out. Vlad looked at him with disbelief and the vulture said:

- It seems to me that you need help, Vladimir.

Sephia took a crying Alondra to the throne room, there were two crystal statues, a dog, and a centipede, so to speak. There were two human size platforms in front of the throne and between them a crystal ring covered with naked wire rolled up around it. In a corner, there was a sumptuous oak four-poster bed with gems in its columns and thick black lace curtains. There was a mild putrescence smell coming from the bed. Sephia took Alondra closer to the bed and opened a curtain. A stench of perfume and decomposition slapped Alondra's face and Queen Carmina slowly incorporated towards her, wearing a black silk camisole. Her red curly hair was straw and meager, her skin was white with green shades and dark veins showing in all its extension, her eyes were nearly black, and her nails had fallen, leaving deformed and wrinkled fingers in her hands. She smiled at the girl and her rotten, dark blue teeth and fangs showed up to Alondra's terrified eyes. The girl screamed in horror and Sephia closed the curtain. She touched the girl's forehead and she fell asleep.

- Dress her up, darling.

Sephia took Alondra's harlequin costume off and dressed her with a black lace gown, a little big for her size. Then laid her on the platform further from the room's entrance.

- At midnight?
- Yes, midnight will be perfect, I'll sleep until then.

Inside the shop, the vulture was behind an attention desk, treating Vlad like a customer. Vlad asked him what he was, and he answered:

- I was designed to be an oracle, and I was for a short period of time; back then I needed to be connected to a machine to see the future. Then I became King and I forgot how to do it. Now I had been repaired and enhanced, I have the machine in my chest, so I see the future in waves, fragments, and exiguous visions, all by myself.
- Can you help me save my sister?
- I can guide you to who will help you, Vladimir, but there is a price for her help and mine.
- I have nothing to offer.
- You have blood in you veins, and I'll only ask for a little of it.

Vlad put his left forearm on the desk, offering it to the vulture; he made an incision with a curved knife and collected Vlad's blood in a small crystal bottle. Then he poured some drops of a white substance into the bottle, covered it with a cork and shook it. Vlad's blood became black, and the vulture put the bottle on a shelf. Then he put a machete with one and a half feet of blade on the desk.

- Will I face the Queen with a knife?
- No, that is for the rats, you'll have to go back to that dark passage, advance two blocks straight and one to the left. There should be an iron door, knock it with the knife and ask for Maria.
- Understood.

Vlad took the machete and disposed to leave.

- Wait, there is something more. Maria is a witch, like the Queen and Sephia; they all think alike, so her aid, even if sincere, will only take you so far. You will also need this, and this.

The vulture put a roll of ducting tape and a metallic cylinder of eight inches long on the desk. From the cylinder came out a wire with a needle at the end.

- You plug the needle in your palm, and then you only need to put together your thumb and little finger.

Vlad took the items, put them in his pockets and headed to the door. Before leaving he looked back at the vulture and asked:

- What will she ask of me, in payment for her aid?
- Just tell her that you want to kill the Queen; she will make you a reasonable offer. And tell her you only have until midnight.

Vlad advanced through the dark passages impaling and beheading rats, until he reached the iron door described by the vulture. He knocked on it three times and heard some movement inside.

- This access is forbidden.
- I come to see Maria; I have business for her.
- Maria needs no business, go away.
- Tell her I want to kill the Queen.

A silence and then some rampage from the other side indicated Vlad that he would have to wait but was heading in the right direction. Minutes later, he heard more movement and the door opened. An apparently young blonde girl with blue cat-eyes stared at him. Behind her, a short person, in dark clothes that covered all his body except for his eyes was in an attentive posture. His skin seemed to be slightly blue.

- Come inside – said Maria, and together they advanced through a corridor.

They got to a room with various undefined smells that Vlad could not identify but remembered him the scent of a hospital. There was a table and some chairs, sat in one of them was a light-blue skinned girl in a white dress, her hair was blue and long to her hips; her eyes were black with stars in them. They all sat by the table and Vlad explained them his situation. Maria replied:

- When do you want to do it?
- I only have until midnight.
- Right, they love their traditions. And that will be their only moment of vulnerability. What do you think? – asked Maria to Astarte, the blue girl.
- The biggest problem are the goats, assuming that is possible to catch the witches by surprise. Qatirian goats can project themselves at nearly half the speed of sound and pulverize concrete with their horns. They may be manageable if you cut their wings and rear legs. We could also take advantage of their own strength to set a trap.
- I'll be clear with you – said Maria to Vlad – we will provide you with a plan and the basic means to make it happen, but we will not participate, and once it starts, you'll be on your own. We won't get anywhere near her; she knows us and knows our intentions.
- I understand. But what will you ask me in return for your help?
- My child, we are not helping you, you are helping us. Now I want you to listen to me, as carefully as you can. Kill her in any way you find fit, but don't damage her eyes, is our only condition, but is absolute. You can cut her head, pierce her chest, even destroy her brain, but her eyes must remain intact, understood?
- Yes, I understand.
- And we keep her corpse, all of it, no excuses, no exceptions... don't burn it either, got it?
- Of course – he made a pause and asked – why do you hate her so much? Are you some sort of revolutionaries?

And the three of them laughed for a couple seconds, then Maria answered:

- My child, we don't hate her, on the contrary, we want her...
- For dinner – added Astarte.

- This is a MA-2152 rifle – said Maria – It is to our knowledge, the only automatic fire weapon in the city. We reassembled it from parts left behind around Wurttemberg.

It was a machine gun designed to be fired from the hip, with handles like those of a chainsaw. It used a hundred shot magazines, they had two of them. Attached to the right side of its thick barrel, it had a gear in the barrel's base and another in its tip. Those gears guided a chain with large blades that resembled a car transmission chain, but it was designed to cut through an armor. The chain was moved by an electric motor connected to the gear at the barrel's base. She handed it to Vlad, and he hung it by its strap around his shoulder.

- You'll need a poncho.
- What?
- To hide the rifle. Is a long way to the palace.

Then she put some sort of cloak on him, made of wool, dark green with strange white decorative patterns, covering him from neck to knees, it was heavy.

- It has a metallic mesh layer for additional protection.

She put a round metallic brooch on the poncho near his neck and adjusted the position of a little disc on it.

- There it is, double. This will cast a double hologram of your image if you press it. Now, this is a smoke grenade; you will need it for the holograms – and handed Vlad a small canister.

Trimurti, all covered in black fabric except for his eyes, unfolded a blueprint on the table and explained to Vlad:

- If you approach the palace from the Necropolis, you'll be able to shoot the guards at the entrance before they see you. Then you'll have seconds to throw the grenade into this hall and press the holographic generator. It must be that hall and that specific wall, because concrete there is thin and behind the wall there's soft terrain, not rock, so the goats will pass through the wall and possibly bury themselves a dozen feet into a wall of earth. Then you will have to disable them as much as you can, as fast as you can. From there, there is a hundred yards corridor to the throne room, that is where your sister most probably is.
- Is that all the security she has?
- Trust me, the goats alone can overcome any threat she can have in this planet if faced directly. The guards are there mostly for ceremonial purposes.
- Getting rid of the goats will be the hardest part – added Maria – it would be like trying to kill a truck. Taking the witches by surprise will mostly depend on timing; you must get there just before midnight, because if they had already started the ritual, is improbable that they interrupt it. Sephia certainly would sacrifice herself for Carmina, have that in mind, and don't hesitate.

- Thank you.
- No, thank you.

Vladimir was waiting at the Necropolis, near the entrance that led to Carmina's palace in almost complete darkness; he looked at his watch, it was five minutes before midnight. He decided that it was the right time to begin. He came out of the Necropolis and there were three guards at the palace entrance. He took the machine gun out of the poncho and gave them a lead bath before they even grab their obsolete rifles. The goats woke up in an inner chamber of the palace and flew through its corridors heading to the entrance. In the throne room, Carmina was laying on her back with her eyes closed on the platform nearest to the room door and Alondra remained unconscious laying on the other. The wire rolled on the crystal ring between them was shining and the ring itself had become black, liquid and began to oscillate. Sephia had her arms extended over Carmina's head with their palms pointing to each other, and between them, a blue flame floated in the air. Carmina opened her eyes and said to Sephia:

- Continue, whatever it is, the goats will handle it – and closed her eyes again.

Vlad ran into the palace and found the hall indicated by Trimurti, stood before its entrance, threw the smoke grenade to the agreed wall, and pressed the brooch under his neck. Smoke filled the place, hiding the wall behind it and two images of him appeared trembling in the fog. A couple seconds later, he heard two powerful impacts, like if two cars would have crashed against the wall. Vlad deactivated the holograms to see clearly, ran to the wall and found the two goats nailed, buried in it with only the tip of their rear legs showing out. The holes were separated by several feet, so he started shooting into the nearest one. The goat inside was trying to get out, and it would have succeeded if Vlad would not have discharged all he had left of the first magazine on it, until the animal did not move anymore. The other goat had half body out of the hole, Vlad changed the magazine and shot to its legs, but it didn't have much effect, then he turned on the chainsaw and severed half of the long and powerful rear legs of the beast. The goat came out anyway, it was ten feet long with four curved horns in its head and vulture wings on its back. It aimed at Vlad, and even with only half of its rear legs, aided by its wings, it managed to charge on him with the force of a big bull, piercing his four horns on Vlad's stomach. Metallic mesh in the poncho prevented the wounds from being fatal or disabling and Vlad got trapped over the goat's head leaning to his left, while the animal kept advancing to find a wall to smash him. Vlad's left leg got within the reach of the goat's jaws, and the animal severed it at knee height. Vlad hit the back of the beast with the chainsaw, but it seemed to have a metallic plate there, and his weapon did not cut through. Then he severed the right wing of the animal; that slowed its advance but did not stop it. Then he swung the chainsaw and cut the goat's right front leg at shoulder height. The beast stopped and shook its head to get rid of Vlad, the boy fell backwards to the floor a couple feet in front of the beast. The goat advanced limping over him and opened its mouth to bite his head. Vlad put the rifle's barrel inside the beast's mouth and shot a discharge of ten bullets to its brain. The goat's corpse fell over Vlad.

The pain was overwhelming, but he had to find a way to travel those hundred yards to the throne room in time to save Alondra. Vlad freed himself from under the beast and looked around; behind the goat corpse he saw the severed right front leg of the animal. He realized that it was

roughly the same size as one of his own legs. He crawled to the goat leg and grabbed it, then took out the ducting tape from his pocket and tied the beast leg to the outer side of his thigh. The tape was extremely resistant and adhesive, so it endured the task. He stood up and walked limping towards the throne room with the rifle in his hands, slowly bleeding out from his left leg.

The goat claws produced a metallic noise on the floor when Vlad walked. In the throne room the witches heard that sound when it was already close; Carmina opened his eyes and said to Sephia:

- It's a goat, continue and finish it – and closed her eyes again.

Then Vlad blasted the lock of the throne room door with a short discharge of his rifle and pushed it open with the barrel. Sephia turned towards him, the Black Vulture of Kish flew to her hand, unfolded, and activated. Vlad aimed to her chest and discharged ten bullets into it. Sephia fell dead to the floor with the Black Vulture in her hand, which deactivated and folded again. He approached the platform closer to the door. Carmina had her eyes closed and he severed her head with the chainsaw, it fell to the ground. Then he threw his rifle away and took Alondra from the other platform grabbing her by the back of her armpits. The glass ring went back to normal.

As he could, he dragged her limping across the room to a wall near the four-poster bed. He rested his back against the wall, turned her around, and sat on the floor hugging her. He kissed her forehead and combed her hair away from her face. Alondra opened her eyes, they were green and human, he smiled at her. She looked at him and then the sclera of her eyes turned blue, eight-pointed stars of a darker blue replaced her green irises and white vertical lines appeared crossing their centers. Under her eyelids, two black moles emerged, one to each side.

- Nooooo! – Screamed Vlad in desperation.

Her body slightly floated over him and she stretched her right arm to the side, the Black Vulture of Kish flew from Sephia's inert hand to hers, but she did not activate it, only unfolded it to form a hundred degrees angle. Then she put the tip of that vulture wing on Vlad's neck, and using other spiritual means she lifted him against the wall until his feet didn't touch the ground. At the same time, she stood up letting her feet slightly separated from the floor, stretching her arm to keep contact between the Vulture and Vlad's neck in every moment. Looking at him almost in rapture from below, Carmina said to him:

- You reminded me of The Beast of Nineveh.

That said, she elevated further from the floor and let him fall flat on his back on it, under her feet. Then she opened her legs and mounted his belly, Vlad moaned, still soared from the goat's charge. She put her face closer to his, placed the Vulture between them, unfolded it completely and activated it, dangerously near Vlad's neck.

- I'm not sure you have to die – said Carmina and smiled in a way that froze Vlad's blood.

Then Vlad raised his right arm. With duct tape, he had tied the metallic cylinder to the inner part of his forearm and plugged the needle at the end of the wire into his palm, securing it with tape too. He put the tip of the cylinder in contact with the left side of Carmina's head, then he put together his thumb and little finger. An electromagnetic bullet came out of the cylinder and crossed Carmina's skull from side to side. The Crom Witch fell to Vlad's left side and the Black Vulture deactivated.

Vlad crawled closer to her and hugged her on the floor, he closed her eyes with his fingers, so she would look more like his sister and less like a demon, then cried in silence caressing her curly hair. The crystal statues started to come back to life. Some steps called Vlad's attention, it was Trimurti, that had come to collect Carmina's corpse.

- No, let me keep her – and Vlad clung to the witch's dead body.
- Please, understand, she is not your sister anymore.
- Nooo!
- I'm sorry.

Trimurti blinked, Vlad's eyes became white, and his body became atonic. The Macsk grabbed Carmina's hair and took her away from Vlad; then dragged her by the red mane across the throne room and disappeared through the door.

Anubis and Llacme regained life and coughed. By a side of the throne there was a short spear, Llacme took it with her right mechanical hand and broke it in pieces. Anubis took Vlad's body carefully in his arms and placed it on the platform further from the room door.

- What will you do with him? – asked Llacme.
- Kill him and bury his body in the best mausoleum of the Necropolis, accompanied by his sister. After all, he avenged the one buried in that grave.

The Black Dog took the severed rotten redhead skull from the floor and put it in its place on top of the lifeless body on the platform closer to the door. Then he looked at Sephia's corpse and recognized her from a diffuse, unreachable place in his memory.

STORY VII

Saturn

1

For twenty years Anubis tried to seduce Achish to abandon the lower levels of Kish and join him, in Ekron, to end Maria's control over the cave in Dobruj, and therefore, her restrictive control over the remaining celestial beast: Szörnyet. The presence of Irkalla and his goat in Dobruj meant that, in case of disagreement between Anubis and Maria, regarding usage of the beast, Maria could always force inaction by sabotaging his connection to Szörnyet. He had a powerful weapon that he could control, but Maria had the power to disconnect it whenever she wanted. Besides, he had to maintain its mechanism as a secret, making everything more complicated. It was an objectively bad situation, but what really bothered Anubis, and moved him to act, was the fact that Carmina Drekkva was still in existence, even if reduced to a blood supply for the Macsks, and he wanted her shredded in pieces, her eyes destroyed, and her memory lost. So, after twenty years of visiting Achish in his handicraft shop, begging him forgiveness for the fall of Ekron, in his name and Gog's; he decided to change his strategy.

There was something else that could tempt the vulture chimera, eager for knowledge and boundaries to violate. But it had to be done carefully, because there was someone else involved, someone Anubis didn't want to insult by any means, as she had become one of his closer allies: Llacme. His proposal had to appear as a favor for her when it actually was a bait to get the real favor from Achish.

Anubis visited Llacme at her castle in Sibara, now decorated in blue crystal and iron. She had a sapphire new throne, fit for a human. She sat on the throne like a person and rolled the surplus fifteen feet of her thin body around it, leaving her enormous wings unfolded on the sides. Her mechanical arms had become much more sophisticated, covered in black chrome. She wore veils and garlands in her antlers and started to move her hands while talking like a human. When Anubis arrived, he found Cymra's sons standing beside the sapphire throne. Accar and Chelis; twenty-six-foot-high black scorpions standing vertical on powerful rear legs, with wings like those of Llacme, their bodies were covered in thick long black fur and their stinger tails were longer than their bodies. Llacme stood from the throne and bowed down to Anubis, Accar and Chelis did the same. Anubis made a sign and they stood up.

- I've heard that your brother Cymra has been raiding your lands.
- We hadn't heard from him in seventy years, nobody even offers him sacrifice anymore, he was left for dead. Until a month ago when he was spotted hunting goats on the mountains near the Humner. He is not making any damage.
- The goats are a plague – added Accar.
- This issue worries me, Llacme – continued Anubis - but not in the way you think. All this began when Vadállat was injured. We never really talked about what happened.
- You mean when you blinded Vadállat.

- I did not. If you remember what I did with Szörnyet, it was a totally different process. There was no harm involved.
- And I remember you conned me and made me believe that Cymra was behind it all.
- To form the alliance we have now, an equilibrium.
- At Cymra's expense.
- And now I want to, at least, try to compensate that.
- My father is now known as The Heretic Fish, Killer of Gods – interrupted Chelis.
- Because he killed Teremy and defied his prophesy – said Llacme.
- Well, that's the point, what if the prophesy was wrong, Cymra knew it in his heart and that's why he killed Teremy? – said Anubis.
- That is blasphemy! – replied Llacme.
- Not necessarily, from where I come from, Gods are entities that foresee reality in a way that transcend the limits of normal causality – said Anubis.
- How so?
- In everything that we do, if we would have done it differently, something would have changed and reality would not be the same, so there are infinite possible realities for every moment that passes, hidden to us simple mortals; but not to the Gods, they see all those different possibilities, and my guess is that the Three Angels had that power too. What sense would it had for Teremy to warn Cymra about the tempting demon if he would not have the chance to resist that temptation? What if the demon has already tempted him and he endured the test?

Llacme and her nephews looked at each other's faces, Anubis knew that his words had started to make sense in their heads, so he continued:

- When did Teremy say that this calamity would take place?
- He said: "In short time".
- And eighty years have passed.
- Correct.
- There is even another possibility. Do you even know how old Teremy was?
- They were supposed to be older than time.
- It could mean that he was millions of years of age, in that case, a "short time" may be a thousand, or ten thousand years from now, from his perspective. Then, ostracize Cymra for something he will not perpetrate in thousands of years may not be fair. Maybe the rejection he feels now is the very cause of his misdoing, and we still have time to prevent it.
- How can we know? – asked Llacme with a spark of hope in her eyes.

Anubis realized that she was ready to agree to anything; ignoring that his own words held more truth than he could possibly know at that time.

- That's the issue, right now there is no way we can know any of that, because you have the Angels displayed behind a glass like relics. We would need them to be examined by a scientist, someone with experience and vision.
- Like Maria?
- Maria is a child; we need someone with more substance and reach.
- Do you know anyone like that?

- Yes, only one, but I must be sure that you agree to give him complete access to the Angels before I propose him anything.

Llacme approached Anubis, took his hands made of ceramic and metal, and kissed them.

- Of course, he can come and analyze the Angels. Is there any possibility that he can heal Vadállat, even the slightest one?
- I would not abandon that hope.

Anubis left Llacme's castle convinced of having conned her again. He didn't know that a big part of what he promised her, would eventually come true.

Anubis entered Achish's handicraft shop at the lower levels of Kish and looked at some little crystal statues of Llacme and him on display. He found them tasteless.

- Does anyone buy this stuff?
- Of course, this place is full of amateur witches, they come here at night believing in ghosts and vampires.

Anubis approached the attention desk and continued:

- I convinced Llacme to give you full access to the remaining two Angels in her castle.
- What did you tell her?
- That you may find out that they are very old, and have extra-dimensional perception, both things possibly true, I also gave her the impression that you can heal them. And somehow convinced her that it would absolve her brother of the assassination of the other one.
- So, I'll have access to creatures beyond our imagination and understanding.
- Yes, you're welcome.
- What do you want in return?
- Something simple, I want you to engineer me an animal, an army of them. A creature impossible to be blinded or stunned by the Macsks.
- Not a simple task, but I think it is within my capacities.

Achish left his shop and traveled to Sibara, where he was received with open arms by Llacme. In her castle, he built a laboratory, and the Angels were put at his disposition. In that same lab, over the next twenty years, he developed a breed of electronically enhanced sea medusas for Anubis.

When the Black Dog saw the jellyfishes, he remembered where he knew Sephia from, whose corpse he had stored in methanol after Carmina's death. Then he handed Sephia's body to Achish.

Maria had her own problems at her lab in the lower forbidden levels of Kish. Since Carmina's body was implemented as primary source of sustenance for the Macsks, permanently tied to an armchair, with wires and hoses coming out of what was left of her brain, a growing distance between she and her cats manifested. In the first twenty years of this situation, the Macsks grew to reach five feet of height and could walk on the streets of Kish dressed like normal people.

Astarte wore makeup to hide her light blue skin, only a little on her face, neck, and hands, as her skin was almost white, with just a shade of blue. She had no fur left in her body, only the dark-blue mane on her head that kept growing to reach her waist and had acquired curls. Her factions were changing towards an exotic, middle eastern beauty. The five stars in her eyes had almost faded, leaving a black sclera in which a subtle cat pupil began to appear again.

Trimurti had started to use a turban that he garnished with pearls and gems, under which he hid a long black mane. He had also lost all other fur on his body. Similar changes affected all thirty-five members of the Macsk pack that stayed with Maria in Kish. Irkalla kept the same form that he had when he first traveled to Dobruj, meaning that he still looked like a big blue tarsier with horns. He fed mostly from his goat's blood and occasional polychaetae, in the dark forests of Qatra.

Maria became afraid of her "cats", they had transformed into transcendental entities that read her every thought and had to descend to her level to communicate with her.

Astarte was examining schematics from notes left by Maria's mother, about a laser cannon. She showed them to María and asked:

- Did your mother ever build this?
- Yes, when I was a child.
- Did it explode?
- Yes, I think it was intended to; its explosive power was well documented way before my mother's time. That kind of weapon was developed at the beginning of the Annihilation War on a bigger scale. The original weapon supposedly overheated and caused the first atomic explosion in ...
- Prague.
- Right.
- I think that, if we redirect the backwards flow into a force field, it may avoid overheating and provide a protection layer.

Maria looked at the draw and did not understand how the force field could be stabilized in front of the cannon. Astarte was staring at her, probably reading her mind.

- Astarte, have you ever thought of blinding me, or disabling me in any way?
- No, never, I love you too much – and kissed her in the cheek.

- I will implement a small compartment of the lab as my personal workroom, I will keep it under lock, I beg you to respect my privacy while I am in there, and you should not enter it while I am not. I will not use it to undermine you in any way.
- I know, is just sad that things must go that way, but I understand your fear, even when I know is unfounded, after all, we can't blind cat eyes.
- Can't you?
- Of course not, they are too similar to our original eyes.

That said, Astarte waited some moments, allowing Maria to digest her words and be able to concentrate in something else, then added:

- Achish has moved to Sibara, to Llacme's castle.
- He may be working for Anubis, but to what purpose?
- Probably to find a way to neutralize us and gain full control of the cave in Dobruj.
- We must install a portal there, as wide as we can and have another one here at the lab. We will need to build ships down here.
- I see, it would be easier to escape from there than from here, in case necessary.
- I think he is planning to destroy Earth, after all.

They placed the portals and built two ships in the lower forbidden levels of Kish; a big one, enough to carry everything important in Maria's lab, and a small one, enough for a task force.

The next twenty years Maria spent and increasing amount of time alone in her workroom. The Macsks gained further skills as they fed constantly on Carmina's blood, such as a mild telekinetic ability. The Crom Queen proved to have a regenerative power superior to Theresa's, as her spiritual nature was exploited to replace her cells almost immediately. The gap between Maria and her cats became an abyss and Astarte understood mournfully that the time to follow separated paths was closer than she would have desired.

In her workroom, Maria spent most of her private time looking for a way to escape from the Macsks, be safe from Anubis and beyond the reach of Szörnyet. The only possible destiny for her was Nineveh, the city carved in Titan, a Saturnian moon; assuming the outer planets of the Solar System had also traveled across the stars and time but were in an unknown location. It was not a whimsical assumption, as to her knowledge, Agatha of Halych was taken to Nineveh at the end of the last war. So, if Agatha's spirit was taken to Dobruj after her death, it means that her soul was taken from Nineveh.

Maria focused her effort on traditional esoteric practices, concentrating her thoughts in Saturn and the Empress as she had no possible technological aid to link with Nineveh. She used tarot cards and a Ouija to catch possible communication from there. She had no response for nineteen years, after that time, a spirit finally reached to her, but it seemed neither entirely human nor a Crom. She proceeded with caution, having the sensation that it was of chimeric nature, but it was neither Baphomet nor Heidrun. After several months of playing card games with the spirit and spending hours to acquire minimum information with the Ouija, she decided to do a riskier move.

With her blood, Maria drew a circle on the floor, and two eight-pointed stars inside it, Nineveh's symbol, and asked the spirit to do the same with only one star, Kish's symbol. She put four lit candles on the circle and sat on the center of it. She said short verses in Qatrian and closed her eyes, visualizing the spirit she was trying to contact inside the circle. She could see the circle as it was made of flames, and a tenuous image of an old woman appeared, barely visible. She was sitting on the floor in front of her, dressed in rags and emaciated, as if she would have been starving for some time.

- What is your name?
- Dolora, what is yours?
- Maria. Are you in Nineveh?
- Not in the city, outcasted. After the Night of Black Tears.
- But you are in Titan?
- What is Titan?
- Are you near Nineveh?
- Underneath it. We need your help, I called for a spirit that can help me resuscitate someone, and you answered. Can you help us?
- It depends, who do you want to resuscitate?
- The Virgin of Halych.

Maria felt a shiver down her spine.

- I can't help you – and she disposed to open her eyes, but Dolora reached out to her and grabbed her hands; her touch was cold and metallic, like a bundle of cables.
- Don't leave me, please, we are dying. We have a rightful Empress, one that will not reject us, but we need the Virgin to defeat the Corpse.

Then Maria saw her clearly, her hair was white with blue and green shades, it moved by itself almost imperceptibly, her eyes were human, her skin was transparent, her veins were visible and had metallic tones.

- You don't understand, – replied Maria – Agatha of Halych is not the same anymore, her brain has been connected to a mollusk for almost a hundred years. Besides, she already had brain damage when she died. If you bring her back, she will not think straight, will not thank you for resurrecting her, or obey to any of your commands. I know for experience how dangerous is to summon something you can't control.
- We would do anything you ask for in return. We are desperate. Starving.

Maria got free from Dolora's grab, opened her eyes, and remained in the circle for some time, thinking, more interested in Dolora's proposal than she would like to admit.

In her workroom, things began to appear in different positions than those in which she had left them, or just moved in front of her. She refused to erase the circle and the symbols on the floor, as she had not completely discarded helping Dolora and escape to Nineveh.

A month after her first encounter with Dolora, Maria contacted her again. This time, Dolora materialized in her workroom, but confined to the blood circle. Then Maria realized that Dolora's hair was actually made of jellyfish tentacles and her visible veins were made of wires and circuitry. Her nails were like long needles and she had three red stigmas in her inner left forearm, one in the wrist, other in the middle and the third near the cubital fossa.

- In what condition is the body? – asked Maria.
- Her body is cut in a half at waist height, but it never decayed, as she is a saint – the real reason was in the nature of her existential transmutation, and the presence of a remaining spirit inside her brain.
- Do you have any of her eyes?
- Both, in reasonable conditions and into her sockets.
- Is the rest of the body complete?
- She has mechanical prostheses instead of her right hand and her left forearm. In her left upper arm, she has three red stigmas, one near the shoulder, one in the middle and other near the stump.
- Good. Everything is in place. You must search in her bowels, in the lower half of her body, embedded inside you'll find a red eye; take it out and throw it away, is already drained, it should become ash outside her body in a couple minutes. Then stitch her parts together.
- Understood.
- You will need electricity, cables, and wires.
- We have electric power, we can scavenge the wires.
- You'll need something more, something that I must get for you, but I'll only provide it once you have materialized me into your world.
- I see that besides those cat eyes, you are human, so I can do that – Maria wasn't sure what Dolora had meant by that.
- Have everything ready, I will summon you.

Maria approached Astarte to ask her something, but the Macsk started talking before she could even open her mouth:

- Anubis is moving Gog's Mausoleum to Sibara.
- It means that he plans to destroy Earth; you must move soon.
- Don't you mean we?
- Astarte, I'm not going with you.
- What if we fail and Earth is destroyed?
- I have means to escape, but I need your help.
- Where will you escape to? I would like to see you again, even if it happens in a distant future.

Maria pondered her answer for a second.

- Saturn – answered Maria and Astarte understood that it was true and a lie at the same time, it broke her heart.
- Well, Maria Brähl, what do you need from me, to escape.
- A flask of your blood.

Astarte closed her eyes and said:

- I think that what you really need is a flask of Sumitre's blood.

Sumitre was another Macsk, a little taller than Astarte, her skin was whiter, her hair was darker, and she had beautiful blue cat eyes, just like those of Maria. Actually, she looked a lot like Maria except for her hair and clothing; she dressed like a gypsy fortune teller. They approached her and Astarte commanded:

- Give Maria some of your blood.
- What for?
- An experiment – said Astarte, knowing exactly what Maria wanted it for.

With a curved knife, Maria collected the white liquid in a nine-ounce flask from Sumitre's arm. Then Astarte took Maria to a section in the further part of that level. There, the two ships were ready in front of the portal gems, Carmina and other supplies were already loaded on the big ship. Astarte wanted to show Maria her latest developments. One of them was a ten feet long laser cannon, mounted on a cart.

- Is called Anjalikastra and is based on your mother's design, with the improvement of a force shield and it doesn't overcharge.
- Is beautiful.

Then the Macsk shower her a transparent jar with a lid that opened and closed electronically. It had an insect inside, some sort of chrysopa, it seemed calm, waiting.

- Well, I only hope that your escape is worth all the lives it will cost – said Astarte.

Maria stood in silence for a moment, feeling scolded by Astarte, then added:

- Whatever you do, remember, is crucial that you cut the connection between Agatha and the mainframe.
- Of course, otherwise she would be able to modulate the mainframe signal and take control of Szörnyet, then it would be even more catastrophic. Do they deserve what is coming for them?
- Possibly, but is not my place to judge them, even when you seem so eager to judge me.
- Would it have been different if you didn't have a place to go?
- No, I wouldn't have gone with you anyway.

After a pause, Astarte said:

- I will always remember you Maria Brähl...
- I doubt it.

That said, Maria went to her workroom and Astarte prepared her pack for a travel to Dobruj.

In a forest near Agatha's cave, Irkalla's goat was taking a nap under a tree, when his sharp senses detected movement somewhere in his surroundings. He looked up for the source and a glowing creature showed up a hundred yards from him. He carved the soil and jumped towards it at half the speed of sound. In half a second, he got to the glowing spot, the creature moved upwards in some sort of fog and the goat passed under it to impact and destroy two trees in a row, and then he fell to the ground. When passing under the creature, he felt a burn in his left side and his left legs lost some mobility. He stood up and from above two more glowing spawns touched his wings and his right side with their tentacles. He felt a sharp pain in all his body and could barely move, either way he managed to jump up and bite one of them but then his mouth started to burn in a venomous reaction. More creatures assaulted him and rolled their tentacles around his neck.

They were modified sea medusas designed by Achish, capable of emanate a fog in which they could float and had venom glands all over their skin. Inside their transparent bodies, a set of circuitry and wires blinked in little sparks as they communicated with each other. They had primitive light sensitive organs, scattered all over their bodies and they shared their limited perception with all other members of their pack, processing the information to assemble a collective vision. Therefore, they could not be blinded by a Macsk, as there were no individual visual organs on their bodies, only partial ones. Their nervous system was filled with breakers that could disconnect any part of their bodies if an attempt of cognitive invasion took place, so even if a Macsk dared to touch them, and endure their venomous discharge, it would still be unable to stun them.

A dozen jellyfishes attacked the goat until he passed out in pain. Then they headed to Agatha's cave. Irkalla was inside it, feeding a power cell with sea water, when thirty medusas entered the cave and overran him. Irkalla tried to blind them, stun them, called his goat, but everything was in vain. In a minute, he was unconscious on the cave's floor, intoxicated with venom. They put a metallic helmet on his head that impeded him from seeing, and therefore from blinding anything. Then they put a pair of raw metallic gloves on his hands that impeded him from touching, and therefore from stunning anything. Helmet and gloves had mechanical locks that prevented him from taking them out. They took him to a ship that transported him to Sibara, where he was imprisoned for millennia. Two dozen medusas stood guard outside Agatha's cave to protect its functioning.

Anubis received Gog's mausoleum at Llacme's castle. Then, standing next to Llacme and Achish in Sibara's throne hall, he closed his eyes and woke up the beast Szörnyet from his sleep. The celestial monster opened his black eyes and gazed into the cold vacuum.

In Dobruj, the jellyfish pack collectively saw a distant gleam; moments later a small spacecraft landed near Agatha's cave. From the ship descended a group of six Macsk in hydraulic suits: Astarte, Trimurti, Osiris, Sumitre, Enki and Ninhursag. By their side, there was a cart carrying Anjalikastra, weapon of gods. The jellyfishes attacked them, but a force field coming from Anjalikastra surrounded the Macsk group and stopped the advance of the medusas, slowly frying their circuits. The weapon casted red rays on the jellyfishes still guarding the cave, burning their

bodies to ashes. An army of a hundred more medusas came from the forest nearby and the Macsk threw a transparent jar out of the force field using an especially designed launcher. The electronic lid of the jar opened, and a winged insect came out of it. It flew to a jellyfish tentacle and chew its way inside it, unaffected by the venom. The jellyfish acquired a dark blue color, its body became crystalline and broke in pieces. From its remains, a dozen more insects came out and attacked the other jellyfishes. In minutes, there were no medusas left. Trimurti pressed a switch on an electronic controller and all insects became crystal as well, except for one that returned to the jar, and the electronic lid closed.

Astarte entered the cave and the black dog inside had his eyes closed. Astarte took a machete out of her suit and cut the dog's throat; the animal fell to the ground and died in silence. At Llacme's castle, Anubis empty right eye socket started to bleed profusely, The Black Dog of Ekron fell to the ground holding his neck with both hands and lost consciousness. In the space between the stars, Szörnnyet closed his eyes again, and continued dreaming.

Astarte then severed the cables that connected Agatha to the mainframe. The Osmógreh opened his five eyes and ran outside the cave dragging Agatha by the cables connecting their brains. She, strangely, kept her eyes closed. The Macsks saw the scene with a mix of strangeness and pity. Astarte came out of the cave and said:

- It's done.
- We can just go back to Kish then – added Trimurti.
- No, we're leaving this place.
- What about Maria?
- She will escape by her own means; we'll join her later.
- Where?
- Saturn.

That said, they went back to the small ship and joined the big one in a valley nearby. Then together they broke through Qatra's suffocating atmosphere. Once away from the planet, they entered hyperdimensional navigation and traveled across the Orion–Cygnus Arm of the Milky Way.

The Osmógreh was still running, when he realized that he was dragging Agatha behind him, he lifted her up by the waist with a tentacle and attempted to clean her clothes with another. Her hair had grown thirty-three feet in the century she was cloistered, and long red dreadlocks had formed on it. Her toenails were nine inches long, as they had broken several times, and looked like vulture claws on her bare feet. Her face, nevertheless, was still the same that she had when she was fourteen. She still had no right hand or left forearm, and her eyes remained closed. The Osmógreh grabbed her like a doll and kept her close to his left side. Then the animal opened his wings and flew across the black skies heading to the ocean. He left the shores of Dobruj and when he reached the high seas, he dove into the pits where once he had family, with Agatha by his side. There was no sign of his relatives in the dark silence of the abyss.

Maria put the flask containing Macsk blood in a back pocket of her overall and sat inside the circle of blood at her workroom. She called for Dolora and the spectral witch appeared sitting in front of her.

- Do you have it with you?
- Yes, now take me to your place.
- Of course – Dolora made a pause and added – I haven't done this in a century.

Then Dolora stabbed her right-hand's nails in Maria's left forearm, piercing through her clothes. Maria cried out and her workroom disappeared, then she found herself in some sort of bunkhouse. Dolora removed her nails from Maria's flesh, who grabbed her arm in pain and fell to her left side. The spectral witch stood up and put the palm of her right hand on Maria's forehead. Lights of different colors blinked across her forearm as she read Maria's brain. Then she took the flask from Maria's back pocket and headed to a wide wooden table on the center of the room.

- What have you done to me?!
- Now you're one of us, it was the easiest way to get you through the portal.

Maria rolled up her sleeve and looked at the wounds left by Dolora's nails; a light-green blur was growing by the second around them. She started to feel numb and feverish. She stood up and saw that she was on a circle drawn with blood with an eight-pointed star inside. She stepped out of the circle, to be sure that her transference was effective and looked around. The place had bunks and was mildly illuminated. Maria saw only old women there. Some of them seemed as emaciated as Dolora, and all of them had the same jellyfish hair. She looked at the table in the center of the dormitory and saw Agatha's corpse laid on it. Dolora was by its side with the flask in her hand. Thick wires made their way from an electric panel to the table. Maria saw a door to her right, close enough to go through it before anybody would notice. Anyway, nobody seemed to care if she stayed or left.

She had so many questions but knew immediately that she couldn't trust any answer from those specters and didn't wanted to stay and behold the resurrection of the Saint of Halych, not in her current state. So, she walked through the door and found a dark lonely passage, there was no one in the streets, apparently everybody in that section was congregated inside the bunkhouse. Her arm started to hurt more than before, and fever made her stagger as she walked. The blur covered her entire arm and became transparent. Her veins were becoming visible and little wires pierced her flesh in a painful process. She saw an air duct entrance big enough for her and got inside it, crawled for a minute until she found a turn and hid on the other side of it.

Laid down inside the duct, she began to gain sensitivity from her hair; it felt liquid. She looked at her left forearm, circuitry was forming in the place where Dolora had pierced her nails; the same three stigmas showed by the spectral witch had appeared in her flesh. Then she passed out from the fever, in the deep guts of Nineveh.

Dolora had not only followed Maria's instructions regarding Agatha, but she had also cut the corpse's hair to her feet, as it had continued to grow after her death, a century before. She washed her, cut her toenails, put leather boots on her feet and cleansed her black lace dress. She even polished her mechanical limbs. Of course, Agatha's wounds were carefully stitched up, as well as the lacy clothing that had been cut with them. Having read Maria's mind, Dolora knew the required procedure in detail and didn't need the cat girl to complete it.

By her side, another spectral witch was assisting her. They opened Agatha's eyelids to have access to her eyes. In the left one, Dolora drenched the blue iris with Macsk blood from the flask, then spread the blood with circular movements of her finger. Iris and pupil dissolved becoming an unregular light-blue stain with white blurs scattered on it, mixing with the sclera. The same process was applied to the right eye. With her fingers, Dolora closed Agatha's eyelids afterwards.

The remaining Macsk blood was poured into Agatha's mouth, lifting her head to carefully make sure that it could reach her stomach. Then, with a knife, Dolora made incisions through clothing and flesh in Agatha's shoulders and thighs. Inside them she plugged the naked ends of thick electric wires, connected to the bunkhouse electrical panel.

Then Dolora clapped her hands twice and everybody in the room acquired a solemn attitude. She knelt down and all the spectral witches knelt down with her. They prayed for about a minute, some of them poured black tears from their eyes and fell into a trance. When Dolora stood up, those that had cried black tears had to be touched by another witch to come out of the trance and stand up again. Dolora made a sign, and her assistant connected the electric power to the wires.

Agatha's body shook and convulsed for twenty seconds, power went off and the room got completely dark for a moment. Then backup power turned on, and red lights illuminated all that level of Nineveh. On the table, Agatha opened her white eyes. The witches in the room, felt a warm pain on their backs, and pairs of black lace wings came out of them.

- We've been transformed into angels! – exclaimed Dolora.

The slim tentacles in their heads became thicker, their arms became black and split each one in two longitudinally, acquiring an arthropod exoskeleton. Their waists liquated separating lower body from torso, and they fell to the ground on their new four legs made from their arms, resting their new cephalopod tentacles on the floor, made from their jellyfish hair. Their faces acquired an indifferent expression as they had become a distorted version of what was in Agatha's mind at that moment: an Osmógreh.

Agatha sat on the table, took off the wires stabbed in her flesh, slowly stepped on the floor by her side and stood up. She advanced towards the same door through which Maria had escaped, followed by her spectral cephalopods.

In the depths of Qatra's ocean, Agatha opened her white eyes. The Osmógreh felt possessed by a force that he could neither comprehend nor resist. He placed Agatha in front of his eyes, looking forwards, as if he would perceive the world through her eyes from then on, holding her with two tentacles by her waist. The beast opened her enormous wings, and without moving them, he elevated through the ocean to reach the sky half a mile above the sea surface.

They looked like a cross, with the beast wings extended to the sides and Agatha's long hair hanging down from them. In the horizon, near the shores of Sibara, an electric storm began to form, and lightnings whipped seaside villages across it. They flew towards those shores. Enormous twisters formed over the sea at their pass and followed them wiping-out villages, caves, and castles, in a whirlpool of dust and electricity.

They moved from the coast to inner lands leaving a trail of destruction, of which news were promptly received in Llacme's castle. Anubis had regained consciousness; he was still injured but recovering as his right eye socket had stopped bleeding. He and Achish were next to Llacme's throne, where the humanoid centipede was sitting. Llacme asked the chimerical dog and vulture for an explanation.

- The Virgin of Halych, Mistress of Storms – said Anubis.
- What can we do about her? – asked Llacme.
- She is passing over the Humner now – added Achish – when she reaches the mountains, maybe the goats will take her down, if not, there isn't much we can do.
- Where did she come from?
- Possibly summoned by Maria, to stop us from destroying Earth – said Anubis.

At the mountains near the Humner, Agatha and her Osmógreh advanced as the goats prepared to charge against them. A circle of electricity barely visible formed on the horizontal plane around Agatha and her beast. The goats smashed their horns against it and fell to the ground electrocuted and unconscious.

After three days destroying Sibara, Agatha arrived at Llacme's castle and was received at its entrance by Llacme, Anubis and Achish. She descended to a couple feet above the ground and looked at them with her bluish white eyes. After some moments of tense silence, she commanded with her harsh whispering voice:

- Letérdel (Kneel down).

Anubis and Achish knelt, but Llacme, that did not understand Hungarian, remained up and looked at Anubis for an explanation.

- Bow down.

Llacme inclined, subdued to the will of the Virgin of Halych.

In Nineveh, in the same room where she was resurrected, another Agatha opened a portal drawn with blood on the floor. She had a platinum tiara on her head, a bracelet made of bones with one red Crom eye in her left wrist and her mechanical hands were soaked in red blood. She was carrying a scepter made of human bones, it had a big green eye in its tip, three times the size of a human eye, looking perpendicular to the scepter's length. The eye was embedded on a socket in a thick bone circle, that connected the eye with the staff. Six long metal needles with irregular crystal coverage came out of the bone circle, three to the right side of the eye and three to the left side. The eye had green sclera; instead of iris and pupil it had a dark-green eight-pointed star in its center which rays reached the eye's borders. Superimposed over the star, a white vertical line crossed its center, coinciding with its upper and lower rays. The scepter's staff was seven feet long and retractile, its lower end was sharp and metallic.

Agatha used the portal and appeared in Maria's workroom. Then she activated the scepter; the needles shone red, the crystal layers on them liquated and were projected one foot further from the needle tips; transforming liquid crystal in black masses of plasma, rippling, and waving at five thousand degrees Kelvin, at the end of thick electric arcs connecting them with the needles.

She opened passages through the walls in her way with the gurgling black plasma masses on the sides of The Green Eye. She emerged from Kish, looked north and disappeared. Then she materialized herself near the crater of Lidya. She activated the aquamarine portal with an electric discharge from her left hand and crossed to the forests of Sibara. Minutes later she appeared near the entrance of Llacme's castle, where another Agatha was suspended in the air, held by an Osmógreh. They turned around to face her and descended to the ground. The Osmógreh carefully put his Agatha's clawed feet on the stone floor, and Agatha with the Green Eye scepter approached her. She put the palm of her bloody left mechanical hand in her forehead, and both closed their eyes. The Agatha with extremely long hair and clawed feet disappeared in black fog carried away by the wind. The cables connected to her head fell to the ground. Then Agatha, with the Green Eye in her right mechanical hand, approached the Osmógreh and caressed his tentacles with her left hand. She said to him in harsh whispers:

- Ha magányosnak érzi magát, akkor mindig a barlangban lakhat, szellemem időről időre meglátogatja (If you feel lonely, you can always live in the cave, my spirit will visit you from time to time).

And the beast opened his wings to fly over Sibara, over the ocean and finally over Dobruj, to the place that was his home for a century. Cables were still hanging from his head when he entered the cave.

Anubis, still kneeling besides Achish, looked at the Green Eye and said quietly:

- Oh, God. That scepter, has been...
- Remade... – said Achish, completing the sentence.

Agatha entered Llacme's castle. Anubis, Achish and Llacme stood up from their profound reverence and followed her steps. In the throne hall, they knelt before her again, as she sat in the sapphire throne, looking back at them with her unexpressive bluish-white eyes. Anubis remembered the first time he saw her, covered in blood, at the head of a procession.

The two Macsk spacecrafts entered the original Solar System a decade after. Macsks searched for life signals in Titan, moon of Saturn, but as expected by Astarte, they found nothing. Then headed to Earth's moon and settled on the dark side. For a couple years they stayed away from the blue planet, where Cro-Magnons and Neanderthals lived in caves painting with their hands in primigenial darkness. After that, they descended and became guides and gods for the first human civilizations, some of them fated to rise, fall, and disappear from memory without a trace.

To facilitate travel between their human kingdoms and the Moon, they installed portals made of big aquamarine gems; the one on the Moon oscillated at thirty-tree Hertz.

STORY VIII

Red Cocoon

1

Gog and Alexandra, which body had been possessed by Anubis, and her own soul had fled from her body; were walking through a frozen landscape at the beginning of the first nuclear winter and therefore, its consequent ice age. Their defeat in the Annihilation War was painful and definitive, so they needed a new place to start over, form new pacts and move on. They had been in the long way from Constantinople to Lidya for some weeks, when forests and rivers froze, and their path became impossible. Alex advanced behind Gog, barefoot, and her right foot got glued to the ice beneath her while she was walking on it. Gog looked back at her and saw that she was stuck, so he sat by her side and motioned for her to sit down too. Her blond hair was long to the ground, she was wearing a long white dress that fitted wide on her and was very dirty. Her right eye was missing, in its place she had a black crystal ball, and her left eye was completely red. She had a black necklace with a black spider on her neck and the spider seemed to be embedded in her chest. She looked between eight and ten years old. Gog was wearing a black hooded cloak long to his feet, so worn out that it looked like just a large rag. Alex sat and Gog said:

- We will have to pass the winter here.

His nails were like metallic needles covered with crystal, but the tips were naked. With them, he cut his right forearm and poured blood on the snow in front of them. Then took Alex right forearm, cut a little wound and poured some of her blood over his own on the snow. He stretched his left palm towards the blood puddle, an obscure fog formed on his hand and a black electric arc passed from that fog to the blood. A thin thread of blood came from the puddle and started to roll around them forming a cocoon. When it got to their feet, ice around Alex right foot melted and both their bodies got completely covered by red fiber, together in that red cocoon.

- When all this is over, I'll make you a weapon, like the one I had. It will have to be something from the seas, or rivers, maybe a shark or a crocodile.
- With horns, it must have horns.
- A crocodile with horns... I can do that.

After a pause, she asked:

- Was it my fault?
- No, it was mine, I thought we had more time and I fooled myself, then we were betrayed by Achish.

She looked down, not sure if she wanted to know the answer to her next question:

- Why do we do all this? Is there a purpose, a meaning at the end of our path?

- No, there is no meaning, only an insatiable appetite, a vacuum, a pain that drag us along the dark path irrationally and desperately. I chose that path when I was very young, I'm sorry I never gave you the chance to choose for yourself.

Time stopped inside the red cocoon and snow covered it completely, burying their bodies under ten feet of ice.

Two centuries passed by and the ice age receded. Ice melted around the cocoon and sharp metallic nails cut across its fibers, from the inside. Free from the snow layer, terrain seemed dead in front of them. Former Belarus was like a desert with vestigial tree trunks scattered all over it. They kept walking to reach the scorched ruins of Riga in former Latvia and spotted the entrance of the subterranean bunker called Lidya. Gog did not stop there, and said to Alex:

- We must eat first.

They advanced to a vestigial forest in the gulf shores and heard something moving behind them. They hid between the black trees and saw that the horrific inhabitants of Lidya were going fishing, just like them. They were human skulls with their respective spines. All flesh from their bones had been removed, except for shiny green eyes in their sockets. Coming out from their necks, four arthropod legs, four feet long, allowed them to walk like spiders. The spines were transformed in long jellyfish tentacles that dragged on the floor while they walked and could emit electrical discharges at their will. They could not propagate their condition to living humans, only to dead corpses. A dozen of them plunged into the Baltic sea, and fifteen minutes later, they came back with deformed fishes, stunned with electricity, dragged them into the forest and then to Lidya. The bunker doors opened for them and closed once they were inside, controlled by electric arcs from their tentacles. From inside the tormented city of Lidya, savage noises like those heard in the caves before history, came out through its underground walls.

At night, Gog and Alex approached to the coastal sand, and she heard more company from the woods.

- There are Ekron spies in the trees – she said to Gog.
- Don't mind them, what they are looking for is not here yet.

Sentient machines were hidden in the vestigial woods; from there they saw Gog open his arms and recite a Qatrian orison to the sea. Then they went back to Ekron with inconclusive reports. From the sea before Gog, a marine aberration bred by acid rain came out and growled, only to receive a ray from Gog's eyes in its head, which became crystal, then Gog collected its body dragging it across the sand with his metallic nails. Alex and Gog ate from the creature's flesh and went to sleep in the residual forest.

The next morning, they walked to a plain near Lidya's entrance. Gog aimed at the ground and casted a white ray with his eyes that transformed a portion of the soil into glass. He kept his gaze on that same spot until all layers of Lydia's armored shell became crystal in that point. Then he stabbed the glass with his sharp nails and the glass broke, leaving an eight inches wide hole from the surface to the interior of the city. He hugged Alex and both became a black fog, entering the city through that hole.

Inside, the reek was overwhelming, as the city's ventilation system was only partially operative, and its inhabitants were not prone to hygiene in any of its forms. Still floating as a fog, they traveled

through the filthy corridors until they found a small room, with only one “spider-skull” inside. In a wall of that room there was a shelf displaying a series of transparent jars, with special insects inside them. They materialized into the room, Gog closed the door and locked it as the skull approached him with aggressive intentions. He casted a black electric arc to the skull, black spectral worms appeared near its eye sockets and entered its brain. The skull became black and rotten, collapsing inert to the ground. Other spider-skulls were charging the door from the outside as Gog inspected the jars. There was a spider, whose head was a skull with green eyes. Gog opened the jar lid and took the spider out. The arachnid walked in Gog’s hand and the sorcerer made a little incision in his own flesh near the spider. The arachnid drank Gog’s blood and went back to its jar. The skulls outside the room stopped their attack, Gog opened the door and came out with Alex.

The spider-skulls started to obey Gog’s thoughts, so they wandered around the City of Plagues with tranquility. Humans had been kept prisoners there since the Annihilation War, under the rule of Gizem, a witch that was once Gog’s apprentice and collaborator. She had probably died, to Gog’s knowledge, and she had left the bunker to the automated will of the skulls. Living humans were kept in locked departments and cells under the vigilance of the undead, that started fishing in the gulf of Riga to maintain them. Supplies were saved when the ice age began and were sufficient for the first decades of it. Then the gulf froze, and fishing became impossible, so humans without means of subsistence slowly fell into cannibalism. Decades later electric illumination and ventilation partially failed, so an eternal gloom and stench took over the city.

From a population of almost five thousand prisoners in Lydia, at the end of the Annihilation War, Gog found barely five hundred; but no corpses, only bones gathered in filthy cells by creatures that had lost most of human traits, except for violence and a simplified guttural language. Months before, the gulf ice melted, and skulls began to fish again, but it was too late for the prisoners of Lidya; they ate fish, but also craved for human flesh.

Gog took a crystal jar that had a lacewing inside (various of them had different types of lacewings), he opened a cell full of those cannibals and liberated the insect there. The lacewing bit one of them and returned to the jar. The infected human convulsed and lost his arms, his legs fused together and his torso lengthened three times its original size. His jaws prolonged backwards to include the throat and the tongue became a clawed proboscis as he started hissing. The infected transformed into an eel or monstrous worm, it started to emanate foam from its jaw and from the foam came a swarm of little spores that inundated the room. The other humans in that cell were infected by the spores and transformed too, they started to bite each other, and left the room with an inexplicable rush. Gog ordered the spider-skulls to open all other prison departments and cells. In minutes, the remaining humans in Lidya became horrid hissing worms.

Alex went to a big hall in the middle levels of the city and sat on the floor resting her back on a wall. Gog took a worm and placed it in front of her. When the worm looked at her eyes, a black spirit came out of her mouth and possessed the worm through its eyes. The worm’s eyes became bright red, the creature stopped hissing and foam stopped coming from its mouth. Alex’s left eye lost its red coloring and became a human blue eye. Her body became inanimate and remained in that same position, like a doll.

Lidya’s entrance was opened by the spider-skulls, and the possessed worm went out through it. It crawled hundreds of miles in silence until it reached Ekron and entered the city’s ventilation

system. Heavily damaged by the massive fans inside the airing system, it managed to reach the interior of the underground metropolis. Once inside, it expelled foam from its mouth and the spores flew to the bodies of Achish's most precious possessions, electronically enhanced humans under his complete control from birth to death. They became mindless vermin causing extreme repulsion and pain to Achish.

Having achieved his vicious vengeance for Achish's betrayal, the spirit of Anubis left the worm, coming out of its mouth and went back outside through the airing system. The worm, mortally wounded, died in the streets of Ekron surrounded by chaos and never-ending hissing. The chimeric black dog flew south over the Baltic shores in spiritual form, heading to Lidya.

While Anubis was conducting his revenge mission, Gog prepared a transaction with an entity with which he had not trade before. He took a worm and cut its head with his nails, then drew a portal with its blood on a wall of the big middle hall, as wide and tall as he could. He knelt before it and said some verses in Qatrian. With the aid of the spider-skulls, he had gathered all the worms of Lidya in that hall, only one worm managed to hide in the dark corridors and remained unseen until later. The portal opened and a twenty feet long centipede, with a hundred and eight legs came through it. Her face was humanoid, and she had deer horns on her head. A pair of mechanical arms on her chest gave her an anthropoid resemblance. She had green eyes and had put black makeup around them to make them look bigger. She was beautifully horrifying. She looked at Gog kneeling before her and said in Qatrian with a voice like ringing bells:

- Rise. Is that your oblation? Those worms?
- Yes mistress, is just a sample of what I can provide you if you assist me.
- Cymra told me that you were incompetent and worthless, but that your oblations were delicious. This doesn't seem to be the case, what's special about those worms?
- They are still alive, mistress, you can consume their souls directly from their bodies.

Llacme approached a worm, that hissed in fear and tried to escape but was kept in place by the skulls. Llacme opened her mouth and an almost imperceptible white fog passed from the worm's eyes to her jaws. The worm's body got black and rotted in seconds while the white fog got thinner until it ran out. Llacme savored with her bifid green tongue and said:

- Is true, the taste is completely different, it feels almost indecorous or sacrilegious. I accept your tribute.

Gog made a sign, and the skulls directed the worm pack to the portal. A dozen of skulls passed through it accompanying the pack to the other side and kept them in line. Llacme then noticed Alex, sat on the floor by a wall, and nothing about the girl made sense to her. She approached, looked at her with curiosity and asked:

- She doesn't have a soul, but she breathes. Her brain is like an uncomplete piece of machinery. And that necklace is, feeding on her... What is she?
- Don't worry about her, do you have my payment?

Llacme looked back at the portal and made an acute sound, like a whistle. Through the portal came a small Osmógreh, only six feet high, with a metallic helmet embedded in its head.

- That is barely a larva, I need a full-grown octopus.
- This is what your oblation is worth, take it or leave it.

In that moment, the soul of Anubis entered Lidya through that same hole in the ground made by Gog. It flew through the corridors and found the big hall, then possessed Alex's body again and

her left eye glowed red through the reigning gloom. Llacme felt the irruption and her gaze focused on Alex with growing unrest for several seconds. Then she looked at Gog and asked:

- Is this planet blue and the third from your star?
- It is.
- Does it have a white moon?
- It does.

Sensing a menace from Llacme, an entity that she hadn't seen before, Alex took a cable from her clothes. In a fast movement Llacme crossed the distance between her and Gog, and grabbed his neck with her right mechanical hand, raising him until his feet did not touch the ground.

- It was you! You blinded Vadállat! – then Llacme looked at Alex and added – You lied to me all this time! You filthy dog!

Alex plugged the cable in a black connector located where her left ear should have been. Gog touched Llacme's mechanical arm that was grabbing his neck with one of his clawed hands and a black electric arc passed through it to reach Llacme's body, who released him in shock. Gog's feet stepped on the ground again and Llacme attacked him with her stinger tail. The hit severed Gog's body in a half at waist height, his pieces fell to the floor twenty feet away but his hooded cloak fell closer to Llacme.

Alex, still sat on the floor, connected the other end of the cable to a socket on the wall. Cables from that wall, the roof, and the floor, came out and aimed to Llacme. The centipede was already swinging her tail towards Alex when she got pierced by a dozen wires and electrocuted. Llacme's sting was stopped barely three feet from Alex's face. Electricity kept flowing for some seconds until the centipede stopped fighting against the wires and passed out. The cables kept her hanging in the air like a marionette.

The two halves of Gog's body, started to approach each other on the floor, as black oily worms coming from each part intertwined and connected the sorcerer's flesh. In seconds, his body was patched leaving only a thin scar in his skin. He stood up without his cloak, showing his real form. He had legs like the rear ones of a Qatrian goat. His arms had a black exoskeleton and his hands had long needles as nails. His eyes were black crystals with metallic spikes in their centers, as pupils. Four curved horns crowned his head. The rest of his exterior appearance was human. He took his cloak from the floor and put it on, covering his anatomy again.

- I don't think she will trade with us again, just give her back.

Alex obeyed; she lifted Llacme's body with the cables, and threw her into the portal, that closed behind her. Gog approached the Osmógreh and examined its condition.

- We can generate something useful from this, maybe several useful specimens.

They took the Osmógreh, the remaining skulls and the insect jars to a specially armored room in a corner of the structure, attached to one of the city pillars, and locked themselves inside. Alex connected herself to the control network of the city again, and a disorderly mesh of cables and naked wires covered the entrance of that room from the outside.

When the bombs started to fall on Lidya, a solitary eel was the only creature wandering its corridors.

STORY IX

The Gipsy Witch

1

1866. By the side of a forgotten dirt road, near a rural village in Transleithania, a gypsy witch and her son parked their horse cart and settled a tent. The witch had a lustrum more than fifty years of age but looked no more than thirty. Her hair was reddish blonde, straight and long to her knees. Her eyes were dark blue and her nails, painted red and four inches long. She had a mole under each eyelid, a trait that appeared intermittently in her family and was not shared by her son. Her name was Csilla, and she was born in Bohemia. She preferred long black dresses than traditional, more colorful gypsy clothes.

Csilla's son had fifteen years, he was her younger offspring and the only one that remained by her side after she was outcasted from their community for engaging in extreme dark magic practices. His hair was dark blonde, slightly curly, and long to his shoulders. His name was Czesar and he had no beard yet. He wore a brown leather hat, inherited from his grandfather. He had assisted his mother in her obscure rituals since childhood, but he was profoundly Christian; that caused a dichotomy in his soul, because he knew he was condemning himself with those practices. He read the Bible every night and prayed for his soul and his mother's.

Csilla did not believe in any god, she barely believed in the demons that she summoned, even when she could talk to and even touch them. Her mind was consumed by absinthe and laudanum, as they were the only way she knew to anesthetize that vague pain and vacuum in her soul; undefined, invisible but more real than material world for her, tormenting her every second of existence. It was a vicious circle; she did not believe in anything because her mind was estranged by absinthe, she consumed absinthe to fill the vacuum in her soul, and her soul had that vacuum because she didn't believe in anything; she felt an overwhelming spiritual loneliness. Black magic was added to her vicious circle about thirty years before, when she was living in Moravia. There she knew dark witches of a different kind, their dangerous practices were delicious to Csilla, even when high prices had to be paid to perform them, sometimes. She didn't have the biological frame to properly emulate the rituals of the Moravian Coven, but she was reckless enough to try them anyway, because she didn't care; nothing cared enough for her anymore, only her opium syrup and the green fairy.

On the tent, a sign said: "Fortune Teller and Charm Caster". Csilla sat inside the tent waiting for costumers, as Czesar was feeding the horse and preparing goulash near the cart. Nobody came the first day, as usual. Czesar entered the tent and offered his mother a dish of stew. She refused and said:

- Don't worry, I'll eat tonight.

Czesar left her alone with the bitterest sadness and ate the dish himself. It was summer and there were no clouds in the sky. Csilla felt that it was already evening and started drinking absinthe.

As she finished her second glass, the sky filled with dark clouds and seconds later, a torrential rain started to fall. Czesar made a tent for the horse and took refuge underneath it too. Lightnings fell and dusk came before it should have. Not long after, it was night at the near village, and Csilla was so intoxicated that she neither could stand up by herself nor wanted to.

Sitting on the tent's floor, Csilla took an old rosary, that had a metallic bead in the shape of an eight-pointed star, with blood remains on it. Then she put a bowl on the floor in front of her and with her sharp nails she cut her left wrist letting a stream of blood come out of the wound into the bowl. Her right hand was open and when she closed it, the blood stopped coming out of her wound. Then she wet the tip of a finger with her blood, from the bowl, and drew the shape of the eight-pointed star on the metallic bead, first a cross, and then an x. After that, she drank the remaining blood in the bowl and tasted her mouth with her tongue.

Csilla started calling a demon she knew as Baal, whose real name was Djaall, but she usually simply called him "Lord of Flies". She had seen him a couple times, a ten feet high meat fly, covered in long black fur, horns in his head and fangs in his mouth. His red compound eyes looked lifeless and cruel. But in the last decade, she had only felt him as he possessed her body and flew like a free spirit using her as vehicle. Astral projection of demonic possession. Djaall loved it, as he wandered in different worlds, not in a search for power anymore but pleasure, and Csilla's special set of obscure skills made him feel young again, fearless, sharing the narcotizing effects of her poisons, having power over wind and rain. Those abilities did not come individually from Djaall or Csilla, but from the communion of both witch and demon.

As the Lord of Flies entered Csilla's body, her eyes became bright red and compound, her skin was filled with thick black hair, horns grew on her head and fangs in her mouth. A spirit, mixture of a part of her soul and Djaall escaped her body as a human size fly made of black fog, with horns and bright red eyes. It flew towards the village between rain and lightnings. Once there, it attacked a woman walking alone across the narrow passages, piercing its fangs in her neck. As the spirit sucked blood from the woman's neck, a new stream of red liquid came out of the wound on Csilla's left wrist and was poured into the bowl, this time filling it. The black fly left the woman dead on the ground and the fog it was composed of dissolved in the rain, but not before some villagers could see a glimpse of it. Csilla came back to her human form and drew a vertical line on the metallic bead with the new blood, starting at the tip of the upper ray of the star and finishing at the tip of the lower. That way, the charm was sealed. Then she drank all the blood in the bowl with the same thirst with which she drank laudanum. Rain stopped and skies cleared to show a beautiful last quarter Moon.

The next day, rumors of a witch camping near the village spread. Reasonable people felt fear and a council was called for that evening to evaluate and determine a possible course of action. But innocence can transmute into stupidity when circumstances are appropriate. White magic can be dangerous if you start thinking that all magic is white. That was the case of Illona, a young lady suffering for an unrequited love. She played with crystals, charged them with moon light and lit special candles to avoid diseases in her house. She had hair from her loved one, but her love charms weren't working at all.

Illona appeared in Csilla's tent carrying a lock of hair in a folded hanky and some money to trade. She entered the tent and a scent she could not identify almost made her sick. It was the stench of coagulated human blood, and it came from various places inside the tent. Illona sat in front of Csilla, and the dark witch asked:

- Did you come here for fortune or charm?
- Charm.

Csilla put away the Tarot deck she had in her hands and continued:

- Do you have a personal item from the subject?

Illona handed her the hanky. The moment Csilla touched it, she imagined six different ways in which she could murder the subject, without even invoking Baal. Illona added:

- I know we would be happy together, but he just doesn't see me that way.

Csilla looked at her with a mix of scorn and disappointment, handed her the hanky back and said:

- I don't do love charms, my apologies.
- But the sign says Charm Caster.
- Another type of charms, girl.
- But I need him...
- Go away.
- Please, I beg you...

And Csilla, still drunk from the night before, expelled a mass of liquid fog from her mouth, that flew to Illona's neck and started choking her. The dark witch laughed as the girl suffocated to death inside her tent.

When Czesar went to offer her some stew, Csilla was eating the girl's legs and said:

- No thanks, I'm already eating.

Czesar threw the dish to the ground and took Illona's arms to take her out of the tent, while Csilla clinched to her legs to keep eating them.

- This has to stop, Mami, you had become a demon, a vampire!

Czesar let go the girl and showed her mother a crucifix.

- I order you demon! Let go of my mother in the name of Jesus!

Csilla laughed at him with bloody teeth and said:

- Boy, is not the demon possessing me... it's me, possessing the demon!

Czesar got inside the tent and put the crucifix on his mother's forehead. Csilla stood up and slapped the boy's face with such power that threw him unconscious three yards outside the tent. Her nails cut his face from under his left eye to his neck, leaving three gashes that took months to heal, and left scars that he would carry his whole life. Years later, he told his daughter Agatha that a bear had left him those scars.

As well as there are different levels of evil, there are also different types of it. The miserable, fearful, and insecure type of evil that drive parents to physically abuse their children was incompatible with the glorious megalomania that sickened Csilla's spirit, it was below her in all ways and senses. She authentically felt bad after damaging Czesar, a sense of self-repugnancy invaded her mind, and she sat back in her tent, to drown it in absinthe.

A pair of farmers passed through the dirt road, they saw Czesar lying wounded on the wet grass, and half of Illona's death body coming from the tent. They rushed their steps to give advice to the village.

Csilla drank half a bottle of absinthe and a great idea came to her mind, as clouds began to darken in the sky. She took a half body mirror and propped it vertical on an inner side of the tent. She sat in front of the mirror and put a glass between them. In the glass, she mixed formaldehyde, laudanum, and some of her own blood, forming a reddish liquid. Then she invoked Djaall as many times before.

When her transformation was complete, her body was furry and her eyes were bright red and compound, like those of a meat fly; she looked at herself in the mirror and proceeded to take her eyes off their sockets with her nails. She threw the red fly eyes into the glass and her body came back to human form. The eyes, nevertheless, remained red and those of a fly. She rubbed her fingernails, and a red flame came out of the glass, the formaldehyde mix seemed to boil, and a red vapor came out of it. Then she fainted and fell to a side, eyeless; the red flame extinguished, the liquid in the glass became transparent and the red eyes seemed to look at her from the bottom of the cup.

Sun shone again as the clouds dissipated. Czesar woke up with his face sored, took the rest of Illona's corpse out of the tent and then he saw what his mother had done. He cried, somehow blaming himself for that aberration. He knew a respectable amount of dark magic procedures, by observing and assisting his mother through most of his short life but was reluctant to put them into practice for religious reasons. Forced to put that aside, he took the red eyes from the glass, they had acquired a rubbery texture. He dried them and cut some irregularities, like those closer to the optic nerve, where flesh was ripped up and looked "un-aesthetic", making them as round as he could. He

made them copper shells, with wire rings to the sides suitable to connect them with jewelry. He glued them into the shells, leaving the front half of the eye visible outside of each shell.

Then he took his mother's rosary and added the red eyes with their shells as new beads in it. He put the resulting rosary in Csilla's right hand and black crystal balls in her empty eye sockets. Then he knelt to pray by her side until she woke up.

It was already dusk when Csilla regained consciousness. As she had vision, for a moment she thought that her extreme ritual had been just a dream. She tried to stand up, let go the rosary, and her vision went away leaving her in darkness. She emitted a little cry, more of surprise than of fear, so Czesar rolled the rosary around her right hand and her vision came back.

- As long as you hold the rosary, you'll be able to see. Like clairvoyance, but right now and in front of your eyes.

She looked at her image in the mirror and saw her new crystal black eyes. She was amazed, she knew that such procedure was possible, but everyone that had ever tried to perform it, had failed, mostly because they attempted to do it without help or with poor one; putting together the jewelry without vision or necessary skills, led them to errors that made the experiment a disaster, always leading to complete vision loss. Then she looked at the rosary and saw the copper shells with the eyes of Baal; she understood in that moment, the huge amount of power that she had gained, when her original intention was to punish herself and get rid on the demon.

Csilla kissed Czesar on the forehead and apologized for hurting him. Then they heard the noise of a crowd approaching them. They went outside the tent and saw three dozen villagers walking across the dirt road and heading to their location. They were armed with scythes, pitchforks, stakes, and fire. They yelled "death to the witch" as they advanced.

Csilla ordered Czesar to keep the horse in its tent and take cover with it. She went to the middle of the road and stood there, waiting for the crowd, as clouds thickened in the sky above them. Sun went down completely, so the only light were the torches carried by the mob. Csilla caressed the rosary, the eyes contained in it shone red as well as Csilla's crystal eyes and the moles under them. From the clouds, a black rain fell and soaked the villagers, Csilla, and Illona's corpse. It was corrosive, and the shouts of pain from the villagers filled the cold night air. Of course, Csilla was immune to its acid. The black rain turned the torches off, so darkness was complete except for Csilla's red eyes. A series of lightnings fell over the mob, burning them as Csilla's smile was visible whenever a ray impacted the ground.

Csilla's eyes became black again, and a beautiful summer night sky, full of stars deployed. Czesar disarmed the tents and prepared the horse to pull the cart. They boarded the vehicle and resumed their way across rural Transleithania. The burnt bodies of the villagers were left in the road, to rotten.

STORY X

Constantinople

1

1905. Ottoman sorcerer, assyriologist, and amateur engineer Gul Goker Gokshe has taken possession of an ancient Mesopotamian sarcophagus from Robert Koldewey's Babylonian excavation, after the unexpected death of all its crew by an unknown hemorrhagic disease. Ostracized by archeological community for his peculiar views on Anunnaki traditions, Gul had allied with another outcast, the dark witch and anthropophagite Gizem, to fulfill his appetite for obscure knowledge and power.

According to his investigation and subsequent conclusions, the Anunnaki had blinded, captured, and imprisoned the material form of twelve known Ekimmu, vampire-like demons that had defied their authority or offended them in an unforgivable way. The crypts of those twelve demons were documented in clay tablets from fifteenth century BC, including names, dates of imprisonment and causal offenses. Matching tombs were found by Koldewey's excavation supported by Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft in 1901 under the Ziggurat Etemenanki. Strangely, details of those tombs were not publicized as much as the rest of the expedition's findings.

Gul Goker, aided by Gizem's extraordinary powers, contacted spirits of ancient Mesopotamian warlocks and their slaves to get a better idea of the reasons behind such concealment. He also consulted later papyri in Aramaic found by Bedouin shepherds in Khirbet Qumran and stolen by Gizem. Those sources indicated that the supposed twelve Ekimmu were merely human warrior kings that had defied Anunnaki supremacy and were punished for that, but without presenting any supernatural feature, and that the idea of them being vampiric entities only came from the nature of their punishment. The correct description for the twelve Ekimmu would then be "punished as a vampire" or "punished in the same way as a vampire", remaining the original vampire unseen or hidden. Some papyri insinuated that it was only a supposition, that blind imprisonment would be the correct way to punish a vampire in case it would have existed and offended the Anunnaki, others on the contrary indicated that such vampire was real and was in fact imprisoned, but its name and tomb were kept secret. Unclear passages in a different language, identified by Gizem as Qatrat or Qatrian could be interpreted as if both possibilities were truth at the same time: there was a vampire imprisoned in one of those tombs, and it was only a hypothetical reference to an inexistent entity. It was as if the Anunnaki would be aware of both possible realities and were conciliating them by recognizing those tombs as Ekimmu imprisonments.

In any case, the spirits contacted by Gizem had a clear testimony; there was an imprisoned Ekimmu but not in any of those twelve tombs, but in another one hidden below them. Gul Goker's father had died in strange circumstances, aided by Gizem, and the assyriologist received a massive fortune as inheritance on his thirty-third birthday. Gizem, almost twenty-eight, used some of that money to buy Russian slaves and "recharge" her extracorporeal projection abilities. So, hidden by the immateriality of her spirit, Gizem inspected the Koldewey excavation and found the thirteenth

tomb, kept aside, and covered from view with dark tarps. It was at least several millennia older than the other twelve and had no name scripted on it.

A red fly entered the excavation camp two days later, laid on all expedition members one by one and came back to a flask in Gizem's hands, who was waiting for the insect, hidden nearby. By the end of the day, a hemorrhagic fever had killed all members of Koldewey's expedition, and a truck driven by Gul Goker's employees arrived at the excavation site. The thirteenth tomb was taken to the truck, and then to Constantinople, with great precaution to avoid scrutiny from imperial authorities. In Constantinople Gul Goker and Gizem had prepared a laboratory, in a large basement that eventually became a bunker, and later, an underground city.

Using more of his fortune, Gul Goker acquired a new group of Russian slaves and managed to keep his operation undercover. Assisted by Gizem, he sacrificed three slave women and three female cats, drained its blood and collected their eyes. With those elements, he manufactured a human size green cat eye with heavy spiritual charge to give partial vision back to the imprisoned Ekimmu and allow her to escape its confinement. According to some of the papyri, the vampire was a female spirit, of eternal substance, which was not dead but sleeping, and that the only thing keeping her imprisoned was the lack of sight, so, once the Ekimmu would recover her sense of vision, she should be able to come back to physical life.

They opened the grave and found a corpse that instead of rotting, had apparently just dried out with time. It was a female, apparently human with long black hair. In her right hand, she had a scepter with a white gem similar in shape to a human eye but three times its size. They carefully opened the corpse's eyelids and found that it had compound big green eyes, like those of a fly. Gizem said to Gul:

- It's supposed to have white eyes, blinded ones.

Gul meditated in the matter and answered:

- Maybe she was not physically blinded, but spiritually by her association with a ghost living inside the scepter. The Ekimmu were prone to possess other entities, then maybe the real blinded vampire eye is the white gem.

Gizem agreed with the theory, so they carefully detached the gem from the scepter and replaced it with the green cat eye they had produced for the ritual. They put the white gem in a metallic container and stored it in a safe box. Then they rolled naked copper wire around the ends of the scepter, still inside the crypt and in the right hand of the corpse. Maintaining a safe distance from the tomb, the sorcerers gave an order, and their slaves began rotating a crank connected to massive dynamos in parallel that provided electric power to the grave. After some minutes without change, the cat eye grew to fill the socket in the scepter and shone in green fluorescence. The scepter began to float slightly over the corpse, still grabbed by its right hand. Gizem made a sign to the slaves and they stopped moving the crank, the scepter kept floating, and a black-haired woman appeared standing over the corpse. Her limbs were mechanical, except for her right hand that was open and pointing to the scepter, it was as if she would be trying to attract the scepter to her hand but could not separate it from the corpse, still grabbing it. Her skin was almost white, and she had a green cat eye in her left socket, replicating the one in the scepter but on a human scale. Her right eye was a black crystal ball, and she had no eyebrows. She was dressed in a white fur coat, long to reach the half of her calves. Her black hair was long to her knees and slightly curly. Her mechanical feet were naked.

She closed her right hand and the scepter fell back to the right side of the corpse. She looked around and swiftly flew to a small round window on the top of a wall, the only direct way to escape

from the basement. She broke the window and went outside, disappearing from the sorcerers' sight in a split second.

Gul Goker Gokshe felt the idea of another presence in the room. He looked back at the crypt, and for a moment he saw the same woman that had just escaped through the window, but then in a white lace dress, and without eyes, only blood in her eye basins. But that moment passed and then there was nothing there.

Gul and Gizem rushed outside, to the streets, and saw the woman flying straight up to the sky, heading to a beautiful full moon in Constantinople's firmament.

In the dark side of the moon, the recently liberated spirit of Ninkurra Drekkva, transmuted by means beyond her power, found two temple-like constructions made from spacecrafts millennia before mankind would build its first pyramid. She opened a hatch in the larger ship and rushed inside as alarms started to ring at her pass. She traveled corridors and rooms in the temple, looking for an electric panel or its equivalent to cut power off and facilitate her vengeance on those who had blinded and imprisoned her. She entered an elegantly carpeted room and felt a close, dear presence, an entity that she hadn't seen in so much time, that she couldn't remember how she had lost her company. Carmina was sat in a throne made of wire and aluminum, her brain was mutilated and filled with circuitry and hoses. Her red curly hair was long and had clearly been combed regularly for those who were keeping her secluded there. She had a mole under each eyelid and her eyes were closed. Her arms were full of scars and blood remains.

Ninkur stood in front of her, the remains of what once was Carmina's soul woke up and she opened her eyes for the first time in thirty centuries; those blue compound eyes, with a dark blue eight-pointed star and a white vertical line in their centers. Ninkur heard steps, so she only managed to say:

- You don't deserve this.

With the long sharp nails of her right hand, painted red, Ninkur took Carmina's eyes off their sockets, one after the other; then with the same hand, she penetrated the semi-ethereal matter of her own clothes and flesh, to put those eyes inside her own belly. The Macsk appeared in the carpeted room to find her in front of an eyeless Carmina. They were wearing tight rubber suits with transparent helmets. Their skin was bluish white, their hair was bluish black, and they had cat eyes. They seemed dumb and slow, as they were intricately connected to Carmina, and the loss of her eyes had heavily affected their senses. One of them, that was closer to the wired throne, raised his hand to Ninkur and blinked. Ninkur felt a shiver, as she had been blinded by them before, but nothing happened. Ninkur looked at their cat eyes and understood that they could not "steal" eyes that were too alike their own.

Ninkur's left eye shone in green fluorescence, two large black lace wings grew from her back as her hands and feet became bestially clawed. She reached out an arm towards the Macsk closer to the throne, attracted him to her claw with spiritual means, grabbed his helmet and smashed his head against the ground, breaking the helmet. Then turned him around on the floor to see his face and asked:

- Where is the one that stole my eye?
- Still sleeping, near the bridge.

Ninkur grabbed the Macsk head with one hand and his body with the other, then ripped off his head and spine, throwing away the rest of the body. From her mouth, she poured a black oil to the backbone and skull. From the oil, black worms ate the flesh and crawled inside the bones, turning

them black. The vestigial pair of horns in the Macsk skull enlarged and became metallic needles covered with crystal. She took that improvised weapon from the middle of the backbone and activated it. The needles shone red, and the crystal layers melted forming a plasmatic black mass that received a powerful electric arc from the needles and placed itself eight inches further from the needles' tips.

The other Macsk's ran from there. Astarte ordered to evacuate the big ship and escape in the small one. She also designated Sumitre to stay in the big ship and destroy it with Ninkur inside. Sumitre asked back:

- What about Trimurti?
- He's been sleeping for millennia. Just let him sleep forever.

That said, the remaining Macsk followed Astarte to the small ship and took off from the Moon. Ninkur understood their intentions and rushed to the bridge of the ship that she was in. Once there, she noticed that the controls were like those of a Ninevian vehicle, and she managed to make the big spacecraft take off too. She started to follow the small vehicle; that had already made a turn to pass by the side of Earth in its way to the stars. The ships left debris and remains on the dark side of the Moon, alongside with two remarkable aquamarine gems.

In a room contiguous to the bridge that Ninkur had taken over, Trimurti was unconscious in a capsule that had kept him alive for millennia. After he stole Ninkur's left eye, his mind couldn't come back to material conscience and got trapped in an extradimensional riddle. His right eye was black, and his left eye was still an exact image of The Green Eye that he had stolen from Ninkur.

In the bow section of the spacecraft, where the bridge was located, there was also a nuclear bomb, for self-destruction purposes; various versions of Anjalikastra, a laser cannon; and the remains of Carmina on her throne.

Sumitre had to get Ninkur away from the bridge to initiate the ship's self-destruction sequence, as the control panel was there, so she attacked her from the back with an electromagnetic spear, but Ninkur sensed her move and blocked the spear with her improvised spine cranial Macsk weapon. Sumitre ran to the stern of the ship and Ninkur followed her; the Macsk's plan was to trap Ninkur somehow and then go back to the bridge. The ship lost its course and started orbiting Earth.

Chasing Sumitre, Ninkur threw her weapon towards her and missed, cutting several cables in the corner of a corridor that fed the pumps of the cooling system for the ship's propulsion engines, that were located between midship and stern sections. Sumitre managed to close a door behind her and that way she delayed Ninkur's advance in a couple seconds; allowing her to reach the stern section with a small advantage. The engines were already overheating for the lack of cooling liquid when she got there.

Sumitre took off her rubber gloves, with her sharp nails she cut her left wrist and drew a circle of white blood on the metallic floor with a series of non-Euclidean symbols inside it. She stood behind it, facing the passage from which Ninkur would appear. Sumitre closed her eyes and opened her arms; on the floor, a portal to the wild forests of Dobruj unfolded. In the passage, Ninkur appeared and threw her weapon at Sumitre. The Macsk moved her arms forwards, the portal rose from the floor acquiring vertical position, facing Ninkur and standing between her and the Macsk.

The weapon passed through the portal, Sumitre made another hand movement, and the portal flew towards Ninkur, swallowing her into Dobruj. Sumitre lowered her arms and opened her eyes. The portal disappeared and the Macsk sighed relieved.

In that moment, the ship engines exploded splitting the spacecraft in two. Both parts separated from each other considerably before they entered Earth's atmosphere and fell like meteorites on the planet's surface. Sumitre managed to reach a stern armored compartment and hid inside it to protect herself from the impact of the landing. The compartment contained transparent jars with plague insects inside. "This will not end well for anybody" she thought.

Gul Goker Gokshe and Gizem saw the explosion, drawn on Constantinople's beautiful night sky and the subsequent shooting stars going in opposite directions. Of course, they did not imagine its real meaning, but they knew that it was a sign for them to follow. As good business partners they divided the quest and bounty of those gifts from the stars. One of them fell remarkably close; into the Black Sea near the shores of Zonguldak; it was the bow of the spacecraft; Gul's bounty. Gizem traveled to the vast forests of South American Patagonia, to reclaim the secrets contained in the ship's stern.